

Carolyn D. Shields: To Seekers, with Love

Carolyn D. Shields

May 18, 2003

To Seekers, with Love

My Beloved Seekers,

I remember the day, almost six and a half years ago, when I first walked through the front doors here, and introduced myself as a newcomer during circle time. Most people vividly remember their first Seekers sermon, but I have to admit, I do not. I remember meeting a good number of you, and I remember leaving that day with the impression that you were a welcoming bunch. I remember Jeanne's Welcome to the Party sermon some weeks later, and I remember Glen and Deborah's 90th birthday party, as events that made early impressions on me. I kept coming back to Seekers, and gradually, I became an integral part of the community. This sermon is an attempt to share some of my story about my time spent with you, and to think through for myself how it all fits in with my move to Gould Farm in Massachusetts next weekend.

As most of you know, I spent my adolescence and young adulthood struggling with anxiety and panic disorder. While the panic attacks themselves were violent, and hard on my young body, the phobia I developed around the daily, even hourly possibility of having a panic attack was more destructive to my sense of well-being than the actual attacks were. For eight years, from ages 14 to 22, I lived in an almost constant state of dread and anxiety. Even though I am now almost 35 years old, and a full thirteen years have passed since I finally got help and learned to live a normal life

again, I know I have still not fully integrated the meaning of the panic into my life. I find I keep asking the question, "What role did it play then, and now?"

What I do know about the panic disorder is that it served as a defense mechanism. As violent and terrifying as my panic attacks were, I unconsciously chose to have the attacks rather than to feel the full depths of my feelings. As most of us probably did, I grew up in a family where it was not okay to show feelings unless they were happy ones. As the daughter of a rage-aholic parent, I was forbidden to react in any way but submissively to the rages. I learned early on that things only got worse if I showed anger or rebelled or if I cried during or even after them. Therefore, as a dutiful daughter trying to keep my place in the family, I obligingly covered and took the blame for whatever was supposedly my fault at the time, and then I was sure to be perfectly cheerful and respectful five minutes later. No other behavior was tolerated. I got so good at this charade; I do not even remember when I started to separate the face I showed the world from what was really going on inside me. I honestly do not have any memory of the rage these humiliating injustices evoked in me. The memories I do have during those episodes are of fear, and of wanting to get away to my room as quickly as I could to be alone and cry.

After years of searching, when I was 22, I finally found and received behavioral therapy for the panic attacks. It worked wonderfully well. Within just a few sessions, I had learned enough skills to use in anxiety provoking situations to keep the panic at bay most of the time. I remember feeling wonderfully free, as if the world had finally opened itself up to me. A few years after that I got a Master's degree, went to Ecuador in the Peace Corps, and then after Peace Corps, came to D.C. and found Seekers.

During the time I have been with you, I have learned so many important things; I will never be able to name them all. One of the most important is the reclaiming of myself as a

Christian. The concept of the Inner and Outer Journeys awed and inspired me. During my first few years at Seekers, especially during the School of Christian Living classes, I was inspired to learn that Christianity is about community life and faith, but that it is also about relating to scripture, doing inner personal work and discerning individual and communal call in the world. This reclaiming of my Christianity and Seekers' groundedness in the Christian tradition served me during every step of my journey with you.

At Seekers, I learned that I was, as everyone is, called by God to do some work in the world. This was a new and amazing concept to me. Again, this came out most strongly during the School of Christian Living. I spent the first few years at Seekers asking myself, "What is my call?" Because this question was at the forefront of my mind, and because I had joined Learners and Teachers and was writing weekly spiritual reports, I was able to recognize that the yoga classes I started taking were much more for me than simply a way to unwind. Once again, I felt as though the world had opened up. This discipline called yoga, of which I knew practically nothing, called to me from a very deep place. Feeling as though I had fallen in love, I dove into the practice with everything I had. I felt as though God had given me the greatest gift in the world, and I was very grateful.

