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My First Northfield

It must have been in 1935 or 1936 that I first heard of Northfield. Some girls I knew went off to the Conference and came back changed beings — for the worse, I thought: From being good fun with an engaging sense of humor, they had turned all dewy-eyed and serious. The Conference had been (here a heavy-breathing pause) **wonderful!** They had met a group of ministers who were (another pause) **wonderful...** sooo sweet and sooo good-looking! They had learned what real Christian (still another pause) **love** was, and it was our duty-everybody's duty to **LOVE** (here the eyes opened wide) **EVERYBODY!!** My rejoinder that this all sounded sentimental to me was dismissed with a pitying smile and the reply in deliberately gentle tones that of course I couldn't be expected to understand. I, of course, had never been to Northfield. That was a privilege available only to girls! Listening to them totally put me off. How gooey can you get! Within two weeks my friends became their normal down-to-earth selves again, which was a relief; but I never forgot that bizarre, if reassuringly momentary, aberration of theirs into dismayingly damp piety. Northfield! Hah! No Thank you! Not for me! Not ever!

My actual introduction to Northfield came over thirty years later, in 1969, when Sarah Gamble and Leo Conant, after one or two failed attempts, finally inveigled me into agreeing to join the staff of ministers and teach a bible class and a class in Christian social ethics.

I arrived on campus and, having put my clothes and books in the clean, but Spartanly-furnished room on the top floor of Merrill Keep that I was to share with another member of the staff, went back downstairs and, figuratively with ears drawn back and eye-whites showing like those of a frightened horse, stepped into the living-room where the first pre-Conference meeting was shortly to begin.

Immediately all my apprehensions were confirmed. The room seemed absolutely awash with women, most of them apparently in their late teens or very early twenties, all talking at once, some standing, some sitting, some lying on the floor, some moving from group to group around the room. At the center of almost every group was a male figure whom I had little difficulty in divining must be one of "the Ministers." On a couch off to the right of the doorway a tall, broad-shouldered young man was sitting, breezily clad in a capacious Mexican peasant blouse (tied in at the waist with an intricately braided fiber belt), white bell-bottomed trousers, and with bare sandaled feet. He was sending one joke after another spinning into the air to the uproarious laughter of a patently adoring group of girls of high-school age who were draped over the back and arms of the couch and on the floor around him. He, I learned a few minutes later, was Charley Stubbs, the Catholic chaplain at a Connecticut convent school and a Conference favorite. Beyond him, by the window, stood a young man with almost film star good looks who was joking teasingly with his surrounding throng of female admirers. He, I was to learn, was Dick Danenfelser, the Protestant chaplain at

Brown, a onetime football star and another Conference favorite. In the middle of the room, a slightly older man was standing, dressed in white shirt and tennis shorts with a racquet under his arm, talking earnestly with a circle of older women who seemed to be hanging on his every word with the same intentness as the girls in the other groups. He turned out to be the Conference's first seeded player both in the chapel and on the tennis court — Larry Durgin, the week's Conference Hour speaker, minister of an historic New York congregation that under his leadership had been experimenting with revolutionary changes in its pattern of corporate life. In another corner an older woman was sitting, somewhat bent but with eyes sparkling with Vitality, talking animatedly with another bevy of attentive girls grouped on the floor at her feet. She, I was to learn, was Mrs. Harper Sibley, whose leadership of women in the Episcopal Church, I knew, had become close to a legend for its vigor, common sense, and spiritual depth. A few feet from her was standing a man in white shirt, khaki drills, with something like a baseball cap without a visor shoved to the back of his head, that my years in predominantly Jewish Brookline enabled me to recognize as a yarmulke. He was standing alone, and I thought with relief, "There's another stranger like myself. At least we have something in common" when a fresh group of girls swept by me into the room, looked across at him shrieked out **"Max!"** and like a flock of seagulls swooped across to gather him up and cluster behind the grand piano where they could talk with no fear of interruption. He, I was to learn, was Max Wall, the rabbi of a vigorous Conservative temple in Burlington, Vermont.

In this maelstrom of movement, in fact, there seemed to be only two centers of quiet. One was where two young men (one white, bearded, with a face out of an El Greco painting, the other Black, clean-shaven, with an expression difficult to read) and a young woman, the only three people in the room clad in blue jeans, stood together enigmatically watching the various groups and occasionally exchanging a brief word with one another. The other was where I was standing by the door — alone.

Alone, until a woman I had not noticed hitherto, blonde hair carefully groomed, and wearing one of those deceptively casual yellow cotton frocks for which **Talbots** has become famous, quietly appeared at my elbow, asked who I was, and introduced herself as "Emily Mitchell", adding wryly as she looked out into the room, "I don't know why I'm doing this. My daughter and I are in charge of the sports program." I had a momentary impression, inaccurate perhaps but comforting nonetheless, that she might just be feeling something of the discomfort in her role that I most certainly was feeling in mine (and I felt like turning around and going straight back home). That helped.

