

William "Bill" Jenkins My Spiritual Journey

**As told to
Atlanta Friends (Quaker) Meeting
November 25, 2007**



This has been an experience for me. I'm still not sure what I'm going to say. There are so many things. I'm going to start with my family background because it's going to explain how I've really become familiar with Quakerism. My maternal family – and not my paternal family – there's things written about my paternal family quite a bit so I don't have to talk about them, thank God.

I'm going to start with that, and then I'm going to talk about my own experiences. Then I'm going to mention some of my thinking about my view of Quakerism, which might be quite different because I come from a different cultural history, different experience, different training than some others. That's how I'll end it.

My maternal family came to this country in the dark ages, I guess, in America when it comes to Africans during slavery. They were rice growers on Pawley's Island which is the northernmost sea island of the sea islands that run from around the border of North Carolina, South Carolina to St. Simon's, the southernmost sea island. There were essentially rice-growing and indigo-growing plantations on those islands.

And my great-great-grandmother was a healer, Serena and her husband Prince Wilson. After the Civil War the sea islands became popular among the industrial barons. They wanted to own these islands. And in late 1870s, around 1880, the Klan came on Pawley's Island, and they basically told everyone to get off. So they got off and migrated to a little peninsula called Hungry Neck, just a little peninsula that jutted out between the Charleston Harbor and swamps of South Carolina. And on that little peninsula was a Quaker school called The Laing School, which had been started in 1866 by Quakers. So they migrated and that's where they learned to read and write. Their daughter Rosella also went to Lang School and was trained as a nurse-midwife. And her daughter Martha Jenkins, my mother, also went to that school. She was trained as a teacher. She actually finished high school at around 14. She had to say she was 18 in order to teach [for] a

couple of years. Then she went to a prep school called Avery Institute and Hunter College in New York and completed her degree at Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina.

There are a couple of things about that. My mother's family became a very big part of this little village, a village of people who lived by shrimp, fishing and crabbing, and then selling their wares to the market in Charleston. So my family, interestingly enough although I hadn't thought about it before, but my grandmother helped all the children in this village be born. My mother taught these children in this little village. My cousins built the houses. Others ran the grocery store and my father buried people in this little village. So we provided cradle to grave service in South Carolina.

We got ready to go to school, my brother and I. I had an older brother, four years older. Well, let me back up. My mother and father come from a mixed marriage, which is kind of interesting because I hadn't thought of that either. Charleston is considered a city of three races: Whites, Blacks and Mulattos. And those people who were mulatto were actually sent to a separate school system, Mulatto meaning mixed so-called race whatever that means. And so the cultural difference between my father's family and my mother's family was huge. It's an interesting way to grow up even though I didn't particularly realize it at the time.

Growing up in Mt. Pleasant, when I was very young, was sort of a special place to grow up – beaches and crabbing, fishing and running around. You could basically act pretty free. There was no restriction.

The town was all black and the white people theoretically existed, but I didn't know them in any way except in theory. Even in the summers in New York going to the Radio City Music Hall - I thought it was a fluke. It never occurred to me they were actually white people.

The Quaker School closed or the state took over the Quaker school maybe when we were in the first grade or something like that. My mother for whatever reason wanted us to continue to have religious education or private education, I don't know which, but we were sent to the school that my father's family would have attended, a private Catholic school in another city [Charleston]. That was the first time I realized that there were cultural differences between my mother and my father: that was essentially a Mulatto school. My brother and I and maybe two or three other kids were the only dark-skinned kids in the school. The other kids, their parents were principals of the black high school.

So I spent a few years in Catholic school which . . . on the one hand influenced me greatly in terms of my religious beliefs. I don't consider myself a recovering Catholic. It was important, Catholic faith was important for me because I needed answers, and the Catholic church had all the answers. I had catechism in the morning, and there was an

answer for everything, a name for every sin, everything was clearly laid out, so for me it was a good thing, and I remained a devout Catholic until I went to college. In fact, I started, myself and two others, the Catholic Youth organization in Atlanta University Center which is still [there] to this day.

