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A Spiritual Pilgrimage: Adventuring with The Urantia Book

An Autobiographical Sketch of Rev. Meredith J. Sprunger

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This collection of papers had its origin in an urgent appeal that I seriously consider assembling the various papers I have written over the years and make them available. These papers written in the pioneering years of the Fifth Epochal Revelation may have some value for individuals who discover the Urantia Papers in the future and wonder about the thinking of those of us who were privileged to fellowship with the founders of the Urantia movement.

On Giving a Testimony

Among my earliest memories I recall as a four or five year old boy sitting in the Missionary Church in Woodburn, Indiana listening to people give their testimonies of how God had blessed and helped them that week. Sometimes I was impressed by their sincerity and genuineness; but more often, even as a small boy, I was critical of their claims and wondered about their motivation. An aversion to exhibitionism has been a strong aspect of my personality.

I am a person of very ordinary abilities and gifts, yet my life has been blessed and rewarded in so many ways. Over the years, I have come to the conviction that I have a very able Thought Adjuster. Many times I have had the urge to bear testimony to God's guidance and acknowledge that whatever accomplishments I have achieved are largely the result of my Adjuster's shepherding and undergirding and not my human abilities. But my aversion to exhibition and the suspicion that disguised egocentric motives may be involved in this testimonial urge have always thwarted its actualization.

As an octogenarian, I have struggled in ascertaining the most effective avenues of service to which I am called. My direction has always been in the areas of nature, philosophy, theology, spiritual insight, and writing. At times I have envied those whose calling was in more tangible areas such as helping people with specific material or physical problems. Intellectually, I know that philosophers and writers contribute a valuable service, but emotionally I sometimes wish for more immediate and tangible results of service.

From an egocentric point of view, I would prefer to abandon this testimony project, but after much soul searching I feel constrained to witness to the guidance, support, and partnership of a wonderful Thought Adjuster and loving friend, along with the Spirit of Truth and Holy Spirit. Those who have experienced this divine partnership know the truth of a Mighty Messenger statement, "when man gives God all that he *has*, then does God make that man more than he *is*." (U.B. p. 12185)

Odyssey of Peak Experiences

Our lives are shaped by our peak experiences. These episodes of transcendence are sometimes difficult to explain, but most people have a sense of the ministry of a Reality above and beyond themselves that bring meaning to their lives: ..."at every crossroad in the forward struggle, the Spirit of Truth will always speak, saying, 'This is the way.'" (U. B. p. 383)

My search for knowledge and truth started at an early age. I have a vivid memory at the age of four of a compelling urge and deep hunger to know more about life. I was standing outside on the south side of our house in the bright sunshine. I recall saying to myself, "There is something about life that I do not understand, but I'm going to find out."

These prayers of the heart take years to integrate our minds and fashion our lives. Along the way critical peak experiences stand out in our memory. Around the age of eight my father was treasure of our church. He had piles of coins on the dining room table. One glass was

full of fifty cent pieces. I took several of these coins and hid them. When my father recounted the money, it did not agree with his original count. He was quite disturbed and sought me out, saying, "Meredith, did you take some of this money?" I felt terrible and admitted taking the money and showed him where I had hid it. This humiliating experience made me determine never to do anything like that again.

When I was nine years old my mother developed breast cancer and suffered terribly in the later stages of the disease before she passed away. A year and a half later my father's vermiform appendix burst and, before the days of antibiotics, inflammation set in that took his life. I shall always remember my father facing death, gathered us four children around him and telling us that he hoped that we would always live lives that were good and truthful, following the guidance of our heavenly Father. The deaths of my parents were rugged reality probing confrontations. I recall sitting in our front room during the home funeral service of my father looking out of our picture window at a herd of cows grazing in the sunshine, and saying to myself, "Now I'm like those cows with no one to care for me but God."

An aunt and uncle took me to live with them at their home in the country near Monroe, Indiana. When I was around thirteen, we went to the Mennonite Church in Berne, Indiana to hear the community chorus sing Handel's Messiah. I was so carried away by the spiritual grandeur of the lyrics and music that I became acutely aware of my own finitude and insignificance. When we got home, I went up to my room and prayed fervently, "Lord, make me a part of something more important and significant than myself!" Little did I realize that one day I would have the privilege of being one of the pioneers associated with the Fifth Epochal Revelation.

My central interests have always been in nature, philosophy, and religion. As I struggled with the decision of what course of study I would pursue in college, I was drawn to a career as a naturalist. Since I was without parental guidance, I tried to think objectively. Reasoning that my attraction to nature was a passing adolescent fancy, I attempted

to make a more mature, conventional choice. Since I was always interested in the "why and wherefore" of things, I thought chemistry fit this description. Knowing, however, that I did not want to spend my life in a laboratory, I settled on Chemical Engineering.

Although I received an excellent grade in chemistry in my first semester at Purdue, I knew that I did not want to be an engineer. So I turned to my first love and transferred to the School of Forestry. Here I felt comfortable but more and more the idea of philosophy and religion seemed to be calling to me. Comments my uncle made about ministers led me to think he regarded them as "parasites" on society. The idea occurred to me that I could earn my living as forester and engage in ministry as an avocation. So I wrote Mission House Seminary (now United Theological Seminary) asking if I could enroll in the seminary after graduating from the School of Forestry. Their reply was, "No, you should have a liberal arts major to enter the seminary." This was a devastating blow to my life plan. What should I do? What was God's will? I walked late nights under the full moon in pasture fields near the agriculture campus trying to discern spiritual guidance. It was an agonizing decision, but finally I felt confident that God was calling me to take the more difficult course, transfer to Lakeland College, major in philosophy, and enter the seminary.

