

LIFE/WORK DIRECTION—INTRICATELY WOVEN

1980-1981

Starting Point: Schatz Arrival in Boston

Downtown Boston had charmed Don and me from the moment we arrived in the city—the ancient Commons flanked by the gold-domed State House on one side, Park Street Church with its lighted spire on another, and the Episcopal Cathedral on the third. Two subway lines intersected below the surface, one of them the Red Line that connected us from our home in Dorchester to Don's job in Cambridge. In my first weeks in town, I walked around Boston's quaint downtown area like a visiting tourist, camera strapped to my shoulder. The Commons provided me with plenty of photographic material: an old sea skipper carving wood, a tall skinny juggler entertaining the crowds, mothers with strollers and small children, vagrants sleeping off the chill of a homeless night, families riding the swan boats that sailed on the limpid pond in the adjacent Public Gardens. Something about the lighting in early morning or late afternoon caught my eye. I was experiencing Boston as a stranger, and I fell in love.

It was a scant half block from the Commons that Don found the Many Mansions enterprise in a five-story building wedged between a Chinese bookstore and a convent selling religious icons. Two doors away stood the Brattle Book Shop, legendary for its selection of rare used books. Don could begin to feel at home in this environment.

Don walked through the arched entrance into the midst of chaotic reconstruction. Young men and women in overalls were full of energy as they pounded down partitions, climbed ladders and perched on scaffolding, armed with buckets of plaster. They were tearing out walls and counters and shelves in order to turn the first floor of the old shoe store into a restaurant. A rickety elevator took Don to the third floor where the Many Mansions offices were located. He was greeted with effusive friendliness by an assortment of volunteers—two suburban homemakers bustling over preparations for the noon meal and another struggling with an archaic addressograph machine. The two co-directors, Dick Faxon and an associate, Richard Valantasis, both Episcopal priests, stepped forward to introduce themselves.

It was almost lunch time, but first noonday prayers were conducted in a swept-out corner of the second floor, where a makeshift altar stood before a row of windows looking out over rooftops of nearby buildings and onto an alley. A few chairs were placed facing the altar. The rest of the group sat on low shoe store stools salvaged from the first

floor. A gong sounded to announce the commencement of quiet before one of the volunteers read the "daily office" from the *Common Book of Prayer*.

Lunch took place around an enormous square table on which women placed a huge wooden bowl of salad and a tureen of soup. Conversation was lively, as Don tried to sniff out just who these persons were who had gathered from city and suburbs to join in this anomalous enterprise. Richard Valantasis found out Don was interested in the arts and began plying him with questions. Don gave him a copy of his latest work, entitled "Jew for Jesus," written in Chicago. Richard was intrigued and began trying to convince Don to join them in Many Mansion's outreach.

Don began hanging out at Many Mansions. He would sit at the piano in the chapel and play, and once he brought in his bass fiddle to play with a musically talented visitor who happened by. An empty space on the second floor was designated for various programs, including possibly an art gallery—an idea with a familiar ring for Don. Was Many Mansions a place where he might pursue some of his interest in the arts with a congenial community of peers?

He was welcomed warmly and given a key to the building. He soon found that the role available to him entailed bookkeeping and other administrative tasks for which he was not well suited. But the conversations with people intrigued him. Something about the spirit of the place and the people resonated—a combination of religious fervor, and a hint of familiarity with the art world.

Slowly Don began to discover that Many Mansions had less to do with the arts than he had been told. He found that it was an ecumenical venture, largely evangelistic in purpose, geared toward reaching the unchurched. A group of persons from several traditions—Catholics, Baptists, Episcopalians, and others—had been meeting together informally in downtown Boston for several months to pray. They had no permanent location and their goals were modest. As part of their outreach, they envisioned using the arts in some way, principally through music.

A Location Downtown?

In the process of looking for a meeting place, a five-story building on West Street came onto the market in 1979. Dick Faxon instantly recognized its strategic location—at the intersection of the financial district, the Commons, the theatre district, and city, state and federal government offices. Of the group that had been meeting for prayer for several months, Dick stood in the best position to take advantage of this unforeseen opportunity to locate a center in downtown Boston. He had recently received an inheritance after the death of his father and offered part of it to make the acquisition of this building in a prime

downtown location possible. Modest goals suddenly expanded to match the size of the building; the name “Many Mansions” was chosen to fit the enlarged vision.

What might they do with five floors? Don watched from the sidelines warily as he listened to the core group begin envisioning a restaurant on the first floor—something to draw people in off the streets, and a fitting setting for Saturday night “cafés” where musicians might perform in a contemporary style, softening people for an evangelistic appeal. The second floor had convenient space for seminars and sessions for business people working in the financial sector nearby, where they could meet for discussion and prayer as they looked for ways to relate their work to their faith. The third floor was suitable for offices and contained space for a chapel where light streamed through floor-to-ceiling windows. Dick proposed that the fourth and fifth floors be renovated into residences for persons such as “policemen and social workers”—providing a sense of community in the middle of the congestion of the inner city. It was like Dick to think of all these tiers of society gathered around a common focus.