Then, as most of you know, while I was happily practicing yoga every day and making plans to become a teacher, I developed a severe case of back pain and sciatica. By this time, I had been with Seekers for about four years. People knew me as an enthusiastic, if at times overzealous, member of the community. I had already led Seekers through its first AIDS Ride experience, so I had developed something of a reputation for being sparky. However, the sciatica knocked me for a loop. After many months and a lot of money spent on doctors, x-rays, MRI's, and a variety of different healers, I eventually gave up the hope of ever being well again, let alone of ever being

a yoga teacher. My greatest dream was crushed. I spent the awful summer of 2000 lying on the floor of my apartment sobbing, convinced that I was dying, or at least that I would be handicapped for the rest of my life. I truly believed this – I thought that my life as I knew it – the life of a person with a healthy body – was over. I was furious at God for giving me a glimpse of what my life could have been-I could have almost touched being a yoga teacher– and then for cruelly snatching it away from me, leaving me abandoned and in pain.

After a while, because I had no other choice, I surrendered to this new life, got up off the floor and joined another Seekers mission group, Jubilate, with the intention of become a Seekers steward. I was doing the best I could to follow what I thought God was calling me to do. What I really wanted to do was to be doing yoga, but it seemed very clear that God had said no to that dream. In junior high and high school, I had been a musician but had to quit because of the panic attacks. Before the panic attacks, I had always loved singing in choruses and church choirs, and I loved attending the Seekers sing-a-longs. Maybe God was calling me to take up music again.

This leads me to something else I learned at Seekers– belonging. By the fall of 2000, I was no longer the sparky, enthusiastic Carolyn everyone had gotten to know during the AIDS Ride. People told me the light had gone out of my eyes. Nevertheless, even though I was devastated by my handicap, there was still a place for me in Seekers worship and in Stewards. I learned that Seekers would take me, for better or for worse, with or without a handicap, whether I was enthusiastic and setting the world on fire, or barely getting through each day as best I could. Whether you realized it or not, this sense of belonging, of knowing that no matter how bad things got, there was still a place for me here, went a long, long way toward my healing.

As you might have guessed, while the behavioral therapy I received for my panic attacks in my 20s helped me to live a

normal life in the world again, it did not solve the problem of why I was having the attacks in the first place. It did not address all of the repressed rage and terror of my childhood, which I did not even know I was carrying. However, life in my 30's was not that much different from life in my teens and 20's; my mother was convinced that Seekers was a cult, she disapproved of it with a passion, and she and I were barely speaking to each other. I see now that my life-long repression of the rage I felt about not being seen or valued by my family disconnected me from my body, and that the reason I loved yoga so much was that it connected me to my life-force again. Before my injury, I had felt whole, calm and happy when I did yoga. Yoga was the first thing I ever pursued that came from my authentic self. Marion Woodman says that often when people are doing something for themselves for the first time in their lives, as soon as they really start to make a move, the dark mother appears, and there is an immense battle. My battle looked like sciatica. If yoga was to be my chosen path, there was no way in the world it was going to let me get away with the kind of denial and repression I was holding in my body.

The realization that energetically, I was still playing the role of the wounded child, and that what I needed to do was to show and stand up for my authentic self to my family despite the consequences, was profound. During this time, I had a dream. I dreamt that an African woman was pushing me up a mountain in a wheelchair. When we got to the top, she pushed me to the edge of a high cliff. I got up out of the wheelchair and jumped off the cliff, and plunged downward, legs and arms flailing wildly, out of control. I was terrified. As I continued to fall, however, I eventually pulled myself together and started fall more gracefully, turning over and over in graceful somersaults. After a while, I reached into my vest and pulled a lever, and a huge, beautiful blue and white parachute opened, breaking my fall and saving my life. When I woke from the dream, I knew the nightmare of the devastating year of sciatica was over, and that I would finally be granted

healing.