My educational pilgrimage proceeded normally through Mission House Seminary, B.D., Princeton Theological Seminary, M. Th., a pastorate at Trinity United Church of Christ in Mulberry, Indiana, and earning a Ph. D in psychology at Purdue University. In 1950 I took a position teaching psychology at Elmhurst College and a pastorate at Highland Avenue United Methodist Church in Chicago. The pressure of these two new positions plus the 25 mile drive through Chicago traffic began to take their toll. Being a hearty person with considerable ego-reinforcing courage, I plunged on until my physiological and psychological energy reserves were exhausted. Suddenly my ego invulnerability was shattered. I was thrown into the physical exhaustion and psychological depression of battle fatigue.

Only those who have experienced the engulfing depth, anguish, and hopelessness of such depression can know what it is like. It is a psychological-spiritual event that tests the depth of the soul. It will either leave you a wounded and broken individual or a transformed and stronger person more in tune with spiritual reality.

While it was the dark night of the soul, it was also the transforming peak experience in my life. Stripped of all my ego-defenses and rationalizations, I was faced with either giving in to despair or surrendering my ego-defenses and giving myself completely to God regardless of consequences. I saw this as the only option with which I could identify. My life had been dedicated to God before but now I had faced the ultimate test. The restructuring of my inner life was slow but sure. I had a better understanding of what it means to be spiritually born again. I had passed through the tempering fire of testing and knew the spiritual invincibility of being a son of God. Much later my experience resonated with a passage I read in The Urantia Book:

But long before reaching Havona, these ascendant children of time have learned to feast on uncertainty, to fatten upon disappointment, to enthuse over apparent defeat, to invigorate in the presence of difficulties, to exhibit indomitable courage in the face of immensity, and to exercise unconquerable faith when confronted with the challenge of the inexplicable. Long since, the battle cry of these pilgrims became: 'In liaison with God, nothing—absolutely nothing—is impossible.' U. B. p. 291)

In 1952 we took a pastorate at Grace United Church of Christ in Culver, Indiana. I found that my spiritual insights and growth took on a new dimension. After several years of working out sermons and papers formulating my own spiritual experience and emphasizing the religion of Jesus rather than the religion about Jesus, I realized that a new spiritual approach was needed in mainline Christian theology. I tentatively outlined a couple of books that needed to be written, but I was not ready for the discipline required to write these books. After

some time of trying to avoid commitment to this project, I realized that in loyalty to this inner leading a decision had to be made.

To seek the will of God in making this decision I spent hours under the stars in our back yard. It seemed clear to me that a new theological-spiritual orientation was needed in understanding our Christian faith, and that God was leading me to move in this direction. I finally expressed my willingness to make the commitment to undertake this project. Not long after I made this decision, *The Urantia Book* was placed in my hands. I promised the friend who gave it to me, Judge Louis Hammerschmidt, that I would evaluate it.

Its table of contents turned me off; I thought it would be a waste of time to read it. After many months of procrastination, I started reading the section on the Life and Teachings of Jesus. I did not find what I expected to find. It confirmed and greatly enhanced the New Testament story. Often I read with tears streaming down my cheeks. When I finished reading this seminal presentation of the Life and Teachings of Jesus, I knew its authors had a profound grasp of spiritual reality. Thus motivated, I read the entire book. When I finished reading the Urantia Papers I realized that this was the most authentic picture of total reality in print. The integration of science, philosophy, and religion along with its spiritual cosmology gives a picture of the universe of universes that is without parallel in spiritual insight and philosophic coherence in world literature. I recognized that the basic ideas I had decided to write about were here presented much better than I could possibly formulate them. I had the pervasive sense that my whole life had been prepared for this new vision of spiritual reality. The rest of my life has been a postscript and postlude to this climaxing peak experience.

In order to learn more about the origins of *The Urantia Book* I soon established a relationship with Dr. William S. Sadler, a Chicago psychiatrist, who was the leader of the group receiving the Urantia Papers. This association developed into a warm friendship with Dr. Sadler, his son, Bill, and Emma L. Christensen (Christy). They were all members of the Contact Commission receiving the Papers. Irene and I

spent many week-ends with Dr. Sadler and Christy and developed friendships with members of the Forum. It was my privilege later to officiate at the Memorial Services of Dr. Sadler, Bill, Christy, and other members of the General Council.

I was elected to the General Council of Urantia Brotherhood, and Bill Sadler and I were appointed the first Field Representatives of the Brotherhood. Later I served as chairman of the Education Committee and Fraternal Relations Committees, and President of the Urantia Brotherhood. After Dr. Sadler had graduated to the Mansion Worlds, Christy became the "director" of the Foundation-Brotherhood offices. When she was getting up in years, Christy invited me to come to Chicago and take her place. I told her that this invitation was a high honor, but that I had a sense of calling to a less prestigious and more difficult ministry of interfacing with the leaders of mainline Christianity.

In closing this autobiographical odyssey of peak experiences, I should testify to several psychological-spiritual experiences that are rationally and scientifically inexplicable. They occurred in periods of both psychological and physical crises. Although such experiences are important to one's inner life, they must remain personal. The seemingly miraculous I'm confident would be explicable if the range of our knowledge were greater. I recall that my gratitude was so great in one of these experiences that I said to the indwelling presence of the Father that I would remember it, in the far distant future, when I stood in his presence on Paradise.

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