When I got to the 9th grade, my mom arranged for me to take the SAT, so I was able to take it early and I didn't have to worry about college after that. My mother did something I'd always wanted to do which was to allow me to go back to public school. My last two years I spent at a public school, a very different experience from my experience in Catholic school. I learned about juke joints and rock and roll. The girls are quite different in public school which I appreciated greatly.

I had been involved in voter registration in South Carolina and because I was young and registering people to vote in the county, there was a certain amount of publicity, while I was waiting to go to college. My father decided it would be better if I left early, and so he sent me to a school I never heard of before: this was Morehouse College. I was put on a train and sent to Morehouse and I never heard of Morehouse, so I was a little bit surprised to learn it was all male. That was the first of many surprises about Morehouse.

WHAT YEAR? (from the audience) '67. Started in '63 and finished in '67.

I went to Morehouse and I majored in what I was told to major in. My brother was to go to med school and I was to go to law school. Over the next two years, though, I found out that after clerking at some fancy law firm in downtown Atlanta – King and something, I don't know . . .

KING AND SPALDING (from the audience)

Some fancy law office in downtown Atlanta. I found out I hated law: the most boring experience I ever had in my life. I had been brought to tears because my view of law was going to be like Perry Mason. I didn't know you had to sit in the library and read cases after cases summarizing - oh God – it was terrible.

So luckily I spoke Gullah when I went to Morehouse and then standard English. I had to take speech two years in order to speak standard English. Every Saturday. And what that did was make me go into mathematics. English was not required. I found out also that the advisor we had – at that time Morehouse was adopted by Harvard pre-law students; my advisor said to major in math at that particular school. I majored in math . . .

I went on and minored in psychology and the natural marriage there was statistics, which I found out I love to do. I finished Morehouse in mathematics. I should say that my freshman year, at the end of my freshman year I lost my scholarship. Morehouse was an interesting place at that time because some of us got involved in Student Nonviolent

Coordinating Committee. We were the foot soldiers; we weren't going to lead or anything like that. But whenever someone went to jail I'd volunteer – particularly the Pickrick – I got arrested twice there, spent a few weeks in jail. The problem is being in jail a few weeks tends to have an effect on GPA. I lost my scholarship. And my sophomore year I realized I really needed to focus on finishing Morehouse, particularly since I changed my major. For the next three years other than the Newman Club, I just studied and worked. I had to get a job, too, and didn't get involved in very much of anything except as you probably know M.L, Dr. King's nickname was "Tweed" at Morehouse; he would visit the school at least once a month to have Sunday dinner with Dr. Mays, and after (dinner) they would come out of Mays Hall and ask the white workers to leave and talk to us about what was happening in the Movement.

And so those Sunday afternoons were interesting. Stokely Carmichael had been at Morehouse briefly before he went to Howard. John Lewis was there, and the guy from Clark whose name never comes up when it comes to the civil rights movement: he was actually president of SNCC for a while.

I can't remember this guy's name. But anyway, so there were a lot of things going on at Morehouse, a lot of talk with teachers. Mohammed Ali came several times teaching. H. Rap totally freaked me out. Totally out of his mind. He came there to teach. All these people. It was an interesting place to be at that time philosophically. Each of us, I think, ended taking up a route to - become militants. Mainly rapped about Black Power and stuff like that. I happened to be in the office off Hunter street, off MLK, when Stokely came up from Mississippi talking about something called Black Power. So that was an interesting night. We stayed up basically all night, asked the white workers at SNCC to leave; that was one of the most emotional nights I ever had.

Some of us split. Some of us thought Black Power Black nationalism which was one of the institutions we knew. Some became integrationists, you know, and so on. It was a very interesting a very emotional period.

So I finished at Morehouse in 1967, went to Emory [graduate school in] Biometry at Applegate house which is no longer there. Hospital was torn down.

In biometry I ran into my first experience with racism personally. Deal with it theoretically. I didn't fit into Emory very well. I won't go into that.