My initial discomfort diminished, much to my relief, as the days passed. Not that I felt more adequate to the task at hand. At evaluation sessions with the Program Committee (chaired by Chris Wilcox) while some of my colleagues reported their classes as breathlessly interested in every word they uttered, an amiable, slightly bored patience was about the best I felt I evoked in mine. However, any self-conscious preoccupation with myself was simply submerged in the interest I rapidly found myself taking in all that was going on around me.

For one thing, the mere size of the Conference made it impressive. There were four hundred girls at-

tending in 1969, filling the two dormitories Gould and Marquand, and necessitating the use of two separate dining rooms. There were housemothers and a corps of "Junior Advisors" (principally former Conferees who were now freshman and sophomores in college) who were in residence in the dorms with them. The second floor of Merrill Keep was filled by the group we ministers collectively christened "The Ladies." These women, many of whom had been Conferees themselves in their schooldays, were so convinced of the value of the Conference as a spiritual experience for teen-age girls that they voluntarily assured its continuance from year to year by contributing time, energy, money, and, whenever they could, their physical presence to maintain the standard of organization, administration, and program that they considered essential. On the third floor of Merrill Keep (discreetly segregated by the phalanx of Ladies on the second) were the male participants in the Conference: "the Ministers" (who comprised all but one or two of the entire professional staff) and the two teen-age boys (christened "Heavenly Messengers") who set up projectors, ran films, carried messages, took people to and from the bus station in Greenfield, and ran whatever other errands the Registrar, Graceanna Hawley, needed to send them on. The Ministers and the Ladies all breakfasted together in Merrill Keep, and at lunch and dinner were assigned to tables in the Gould and Marquand dining rooms to eat with the girls.

The day began with an optional, but well-attended, pre-breakfast period of prayer and meditation in the Merrill Keep living room (as one of the ministerial"new boys" that was a duty of mine one morning). After breakfast came Conference Hour in the Chapel at which Larry Durgin, robed, gave from the pulpit a series of lectures on Christian theology. After that the conferees adjourned to assigned bible classes at which attendance was taken. Then came lunch.

Immediately after lunch, the Conference assembled in the upstairs amphitheatre in Stone Hall for Platform, a program of films — some experimental, some documentary which raised the social issues to which Christian Faith must somehow be applied if it was to have any relevance to life. In the "Faith and Life" classes that followed (once again in a school-room, with different students and teachers assigned to the various class rooms and attendance required) these issues and their implications for individual members of the Conference were expected to be explored in greater depth and detail. The rest of the afternoon was free for sports or art work in the school's studio.

After supper (for which the Ladies and the Conferees changed into dresses or sweaters and skirts, and the Ministers donned jackets and ties) came Tree Sessions, which turned out to be exactly that. As soon as supper was over, every Minister was expected to go to the stretch of lawn between Gould and Merrill Keep, select a tree, and sit down under it. The girls were then expected to circle about, like customers at a rummage sale, pick out the minister of their choice, and join him under his tree to talk about whatever they chose. Rather than settle permanently on one, they could, if they preferred, move from tree to tree as a customer moves from table to table.

About a half-an-hour later the Tree Sessions were scheduled to break up, and the entire Conference in twos and threes would set off across the rolling lawns to Round Top, on whose slopes everyone would

sit for another thirty minutes looking out over the Connecticut Valley and engaging in silent meditation. Sunset would warn that Vespers was about to begin, and the company would then stroll back to the Chapel for the service that would bring the day to a close. The girls would then retire to their dormitories, the ladies to the second floor of Merrill Keep and the ministers to the third floor and that would be that until the next morning.

Such a busy program left little time for morbid musings. I must confess, however, that it was not the program itself that aroused my keenest interest. The Conference had been going since 1893, with the experience behind it (through his daughter-in-law) of Dwight Moody, the Billy Graham of the 19th century and, through the Ladies themselves, with as much as 60 years pooled experience of (to quote Moody himself) "bringing teen-age girls to Christ" — it was clear to me the Conference knew what it was doing. Indeed, I shared many of the same goals. However, as I'm sure was true for others, my own experience and personality made certain parts of the program more appealing than others.

