

PEACE AND SOCIAL CONCERNS NEWSLETTER July 15, 2018

HAVE YOU EVER BOUGHT A MELON?

Jean Capps thinks and speaks in metaphors. We met for lunch in downtown Silver Spring recently. I wanted to know more about this Maryland girl who is always flying off to some place exotic or scary or both.

Her ambition, as a young girl, was to become a nurse. Off she went to Montgomery College, then UMD, finally to GU, for a BS in Nursing. At Georgetown she was required to take courses in philosophy and in religion. She feared efforts to convert her to Catholicism, but those fears proved unfounded. The courses instead turned out to be fundamental to her world view and her life's work.

The philosophy course included three parts: Ethics and International Relations, the Philosophy of Nonviolence, and the Ethics of Tactical Nuclear Weapons in Western Europe within Rich Nations and Poor Nations.

The course in religion included Religious Traditions of Southeast Asia, India, China, and Japan, and provided her with a beginning knowledge of Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism and sparked an interest at looking at her own Christian background.

Upon graduation, Jean began to work in hospitals in Medical Surgical, Shock Trauma, and Intensive Care Units. She saw many cases that resulted from preventable causes: smoking, overeating, poor nutrition, alcoholism, violence. This work led Jean to question what brought many people to death's door prematurely, planting the seed for Jean's lifelong interest in public health.

At a casual luncheon Jean expressed her interest in international public health. Her friend's idea was to try to get to the refugee camps on the Cambodian border in Thailand. At the time Cambodia's Kampuchea government was limiting health relief workers to communist countries. Jean overcame that.

From 1969 through the 1970's Cambodia was in constant struggle with external forces from North Vietnam, US backed South Vietnam and Thailand. U.S. bombing of Cambodia resulted in the rise of the murderous Pol Pot regime, which led to mass attempts to flee the country and Cambodian border camps which were rife with conflict, illness and starvation. Eventual humanitarian aid arose through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Jean went home from her luncheon and called the Red Cross. Her message, "I'm fluent in French and I want to go to Cambodia." Within a month she received an assignment from Geneva to go to Southeast Asia. Those philosophy and religion courses became tremendously helpful in understanding the religious and cultural perspectives of the refugees. She traveled to India, Malaysia, Singapore, Nepal, Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand, and then Somalia. The refugee nurse bug bit hard and deep.

She understood that she needed more education in diseases in the areas she was visiting. She applied to Johns Hopkins, the number one school in the world for Public Health, and took a one year intensive course to receive her Master's of Public Health (MPH) Degree. She began working for the Peace Corps in an administrative position providing advice and managing cases for sick and injured Peace Corps Volunteers.

In the 1990's she received a John Hopkins' Fellow's position to work for USAID. She was a technical advisor, working to strengthen the quality of health and nutrition programs in relief organizations such as CARE and Save the Children. She came to realize that well-

meaning staffs of humanitarian organizations did not know how to evaluate and defend their effectiveness. This position formed the foundation of her approach to evaluating effectiveness of good work in health and nutrition, to “uncover lessons learned and to foster best practices.”

When the fellowship ended she took her own “lessons learned” to consult with many programs tackling major issues like HIV, maternal and newborn health, malaria, and Ebola. Evaluations usually ran into initial resistance. People are often reluctant to examine their own programs. She opens her presentations with innocuous questions.

“Have you ever bought a melon?”

Despite chuckles and raised eyebrows, she continues.

“After a few purchases, you learn to smell the melon, to push gently at the stem point, to bounce the melon in your hand. The information you’ve picked up by watching other customers, talking to vendors, cutting into under ripe, tasteless melons, has taught you how to purchase a perfect melon, juicy, sweet, firm, delicious.”

This is Jean’s approach to evaluation. She is not a statistician. She is a detective, searching out unique perspectives at every level. Posing questions to policy makers, to mothers who change their routines, to nurses who introduce sanitary conditions, and ultimately encouraging these same people to be comfortable with asking questions of themselves. She promotes the experience and observations of everyone to uncover what works and what doesn’t.

Given the enormity of problems in areas of the world where Jean has worked, many would find her work overwhelming and depressing. But Jean keeps the focus on discovering what works and being able to say with certainty that X number of children or mothers will not die since there is proof that this practice works.

Jean’s philosophy is one of life long learning, to constantly be open to evidence, to wisdom, to experience. Her goal in taking on a subject as big and difficult as chronic malnutrition is to look for factors that are preventable and the practices that make a difference. Then make the evidence understandable to decision makers, to nonprofessionals, to donors, to the public.

Our conversation turned to Quakers. Jean began learning about Quakers from reading when she was in Somalia and visiting her first Meeting in London. She has been an attender and member of FMW for 36 years. Her professional side informs her spiritual side. Lessons she has learned can be applied to FMW, and committee work, and in our personal lives.

She remarks that faith based organizations, with people who love and care, are often reluctant to objectively look at the results of their work. The peace efforts of Quakers should be examined. What has made a difference? Are 1968 approaches effective in 2018? What needs to be tried? Are we willing to look at our programs, to be open, to accept failure, to understand that every point of view is important, to use what works? Start with the questions.: “What do you want and when will you know you got it?”

Peace and Social Concerns Committee has a really big charge, to speak for the concerns of the community as a whole. We must be willing to question and measure, to think about why this and not that, to find the evidence that our efforts are making a difference.

On a personal level which organizations will use our donations well? Is the activity of advocating enough to solve problems?

Her final metaphor for gathering and assessing information, “If the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail.”

Thanks, Jean.