Deborah Little Wyman

A small good thing. You get an idea, let the idea get you, help it to grow. What happened to me was a slow stripping of layers of myself I thought I couldn’t live without. One day I evidently hit bottom with my fears, belongings in paper bags. I heard my own silent voice say, I want to have a life in which I could go and sit with that woman until she has what she wants. I had been uneasily aware for some time that despite how I was doing, I was not on the street. I think it’s in the job description of authorities to make innovators time), to create an environment in which people who have nothing could make impulses, with my best skills (writing, creating something new, networking, and communications, something else was lying in wait for me. An unexplained itch was not going away.

A few months earlier, the rector of the church I’d gone to for a few years initially for the music, sat me down and told me he thought I was a priest. I had stowed off of its office and stomped down Newbury Street in Boston saying with every muscle, no no no. I grew up in the ‘60s and had no desire to be anywhere near something as hierarchical as I knew the church could be. Besides that, I wasn’t spiritual enough. I was a writer. I couldn’t stand up in front of people and talk. I needed a salary, a job description, benefits. I couldn’t afford seminary, and ordination I’d heard, I shouldn’t pass ordination exams. These two “invitations” literally fell unbidden and unwelcome into my life.

How do people do things that are impossible? What followed for me were several years in an excruciating cavern between one life and another I couldn’t yet see. I had a grip on my dearly-won seat as a responsible tax paying adult, and I was sifting and sorting through the rich soil of wounds and dreams that life so generously provides each of us. How far could I roam and still be me. A sure sign of new direction is the prize combo of fear, doubt, and insecurity.

In the early ’70s I worked with Edwin Land, founder of Polaroid, as he was inventing a major advance in instant photography. I was the first person on the steps. I resigned from all my nonprofit boards and started volunteering in a new women’s shelter in Cambridge. The director wanted me to do communications and development work, of course, but I was there to move closer to the women, to basic needs, to just sit still, on those hard folding chairs, and listen. I fell in love, with the simplicity, the women, the no nonsense, bare vulnerability, truthfulness, no justifications or explanations. Lives with no footnotes, just out there on the page. It was the beginning of a slow turning from a life I loved to another, very different one. I wanted to take what I had experienced as the gifts of church—community, acceptance, forgiveness, compassion, silence and music, the gifts I knew first hand—out to people who could not, for whatever reason, come in to receive them. Here was a way for my energy from civil rights, anti-war, free speech, women’s rights, AIDS and other actions, a way to bring together my best political and social impulses, with my best skill set of creating something new, networking, being outsiders, organizing, talking with people, and especially one person at a time, to create an environment in which people who have nothing could make a safe, kind community.

You know you are on to something when the interesting people start cheering and the institutions dig in its heels. The diocese did not think a priest belonged on the street. I think it’s in the job description of authorities to make innovators miserable. Important to remember that’s the job they—and not we—have chosen. But still, we have practicality, including a living wage, responsibilities and fear to protect us from change. So a yes is the beginning of a long trip requiring all the faithfulness we can muster.

Friends reminded me of old truths: “just keep doing what you are doing” and “you know Debbie, sometimes it’s not enough to be right.” I needed to keep doing the ministry, collecting stories that would make the necessary bridges to change old thinking. As I felt more and more in love with folks on the street, I felt their support and became better at putting words on what we were doing. Over time, as the ministry became real and more public, many radio, TV and print pieces appeared, and I began to hear us referred to as a movement, and that our street ministry was changing the church, breaking it open, giving it meaning, and changing how people understood homelessness.

We all navigate in spheres starved for innovation. Individually and collectively our very integrity depends on new vision, requiring every last ordinary one of us to show up.

In fact, it’s true, in the beginning I didn’t know what I was doing. I made up street ministry as I went along. “What are you doing out here?” I was asked by a man I’d greeted for two weeks passing by his panhandling spot. This was the dreaded question not just Jack, but my bishop was asking. We’re standing there, eye to eye, Jack, his outstretched cup into which a passer by had just dropped a coin—and brand x, middle class me, in a clergy collar. He looked me in the eye, he, having nothing to hide or lose. He said, “Doing good is a hustle too, you know.” In no time, I was panhandling too.

Street church doesn’t cost anything, but I needed a salary. Two things I felt panhandling about made found a home. I realized we were not an outreach project. We are a church that has no way to support itself. I would say, “We don’t need your money as much as you need to come and be with us.” Second, donors love successes and I had to resist the temptation to sell our ministry as a solution to homelessness. People we referred to as “the chronically homeless” are listers in a way they and they are by definition likely never to go, as we say, “to” or make life changes that people who live as we do consider worth supporting.

