

# Margaret Scattergood: In Memoriam

by Chuck Fager

**T**he processes of human decline and dying, especially when long and drawn out, are seldom pretty. That was the case with the passing of Margaret Scattergood, a member of Langley Hill Meeting in Virginia, last November. But there was also beauty in this process, and even an unexpected ministry.

In her life, Margaret embodied a type of Quakerism which is all but gone now. A birthright Friend of long Philadelphia lineage, she attended Westtown School and Bryn Mawr College. In 1917 she went to France with one of the first relief units of the newly-formed American Friends Service Committee. She later spent 26 years on the staff of the American Federation of Labor, and worked tirelessly for an end to racial segregation in northern Virginia where she settled in the early 1930s.

Margaret's temperament was not a combative one, but when the necessity arose, she could hold her own. She once even managed to fight the Central Intelligence Agency to a draw. That happened when the infant CIA, which had been shopping around the Washington area for a place to build its headquarters, decided it wanted to take her land. She resisted, and the ensuing legal struggle was ended only by a special act of Congress in 1947. The act permitted the CIA to lay claim to the land, but not to occupy it until after Margaret's death. She was then 53; one doubts that agency officials expected they would have to wait almost 40 more years to take possession, but Margaret was that kind of Quaker: unpredictably sturdy.

This is not, however, an account of Margaret's life, remarkable as it was, but of her death, or rather one part of

her journey towards it. Much of this journey, as mentioned above, was a long, fitful, but marked physical decline, accompanied, more unhappily, by slow deterioration of her once-keen mental faculties. In the early 1980s, there came the illnesses of age, including breaks in

brittle bones, and long bedridden stretches in hospitals and convalescing at Calvert, her stately Victorian home.

Whenever she could walk, though, Margaret came to meeting for worship, sitting almost always in the same spot, but rarely speaking except to make an-



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nouncements. A founding member and long-time corresponding secretary of Langley Hill, she was, in her last years, a mostly silent pillar among us.

It should be no surprise, then, that last summer, when Margaret suffered a stroke and was not expected to live, Langley Hill Friends rallied around to do what we could for her in her last days. The initial form this took was a meeting for worship by the bed where Margaret lay in a coma. Since she was not expected to live long, Friends gathered daily, wondering if each time would be the last.

The days passed, however, and the vigil continued; then someone suggested that they sing, to provide a break in the long silences. And so they did, hymns from the old *Friends Hymnal*. Not surprisingly, they enjoyed the singing, and did it again.

It was at this point that something unusual began to happen. During one of these periods of singing, Margaret began to make strange sounds. At first, people were alarmed, but soon they realized that the sounds were not cries of pain, or random noises; rather, from out of her coma Margaret was trying to sing, to join in the hymns.

And join she did. After a few such sessions it became evident that this music was, for Margaret, like a rope ladder on which she was climbing up from the depths of her coma. Within a few more days she not only could sing, but had regained consciousness sufficiently to speak, to remember and recognize people, to converse, and to enjoy being read to.

This rapid and dramatic improvement was not, at least as I understood it, a recovery in any real sense. Margaret was still dying; doubtless she knew it, as did we. Rather, it seemed as if somehow she had decided, or been enabled, to pause in her passing to take part in and enjoy the fellowship being offered her by the visiting Friends.

And thus for the rest of the summer Friends came to her bedside almost every day, in small groups and individually, to sing, read, or just to talk. And as both an observer and participant, I became aware of an unexpected dimension in this process. It began as a ministry to the dying, but it became as well a ministry of the dying. Margaret's response to our attentions, if it did not heal her, was uplifting and healing to the

entire meeting, and to many of us individually as well.

These singing and reading visits, for instance, were frequently spoken of very movingly in our First-day worship. An experience of mine may give the flavor of their individual impact. One afternoon I visited Margaret while feeling very depressed, in the depths of what I came to call the mid-life blues. We did not speak of this; I did not seek her counsel. I read to her from the New Testament. It was something of a benefit of her condition that although she had heard and read the passages many times before, they still seemed new and striking to her. Then we talked a little, and when I left, after about an hour, she thanked me for coming.

As visits went, this was not unusual. It was only afterward, on the way home, when I realized that sometime during that brief visit, my depression had bottomed out, and my disposition was now on a steady upswing. Then I realized that while I had gone to minister to her, she had also ministered to me, probably without even realizing it.

There is no happy ending to this story. The respite, lovely as it was, could not last long. The overbusy schedules of Langley Hill Friends made frequent visits harder and harder to sustain as the weeks went on; and by the beginning of autumn, Margaret's condition again resumed its decline. She became steadily less responsive until finally, in mid-October, she was moved to a nursing home, where she died on November 7, at the age of 92.

As this recollection was being written, construction signs were already up on fences along the edge of Margaret's property, announcing its impending absorption into an expanded CIA headquarters complex. The agency will now get Margaret's land, but Langley Hill Friends are left with something of hers too: a shared experience that has become more than a community memory, almost a legend in our time.

"Blessed are those who mourn," Jesus told us, "for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). There are many who have mourned Margaret Scattergood's passing. But for me and others, as Jesus said, there has been in this mourning unexpected comfort in Margaret's dying. And being thus graced with this unexpected ministry was a blessing indeed. □



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