This impulsive move into the West Street building on the part of the founding group generated new enthusiasm. Young persons were eager to participate in the renovation—tearing down walls, clearing out construction debris. High unemployment in the early 1980s left lots of people available. Soon the place was crawling with youthful energy.

The sudden increase in size of the project carried complications with it, however. In this case, it created a split from the original vision of Many Mansions as a not-for-profit ministry supported by donations. The expansion that flowed from occupying this larger building in a prime downtown location put the restaurant in the uncomfortable position of being run as a for-profit business providing the main source of income to support the ministry. This turned everything on its head, giving undue prominence to the business side of the venture. It would prove a fatal flaw.

A for-profit restaurant in downtown Boston would present legal and bureaucratic hurdles. An interminable governmental process was required to secure the permissions to renovate the building according to code. Ever since the famous Coconut Grove fire decades earlier, Boston installed exceedingly stringent fire safety regulations. The people gathered for Many Mansions’ ministry were unaware of these legal tangles. The younger people gravitated more naturally to the familiar aspects of restaurant management and experience: table size, décor, and menus. They could see a meaningful place for themselves as employed staff of the restaurant and café.

Richard Valantasis stepped into the role of manager of the restaurant and began digging into his own Greek heritage to come up with finger-licking recipes. Always a man who functioned with flair, he set to work optimistically. He ordered printed

stationery for the restaurant—stationery we would use as scrap paper long after the dream of the restaurant died. He ordered bolts of crimson and yellow cloth, presumably for tablecloths and to festoon the bare brick walls and add color. I still have yards of it in our closet.

Someone Needed Us

Don observed this development of events as he visited in his spare time. After a few weeks, he began urging me to come down and visit too. “They need you,” he told me. He really liked the people but wondered about the viability of what was envisioned. He knew how important it was that I find something in Boston to which I could say a hearty “Yes.” So I dropped by one day with Don to check it out. Dick greeted me warmly and quickly intuited that I had energy and skills to contribute and invited the two of us to take part. Don and I realized this was an opportunity for us to work together again, but we worried that Many Mansions was out of kilter with the way both of us thought and functioned in our religious lives. Its focus was evangelism, and at that time we were still the “unchurched” that Many Mansions’ brochure claimed to want to reach. The leadership of priests—both Catholic and Episcopal—and the resultant subtly hierarchical atmosphere, was foreign to us. We were in the midst of lay people who addressed the leadership as “Father” with almost reverential tones. Another element was missing for me: attention to the psychological dimension of spiritual growth, a strong interest of mine.

On a practical level, Don and I had some hesitancy about linking our futures to this project. My visit to Many Mansions had confirmed for Don that what he felt was also what I saw, and I could articulate it. We knew how possession of a large building could choke the elemental vision of a ministry and sap its energy, diverting it to the needs of the physical structure and the consequent costs. It had happened to us at the Urban Life Center in its first two years. Yet, we felt strangely drawn to the people we met at Many Mansions. I was aware that a critical mass of young persons had come together here concerned about the very issues of life and work to which I was prepared to devote my energies at this stage in my life. Not tangentially, it took us away from our difficult living environment and into a world more familiar to us.

The Right Partner in Work as Well as Life

Chief among the persons we met at Many Mansions was Dick Faxon himself, who had clearly sacrificed the most for his vision. He had told us enough of his own story to create a sympathetic bond, and we felt inclined to join him as helpers despite the lack of clarity of the venture.

Dick's religious journey was a colorful tapestry interwoven by several strands. His roots in the Episcopal Church were strong, but he combined this with a large dose of empathy for the warmth and vitality of evangelical Protestant groups and charismatic movements that had a profound effect on the way in which he carried his faith day to day. He placed great importance on the ecumenical nature of his venture; his affinity with Roman Catholics meant that it was natural for him to collaborate with Father Kevin at St. Anthony's Shrine located a few blocks from Many Mansions. The group that gathered at West Street included evangelicals from Protestant groups of every stripe, often from the suburbs, but also Catholic and Episcopal priests and congregants. I was fascinated by the blend of different traditions, exemplified in one instance by the near-parity in the gifts coming in big checks from affluent suburban Protestant donors and sacks of coins collected at mass at the Shrine from Catholic parishioners, most of them city dwellers of very modest means.

We stayed on the edges, tentatively feeling our way forward. In May of 1980, Dick Faxon formally asked us to come on staff for the summer, promising us a salary. We decided to take the leap.

Why did we say "yes" to Dick Faxon's offer? To this day, I do not fully understand why because it is so entangled in Don's and my marriage. We have often joked that each of us feels that the other one has the power in our decision-making. We are strongly influenced by each other.

