



*Nancy Thomas*

Several years ago I facilitated a narrative writing workshop for Latin American Quakers. In three different locations, over fifty-five women and men joined for the sessions, each one writing a first-person narrative about a time they encountered God. Twenty-six of these essays, revised and polished, were published in a collection entitled, *De encuentro a ministerio: La vida y fe de los Amigos Latinoamericanos* ("From Encounter to Ministry: The Life and Faith of Latin American Friends," 2012).

This week's devotionals present seven of these stories, each representing a different way that we encounter God. My prayer is that they encourage you with ways that you meet God, as well as introduce you to some delightful Quakers from another part of the globe.

*BIBLE READING: Mark 4:1-8*

Manuel Coronado, a Guatemalan Quaker, grew up in what he calls a “disintegrated home.” His father’s alcoholism and desertion added to the poverty in which Manuel and his four siblings lived. He remembers his mom stumbling home each night after eighteen hours of work. His three older siblings had to quit school after the sixth grade to work. But Manuel excelled in his primary school studies and earned a government scholarship to high school; by grace, his mother consented.

Manuel chose to attend the Friends school in town because of its good reputation. In his first chapel service he heard the pastor say, “There’s something special about this school.” Later that year, Manuel identified the “something special” as Jesus and decided to give his life to him. His siblings and old friends ridiculed him, but he received encouragement from the adults in the church and the school. Today, Manuel is a Friends pastor in Chiquimula, Guatemala.

This is a clear illustration of the seed fallen into good soil. But as we reflect on how people encounter God, let’s focus on the sowers in the parable. If it were not for the faithfulness of local Christians, working through the school and the church, the seed would never have reached the soil. They took an interest in this child from an unpromising background, and through their faithfulness Manuel encountered God. Today his life blesses many.

How is your local meeting reaching out to children (or adults) unconnected to the church? Are you faithfully sowing the seed?

*SONG: We Are Called to Be God's People*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Help us to faithfully reach out to the children and adults around us who need to hear some good news.*

—Nancy Thomas

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 119:105; 2 Timothy 3:14-15*

Bernabe Sanchez of Honduras remembers searching for God as a child, primarily motivated by a fear of death. Raised in a nominally Catholic home, in an atmosphere of hostility between Catholics and Protestants, he remembers asking his mother, "What does all this have to do with God?" The priest told him he was too young to confess, but that he would find it helpful to repeat the Lord's Prayer to a certain image. He didn't find it helpful.

But one day he found a New Testament on the road and began leafing through it, noticing words he had heard the priest say, names like "Jesus" and "God." He wondered how come, if Protestants were evil, their Bible could speak of God. Sometime after that, his mother obtained a whole Bible and the family began reading its stories out loud. This whetted Bernabe's appetite, but it still wasn't enough. A few years later, through a neighbor, Bernabe came face to face with the Author of the Bible, and his life changed. Now he recognizes that God was preparing him all along through his encounters with the Bible for the deeper encounter with Jesus. Today Bernabe serves as a leader of the Honduran Friends Church, as well as pastor of a local meeting.

Quakers believe the Bible is the written word of God and has authority as such. We also believe that Jesus is the present and living Word of God. One of the best things about the Bible is how it leads us to the living Word. That's the encounter that changes lives. How do you balance the written and the living Word in your experience with God?

*SONG: Wonderful Words of Life*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Help us to genuinely encounter you through the words of the Bible.*

—Nancy Thomas

*BIBLE READING: Psalm 42*

Elena Rivera, a young Quaker of El Salvador, was set apart for God from her birth. After arriving prematurely, her life hung in the balance, and her desperate parents told God Elena would be his if he would heal. Against all odds, Elena survived and grew up knowing she was cherished by her family and set apart for God's service.

But as the years passed, so much cherishing and protecting stirred up rebellious feelings in this adolescent. As she entered young adulthood, she stopped attending church and began experimenting with all the world had to offer. While God protected her from going off the deep end in drugs and alcohol, she began dressing provocatively and entering into unhealthy relationships with men. When one especially intense relationship ended in disillusion and heartbreak, Elena took it out on God. "Get out of my life! Go away!" she yelled at the Almighty.

She was surprised at how quickly God answered her prayer. "God turned his back on me as soon as I asked him to," she writes. "It was the most painful moment of my life." The sense of utter abandonment terrified her. Elena fell on her face and cried out to God to return and take her back as his daughter. When God, in grace and love, responded, Elena finally gave herself completely to God. She still lives in that condition of restoration to God, to her family, and to her church community as she prepares for mission service.

Sometimes God's seeming abandonment prepares us for deeper encounter with him. Have there been times when the sense of God's abandonment overwhelmed you? Did this lead you to encounter God anew?

*SONG: As the Deer Panteth for the Water*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Teach us, Lord, to trust you, even when we can't feel your presence.*

—Nancy Thomas

*BIBLE READING: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10*

Mario and Celia Choque looked with horror on their newborn daughter, Imogene. The deformity could not be hidden or denied; a huge mass covered part of her body, from her upper arm to her chest. The doctors in this hospital in La Paz, Bolivia, said they could do nothing. After a few days, the Choques took Imogene home, where followed days of anguished prayer. Imogene's three older sisters added their tears and prayers to those of their parents.

