

# Marjory Zoet Bankson: Exploring Commitment

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A Sermon for Seekers Church

By Marjory Zoet Bankson

## Exploring Commitment

Text: [Romans 14:1-12](#)

Recommitment to membership in Seekers is a challenge that this community poses each year – a chance to be promise-keepers once again. Forty years ago, when Peter proposed marriage on New Year's Eve, I wept – and said, "Do you really know what you are asking?" – because I wanted his assurance that he intended it to be a lifetime commitment before I said "Yes." I was scared to let go of my hard-earned independence, afraid of being taken advantage of, weak in my own ability to love fully and freely. I feel the same way about recommitment to Seekers.

In our text for today, Paul elaborates what he means by commitment for a church he did not start and probably never visited—the believers in Rome, the heart of the whole Roman Empire.

- Do welcome those who are weak in faith, not for the purpose of argument, but for transformation;
- Don't despise or reject those who have different beliefs about eating or even worship – that's not essential;
- Remember, in the end, we are all accountable to God for the way we live and die.

Since Paul never met Jesus "in the flesh," his commitment to Christ was more like our situation than those early disciples who spent three years deepening their understanding in person.

Paul's famous conversion experience on the road to Damascus was a mystical encounter with Christ as Spirit, as a power greater than anything Paul had known before. It turned his life inside out!

Paul's subsequent commitment to his new understanding of God made Jesus' followers very nervous. They were never sure whether he was on the right track, particularly with his dedication to bringing Gentiles into the fold. When Paul writes about including others who have different dietary practices or worship practices, I suspect he was reflecting the struggles that he himself had with the orthodoxy of early believers. Real commitment can make for contentious company.

## **MC Richards: a Committed Life**

MC Richards was a great teacher of commitment to the spiritual life. She died last week and I drove to Camp Hill Village in Kimberton PA for her funeral on Monday. Like Paul, MC lived from a mystical encounter with the very source of creation. She lived from the inside out and invited others to do likewise.

Like Henri Nouwen, she shared her life with an agricultural community of adults with special needs, many of them with Downs Syndrome. She taught a course at Camp Hill called "The Renewal of Art through Agriculture" and often meditated on the mysteries that rural life presented—how the stem of a plant knew when to send out roots; how the original fireball was carried in the yolk of an egg, how there really was no "inside" and "outside," but a seamless universe described best by a mobius strip. Some call it "deep ecology" or the Gaia theory of creation as a living organism. For me, it's belonging to the Body of Christ.

Sometime in the early 80s, Matthew Fox discovered MC Richards, who had already been teaching creation-centered spirituality for about 20 years when he wrote about the four spiritual

paths of Meister Eckhardt. Soon she began teaching at ICCS in Oakland, spending half the year with Matthew Fox and the other half at Camp Hill. In each place, her commitment to call was evident for all to see. She lived in a single room, ate what was put on the common table, did the chores that went with maintaining the community, explored relationships with those who arrived in her life and deepened her art work. She kept to the path of wholeness until the very end.

In 1966, somebody handed me a copy of MC Richards book, *Centering—in Pottery, Poetry and the Person*. I had begun potting as therapy while Peter was in Vietnam—shaping clay on a potter's wheel, feeling in my body what it meant to be centered and off-center, balancing opposing forces to make different shapes and taking my pots through the transforming fire. Her book gave me a conceptual framework for being part of a mystical body that the church had failed to provide. MC Richards gave me language for belonging to the living realm of Spirit in Matter—what we know as incarnation.

In those days, I kept Jesus' incarnation separate from my own feelings of vitality and creativity. But MC Richards made me think that my categories of faith might be too narrow. Her words flung my spirit out into the universe and, at the same time, encouraged me to notice intimate connections — touch, aliveness, moral choices — and a sense of call. Not long after that, I came upon Elizabeth O'Connor's first book, *Call to Commitment*, and recognized the same energizing force behind her description of Church of the Saviour. Both made me hungry for more.

A decade later, I went to Pendle Hill, a Quaker Retreat Center near Philadelphia, to spend a week with MC. She used to travel around with her old Volvo full of pots and plaques, which she would lay out on the floor or prop up against logs to show us what she was talking about. There I saw her "I Am" plaques for the first time—images drawn from Jesus' mysterious sayings: "I am the door," "I am the bread," "I am the vine," "I am the

way, the truth and the life..." I remember being struck by how those images seemed to emerge from the clay as though from the inside. They were not imposed on the clay from the outside. In fact, I noticed that about all her clay work. It came from a deeply rooted religious sensibility – as in *re-ligio*, from the same root as *ligament* in the body. Those clay tablets echoed from the "I am" of God to Moses and drew me in as well.

MC and I made a special connection that week and she gave me a little bowl, which she had made as a demonstration piece. It took me awhile to realize that she responded to the "I am" in me, that we could be friends instead of teacher and student. I needed to take her off the pedestal when I mentally placed her as an older, wiser guide. I needed to learn that we not only isolate people by judging and despising them, but we do it by adulation as well.

In those days, MC talked much about community but she had not yet put her roots down in one. She was an itinerant teacher with a scattered community of friends, but no special place where she was committed to be long-term. It was one of the things I brought to our friendship, I suspect. Our 20-year marriage was a source of interest to her when Peter and I spent another week at Pendle Hill in 1980, introducing her to the liturgy of clowning. The clown continued to be a figure of change and surprise in our conversations until it appeared in her paintings a decade later.