Larry Durgin had achieved a success in the ordained ministry that it was by then amply clear I should never even approach. He had responded to the challenge of making the Church relevantly redemptive in the bewildering complexities of downtown New York with resourcefulness and courage; and he was torn with pain, almost verging on despair, at the half-hearted response of the institutional Church to the social problems of the day in a way that won my deep sympathy. However, in his lectures this seemed to me to skew his presentation of the Christian Faith to the point where, in that disillusioned time only a year after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, and with Vietnam still a running sore, it said 'Amen' to every doubt his audience might hold, and only the most feeble 'Maybe' to the reality of Christian hope or the redeeming power of the Holy Spirit (even in the midst of the near-despair in which so many had been plunged). That bothered me more and more as the week progressed. When he took the position that inter communion between the different branches of the Christian Church could only properly come after a complete reunion of all churches and denominations had been achieved, rather than serving (as my experience had already shown me that it did) as an essential means pushing people towards that reunion. I became as upset in my way as he was in his. The pulpit was his — to take him on in debate would have been merely to create yet another distracting dissonance. Instead, I withdrew further and further back in the congregation (we all sat formally in the pews, and most of the audience were busy taking notes as the lectures progressed). By the last day I was lying out of sight in the very last pew in the chapel, where I could listen without any fear that my otherwise obvious disagreement might disturb anyone.

I found Platform fascinating. The films opened up the social issues of the day — child abuse, racial prejudice, sexism, problems in marriage and family life, drug abuse — with a freshness and power I had experienced in no other medium. The response in the discussion that followed was inspiring in its frankness, honest grappling with reality, and confession of concern combined with bewilderment as to what means to adopt that might make any real impact in attacking these problems.

The classes I found dispiriting. In my morning class the girls seemed to be not merely bored, but even

mildly allergic to the Bible; and my own enthusiasm for it did not prove contagious. My afternoon Faith and Life class was a bit freer, but equally low in energy. The girls were concerned about the social evils of the day, but pretty firmly convinced that the Christian Faith had nothing to say to them that was worth thinking about. Halfway through the week, when the trust level in the class had risen to the point where people began to feel comfortable about sharing some of their deeper feelings, one of the girls, the daughter of one of the Conference organizers, said, with the quiet finality that stops argument in its tracks, that she did not believe in the existence of God anyhow, and that atheism seemed to her the only intellectually respectable position for an educated, thoughtful adult to hold. Meditative nods from several of her classmates indicated that she spoke for many more than herself. I was reminded of Phillips Brooks' comment after reading the autobiography of Harriet Martineau, the English social reformer and critic of traditional Christianity: "the calm complacency of her unbelief is something wonderful", but I was unable for the moment to share his tolerant amusement. The quiet voice rejecting as illusion a faith that had enabled me to survive the stresses I had encountered serving in the Pacific theatre in World War II and to which in consequence I had committed the rest of my life raised in my only half-conscious memory echoes of other quiet voices out of the distant past — my parents' sophisticated Cambridge friends in the 1920s calmly dismissing as unworthy of a moment's respect the faith of their parents, which they had all uniformly repudiated. In a moment I became a small boy again, overhearing this soft, self-congratulatory conversation, much upset by it since I was deeply attached to my grandparents (among the "parents" being discussed) and felt already helpfully sustained by their faith (what little of it I understood anyway!). Then, I had felt far too small and powerless to protest and for a second in that class the girls became those tree tall adults and I the small boy gasping inwardly in dismay at what I heard. Yet, even in that moment of regression and immobilizing dismay, I was also aware of a very different feeling welling up inside me. "Good for you!", I was thinking, "You're saying what you really feel and in an atmosphere where everything is set up to push the other way. 'Unfaith', not 'faith' is where it's really at for a lot of you, I suspect, just as it is for so many of the boys and girls who have grown up in my parish. A lot of what we do here, therefore, which means so much and is so comfortable for me, must seem to you an insulting charade. Thank God for classes like this where you can say what you do believe. It's high-time this kind of dialogue came out into the open and found expression in the formal Program!"

The Tree Sessions I found awkward, initially humiliating, and in the end, as a forced participant, wryly amusing. The veterans among the Ministers, knowing what was up, were first out the door and quickly took the trees closest to Gould and the path to Marquand where their trees would be the first ones reached by the conferees exiting from dinner. The "new boys" took what trees were left — well down the path to Merrill Keep. Any conferees thinking of attending those more distant trees first had to walk past all the ones occupied closer to the dining hall. A better way of making a newcomer feel still more of an outsider than he had on arrival could not be imagined.

A fellow newcomer and I always found ourselves sitting under trees within waving distance of one another two-thirds of the way to Merrill Keep. The first two evenings no one came anywhere near us, and

on the second night I walked over to him and said, "The hell with this. I'm going up to work on my class for tomorrow. Want to come along?" "Oh, I think they want us to stick it out," he replied, "I'd better just go on sitting here." The third night three girls wavered shyly down the path and paid a brief visit to each of us. When they"had gone back to the thickly populated Tree Sessions closer to Gould he called out to me, "Even the dogs may eat of the crumbs that fall from their Master's table." But, after that we never lacked for company.

