

Back about nine years ago, I got a call one Monday morning around seven o'clock. **It was my mother, phoning to tell me my father had had a heart attack in the middle of the night, that they were at the hospital in Danville, but were getting ready to transfer him in an ambulance up to St. Vincent's.**

"But don't worry," she said.

I said, "Mom, you've been sitting at the hospital by yourself all through the night. Why didn't you call me earlier?"

"I didn't want to disturb your sleep," she said.

"A heart attack!" I screeched. "Had he been feeling bad?"

"Oh, yes, his chest has felt heavy for days. I thought we told you."

"Nooo."

My parents and I have many things in common, but we part company on the issue of sickness. If they are sick or having an operation, I never hear about it until it's over. If I'm sick, I take out ads in the paper, have Dawn Sheets activate our prayer chain, and call our neighbors to bring in food. **I want everyone to know.** I want everyone to worry. I want everyone to toss and turn every night until I get better. Then I get better and write a story about it so everyone can know just how sick I was.

So my father was up at St. Vincent's. **All my siblings took the day off work, my brother Glenn had flown up from North Carolina, and we're sitting in the waiting room with Mom, all of us worried sick, the way you get when you think you might lose someone you love.** In my family, when we're really worried, we start making jokes. That's how we cope with bad news in my family, we joke about it. If you're ever in the hospital and I come to visit you and I start making jokes, you're in real trouble.

The cardiologist came out to tell us Dad had four blocked arteries and needed a heart bypass, that they were going to do it right then. He said, "Come back and see him before we go in." So we walked back to where they were prepping him for surgery. **We all gathered around him, and he looked so bad.** He'd been weakened by the heart attack and we thought we were going to lose him, so we started joking with him, but inside we were eaten up with worry. The nurses came to take him away; we went back to the waiting room to wait. **I began writing his eulogy in my head.** After a long time, the cardiologist came out told us Dad had made it. I was standing next to him and I started patting him on the back. It was involuntary. He'd just saved my father's life, and I started patting him on the back. **Then I shook his hand, twice, all my siblings did.** Just kept shaking his hand and thanking him and patting his back.

So here are Mary and Martha. Their brother Lazarus had died. Then Jesus brought him back. **Our 21st Century minds have a hard time grasping that.** We want to know whether Lazarus' resurrection was literal or symbolic. It makes for interesting speculation, but it's beside the point. **To Mary and Martha it was very real.** When we read the story, their sense of loss is genuine and deep. They'd written their brother's eulogy and put him in the tomb. They'd cried and grieved and mourned. **Their brother had died...but Jesus had given him life.** Their joy at his recovery was profound and full.

I don't know what to say about this, except to say that I've seen people who seemed dead, people who seemed utterly devoid of life. **Then something inexplicable and wonderful happened to them, and they got their life back.** They say when you get older, nothing surprises you anymore. Not me. The older I get, the more life amazes me, how like a stubborn blade of grass, life can rise up out of the slightest crack in the hardest concrete, where you least expect it.

Jesus comes to visit Mary and Martha. **They are so grateful for the new life he gave their brother, they thank him the only way they know how—** Martha starts throwing together some sandwiches and Mary, who has

something of a reputation for exuberance, runs and gets an ointment so expensive a pound of it cost a year's salary.

She doesn't just dab a discrete amount on his ankles, she pours it over his feet. Judas objects, pointing out how many poor people could have been fed for the cost of the ointment. He's right. **John whispers an aside about Judas, referring to him as "the one who would betray Jesus."** This, of course, has the effect of making Judas' concern for the poor seem insincere. Poor Judas can't catch a break. Have you ever noticed that when a person makes one mistake, every facet of his life is called into question? **But Jesus treated Judas' concern with the seriousness it deserved.** "Don't fault Mary for her extravagance. It came from her heart. We'll have plenty of opportunities to help the poor. But Mary wanted to do something beautiful for me. Let her do it. Let her thank me while I'm still around to thank."

It's a fine line he had to walk. **Jesus wasn't given to wastefulness and luxury, but neither was he one to rebuke someone whose motives were born of love.** You accept the gift, you say "thank you," and you are grateful for it.

I remember about 25 years ago, I was volunteering at Plainfield Friends Meeting with the young people, raising money for them to attend a Quaker youth convention in Mexico. **We'd raised enough money for the kids**

to go, but not enough for me to go. Joan and I didn't have the money ourselves. We were young and in love and broke.

Then one evening an older couple in the meeting invited me to their home and gave me the money for the trip. They wanted it to be anonymous. I knew it represented a real sacrifice to them and I told them I couldn't take it. They insisted, saying it was important to them to do it. But I didn't know how to receive their gift. **I kept going over to their house to mow their lawn and weed their flowerbeds.** If it had been a Martha kind of gift, if they'd have invited me over and given me a sandwich, I would have known how to respond. **But it was a Mary kind of gift—an extravagant outpouring.** Like most gifts of that sort, it had a tremendous ripple effect. I went down to Mexico, heard the sociologist Tony Campolo speak, was challenged by his vision of Christianity, and decided to become a Quaker pastor.

That's what Mary's kind of generosity does. It changes our lives. It changes our families. It changes our churches. It changes our world.

I'm good at giving like Martha. I'm mastered the art of restraint, of giving just enough, of doing my little share, but nothing more. It's the wild extravagance of Mary, the outpouring of generosity I find difficult. **There is a fearful little part of me, that has always held back.** I'm good at sandwiches, but not at feasts. I've always made sure that what I gave didn't cost too

much, wasn't too sacrificial. I've never been one to run for the bottle of perfume and lavish it on someone or something.

I've always felt at home among Quakers, because we're such a restrained bunch. **We're sandwich people, like Martha.** Most of the time that's alright. But sometimes it holds us back. We here at Fairfield are engaged in a bold venture, we're building a new meetinghouse. The time for Martha's timidity has passed. We need the enthusiasm of Mary. **Friends, we've not asked anything significant of one another for a long time.** We tell ourselves we were thrifty Quakers, so seldom challenge one another to consider the long-range needs of our meeting. **Consequently, our stewardship muscles have atrophied.** And you know what happens when our muscles continue to wither, don't you? We die. All around us, we see evidence of that. Quaker meeting after Quaker meeting in decline, withering away, breathing their last, because they would not and did not expect anything of one another.

We speak proudly about the historic Quaker ministry in this area, but if the Martha mindset prevails, there'll be no Quaker ministry to speak of fifty years from now.

I have heard talk about how we can not afford to give, that we are too poor. That is simply not true. People in Ethiopia are poor. We are blessed. **Now it is time to surprise one another with our generosity.** This is not a time

for us to make a sandwich and pretend it is filling. It is time for us to prepare a feast and feed the children.