I transferred to Georgetown [University] which was great. My mother was very pleased because her feeling was only a good Jesuit education would get you into Heaven. So I went into biometry there. I went into the public health service corps at the same time. It was the first group, I don't know exactly how we were chosen, but we were the first group of black public service health commission officers selected to be – we were appointed by President Johnson himself. That was kind of interesting in itself. And so

as African-Americans back then, you really have to work about 20 years and might be let in. And here we are coming in without any of that struggle. And so the view of what we can do was quite different from African-Americans who had been there previously. A number of them were upset

At that period things got a little wild. I was at CDC but at Washington and Washington was a hotbed in 1968, 1969. All kinds of radical movements. I got involved in some groups on the fringe I guess you could say: came into being militant you could say. We started several organizations, and I started a newsletter called The Drum, which sought to expose racism at the time. And did expose some things, something called Huntsburger Memo, people may remember that: Richard Nixon was president at this time like 1970 I guess, 1971, and he had worked out a plan which if you were to apply for the job corps, you were given a test about your capacity toward violence. This was because African-Americans were seen as inherently violent, and if you didn't pass the test you would be provided training. Then you would be given another test, and if you didn't pass that test, you would be sent to a school. And if you didn't pass at the end of the school, you would be sent to a secured environment and kept until you passed this test that had been developed.

Needless to say, we got a little bit upset, and we got a little rowdy about it. We also found out about the Tuskegee study of untreated syphilis in the Negro male. Black men were not treated for syphilis for 40 years because they wanted to see the impact of syphilis on the human body. So our newsletter tried to deal with those kinds of issues. That ended up following me a good number of years, that's a whole 'nother story.

We founded several organizations. We took over the local union, took over the whole union. That was interesting. And we started other organizations, so-called militant and whatever. It was the '60s. I don't know how to explain the '60s to anyone who wasn't around at that time. It was pretty crazy. That went on a few years. I think the wind got taken out of our sails as some of you probably know; April 4th '68 was a particularly difficult evening for a lot of us. I was coming back from Arizona and the pilot got on the plane and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we're sorry to say Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis and the city is in flames." And everybody on the plane panicked. We were getting ready to land and we looked out and fires were all over the city of Washington. And so I went home and got on my red black and green motorcycle and went out and discovered that there was not going to be a revolution in this country – it was an interesting evening, a very interesting evening. That I think impacted on me but still, because I was angry, something happened to make me realize that violence was not going to be the way in which we make any change.

Struggled with a policeman over his gun. It's a very interesting experience being in almost mortal combat with somebody. That one of you will probably get shot. An

emotional, adrenaline-pumped environment, and then you realize that this is insane. This is totally insane and what I want to do is get the heck out of there. But the chance of getting out was pretty slim. And you know God has a way of stepping in. This came in the form of two very large African-American policemen. They pulled me out, put me in a paddy wagon, and drove me around for a couple of hours and let me go. And I always felt that I owed after that because clearly, that was a situation that was life changing possibly - quite possibly life-changing.

Anyway, I don't know why I said that because I don't usually talk like that at all. I'm getting off track. But it was important because it brought me to American Friends Service Committee working in DC. Working with African-American boys at Lawton Reformatory. Then it made me - Oh, the other thing that - in spite of the fact that I was in all this craziness, my career had taken off by the time I was in my middle twenties. I think most people would have described me as a successful Negro, I guess, you know, with the office and the secretary and that sort of stuff. And I woke up one Saturday morning and decided to walk away.

And fortunately it didn't matter. I had gotten married. And when you get married, you have a certain view of what your life is going to be. And if you marry someone, and I think the same thing happened to my mother, if you marry someone that worked hard and struggled - my father came from what my aunts would call a comfortable family, and I think she was impressed because my father had a lot of businesses and a Cadillac and all that sort of stuff, and she married my father, and then my father was a lousy businessperson, had lost all his businesses. It had an impact on the whole relationship. I think I did the same thing. I got married under the pretext that I would be a successful Negro and then I wake up one morning and decide that that wasn't what I wanted to do. So that was the end of that marriage. And I spent the next - almost the next decade in school picking up degrees of one kind or another because I had thought about what I wanted to do with my life. And it didn't have a whole lot to do with being successful.