Round Top Meditation Time I deliberately stayed away from. The thought of four hundred girls sitting on a hillside thinking beautiful thoughts and writing them down in their journals reminded me so forcibly of my friends of thirty years before on their most pious return from the Conference that it was more than I could face with equanimity. So I stayed in my room and had my own moment of quiet there.

Vespers I really enjoyed. They all run together in my mind now after so many years, but I remember particularly a Vespers in which Max Wall, assisted by Jewish conferees, led a service that culminated in his own description of Judaism's spiritual pilgrimage from the days of ancient Israel to the present that had a poignancy to it that was so moving and a cumulative majestic splendor to it that was so impressive, that we Christians walked out of the chapel afterwards in an awe-inspired silence. To have been privileged to share partially in that extraordinary spiritual inheritance through Jesus and the early apostles simultaneously humbled and exalted us.

I remember a service conducted principally by the girls themselves, using guitars instead of the organ, singing songs by Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan and the Beatles instead of hymns, and reading from Kahlil Gibran instead of from the Bible, in which I became even more painfully aware than I had been in my classes of how wide and deep was the gulf that now yawned between their generation and the generation to which the Ladies and I belonged.

I remember a Quaker Service led by Babs Conant, in which the anger and hurt of some of the girls finally found its legitimate voice, that was my first introduction to the spiritual opportunities and the problems that can arise from the use of prolonged silence in worship.

On Sunday (for the Conference in those days went from mid-week to mid-week) I remember a pre-breakfast Catholic Mass conducted with all-encompassing geniality in the chapel by Charley Stubbs in which the Episcopal clergy were invited to assist, and in which the Protestant clergy who felt unable to participate on principle were given space to explain to the congregation the tradition in which their opposition to the Catholic Mass was rooted.

I remember the service later that morning to which the Northfield townspeople were invited (and attended in sizable numbers) that was taken by Dick Dannenfelser (formally garbed in gown and hood), and where Mrs. Sibley (also attired in academic gown and hood) preached one of the best sermons I had ever heard (I was to hear her several times thereafter and never heard her preach a poor one).

While the formal program undergirt everything, it was the spontaneous informal meetings that in the

end meant most to me. I had been out of theological school for twenty-one years when I went to Northfield. On the third floor of Merrill Keep I found myself once again in company with a group of men who had, like me, committed themselves, however imperfectly, to the service of God, to God's Church and to ministry to God's people in God's Name. I would have written "Christ's Name" except that that would appear to exclude Max Wall, with whom I felt just as close a brotherhood in ministry (as I think he did with me) as I did with my Christian colleagues. It was like being in theological school all over again, and until that moment I had not realized how much I had missed that companionship.

Charley Stubbs had brought with him in the trunk of his car a miniature bar to lubricate discussion; and although we didn't drink deep, we certainly drank long. Glass in hand, sitting on the floor of the long hallway so as not to keep awake the Ladies in the rooms beneath ours, we talked theology to our heart's content, and Church History, and Biblical and pastoral theology. We shared the stories of our lives, their triumphs and disappointments. We talked about our own personal experience of the presence of God and of the manner of our individual calls to the ordained ministry. We talked about the Conference and what happened there and what that might mean to us and others.

The talk went on every night from after Vespers often until the early hours of the morning, occasionally interrupted by a call from one of the dorm housemothers for one or two of us to meet with one of the girls who during the night had been suddenly overwhelmed by some personal problem and needed immediate sympathetic pastoral counseling. Out of those long, intimate conversations grew a spiritual bond, closer with some than with others, naturally enough, that filled a void in my life, nonetheless"real for having been until that time totally unconscious.

Then there were the Conferees, the girls themselves. My wife, Maeve, telephoned me from Brookline one night on some piece of parish business and was not best pleased to be told "I'll try to get hold of him, Mrs. Blackman, but he's out under a tree somewhere with some of the girls"; but she need not have worried. At forty-nine, even had I wanted to (which I did not), I was well beyond attracting the kind of minister-worship that had so annoyed me in my friends thirty years before. The younger ministers filled that role. What really interested me was that here at Northfield I had an opportunity to hear young people talk about themselves in a way that was no longer possible in my parish. When I became Rector of the Church of Our Saviour in 1957, close to the height of the religious boom of that decade, we had a group of college students, most of them women from Simmons and Wheelock, that would number seventy-five at a 7 a.m. Ash Wednesday Penitential Office and Communion Service. However, by the early 1960s the group of college students had begun to shrink; and by 1967 in the wake of student rejection of all the traditional institutions of society in anger over the Vietnam war, it shrank to nothing. So here was my first opportunity in what felt like a long time to get in touch with young people and hear what they were thinking.

