

A Testimony to the Grace of God in the Life of Our Friend Ursula Franklin

Ursula Martius Franklin was a physicist, a feminist, a Quaker, a pacifist, an environmentalist, an activist, a committed and engaged member of society, and a mentor to many.

Ursula was born in Munich, Germany, on 16 September 1921, the only child of Albrecht Martius, an archaeologist, and his Jewish wife Ilse, an art historian. Her parents were loving and caring, and gave her much attention. Learning came easily and she enjoyed it. She had an unusual talent for mathematics. By age five she was entertaining herself by walking up and down her street learning and writing the house numbers. She also told her mother that she was sure Jesus was a girl and not a boy. She was an imaginative child who liked to make up stories and plays – a creative talent that served her well in her years as a lecturer. She learned to knit and crochet at an early age and continued until her fading eyesight made such activities impossible. Many a baby was wrapped in one of Ursula's blankets.

Her experiences in Germany during the Nazi regime and the Second World War fundamentally affected her life and her beliefs about the dysfunction of war and the importance of peace and justice: she spent time in a forced labour camp, members of her family were killed, and she lived through the bombing and later the Soviet occupation of Berlin. She came to Canada in 1949 as a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Toronto with a PhD in experimental physics from the Technical University of Berlin.

In Toronto, Ursula met Fred Franklin over a shared love of music. Fred – an amateur musician who played the cello and recorders – was also a refugee from Nazi Germany. His family had been able to send him to a boarding school in England at a young age, but as with Ursula, Fred's childhood experience deeply affected his life, and was part of their joint history. Fred and Ursula were married in May 1952. They enjoyed art and literature and they particularly loved music of the Renaissance and Baroque periods; they attended concerts regularly, had an extensive record collection, and provided generous financial support for local musicians. Their two children – Martin and Monica – grew up in a home full of activity, books, music, art, ideas, discussions (especially on politics and current events), and lots of visitors and guests. It was certainly not boring!

Ursula was employed as a senior scientist at the Ontario Research Foundation from 1952 until 1967 when she joined the University of Toronto Department of Engineering. She became a full professor in 1973, and in 1984 was named a University Professor – the first woman at the University of Toronto to hold this title. Life as a pioneer in women's equality had many challenges, but her patience and determination carried her through. When she retired at age 65 (in the days of mandatory retirement), she found, to her delight, a new academic home at Massey College where she could continue to follow her life-long leading to advise and encourage young people.

Fred had had some exposure to Friends in England, and in Canada Ursula's circle of friends included several Toronto Quakers. She and Fred began to attend Quaker Meeting in the mid-1950s. "We were pacifists before we were Quakers," Ursula noted some years later, "but it was a very easy transition to Quakerism for us, and it has been a very good home and an extended family for us and our children."¹ For Ursula, one attraction

to Quakerism was the lack of hierarchy. In December 1964 Ursula and Fred became members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). They remained active members of Toronto Monthly Meeting and the wider Quaker community throughout their lives.

Ursula had a gift for spoken ministry and voiced her messages with clarity. She did not avoid contentious issues and had an uncanny ability for focusing on core concepts in Quakerism, pacifism, and social justice. She was deeply concerned about the Meeting's responsibility to be mindful and discerning, and had no hesitation in prompting individual Friends to take on roles and responsibilities she felt they could be good at. She thought deeply and often spoke about the importance of Quakerism in all aspects of her life, and her writing on Friends remains a valuable resource. Many Friends consider her 1979 Sunderland P. Gardner lecture, *Perspectives on Friends' Testimonies in Today's World* to be her most significant contribution. Her two collections of articles and speeches – *The Ursula Franklin Reader* (2006) and *Ursula Franklin Speaks* (2014) – cover a wide range of concepts and concerns.²

Ursula was involved with many key Quaker concerns and committees. She was among the Friends who supported the US draft resisters who came to Canada in the 1960s. She addressed the arms race and build up of nuclear missiles in countless speeches and statements. She joined delegations bringing together women from North America, from the Soviet Union, and from North Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, she actively supported the efforts of the Canadian Friends Service Committee and the American Friends Service Committee to send medical supplies to all parts of Vietnam.

She spoke as a scientist about the dangers of atmospheric nuclear testing as evidenced the presence of radioactive strontium 90 found in children's baby teeth. The collecting of these teeth by mothers across Canada represented not only a significant contribution to peace and environmental research but also an important step in political awareness and community building. In more recent years, Ursula addressed terrorism and the military responses of governments. A Canadian response to war and terrorism, she insisted, must be legal, peace-building, open and reciprocal, based on a recognition that security can come only from justice and there needs to be justice for all.³ She became increasingly concerned about public cynicism and a lack of engagement regarding democracy. She cared deeply about education in our public schools and communities. When the Toronto District School Board founded the Ursula Franklin Academy as an innovative high school in 1995, she took an active role.

Fred was also involved in Quaker work, first as a member of the jails and justice committee and later (following the 1973 coup in Chile) in refugee and immigration matters, particularly with regard to detention. Ursula was Fred's partner in this work. His written reports benefited from her editorial hand and clear thinking and her endeavours were the better for his insights and compassion.

Ursula's activities and involvements were strengthened by her Quakerism. Her faith grounded her, directed her, sustained her, and comforted her when, during her last years, she found (unhappily) that her physical frailties slowed her down. She, in turn, advanced Quakerism through her many efforts to apply Friends principles to the world around her. In her 1979 lecture, she refers to a well known phrase often used Fred Haslam: "Be present where you are ... wherever we are, the opportunity will be provided and we will grow in that

opportunity.”⁴ For her, to be present meant to witness to the human, moral, and religious dimension for questions of our time. We all matter. We all have a role to play in transcending problems and building a society in which people have control over their lives. She often said that a peaceful society should function like a potluck supper. A diversity of offerings is needed: everyone contributes their work and their care and in return finds friendship and nourishment.

Ursula Franklin died on 22 July 2016 in Toronto, surrounded by family and friends. Her ashes are buried in the Yonge Street Friends Burial Ground in Newmarket, Ontario.

¹ Ursula Franklin, interview with June Callwood, broadcast on *National Treasures*, Vision TV, 29 November 1994; transcript published in *Ursula Franklin Speaks: Thoughts and Afterthoughts*, ed. S.J. Freeman (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2014), 23.

² “*Perspectives on Friends Testimonies in Today’s World*,” Sunderland P. Gardiner Lecture, presented at the 1979 Gathering of Canadian Yearly Meeting; Canadian Quaker Pamphlets 8 (Argenta, British Columbia: Argenta Friends Press, 1980); *The Ursula Franklin Reader: Pacifism as a Map*, ed. Michelle Swenerchuk (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2006); *Ursula Franklin Speaks: Thoughts and Afterthoughts*.

³ See Michelle Swenerchuk, “Introduction,” *he Ursula Franklin Reader*, 8.

⁴ Ursula Franklin, *Perspectives on Friends Testimonies*, 1–2; quoted in *Faith and Practice* (Ottawa: Canadian Yearly Meeting, 2011), excerpt 2.6. See also Douglas Steer, *On Being Present Where You Are*, James Backhouse Lecture, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 151 (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications, 1967)