After several years in school, Georgetown and Chapel Hill, I came to Atlanta and basically started all over from scratch. I got talked into coming back at CDC while I finished my dissertation. I was going to stay at CDC six months that ended up being another twenty-something years at CDC. We were able to start some of the centers or institutes I had wanted to start. I had wanted to use some of my skills in my field to make a change in public health in area. So I started an institute to develop African-Americans in public health sciences which is in its 26th year. I started the first MPH program at an HBCU. This was something that was in the hearts of many people back in the 1930s. To have a school of public health at an African-American college -- We'd tried it several times and failed. So I left CDC and started it, and that's in its 17th year, something like that. We started other organizations without going into detail. The whole idea was of black nationalism that could make a difference, but doing it in a very

peaceful way focusing on developing ideas about how you do research and how you involve the community and that sort of stuff, I won't get into that. I came to Atlanta and started all over. I looked for a wife after a few years. I knew exactly the kind of wife I wanted to marry. I wanted a nurse from a small town, maybe finished high school, and as some of you know, I failed miserably in that regard. An interesting experience. If someone had told me I was going to marry a woman from Wellesley College, a physician, assertive, I would have said they were crazy, no way. I would have said they were crazy. Life has a way of impacting. The other thing, I have a daughter, a child that I didn't think I'd have time for. Having a wife who worked in Asia and Africa, which made me a single father: something else I didn't expect. So it was quite an interesting period in a lot of ways.

And my daughter - when I thought about schools for my daughter I definitely wanted her to go to a Quaker school like I was able to do. My grandmother was someone who not a Quaker as far as I know but who certainly adhered to Quaker values. Her Sunday mornings were spent on the front porch in contemplation. I remember because we would all be going out and my grandmother would still be on the porch in a little rocker we now have in our living room.

She introduced me - she gave me Quaker books and readers. That's how I learned about William Penn not taking off his hat in front of the king. That story always stuck with me. I thought William Penn was really cool. So I've been introduced to Quakerism a long time. I'm amazed to look back and see how much my grandmother influenced me. I wouldn't have thought about it but she did. And so I looked at what I wanted for my daughter - to give her some of my growing up in South Carolina. I couldn't do it - give her Mt. Pleasant because [the] Mt. Pleasant [of my childhood] doesn't exist anymore. CDC went in and drained the swamps, gave DDT and one source for malaria was removed. The rest was removed from Mt. Pleasant and European-Americans started to move in to the community. So it's essentially a resort area now.

That's how I was brought back to working with American Friends Service Committee in Atlanta and my daughter attended a Friends School in Atlanta. I came to meeting here and immediately knew the first time I sat in meeting that I felt very much at home here. And that hasn't changed. There are only two times I felt somewhat alienated in this community. Once was when the Decatur Police Department directed traffic into here, and I couldn't believe Quakers would allow people with guns waving people over. That freaked me out a little. That was the only time I ever stood against something in this meeting. The other thing - I get a little twinge when people say it's a white meeting. It might be predominantly white. So those are the only two times that I felt a little bit uncomfortable. I did feel uncomfortable but didn't say anything about it after 9/11 because I was a little shocked that people didn't focus on the twenty-six young men who killed themselves. I thought as Quakers, more than any other faith God was aware of,

why did these twenty-six do that. It wasn't just Americans that were killed. But what was the life like - the experience of these young men that would bring them to doing such an incredible thing? And I don't think we spent time in a way that I thought we should have. You know, seeing that of God even people who would do the most heinous things to us.