One night, both Mario and Celia separately had dreams in which Imogene appeared healed and whole. Dreams are one of the ways God speaks to people in the Aymara culture, so the whole family took courage from this communication. The following years saw times of encouragement and times of deep despair as Mario and Celia pursued avenues of healing. These included clinics in Argentina, medical teams visiting Bolivia, and even a trip to the United States. Imogene is more comfortable now, the deformity less obvious, yet the saga continues.

With a gentle spirit of faith and hope, Mario tells how his family has encountered God through this suffering. Imogene is a peaceful, happy, courageous child who inevitably blesses the doctors who work with her. She is a source of joy to her family, and a testimony of grace to the community. Mario writes that "this trial has been like a school for our family." It's been the scene of encounter with God and growth in grace.

Paul also testifies that his particular physical disability, his "thorn in the flesh," was a source of encounter and a help to ministry. Are there ways in which God has used suffering to help you know and serve him better?

*SONG: Be Still, My Soul*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Help us, Lord, to sense your presence, even—or especially—in the midst of suffering.*

—Nancy Thomas

*BIBLE READING: Acts 9:1-5*

Many times in Scripture people encountered God through supernatural means, such as voices, dreams and extraordinary visions. Generally, people of the majority world today are more open to these types of encounters than are those of us in the United States. This is certainly the case with Leonel Flores, a Guatemalan Quaker.

Leonel's life as a young man was a series of encounters with God and active resistance to the Lord. He remembers when he was sixteen and living in Guatemala City, a voice woke him up asking, "Where would you be if you died tonight without Christ and without hope?" The voice was shortly followed by the 1976 earthquake that left twenty-five thousand persons dead. Even so, Leonel resisted.

A few years later, another voice came out of nowhere and said, "Kill yourself!" He knew it did not come from God and he cried out for help. He fought the diabolical voice for twenty-four hours, never losing the sense of God's presence. But his resistance to God also continued. The next voice, less supernatural, came over the radio telling him to travel to the town of Chiquimula and enroll in the Friends Bible School. This time Leonel obeyed, and as a result he found God and a community of believers. He now teaches theology in a local Friends seminary, in addition to his job as a university professor of education. He writes that he has learned how to distinguish God's voice from the other voices that come from the world or from the enemy.

God speaks to us today, though not always with an audible voice. As we learn to listen, we can discern when it's God speaking. How does God speak to you?

*SONG: Open My Eyes, That I May See*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Teach us, Lord, to recognize your voice.*

—Nancy Thomas

*BIBLE READING: Deuteronomy 6:6-9*

David Tintaya is a leader in the Bolivian Friends Church as well as a pastor in the lowland city of Santa Cruz. His story, while not dramatic, overflows with ordinary grace. And it all stems from family. David's father, also a pastor, served for a time as superintendent of the national church, and his mother on the national board of the Friends women's organization. David remembers accompanying his parents to endless church meetings. As a child he didn't always understand what was going on, and, up to a certain age, he was expected to just watch and keep quiet.

That all changed as David grew into adolescence. His parents hadn't had the opportunities of education, so they began asking David to help them with their different reports and financial accounts. David writes that, "I was entering a time of life where I could contribute and actually give advice to my parents....They trusted me and let me help them." As a young man he became active in the national Friends youth organization. As an adult he has given leadership to several citywide organizations that serve the disabled, has been president of a university's board of trustees, and continues to serve as a leader among Quakers. In all of this David credits his parents for being his teachers in an informal school of leadership, as well as the means for his personal ongoing encounter with God.

Whatever our ministries or opportunities, it still all starts at home. God still asks us to teach our children and grandchildren well. And God still gives us opportunities to let our children and the other young people in our lives teach us.

*SONG: Faith of Our Fathers*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, make us faithful stewards of the faith before the generations that follow us.*

—Nancy Thomas

*BIBLE READING: Matthew 22:37-40*

Manuela Calisaya of the Peruvian Friends Church is a shy person, but God called her to a ministry of hospitality. She remembers God preparing her heart through a sermon on serving God through serving others in our homes. She felt drawn to the idea, yet frightened.

Several weeks later, when Manuela came home from work, her husband informed her that a couple, strangers from another village, had arrived and were asking to stay in their home while they sought medical treatment for the woman. Out of Christian obligation, and partly because of that troublesome sermon, Manuela felt no choice but to say yes.

The woman's medical condition proved worse than expected and the situation required more of Manuela than she was used to giving, but God gave her compassion. With her husband, she ministered to the couple in many ways, including marriage counseling and spiritual reconciliation. This in turn prepared the woman to die, which is how this part of the story turned out. Thinking back on it, Manuela is impressed with how God prepares his people for the hard things they will face. This was actually the beginning of a lifestyle of loving hospitality that continues today. Through this service, Manuela not only blesses others; she encounters God.

The first commandment, to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, leads to the second, to love our neighbor as ourselves. And somehow loving service to others circles back again to enrich our love relationship to God. How do you encounter God through simple service to others?

*SONG: Brother, Let Me Be Your Servant (The Servant Song)*

*PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, let our love for you flesh out in service to those around us. Let us find you in that service.*

—Nancy Thomas