I encountered almost none of the sentimentalism that in my friends had put me off thirty years before. Not that dewy eyes were completely absent. Every now and then, for no reason that I could determine, one or other of the girls would, as our disapproving 19th century ancestors were wont to say, "turn into a wa-

tering pot" and suddenly collapse in tears, to be sedulously taken out of the chapel by surrounding friends and comforted until they felt ready to return. With every Vespers the number of watering pots increased. But though I was a bit taken aback by this, the Ladies were not. "Goodness," one of them exclaimed to me with a down-to-earth unflappability that would have done credit to Maw Pettingill of ***Ruggles of Red Gag***. *"This is nothing to what used to happen when I was a girl here. We used to keel over in the pews like ninepins! They used to carry us out and lay us down on the lawn like logs, fourteen of us at a stretch. Don't you let this worry you. A good crying spell will do them a power of good. There's far too much stiff-upper-lip in boarding schools nowadays, and what they need most is to have some of that pent-up stuf finside hang out. We'll see they come to no harm. Just you men stay out of the way and leave us to it. If you barge in now with all that minister-kindness you'll only confuse them and possibly yourselves as well.*" (This with a gruff laugh and a shrewd wink.)

With the exception of a group of black girls from Hampton Institute who had been brought, I understood, through the generosity of Sarah Gamble to bring an important element of diversity into an otherwise rather monochromatic social group, the girls came from fashionable Eastern boarding schools and private day schools. There wasn't a public school student among them. Yet, though from economically privileged backgrounds, it soon became apparent that a dismaying number of them had already had far too close an acquaintance with tragedy. Unhappy marriages, broken homes, alcoholism, drug abuse, the trauma of feeling an unwanted child had left many a scar. Hearing them tell their stories, it no longer seemed surprising that metaphors traditional to Christianity like 'God the Father' (or for some of them 'God the Mother', if that metaphor had been in use) and 'the Holy Family' far from being appealing, had only off-putting, painful associations that exacerbated problems instead of alleviating them. The most seriously disturbed among them sometimes were disconcertingly manipulative in their determination to get the affirmation they needed in Northfield's near all-accepting atmosphere, but I was struck by the genuine, no-nonsense care most of them showed for one another, especially in moments of distress; I admired the almost ruthless honesty with which they made what sense they could of the skewed world in which so many of them seemed to have had to live; and I enjoyed the gutsy wit that had enabled some of them not merely to survive, but apparently to flourish despite their scars. Listening to some of the Junior Advisors (a little older and, in most cases, a little more "experience" than the Conferees) left me feeling on occasion as naively ignorant of the real world, despite my own years of not exactly sheltered experience, as Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm or Little Rollo. [Editor's note: Little Rollo emerged as one of the most popular children's book characters in the decades preceding the American Civil War, a creation of author Jacob Abbott (1803-1879) in 1835. Little Rollo was "a good little boy with an inquiring nature, who has to have **everything** explained to him in great detail.]

On only one occasion during the week did I take issue with anything the ministers and the girls had in mind. One of the Northfield traditions at that time was a softball game between "the Saints and the Sinners", the girls on one team, the Ministers on the other. A second tradition that had grown up alongside it was that at the close of the game the girls threw all the Ministers into the weed-filled pond that lay at the

foot of the slope below Marquand (leaving them to walk back to Merrill Keep covered in mud and weed to tidy themselves up as best they could in time for supper). A lively anticipation of this symbolic humbling of the authority of male clergy increased as this climactic event drew closer. Being thrown into bodies of water was no novelty to me. As the cox of an eight-oared racing shell in. school and in college, I had been the crew's sacrificial victim amiably enough many times. This was different. I didn't like anything about it and neither, I discovered, did Charley Stubbs, with whom I had struck up a close friendship. We felt that there had been quite enough indirect hostility to the Christian religion running around without a further ritual scapegoating of the Ministers, and especially when it was already tangled up with an equally ritualistic battle of the sexes. Our doubts were strengthened when one of the Ministers, a keen disciple of Freud, expressed dismay at hearing our disapproval. "Oh," he said very seriously, "You don't understand. It really is *vital* for the girls to be able to throw all the Ministers into the pond. How else will they have a release for their feelings of sexual aggression?" That did it! Any Minister who wanted to spend an afternoon playing softball and then end up being ducked in a muddy, weed-filled pond was welcome to it. Charley Stubbs and I would have nothing to do with it! We did tell the girls this and why we felt the way we did. They expressed their regret at being deprived of two victims "We can do without George," they said, "but Charley, you'd make such a BIG splash!", however, they respected our decision. Instead, Charley and I spent the afternoon driving off to replenish the depleted liquor supply and returned to find the communal bathroom swimming in mud, weed and evil-smelling water while streaked and sodden shirts and trousers festooned every stall. In after years Charley and I were interested to observe that that last gargantuan mock bloodbath proved to be that particular tradition's swan-song. It was never repeated. A change in the perceived relationship between the Ministers and the rest of the Conference perhaps made it seem as inappropriate to the girls as it most certainly had seemed to us.

