

FEELING LIGHT WITHIN



PEG MORTON remembered for the way she lived and died **BY TED TAYLOR**

EDITOR'S NOTE: The quote on our front cover this week is taken from a sign Peg Morton carried in 2002, see below. Its origin is a policy statement by the Friends Committee on National Legislation, a Quaker lobby. See fcnl.org.

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argaret Miner Morton, better known as Peg Morton in the activist and Quaker community, died Dec. 19 at age 85 of natural causes. Before she died, her voice and charisma still filled rooms, and with medical intervention, she likely would have had more years to live, love and be politically active, but her body was telling her, “It’s time to go.”

She was hospitalized with pneumonia over Thanksgiving weekend, and her overall health and vitality were slipping. She said she didn’t wish to burden herself or her loved ones, or expend resources through the kind of prolonged decline she had observed in others, most recently while living at the Olive Plaza senior apartments downtown. Morton said she appreciated medical science, but not when it artificially extended life at great expense and suffering.

She granted *EW* an hour of one-on-one conversation in her light-filled 12th floor apartment, overlooking east Eugene and the Cascades in the distance. She was limiting her diet to a cup of yogurt a day and some green tea. She was about to begin the dry fast that ended her life Dec. 19, after two days in a coma, at the home of friends and in the presence of loved ones. The way she chose to die, by not eating or taking in fluids for 12 days, represents only a small part of her life, but it was also a spiritual and political statement.

In the final chapter of her 2013 memoir, *Feeling Light Within, I Walk*, Morton wrote, “It is my prayer that I live through my dying in a sacred way. I hope to feel the companionship of my community, and also a divine companionship, to feel the Spirit alive within me. ... There are many situations concerning medical treatment and our deaths over which we have no control, but we often can take control and make decisions.” A longer version of that final chapter was written when she was still in her 70s.

“I feel no need to live to a ripe old age,” Morton wrote. “I already have.” And she observed that the lifestyle, longevity and choices we enjoy in much of North America are not universal, and are actually due to the “exploitation of

other peoples and of the natural world.” Solidarity with the poor and oppressed people of the world was always on her mind. She struggled with reconciling her family’s wealth and stature with the abject poverty she observed. She, like many Quakers, chose to live a simple, modest life, consuming little of the Earth’s dwindling resources.

A Painful Decision

Peg Morton’s decision to end her life through fasting was consistent with her philosophical beliefs and religious faith, but it turned out to be more emotionally difficult than she had anticipated. She had observed fellow Quakers and spiritual leaders in their final years and had good friends among the dying residents at Olive Plaza. She noted there are numerous ways to leave this life, but not all are done consciously.

“Many of us feel that we want our bodies to go when they are ready,” she said. “But how do we determine that? It’s so easy to take the next step, to do the medical test or procedure and then you feel a little better, or you don’t. So it’s a gradual progression until you have a stroke or

cancer. Often the people who are sitting in these halls, if their memories and faculties are not totally gone, wish they were dead, wish they could just go, and they don’t know how. Some of them just stop eating, and sometimes when your body tells you not to eat, it’s easier for people and they stop eating.”

The emotional pain came from recognizing how many people were shocked and hurt by her decision. “I feel my heart breaking open now,” she said, on the verge of tears. “I know this is something I’m supposed to do, but then there is the pain of the people left behind. And there is my own pain because I won’t see them again and I won’t hug them again. I need them and I won’t have them. I’ve been thinking about my three daughters, too, and I’ve had a long, painful talk with my daughter Heidi, and my poor daughter Do Mi is trying so hard.” She added, “How will what I am doing affect my grandchildren and my daughters?”

Her family struggled with the decision, along with some of her activist and Quaker friends who wanted more time with her or thought her influence was still needed in our troubled world. “You are a woman of unique charac-

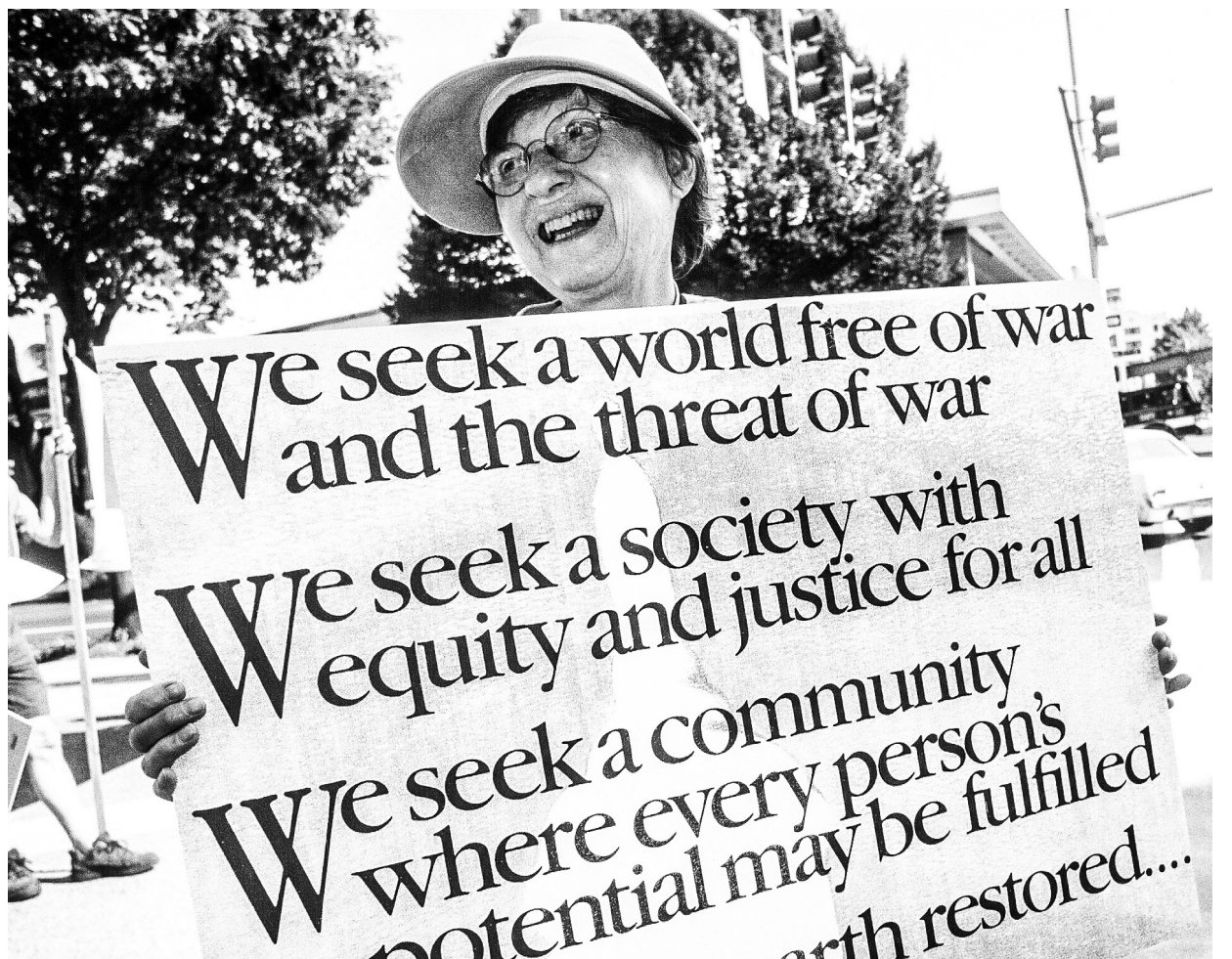


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