Our experience with Church of the Saviour and Seekers also intrigued her. She visited here on Palm Sunday in 1990 when I was to preach, but turned over most of the time to Deborah's profession of faith. That too was different for her, though I didn't really know that then. Services at Camp Hill were highly impersonal and Matt Fox was, by then, doing "rave masses." Homegrown liturgy was not his thing.

About two years ago, when MC learned that two valves in her heart were worn out, she decided not to have surgery. Instead,

she chose to live her journey into dying with her eyes wide open and her paintbrush in hand. She completed a series of egg paintings, which I describe in my book, *The Call to the Soul*, and just six weeks ago she asked me whether I thought they should be sold separately or stay together as a series. I told her that I thought they told a story and should stay together. We talked of other things—of God and prayer—and she gave me her blessing— called me again to the work I am doing: learning to live from the inside out. Helping others recognize we are already connected in a seamless web.

Last Monday, I drove up to Camp Hill Village for MC Richards' funeral. When Peter got the call about her death, I was in Burlington VT, doing a weekend retreat. Getting home was a hassle and I couldn't decide whether to go or not. After all, she was gone. But when I woke up early on Monday morning, my internal sense of call was clear so I quickly dressed, left a message at the office and was on the road by 6:30. On the way, I wondered what had happened to her body.

Committed always to the deep creative rhythms of life and death, I can remember ending a workshop with MC by building a large common pot together with all the clay we had not used, then carrying it out into the woods where the weather would reclaim it for the earth. That she had chosen to live consciously into her own dying process was no surprise to me.

When I walked into Rose Hall, there she was—laid out in a simple wooden box, dressed in a Guatemalan blouse with her long expressive hands still at last. I learned that Rudolf Steiner's Community believes that the spirit detaches slowly, so her body had been washed and anointed, and then people sat vigil with her round the clock for three days, singing, praying, and reading. The Villagers had put drawings on her door—a rainbow and flowers to welcome her home. In her room, a passionflower bloomed early on the last night, filling the room with its fragrance. My own tears came as I touched her to say our final "good-bye."

The service was shaped around the "I am" sayings of Jesus. We heard stories from people who knew and loved her. They were funny, real and touching. In this Spirit-conscious community with a tendency toward abstraction, MC was an earthy, incarnational presence. She lived from the core. She was a wisdom teacher, simple and profound.

Then, as we stood together singing "Dona Nobis Pacem," MC's coffin was loaded into a shiny black hearse, bound for the kiln that would transform her body into dust. One of the short stocky Villagers clung to the gleaming chrome handle, peering in to catch a last glimpse of MC. When they pried her fingers off of the door, she flung herself toward me and pleaded, "Will she be all right?" Then, as the hearse pulled away, another Villager burst out, "Don't go, MC. Don't go!" She voiced what we all felt! When love has been real and plain, parting hurts no matter what we believe about Spirit.

## **For Recommitment**

So, as we enter this season of Recommitment, Paul reminds us that "We do not live to ourselves and we do not die to ourselves." MC's passage was a reminder of that. We are born connected to all that is, born into the binding love of God, but as we grow up, we also learn the harder lessons of embodiment—to distrust, to fear, to believe in law more than love. Dying can be a process of recovering the knowledge our bodies once had—that live and move and have our being in God.

Commitment to this community is a place to deepen your roots in the love of God and the meaning of being part of Christ's body here and now. As in a marriage, commitment means giving others the right to make claims on your life, to impact your choices, to mirror your self-deception and even practice what it means to love our enemies.

Community is a place to confront the truth about ourselves, to test our call to serve others, to give ourselves away on

behalf of the amazing possibility that God really is made manifest through our daily actions. "In the end," Paul says, "each one will be accountable to God for our lives." Community is a place to practice that accountability.

One month from today, **anyone** who is ready to identify themselves as Members of The Seekers Church will have that invitation. We will **all** have the opportunity to make a single commitment of membership here, sign the book, take responsibility for a piece of our common life.

After much discussion and prayerful consideration, the core members are ready to let go of the special meaning that the word "member" has traditionally had in Church of the Saviour. Rather than waiting until we are physically in a new place, we have sensed the movement of Spirit toward acknowledging the intentional commitment among many people who already consider themselves members of this community. This year, we will call that commitment by its true name: **member**.

The current core members will take on a new name as "Stewards," so we don't have two levels of membership. The biblical image of Steward as both servant and responsible agent of the Master seems to describe the function we perform for Seekers better than "member." The Stewards will be confirmed in their additional commitment on the following Sunday.

On the piano, you will find a discussion paper to use during this Recommitment Season. I hope you will pick up a copy and use it for your prayerful decision about whether to become a member of The Seekers Church on October 17.

Out of my work with our scripture reading for today, and my experience with MC Richards this week, my own questions for recommitment to membership here are these:

- Am I ready to lead my life from the inside out?
- Am I ready to let go of more self-sufficiency and bend

toward spiritual guidance?

- Am I willing to look at my resources of time, energy and money for God's call?
- Can I let my life be shaped by those whom society rejects? Expand the notion of family to include others unlike myself?

May God bless our wrestling with commitment in this next month.