Besides the Ministers and the girls themselves, the other component of Northfield that earned my increasing admiration as the week progressed was made up of the Ladies themselves. They provided a continuity through which over seventy-five years of history became a strong, living presence. That was possibly less remarkable twenty years ago than it is now, when for nearly twenty years on both sides of the Atlantic so many of the most articulate leaders of church and state have seemed to be bent on breaking all connection with the past wherever they find it. Nonetheless, I was impressed. A thoughtful (and therefore by no means idolatrous) respect for one's own historical inheritance was central to the Anglican pattern of institutional life that I had always found so congenial; and it was reassuring to me to discover it so vibrantly alive in an institution like Northfield that had its origin in a very different, far more radically Protestant tradition in which the immediate, spontaneous promptings of the Spirit tested only by comparison with the commands of the Bible (itself treated less as a deposit of historically-conditioned tradition than as a contemporary artifact) carried much greater weight.

What impressed me most about the Ladies, however, was the way they used their power. Power? They had it all. They made all the arrangements with the school where the Conference each year was held. They reviewed and accepted the applicants. They hired (and, when they felt it necessary, fired) the staff. They

mapped out the general program, and then approved (or disapproved) the proposals for its more detailed implementation. If any problems arose during the week of the Conference itself, the final decision as to what to do about them was theirs. They knew precisely what they wanted for the girls and they had had, many of them, years of experience in getting it. Power like that can run in the veins like strong wine. Yet, what struck me that year (and in every year that followed so long as that regime continued) was the flexibility with which the Ladies adapted to change (admittedly with accompanying groans which, unlike those of creation in St. Paul's letters, not only could be, but always were, most articulately uttered) and the cautious and deeply Faith-full (the only right word to describe it) restraint with which they used their power.

The late 60s and early 70s were years when members of the mainline Christian denominations were often tempted to close the gates and man the battlements to keep out invaders from what seemed a threateningly disbelieving society. The Ladies, especially since they were vested with the charge to stand firm under the banner of a conservative faith handed down from Dwight Moody through his redoubtable daughter-in-law, were no more immune to this temptation than anyone else. Yet, in every crisis, although they prudently saw to it that the gate hinges were oiled, the bolts operative and hands at the ready to slam them shut at a moment's notice, their ultimate decision was to keep the gates open, to leave the battlements deserted, and to encourage free and frequent communication. I have no doubt whatever that the Conference owes its survival through that troubled time to their faith and their wisdom.

The first evidence of this was before my eyes, had I known it, as I entered the Merrill Keep living room on that first night at the Conference. The three young people in blue jeans who stood out in the crowd like the proverbial sore thumb had not come to the Conference in the normal way. They were students from Brown whom Dick Dannenfelser had brought with him, on his own, without consulting the Ladies. They were part of the radical student movement of the day, and although they had not as I remember been involved with the Weathermen, to a conventionally-minded suburbanite (as many of the Ladies were) they had an undeniable whiff of the terrorist about them. They had cut loose from their own family backgrounds; they were very angry at Western culture's betrayal as it seemed to them, of its implicit promises and especially of the American betrayal of those promises; and they were not at all sure that the required reform could be achieved without revolutionary violence. "Minorities of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains!" was their adaptation of the Communist Manifesto. Their arrival could not have presented a more embarrassing challenge. They had arrived without an invitation from the Conference. They had come without money to pay their way. No less significant, two of the three were young men and therefore excluded from the Conference (remember — at this time the only males at the conference were either Ministers or "Heavenly Messengers" (whose contact with the Conferees was carefully monitored and controlled by the Ladies).

Carol Wardner, the Northern Area Committee Chairman, and Chris Wilcox, the Program Chairman, consulted with the other Ladies. Some were for sending both the Brown students and Dick Dannenfelser himself packing without further ado. Two things held them back. One was that although Dick was certainly exasperatingly unpredictable and "no respecter of proper procedure," they had come to trust his

judgment in human relationships and in raising important issues to the Conference. The other was that the three Brown students, no matter how radical their political stance, unmistakably cared for individual people whether or not those people shared their own social and political agenda. The decision was made to ask them to stay and the two young men moved upstairs to share the top floor with the ministers and the "Heavenly Messengers".

There were times during the week when that decision was challenged. Once, when David, the young white radical, put the case for armed, violent rebellion against the *status quo* in a general discussion following a Conference Hour; and once when one of the housemothers discovered that one of the girls had gone for a walk with the young black radical after Vespers, and was convinced that walking was far from all they were doing together. In each case Chris and Carol stuck by their guns, in close consultation with Dick, and in each case whatever fears had been aroused proved to be groundless.