After two years of hanging out on park benches, subway stations, heating grates and train tunnels in Boston, during the week before Easter 1996, I had the idea that we could actually have an outdoor worshipping church. I sensed people sitting waiting to be gathered. That Easter I set up a folding table on Boston Common and 10 brave souls came. I hadn’t asked permission or planned this to be regular, but the next day as I made my street rounds, several men who had not even been at the service told me they’d see me on Sunday. Celebration is deeply sought by people who by our standards have nothing to celebrate.

I learned that church can be made from the shards of real life and is big enough to welcome the bloody faces, raw truths, drunken gospel singing, cigarette smoking, seizures, nakedness, squabbling, ecstasy and despair. Dave overdoses on Listerine waiting for the Sunday morning bootlegger and the EMTs drive into the middle of our church to pick him up. We pray for him and I’ll head to the ER at Boston Medical after the service. John needs his new wheelchair blessed. “Here, I have a song for ya,” says Jimmy grinning and singing rounds of “God bless the Boston Red Sox” as we start our prayers. Micky has a shoebox full of baby rats she wants baptized.

I have a pastoral care team that treats mental health in hospitals, plus common art and common cinema. Part of making it up as I went along included how to handle all the offers of help, and how to ensure the physical and emotional safety of people working with us, and I found myself chaplain to the new social services teams. I realized we needed disciplined self reflection to prevent burnout. I required volunteers and seminarians to be given an open space. I realized that I had eyes Al-Amin, have spiritual directors, and attend team reflection meetings.

I was determined that the ministry survive the founder’s leaving and I knew that meant I shouldn’t stay too long. This is one of the hardest things, but it worked. Today Common Cathedral Boston is in its third generation of leadership. I left my ministry and my salary and miraculously received a Ford Foundation grant to support what I call the mission work of helping people start street ministries and churches. Today we have some 270 affiliates in the US, Brazil, Australia and the UK involved in about 130 ministries: Church of the Advocate in Asheville, Church of the Common Ground in Atlanta, Open Cathedral in San Francisco, Common Cathedral in Longmont, CO, Street Church in Cincinnati, The Bridge Church in Guerneville, CA, Common Ground in Atlanta, Open Cathedral in San Francisco, Common Cathedral in Longmont, CO, Street Church in Cincinnati, Igreja na Rua in Rio de Janeiro, Church on the Green in New Haven, the Bridge Church in Guerneville, CA, Grace Street Ministry in Portland, ME, Welcome Church in Philadelphia, and so on.

Now that there are many with experience in this ministry, we have a large team of mentors for new ministries. I could be hit by a scooter tomorrow and the ministry would thrive. We receive new inquiries and are connected by a listserv, a website, a Facebook page and a director. Simple links maintained by volunteers.

Yes has a life of its own.

A small good thing. You get an idea, let the idea get you, help it to grow just by following your feet, as soon as you know how to do something really well, teach someone else how to do it and let it go, keep giving it away, give it away. Tell stories about it, invite people to be part of it.

We each hold a unique, fragile idea, a small good thing, the question that needs to be asked, the answer that needs to be tried. An angle on the problem no one else has. No one else can do that thing. It’s yours. You’ll know it when it comes. Inshallah. May it be so.

Baccalaureate Address given Sunday, May 12, 2013 by The Reverend Dr. Deborah Little Wyman, founder & missoner, Common Cathedral & Ecclesia Ministries

Almanac Supplement May 21, 2013 www.upenn.edu/almanac
A Rewarding Lifetime of Service

Every year, our Barbara and Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships engages thousands of Penn students in service-based coursework—more than 60 courses annually—addressing everything from education and health care, to unemployment and economic well-being in West Philadelphia.

You have demonstrated that the best way to combine learning well and living well is by serving others. Yet you can’t help but wonder—with some anxiety—what lies ahead? How do you combine a great career with good work?

In my own life, the greatest satisfactions have never been the quickest wins. As a newly-minted PhD, I earned an average starting academic salary, about $200 a week.

This was more than double the peak earnings of what my hero—my father—ever earned before he died, when I was in high school. Unlike my father, I had many more lucrative options for a career. Had I taken any of those roads more traveled, I would never be here and never had such a rewarding career.

The contributions of a Penn education can never be rightly measured by your first paycheck or even your lifetime income. At the end of the day, it won’t be what you take but what you give that matters.

A previous Penn commencement speaker, Denzel Washington, said it best: of every funeral procession you have ever seen, how many times has the hearse been pulling a U-Haul?

