

Spokane Friends Meeting

February 22, 2026

“Speak, Memory”

Johan Maurer

In speaking to you today, I want to change the way I usually organize my messages by starting right out with a query. Here it is:

What are your earliest memories of how you came to have faith?

Maybe I should add a second query:

What are your earliest memories of how faith seemed distant or was discouraged?

Before I explain what I mean, let me read today’s Scripture. It’s Paul writing to the young leader he’s mentoring, Timothy. The New Testament book of Acts records Paul’s and Timothy’s travels together, and Timothy appears as a sort of coauthor in several of Paul’s letters. They were together in Ephesus for a while, and later Timothy served as a leader in the Ephesian church. This may be when Paul, in a Roman prison, wrote his letters to Timothy, from which I’m quoting today.

2 Timothy 1:3-6 NIV

I thank God, whom I serve, as my ancestors did, with a clear conscience, as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

For reasons I'll get into later, I was especially struck by Paul's mentioning Timothy's grandmother Lois, whom Paul knew, along with Timothy's mother Eunice. The Dutch Golden Age painter Willem Drost painted this evocative picture that is sometimes titled Timothy and Lois, with the book in the child's hand emphasizing the faith dimension:



A couple more points about the Scripture before I connect it to my main theme. First, I love how Paul isn't just telling Timothy stuff, but recognizing the faith that Timothy already has, thanks to his family and the confirmation Paul provided by the specific prayer of recognition that is given with the laying on of hands ... or as we Quakers would do it, the recording of a minute of recognition. The shaping of a sincere faith in a person can come from family, community, and mentors, which is exactly what I experienced, and no doubt, many of you.

It's also interesting to notice that Paul often seems to be nervous and even a bit cranky about women in general, especially their behavior in church and in church communities. I say "in general," because over and over he commends the leadership of specific women, as if he were saying, "Don't turn these opinions into rigid rules!" His theology reflects this more inclusive view, as he wrote to the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In today's case, Lois's and Eunice's spiritual influence rippled out through their grandson and son and who knows how many others, extending to this day.

A Quaker scholar, Sarah Ruden, wrote a book that gave me a lot of help in understanding the apparent contradictions in Paul. If you haven't already read it, I highly recommend it: *Paul Among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time*. Again, that's Sarah Ruden.

It's been nearly twelve years since Judy and I came back to the USA for a sabbatical year during our time in Russia as Friends Serving Abroad under Northwest Yearly Meeting. The year 2014 was a difficult year for us as USA citizens living in Russia at the time of the collapse of the Yanukovych regime in Ukraine and the first Russian invasion. Part of Northwest Yearly Meeting's care for us, as our sabbatical year started, was giving us a month of what we called "missionary rehab" at Link Care retreat center in Fresno, California. We had spiritual and therapeutic care, men's groups, women's groups, and study sessions that really helped us decompress from the tensions we brought with us. At the end of our month, I promised my own therapist there that, sometime in the future, I'd continue to work on some of the

concerns that surfaced during our sessions, particularly childhood trauma and how hard it was proving to be to grieve the deaths of my parents.

Well, it's taken longer to follow up that commitment than maybe it should have, but I'm now back in therapy and trying to keep my promises to that Fresno therapist from twelve years ago. Don't worry, I'm not going to go into all the fascinating details about my mental health when I should be talking about Lois and Eunice and people like them, but there are a couple of things that have happened already in recent therapy that I found very helpful. If some of you have been thinking about trauma and therapy, maybe I can be a gentle voice of encouragement.

So, for example, I left my last session with some homework. I'm to put together a list of early memories that seem significant now. Then I'll try to put them in chronological order, and maybe we'll find some patterns or associations with healing potential.

The funny thing is that, coincidentally, that very day and with no related intention, I began reading a book by the writer Vladimir Nabokov, which Judy found for me at the charity shop where she volunteers. The book is named *Speak, Memory*, and it is Nabokov's own memories from the first part of his life, from his childhood years in Russia through his exile years in Europe, right up to his move to the USA in 1940, but starting from the very first memories he could recall from childhood.

Here's one of those memories, in his own distinctive voice:

Several times during a summer it might happen that in the middle of luncheon, in the bright, many-windowed, walnut-paneled dining room on the first floor of our Vyra manor, Aleksey, the butler, with an unhappy expression on his face, would bend over and inform my father in a low voice (especially low if we had company) that a group of villagers wanted to see the *barin* [that is, the master of the estate, Nabokov's father] outside. Briskly my father would remove his napkin from his lap and ask my mother to excuse him. One of the windows at the west end of the dining room gave upon a portion of the drive near the main entrance. One could see the top of the honeysuckle bushes opposite the porch. From that

direction the courteous buzz of a peasant welcome would reach us as the invisible group greeted my invisible father. The ensuing parley, conducted in ordinary tones, would not be heard, as the windows underneath which it took place were closed to keep out the heat. It presumably had to do with a plea for his mediation in some local feud, or with some special subsidy, or with the permission to harvest some bit of our land or cut down a coveted clump of our trees. If, as usually happened, the request was at once granted, there would be again that buzz, and then, in token of gratitude, the good *barin* would be put through the national ordeal of being rocked and tossed up and securely caught by a score or so of strong arms.

