

Michael Phillips – March 18, 1932- December 25, 2019

Memorial Minute for Victoria Friends Meeting, Vancouver Island Monthly Meeting

Michael Andrew Phillips was born March 18, 1932 in Seattle, Washington to Helga and Herbert 'Scoop' Phillips. He was preceded by his older brother Fielding and followed by his younger sister, Jane. 'Scoop' was raised in a pioneer family of cattle ranchers in South Dakota but left for New York and higher education where he met Helga in Greenwich Village. Dr. Phillips and his family settled in Seattle where he taught for many years as an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Washington. Scoop and Helga joined the American Communist Party during the depression, as did many progressive intellectuals who were deeply troubled by poverty and injustice.

Michael's early experiences and examples of his parents' activism both troubled and enriched his life. His early adulthood and the lives of his family were profoundly disrupted by the decades of McCarthy witch-hunts in the United States. During the Korean War he was conscripted into the US Army Signal Corps but released early with a general discharge because of his family's history. Under the GI Bill he was trained and worked as a pressman and printer in San Francisco. However, he yearned for a life that filled his needs and aptitudes for intellectual work and spiritual explorations. He returned to Seattle in 1955 to study at the University of Washington. As a student he participated in campus clubs dedicated to social activism where he found a willing recruit, Lynne Wiegert. They were married on December 19, 1958. He graduated in 1961 with a BA in Chinese Language, Literature and History.

After their graduations, Michael and Lynne moved to Berkeley, CA. During his undergraduate years at University of Washington, Michael had worked in editing and book production for the U of W Press. He found similar work at the University of California Press that eventually led to a production manager's job in textbook publishing with WH Freeman and Co. The couple settled into a

very middle class life with a home in the Berkeley Hills for the birth of their first daughter Gyllian in 1966. However... that was not enough for either of them. Michael's engagement with Quakers in Seattle had showed a better way for humanity to solve conflicts. In Berkeley both Michael and Lynne were deeply engaged in personal reform through psychoanalysis and spiritual study with Sri Eknath Easwaran (a Hindu mystic, spiritual educator and Shakespeare scholar). New horizons beckoned. They began to seek a new way of life beyond the conventional life of financial comfort which also included the spiritual discomfort of paying US taxes to support the Vietnam War. An opening came via Michael's sister Jane who told them about Quakers who were part of a back-to-the-land community in Argenta, BC. In the fall of 1968 they were accepted as house parents and teachers at the Argenta Friends School. On December 25th, 1969 the family welcomed a second daughter, Holly, born a Canadian citizen!

Michael's five years in Argenta were both challenging and deeply rewarding. His life-long mystical self found a home with Quakers in spite of the fact that he never was and never would be a Christian. His early disillusionment and profound distrust of radical politics had left a deep aversion of commitment to any formal profession of belief. At the same time he loved the witness given by many members of Argenta Meeting as demonstrated by their lives of simplicity, dedication to peace and non-violence, and service to the smaller and greater communities of the world. His reluctance to commit did not extend to service as he willingly filled many roles for Quakers, e.g., treasurer of Argenta MM, registrar and treasurer of Western Half Yearly Meeting and service on a few Canadian Yearly Committees. After 26 years of being "not-a-Quaker", he was finally persuaded to join, helped by his recognition that "any path to the divine is worthy. Even my way is holy." His F/friends rejoiced.

After 5 years in Argenta, yearnings for wider horizons and a shrinking family bank account resulted in a move, first to Vancouver where Michael worked at the University of British Columbia Press while Lynne got her public school

teacher's certificate at UBC. They moved in 1974 in Port Alberni on Vancouver Island to work and raise their family and to enjoy the temperate rainforests and wild Pacific Ocean. Michael and Lynne had secured land on the west coast of Vancouver Island in the small, isolated fishing village of Bamfield, shortly after moving to BC in 1968. Michael built a cabin on second-growth forest land with logs that he felled on land that he cleared. He always loved building and making things from simple materials, especially wood. Bamfield was a kind of paradise for him and his family for 45 years. During those years the family learned to love canoeing on Kootenay lakes and rivers and in the Pacific Ocean near Bamfield.

While in Port Alberni, Michael had worked as an assistant to the administrator of North Island College. This job opened a leading to work with adults through education. Again the family moved across the province in 1977, this time to the Kootenays, where they settled in the Trail area with Michael and Lynne both working for the public school district. He eventually retired in 1993 after years of service as an administrator of Continuing Education for Selkirk College and the Trail School District.

Michael was a hard worker always, but work was not the center of Michael's life. His spiritual apprehension of the divine, and his working out of his relationship with the divine, with himself and with the world, were at the roots of his seeking soul. Here's what he said on the occasion of his 75th birthday: "All my life, so far, I've revered and envied people with a real vocation... I've turned my hand to what has come to it. I've tried to be decent. I've grown gradually closer to the presence of the divine in everything everywhere always. My heart has learned to open itself in love and compassion from time to time, here and there."

"But My Work has been no more than this: to make a living in some right occupation, to do as little harm as I can, to gather up and manage my many faults and weaknesses, to do right by my family and friends. No more than that."

"I frequently declare and promote the Doctrine of the Sufficiency of the Ordinary, by which I mean that any path to the divine is worthy of it. Even my way is holy. By that doctrine My Work is good enough."

Michael's final life move in 2007 brought him and Lynne to Victoria, attracted by the rich cultural life, the ocean and the opportunity to (finally) live in a community where they could attend worship weekly and commit themselves fully as members of the local Victoria Friends Meeting. Michael edited, designed and printed the Island Friend monthly newsletter for a number of years and gave freely of his skills as handyman. He loved to be useful. He rejoiced that he could fully indulge himself in writing and publishing his own books and the books of anyone who could be persuaded into print. He and Lynne also had a reprise of playing in a recorder ensemble, a mutual passion that had started with Michael teaching Lynne to play duets with him in 1961. They had always found players in every community but Victoria was the culmination of a lifetime of enjoyment with a wonderful group of dedicated recorder players who loved to perform renaissance and baroque music on their "little wooden whistles". Michael stayed with the group through growing dementia as long as he could. Lynne continues to play with "The Pipe Dreamers."

Although a fundamental modesty kept Michael from embracing the role of Wise Old Man in the Meeting, he was a loving, helpful and open presence to many. He felt fully accepted for who he was – a life-long mystic whose life was shaped by deep and abiding journeys in the numinous. He loved "god-talk". He learned and shared much wisdom as part of a spiritual friendship group that endured for about 10 years. His ministry spoke to many hearts over the decades of worship with Friends. He also sought and was sought as a "spiritual friend". He felt that spiritual intimacy strengthens our Meeting when people meet in one-on-one friendships with those who share a passion for exploring the Light and the Dark. Michael's often repeated slogans included "*experience, even the Practice, of the Presence of the Divine in Everything, Everywhere, Always, The Knowledge of the One Wholeness of All Being*". When words failed him, he

resorted, while spreading his hands, to speak in tones of wonder: “All this! All this!”

Although his journey through dementia was always hard, always leading into darkness, Michael was remarkable for his courageous will to walk that path with open eyes and a loving heart. His final month of the journey into death was in hospital, awake and aware of what was to come, with family around him, still loving and knowing that he was loved. Michael died peacefully on Christmas morning 2019 with his beloved family as witness to his final union with “Everything, Everywhere, Always”.