There are so many ways everyone can serve and it’s never too soon to start. Early in high school, my first job was washing dishes at a sleep-away summer camp for disadvantaged children. I later became a counselor at this camp, and still count spending time with those children as among the most satisfying summers of my life.

Like almost all of my campers, 10-year-old Dana’s family was on assistance. Her single mom worked three jobs housecleaning, but lived below the poverty line. Dana seemed unrelentingly sad, and often acted out, except when she had my attention. She told me she felt sad and guilty that her mom couldn’t come to camp with her because her mom was the one who worked so hard to support Dana’s entire family.

One of my goals that summer became to dispel Dana’s guilt. Now, dispelling guilt does not come naturally to anyone who—like me—has been raised well by a Jewish mother and father. But being happy and guilty—now that might be achievable. And I was also taught that to save one person is to save the world.

So I set out to prove to Dana that if she worked really hard to become the camp leader in her age group—as she did—that her mother would be so proud. After camp ended, Dana’s mother wrote me to say that Dana came home much happier, and better behaved.

In college, I was a work-study student and substitute teacher at an inner-city high school. I’ll never forget my first day as a substitute teacher. A veteran teacher entered my homeroom and, in front of all my students, sternly shouted at me: “take your seat with all the other students.” That unforgettable moment taught me an invaluable lesson in overcoming humiliation.

My story is far from unique. Everyone we are honoring today will tell you that their beginnings were humble, and that their greatest satisfactions have come from serving others.

To today’s Penn graduates, I say: Share this citizenship of service. You have been successful at Penn precisely because you’ve been such strong citizens of our University community.

Now destiny awaits your success as citizens of your society and the world. Your efforts will bring unrivalled and often unexpected rewards for the good deeds you do.

Today is your celebratory day. I know you will go forth proud not only in your lifelong advantages but also—and far more importantly—avoid in your obligations to serve as citizens. Certainly, we will always be proud of how your Penn education taught you to relish the joys of great citizenship. And you can be sure that I will be avid in my admiration of you.

But—as I am about to prove to you—I am far from alone in my admiration. So I ask that we all stand and join together now—proud moms and dads, spouses and partners, grandmas and grandpas, sisters and brothers, family and friends, honored guests, my fellow trustees and faculty—in unison with our graduates—in showing them and the world right now just how proud, boisterously proud, we are of their Penn citizenship!

Thank you!
Remarks given Monday, May 13, 2013 by Dwight Jaggard, Professor of Electrical and Systems Engineering; and Incoming Chair of the Faculty Senate.

Detecting Your Mission

Good morning everyone—Vice President Joe Biden and honored guests, President Amy Gutmann, Provost Vincent Price, Deans, faculty and our most important attendees, graduating students and their families.

I am Dwight Jaggard, chair of the Penn Faculty Senate and I am delighted to join you in this festive occasion that is a marker of your transition from being students of Penn to becoming alums of Penn.

There is a story I have told once before and it seems appropriate to use it at this place in the program. Here I can identify with Al Gore, who when being one of a number of speakers said, “I feel a bit like the fifth husband of actress Zsa Zsa Gabor. I know just what is expected of me... but I am not sure I can keep it interesting.” Well, this morning I will try to do both what is expected of me and also will try to keep it interesting.

For the expected part, it is my great pleasure to congratulate you on behalf of more than 4,000 members of Penn’s faculty. Without students and graduates, there would be, of course, no university. The majority of us who are faculty have been here during your entire time at Penn—we have applauded your success, watched you mature as intellectuals and have been amazed at your talent and understanding. In some sense, we each took a chance on each other several years ago. Isn’t it great that it has paid off? You made the right choice and so did we! I wish you well in the years ahead. So, felicitaciones, badhâ ’y hâ, mazel tov, gong xi nü, or simply congratulations from Penn’s faculty!

On the matter of being interesting, I would like to leave you with one thought for today. In a time where people are announcing their re-invention, their own transformation, their readiness to grab the next wave, there are some words of wisdom from a figure I often bring to the attention of my students in my leadership classes. That person is Victor Frankl. Frankl was a survivor of the holocaust, an inspiring author and an Austrian neurologist and psychotherapist. His book, Man’s Search for Meaning, is a classic in that it provides insight into how the human spirit can survive suffering. In Frankl’s case it was suffering through the Holocaust. Man’s Search for Meaning also lays the groundwork for Frankl’s pioneering logotherapy, a new approach to analysis focused on meaning. As I have changed and modulated my own career, one idea that has been very helpful has been Victor Frankl’s suggestion to “detect your mission.” This idea of detection is wonderful since it assumes that we all have a mission, a purpose, a deep reason for being on the planet. This is something that I deeply believe. [Of course I acknowledge that this mission, this purpose, can change over time.]