In the dining room, my brother and I would be told to go on' with our food. My mother, a tidbit between finger and thumb, would glance under the table to see if her nervous and gruff dachshund was there. "*Un jour ils vont le laisser tomber,*" ["One day they're going to abandon him,"] would come from Mlle Golay, a primly pessimistic old lady who had been my mother's governess and still dwelt with us (on awful terms with our own governesses). From my place at table I would suddenly see through one of the west windows a marvelous case of levitation. There, for an instant, the figure of my father in his wind-rippled white summer suit would be displayed, gloriously sprawling in midair, his limbs in a curiously casual attitude, his handsome, imperturbable features turned to the sky, Thrice, to the mighty heave-ho of his invisible tossers, he would fly up in this fashion, and the second time he would go higher than the first and then there he would be, on his last and loftiest flight, reclining, as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon, like one of those paradisiac personages who comfortably soar, with such a wealth of folds in their garments, on the vaulted ceiling of a church while below, one by one, the wax tapers in mortal hands light up to make a swarm of minute flames in the mist of incense, and the priest chants of eternal repose, and funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there, among the swimming lights, in the open coffin.

I love this piece of writing, which combines a child's lack of full context with our childhood tendency to make fanciful associations, like the similarity between his

levitating father in his wind-rippled white suit with the angels on cathedral ceilings, which he might have noticed during a funeral liturgy.

In my family, such memories would have been unlikely to occur. We lived in an apartment building, not an aristocratic estate, and levitations of any kind outside our second-story windows would have been very hazardous. Furthermore, any mention of religion was strictly forbidden in our home, as I mentioned in a message here a couple of years ago entitled “Language Barriers,” so I would not have made any connections with angels on a church ceiling. I have a vivid memory from grade school, when somehow a discussion about God began, and our teacher asked us what we knew about God. (This was before the prayer-in-school controversy that began in 1962.) I found myself sitting there, strangely tongue-tied, and thought then that I would never be able to use the word “God” out loud in public. Still, I was fascinated that people who appeared normal could have such a discussion at all. It was as if God had very temporarily levitated above the windowsill of our schoolroom, as Nabokov’s father had when his tenants had lofted him into the air.

Another time that God briefly hung in the air in my childhood was when I found a Gospel tract on the floor of our building’s lobby. The author described something resembling what I would now call a conversion experience. This new believer had so fallen in love with the Lord that, in his daily walks in the city, he would go out of his way to pass churches so that his hungry eyes would see the name “Christ” on the church buildings.

A little later, but long before my personal conversion, I used to listen to a Sunday night church service on my favorite top-40 rock station, WCFL, the voice of the Chicago Federation of Labor. Normally, I would be listening to that station to hear Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs sing “Woolly Bully” or “The Hair on my Chinny Chin Chin,” or Herman’s Hermits sing “There’s a Kind of a Hush All Over the World Tonight,” or Tommy James and the Shondells’ unforgettable classic “My Baby Does the Hanky Panky,” or Wilson Pickett’s oh-so-suggestive “In the Midnight Hour.” But Sundays at 11 p.m., something different was on the air. It was the weekly service of the First Church of Deliverance, with the warm, magnetic personality of the Rev.

Clarence H. Cobbs leading the service. Years later, Rev. Jesse Jackson called Clarence Cobbs his “spiritual father.”

Obviously, I kept my being part of Rev. Cobbs’ radio congregation a secret from my family. I attended the First Church of Deliverance while in bed, listening with my little single earphone, with my head under the blanket. I loved the opening hymn, “Jesus Is the Light of the World,” which was my first exposure to Black Gospel music. But what really intrigued me was the pastoral prayer for “the sick, the shut-ins, and all who love the Lord.” Although I did not know intellectually whether I was included in those last words, they always gave me a distinct tingle.

But my oldest memory of this kind was from sometime between the ages of two and four, during the years I lived with my mother’s parents in Stuttgart, Germany, before my parents came to claim me and take me to my new home in Chicago. I was sitting in my grandmother’s lap in their home at Robert Bosch Str. number 104, and she was teaching me how to tie my shoes. And while she was doing that, she was talking to me about the Good Shepherd. I vividly remember that this was how she talked about Jesus. I like to think that these experiences of God rising into my field of vision for just a short time despite the obstacles, formed a golden thread that usually ran below the surface of my life until the day I came to know that I could trust that very same Good Shepherd, and eventually led to my being with you this morning. Maybe you can see why that image of grandmother Lois and the future apostle Paul is so meaningful to me.

During the open worship, as we become attentive to what God has for us personally and as a community, here are some queries to use, *if* they are helpful.

Queries:

- **What are your earliest memories of how you came to have faith? Was there a Lois or Eunice in the picture?**
- **What are your earliest memories of how faith seemed distant or was discouraged?**

- **For whom might you have been, or might become, a Lois or Eunice?**