Critics of American yoga say that we westerners are so driven and vain about our bodies that asana practice, or the practice of physical postures, is all we are capable of, and that we are missing the real fruits of spiritual yoga practice. I disagree. If you look around, yoga classes in Washington are, usually, not always, but usually filled with highly educated people who sit at desk jobs all day long. Except for yoga class, our bodies are in one seated, upright position all the time, while our brains go a mile a minute. We talk on desk phones, cell phones, send and receive e-mails, surf the web, and create budgets, strategic plans or other documents for our jobs. The increased lack of variety in physical movement combined with sped-up, frantic mental activity, day after day, year after year, creates an enormous disconnect between our bodies and minds. I think Americans need as much grounding asana practice as we can get, rhythmically linking deep breathing and movement together as we gather the fragmented parts of our spirit back into our bodies. When I first was injured, some people suggested it was my own fault that I got sciatica because I probably pushed myself too hard practicing yoga. However, I knew that was not true. There was so much more going on than that. The yoga did exactly what it was supposed to – it united my body and spirit to the point that I could feel the depth of what Spirit offered me to feel, for the first time in my life, and it paved the way for the freedom I have now to live into my own life as authentically as I can.

I am lucky. The depth of my feelings offers me a very rich and abundant life. It is my hope that at Gould Farm I will get to use my body, to plant seeds and to harvest crops, to get dirty and sweaty, and to know the earth for the first time. I hope to tune in deeply to the rhythms of the earth, to feel its heat and its energy through the soles of my feet, and to tune in to what it invites me feel in my feminine body. I want to be

outside, and for the rhythm of my own body to imitate the slow changing of the seasons. I hope the regular routine of earthy farm work will allow me the groundedness to explore all the terrifying, and joyful, places of feeling I haven't yet had the courage to open to, with the trust that what I feel is okay, and that there is depth enough in my relationships and in the world to hold it all.

I am profoundly grateful for Seekers, and for how much you have done for me. I came to you unemployed and desperate for work, with no idea of what I wanted to do, and I leave you as a competent and well-loved yoga teacher and Reiki master, having earned more money in the past four months teaching yoga and Reiki and working as a part-time receptionist than I would have made if I had stayed at my full-time job. This is a phenomenal shift, almost a resurrection story in itself. It was Peter who gave me my first job opportunity at CIS, and Pat who just recently opened the door for part-time work for me at the UCC so that I could leave my full-time job and teach yoga. I have needed Seekers during every part of this journey, from beginning to end.

I came to Seekers as the child of a mother who was convinced Seekers was a cult, and I leave Seekers sharing a peaceful and mutually respectful relationship with her. This April, my mother stood in our communion circle and shared the symbols of Christ's body and blood with us, a sign to me of her willingness to surrender to the totality of the woman I have become and to respect the decisions I have made for my life. This would not have happened without the Seekers women who tirelessly encouraged and supported me, who spoke the truth about my own life when I couldn't see it myself, and who taught me to live into and stand up for the life I was being called to. They gave me the courage to demand to be seen and respected. I have no illusions that any of this would have happened without them. My gratitude and love are inexpressible.

I hope that I am able to breathe through these last hours and minutes with you, as I would breathe through a challenging vinyasa yoga class—with mindful attention, noticing each moment as it arises, whether it is filled with pleasure or pain. Even as I allow myself to fully feel the pain of our separation, I know very deeply that it is impossible for us to be separated. I will carry every experience I have had with you in my heart for the rest of my life. You are part of the very fabric of my being. At the same time, I know that Seekers has been changed because of my presence here. (Just think of how many people own bicycles now!) Just as in today's gospel reading, Jesus is the vine, and Seekers is one of Christ's branches. Through Christ, we are woven into each other's hearts, minds and bodies, and can never be completely separated again.

Even though I have not been a Steward since recommitment Sunday, I have been the keeper of the Seekers plant, and today I return it to stewards. Since Kate Amoss is the one who passed it on to me, she has promised to keep it until the time comes to pass it on to the next person. The item I add to the collection is a stone from the altar of the first Faith At Work event where I was on the leadership team, where I learned the immense power that comes from telling my story, and that true joy and freedom come from not denying the dark side, but from telling the truth about it, so that resurrection is possible.

I will be in touch while I am on the farm to let you know how I am, and I promise to come back and visit. Maybe after my yearlong commitment is over, I will come back to D.C. and be part of Seekers again, but that is not to be known right now. I want you to know that no matter where I go or how long I am away, I will always feel that I am an integral, connected part of this community, and I will always call myself a Seeker.

Amen.