The other significant crisis came later in the week. One of the newcomers to the Conference that year was a young Jewish woman in her twenties, Arlene Krebs, a niece by marriage of Sarah Gamble's, whom Sarah had brought, just as she had brought the black girls from Hampton Institute, to introduce an important element of diversity into the Conference. Sarah felt that Arlene could make a contribution to the Conference because as a teacher she had deliberately gone to Oceanside in the Bronx, one of the most depressed and disturbed sections of the Black community in New York City to teach in the public school system. She had only left it a few days before when the community itself made it clear to her that even though she was no Wasp, as a Jew she was too white to be acceptable. Arlene, while deeply disappointed, understood the feelings expressed by the Black community, although Arlene herself was at that point in her life thoroughly ambivalent about her own Jewishness.

Like the Brown students, Arlene had immediately become a conspicuous and much sought-after member of the Conference among the girls. She was pungently blunt in her speech. No sacred cow was safe from her clear-eyed dissection. She wore exotic clothes — long, baggy pants in orange or purple, peasant blouses and colorful bandanas tied around her black, curly hair. Her favorite post was atop the grand piano in Gould living room where she would lie propped up on her elbows, looking like a slightly disdainful gypsy or a leopardess sunning herself after a particularly successful kill. She had her own tree session every night, just as the Brown students sometimes did, and attracted quite as many admirers as the most popular of the Ministers.

Halfway through the week Arlene chanced to hear that the final Vespers of the week, in accordance with a tradition of long-standing, would be a Protestant Communion Service (usually according to the use of the Congregational Church), followed by a formal commissioning of the Conferees to go back into the outside world to bring others to the Gospel as they had themselves been brought to it during their week at Northfield (this, of course, explained my Northfield-returning friends proclamation of thirty years before that they were now going to **"Love Everybody!"**). Arlene immediately took a dim view of this and said so. In a community where there were Jews as well as Christians, it seemed to her entirely inappropriate to have

a Christian Communion as the final Vespers of the week. She felt this would be exclusive and divisive when the emphasis should be on the essential unity of the community. She certainly would feel excluded, and she thought that was wrong. When Arlene raised her concerns, some Catholic girls said that now that Arlene had brought it up, although they hadn't thought about it until then, a Protestant Communion would make them feel excluded too. The Junior Advisors agreed to carry a protest to Carol Wardner and Chris Wilcox.

What most impressed me was what Carol and Chris did then. They didn't try to decide things one way or another themselves; nor did they simply call a meeting of the Ladies, or of the Ladies with the Ministers in attendance to advise them. For the first time in the history of the Conference, so far as I know, a full-Conference meeting was initiated. Carol and Chris called together the Ladies, the Ministers and the Junior Advisors and invited Arlene, the Catholic girls and any other concerned conferees to come and join them to discuss the issue. The meeting would be held in the Merrill Keep living room with Chris Wilcox presiding.

The meeting was a long one as I remember. The talk went every which way. Arlene made her point without heat. The Catholic girls, younger than Arlene and a little embarrassed at suddenly being the focus of so much attention, softly made theirs. The Junior Advisors backed them up. Someone else, standing up for the old custom, said that: "Northfield began as a Protestant Conference, had always been a Protestant Conference, still was a Protestant Conference, and that since everyone, Protestant or not, was always welcome to partake of communion with everyone else, why shouldn't the old tradition keep going?' Someone else said that: 'that was all true, and that they thought there was indeed nothing wrong with having a Protestant Communion at some point in the week just as there was a Catholic Mass, but surely not on the last night. On the last night — Arlene was quite right the service ought to be one in which everyone at the Conference could participate fully.' And so it went.

In the end there was no doubt about it. The consensus was that the Protestant Communion, traditional or not, was out and the Ministers were asked to craft some other kind of final service.

Charley Stubbs and I both had a hand in creating that service. Corporate worship was a special enthusiasm of ours, and we were particularly concerned that such worship include action as well as words. We wanted to include some aspects of the Christian communion,mass but, obviously given the consensus of the meeting, needed to do something perhaps similar but different. We also wanted something that would echo Max Wall's superb Vespers service in which Christianity's debt to Judaism had been so eloquently demonstrated, and that would honor something very important that had lain at the very heart of the meeting. For while what Arlene had said was certainly important, what she had not felt it necessary to say, but assumed we would all take for granted as surely as she did, was even more important. She had said "I don't want to feel excluded". What she had not said, but clearly assumed was "I feel I belong here just like everyone else; and I need to have that belonging affirmed." The Catholic girls had obviously felt the same way. In a world where Christian had been set against Christian, and Christian set against Jew with sometimes appalling hostility for so many centuries, that tacit recognition of a self-confessedly religious community

within which all, no matter what their religious background or belief, felt they could rightfully claim a place among mutually-appreciative friends testified to something remarkable about Northfield's special power.