So, I encourage you who are graduates, to consider your own core values, strengths and passions... your opportunities, wide open vistas, and a multitude of available paths... and take some time to bring all of these together and to detect your mission, to find your purpose, to find your authentic self, and to discover how and where you will make your contribution. The search will be well worth it. And I wish you the very best of success in this next venture.

Pen Commencement Address given on Monday, May 13, 2013 by Joseph R. Biden, Jr., the 47th Vice President of the United States

A Chance to Write a New Chapter

Madame President, thank you, thank you for the honor. I have the dubious distinction of not having—well let me put it this way—there’ll be no U-Haul truck behind my casket. When I did my financial disclosure as Vice President the first time, the Washington Post said, “it’s probable no man has assumed the office of Vice President with fewer assets than Joe Biden.” I hope they were talking financial assets! Then there was all this discussion about why I had no money. I’ll tell you why I had no money: four years of Penn, three years of Syracuse, four years at Georgetown, three years at Yale, two years at Tulane, two years at Penn, and now a granddaughter at Penn. I was asked why I wore a Penn tie. My answer is “I earned it.”

Faculty, distinguished guests, parents, grandparents, friends, all graduates: congratulations, and special congratulations and thanks to those of you who are going to be commissioned in the United States Military today. You are about to join the finest group of warriors the world has ever seen. Ever, ever seen. My hat is off to you.

To all the parents, I offer you special congratulations today. Not only have your sons and daughters completed an education at what my daughter and my granddaughter and my son say is the finest university in America. Not sure how my son who went to Yale feels about that, but I happen to agree with my other son. Ladies and gentlemen, parents, you’re also about to get a pay raise, unless your child is going on to graduate school. As I indicated, two of my children have graduated from this great university, and my granddaughter who is here with me today, just finished her first year and survived pledging at Penn. So your pride is justified. Not only because it took an awful lot of hard work for all of you to get to this day, I promise you all of you graduates, it’s worth it.

I read the headlines today on the way up... the Associated Press has said “Biden to Offer Advice to Penn Graduates.” I have gained too much wisdom to offer any advice. I’ve been around too long to know that’s not useful. But I would like to make a couple of observations. No graduating class gets to choose the world into which they graduate. Every graduating class faces unique challenges. Every class enters the history that up to this point has been written for you. But few enter at a point where they genuinely have a chance to write a new chapter, to bend history just a little bit. I would (continued on next page)
suggestion your class has that chance, and I acknowledge it creates anxiety, probably more—and I mean this seriously—among your parents than you. I understand, because my generation faced the same kind of questions and uncertainties. What to do is what our grandparents did when they entered college in 1968, and now. And today you see headlines in the Washington Post, January 2, 2013 saying “The world is baffled by the ‘fiscal cliff,’ sees it as a sign of American decline.” The July after I graduated in ’68, the same publication declared, “Polls report decline in US standing abroad.” When you see the headlines in the Wall Street Journal of November this past year about “widespread fiscal and economic uncertainty,” remember the headline in November, 1988, the same publication that said, “US fiscal crisis since 1931.” My generation heard the same voices of doom and despair that your generation hears today. “American decline,” “America’s lost its way,” “whither America?” What those voices do not and did not understand is that in both instances—yours and mine—we graduated into a world that had changed: the world of William Butler Yeats. Writing about his Ireland in a poem called “Easter 1916,” he said, “All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born.”

Old answers, the policies of the previous generation that has served my generation so well, have little applicability to the world into which I was graduating. On the eve of my graduation, Dr. King had been assassinated, the Vietnam War was raging, and in the shadow of my convocation, Robert Kennedy was assassinated. Our generation was not only graduating across that stage to receive our diplomas, to a person we were absolutely confident that the naysayers were wrong, and that there were significant possibilities available to us. We ended the war in Vietnam, we ended the nuclear stalemate, the Soviet Union secured civil rights, fundamentally altered women’s rights for the better, began an environmental movement that’s far from finished, ushered in an information age that shrunk the world beyond recognition and in the process lay the foundation for a period of technological innovation that generated the world’s strongest economy in the 70s, 80s and the 90s. Today, you’re all graduating into another world that has changed equally and profoundly. Different dangers and different possibilities. Climate change left unattended by people with whom I work, and I marvel at whether they got an education. I’m serious. To deny climate change is the equivalent of not recognizing the grief of the family of a person who died a year ago means: A terrible beauty is born.”