So in two minutes I'm going to try to speak to some of the ways in which I might differ from some Quakers. I'm not comfortable with the term Christian. Primarily because... in the 60s there was a professor at Emory, I don't remember his first name but his last name was Blakney (sp) who taught a course at Morehouse in religion. He was famous because he purported this God Is Dead theory. I don't know if anybody remembers that. He was one of the most difficult teachers I think I had in my life. I think I went back to him twice which is crazier. But we had to read so much about the history of the Bible, Christianity and so on until it really changed my view of so many things. One of the things that attracted me about Quakerism is when people talk in historical terms about seeking first-century Christians. I think that was the closest to following Jesus of Nazareth. Then Jesus of Nazareth became Jesus Christ after the first century. I was trying to figure out what did that mean. And it meant it became the first church of Rome - that meant that Jesus became this revolutionary who had to be eliminated on the one hand to someone, a god of war and golden chariots on the other. And that one always struck me. So I feel uncomfortable - all this because Christ and Christianity reflects the institutionalization of a religion that did not start out to be the religion of Rome.

So Constantine, of course as you know, wrote or caused the first Bible to be written. And the way in which some books were added in and some books were taken out to reflect the philosophy of Roman Emperor was a little bit uncomfortable for me.

The other thing that struck me was years later in the creation of the St. James version of the Bible. It's always the one word that's added to take into, factor in to me . . . The one word Christ that changes it entirely for me almost . . . The insertion of the word "only" in the St. James version of the Bible fascinates the heck out of me because Christ may have been a son of God prior to St. James. After St. James that he was the only Son of God and he had blue eyes and blond hair . . . I thought the insertion of one word changed so much, the impact of what this religion is about. I'm just fascinated by the old concepts, and I don't have time to read so much as I used to about the history of the Bible. That's the other thing: the Bible - there are so many Bibles and I'm always fascinated when someone says "the Bible" - that there's only one. The Gnostic bible in early Christianity, and others since - how can people say "the Bible" with so many versions of it. It fascinates the heck out of me.

Then I tend to think I am scientist, I am a mathematician and a scientist. Some people think there is a conflict between science and God. That's something I've never seen. I

think . . . science is the study of God. It's the study of how it works. I find that absolutely fascinating. I see no contradiction there. I don't know what people are talking about. For a statistician God is . . . because on the one hand there are these mass natural forces in which man moves toward justice. But then there are individual decisions that people make on different pathways that might lead them away from it or lead them back to it in the cancelling process of decision-making. On the one hand if there's one thing we learn out of Genesis it's that man has to make choices . . . to me I think of things in very strange and different ways from a lot of people.

I think the one word that bothers me in Quakerism I hear from time to time is "birthright." I don't know what that means. Because for me Quakerism is something you have to come to as an individual, so it cannot be a birthright. And the first Quakers were not a birthright. George [Fox] Wallace was not a birthright Quaker. That smacks of some elitist; that makes me uncomfortable.

Let me ask just one question. Can anyone give me an estimate of how many people were killed in the Holocaust? (various answers) There were 12 million people who were killed in the Holocaust. Why is it when my daughter came home from school, she thought it was 6 million people? The six million Jews, good people who suffered discrimination become so focused on their own concerns and so we lose the important understanding that other people are people too. In the news people talk about Iraq – there were twenty-five people killed in Iraq talking about American soldiers. It has only been in the last few months that people have actually thought of the Iraqi people that were killed. That is absolutely amazing to me. That even people who have been essentially struggling for centuries of discrimination fall into – we become so absorbed in our own pain and our own concerns to the point where we can't think of other people as people.

Audience speaks about war casualties, birthright transition of struggle from young man to now.

We leave things off our c.v. Coming thru the 60s was amazing. One of the things – when I teach – how little students know of anything other than what they are programmed to think about. They don't get students struggling with questions about life, America, how they will contribute. They come to college to get a job. That's what they're focused on. I can remember when Mays was president of Morehouse, he talked about when students come to school with the idea of getting a job, students come to school with the idea of changing the world, and those two students can be roommates, and they live in different worlds. They completely live in different dimensions because they think of the world so differently.