Thinking about that, I remembered how moved I had been when, living with a Jewish family in Switzerland as part of an Experiment-in-International-Living group in 1939, I had been welcomed to the Sabbath supper table along with the rest of the family, Gentile though I was, and had a piece of the loaf of bread (sprinkled with salt, broken, blessed and distributed) passed to me with the same affectionate smile as to the others. Could Max be prevailed on to do something similar at the last

Vespers? Charley leapt at the idea.

The basic features of the service we proposed included features of the rejected Protestant Communion (specifically the blessing and sharing of bread) and some of our colleagues (especially those whose Denominational tradition was not as explicitly "sacramental" as mine and Charley's) expressed concerns. Was this not some kind of Catholic shell-game that would hook unwary Jews and Protestants into participating in an act of liturgical ecumenism that given time to think over its implications, they would rather steer clear of? Max, however, had no difficulty with the proposal whatever and said he would be happy to participate as we suggested. That was enough to resolve all doubts.

On the last night therefore, in the midst of a service that tried to bring together all the elements of the Conference week through music, readings and prayer, Max stood up behind a little table placed in the middle of the chancel and using Hebrew and English, took up the bread, blessed and broke it, giving the pieces to his helpers to put on trays to pass to the congregation. To that ceremony he added a brief prayer of his own, asking that just as we, as a community gathered there, had all been nourished by the one bread and given new strength and broadened understanding by all that had happened to us during the week, so God would bless us as we once again went out from Northfield back into the world beyond and would enable us to carry with us some of the power to heal that we had experienced together. A final benediction dismissed us.

I returned to Brookline the next day strung out like a frayed rope by so many late nights, while at the same time so energized by all that I had experienced that the following night I kept my wife, Maeve, up until 2:30 a.m. telling her all about it. When Chris Wilcox telephoned me a few days later on behalf of the Program Committee to invite me to be the Conference Hour lecturer for the following year's Conference, I accepted enthusiastically without a second's hesitation. For a week I had been enveloped in a worship of God more rich in its all-embracing inclusiveness and diversity than any I could ever expect to experience in the ordinary round of a single congregation's liturgical life. For a week I had lived side by side with a group of men who, while differing greatly from one another in the church traditions that had nurtured them, were at one in their committed, loyal service to God and thereby united in a fellowship that I had found enormously welcome and renewing. For a week I had been admitted into the friendship of a younger generation and privileged to share in their confidence as they expressed their doubts, their frustrations, their apprehensions and their hopes at their current stage of life's journey. Also, for a week I had seen women of

my own generation set in motion a process that with great faith engaged an entire community, diverse in its membership and divided against itself in some ways, in the enterprise of working through whatever problems beset it and finding together the path that they were perhaps destined to tread. There was no question that this would lead into a future that no one could foresee and that there would be intimidating challenges that would threaten the safe and familiar world the Conference had been for so many for so long. On the horizon was an unpredictable, uncertain world in which faith and hope and love would be the only reliable guides if the Conference was to survive and prosper... and I wanted to be a part of it!

Looking back over the nearly nineteen years that have passed since then, I am a little awe-struck at what seems to me the accuracy of my vision. The Northfield of 1988 is indeed very different from the Northfield of 1969. Yet, it seems to me that the essentials that make it Northfield are still there. What has made that possible is the guidance, through a difficult time, of faith that has room in it for doubt but is not dominated by it, of hope that can listen to cries of despair but not be deafened or subdued by them and of love that is sensitive to the needs of the individual while embracing everyone.

To my repeated sorrow I have been in a number of communities over the years where that has not happened. I think I know why it has happened at Northfield. There appear to be places on this Earth where over time the barrier separating the world of space and time in which we humans live out our lives from the world of Eternity wears thin so that the Spirit of the Divine (by whatever name we call it) can move through it with particular power and beauty. Friends who have been there tell me that the Acropolis in Athens, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Pyramids and the Temple of Karnak in Egypt are such places. So, in my own experience, are a small cloister in the Midi, an over-grown churchyard in Brittany, Chartres Cathedral and Mont Saint Michel in France and the ruins of Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire. And so is Northfield. Not primarily because of its beauty, though lovely it is, but because of the way the women and men and children who assemble there together each June behave to one another on that sacred ground. There the creative, redemptive, healing presence of God overarches us in the midst of all our individual waywardness and fret. That is what brings me back year after year — to be surprised frequently, to be frightened sometimes, to be bewildered, oh, often, but to be enlightened always and to be disappointed never, ever, ever.