Don thought there was something unique about the spirit at Many Mansions. He said:

I call it the fluidity of contrasts: rich and poor; the Catholics from St. Anthony's Shrine from Boston's ethnic conclaves and the suburban Episcopalians from Sudbury and Concord; the evangelicals from Ruggles Street Baptist and Park Street Church, and the seminarians at Harvard Divinity School living in Harvard Square; the community activists from South Boston and the South End, and the recent graduates from Ivy League institutions with prep school backgrounds; a novice from a monastery and a lawyer in private practice. I saw a bright new world that was "other" than what I had been part of in the Midwest. But in the end, my decision to join the people at Many Mansions was all feelings.

I would have to agree with the last statement for myself. I suppose that my familiarity with the evangelical world of Christendom, as well as an intellectual acquaintance with mainstream Protestantism, made me confident that I could find enough common ground with these disparate elements, but I didn't really know that at the outset. I saw that Don

was open to the risk and I sensed there was a place for me, so when Dick invited us it was natural to say yes.

These impulses are never simple. In hindsight, I see why I was drawn to Dick Faxon. I was still grieving the death of my father. My dad was also a minister, a quiet contemplative sort, tender hearted and a wonderful father. Dick exuded the same spirit, allowing me to complete the grieving process as we began to work together.

Don's enthusiasm for the group was contagious, and we both had begun to care about what happened to the people gathered. I resigned from my job in Framingham, but prudently kept my part-time teaching position at Northeastern University. Don had left his job at the Harvard Coop bookstore, and began to work at the Chinese bookstore next door to Many Mansions. We needed very little money to live, and actually wanted to live closer to the edge financially in order to have more freedom to pursue the unknown future we were sure God had in store for us. Would this enterprise be part of God's direction for our future? It didn't look promising at the moment, but we acted in blind trust.

Collapse of a Vision—Making Way for a New Beginning

Even as the place was still abuzz with expectations and ideas, Dick understood that all was not well with the fundamentals of the project. He frequently came to work worried. He was the chief carrier of the vision; but the project relied on his initial investment more than was wise. Some of those around him were naïve about the implementation of the vision; one person made a remark that indicated he thought Dick had a nearly endless supply of cash to infuse into the project if it faltered. The persons working there on clerical and administrative tasks—women from his former parish in Sudbury and others—were totally devoted to Dick and to the cause he espoused, but they were out of their depth in understanding the legal and financial perils arising.

Don and I sensed that underneath the surface enthusiasm, the daily prayer times in the chapel, the ebullient lunches around the rough wooden table at noon, the project was more fragile than outward appearances would indicate. While the workmen came in daily wearing their hard hats, beginning the task of renovation, there was an undercurrent of anxiety.

At the precise moment when Don and I agreed to begin working at Many Mansions for the summer, the project collapsed. Renovating the ancient building in accord with city fire safety codes for a restaurant was proving financially impossible. On a more basic organizational level, the mingling of ministry and business in a two-pronged mission was untenable. In addition, there proved to be a problem in getting a clear title to the building.

Uncertainty was pervasive. In anguish over the crumbling of his vision, Dick called a meeting of the workmen and told them their work was terminated.

It was as though Don and I had just stepped off a cliff into free fall. Remarkably, we had anticipated this turn of events, so instead of feeling let down, we were hopeful beyond any practical reason. We persevered, trusting that life would emerge from the death of a vision. We needed to build on a firmer base, one more in harmony with the concerns we held in common with Dick.

Richard Valantasis left shortly thereafter. Others would drift away more slowly. But not everyone. We focused our attention on the motley crew of remaining volunteers who made several attempts to resuscitate something of the original vision. A few “café” evenings were conducted at a nearby restaurant, Blazing Salads, thanks to owner Vicky Thomas, a member of St. Anthony’s Shrine, who was sympathetic to Many Mansion’s vision. There was modest turnout. Two plucky volunteers, Ann Stitt and Chris Waugh, decided to operate a sidewalk cart in front of the building in July—a custom of other downtown restaurants—offering lunch to passersby. It was hard for some to give up the dream of the restaurant, but when the cart proved to be a lot of work with minimal response, we let go of that part of the project.

During these months, Dick was engrossed in the difficult and intricate matters of closing down the operation called Many Mansions. He would never be able to receive the title to the building nor did he see a way to recoup his personal financial losses. Some members of his board were helpful in this; a few had abandoned the sinking ship. In addition, a new worry plagued Dick. It turned out that in the process of demolition, workers had been exposed to asbestos around the pipes. The threat of possible lawsuits lingered for several years before being resolved without incident.

One day Dick came to work wearing a neck brace, a sign of the tension he was carrying in his body as well as in his mind and soul. He could not help but see the project as a failure, and took personal responsibility for that, although this was far from the whole truth. He was a doggedly faithful man to the end, and we stood with him doing what we could to help bring the ship to port.

Supporting the Unemployed

The corps of young persons planning to work at Many Mansions were cast adrift but continued to show up out of affection for the community feeling generated there. When wintry winds blew through that old unheated building, we rented space next door over the Chinese bookstore where Don worked. The space looked enormous and bordered on the industrial in décor. We set to work transforming it into a welcoming place for people to

gather—persons whose hopes for finding a place to serve at Many Mansions were now dashed. We set out the luxuriant array of plants women had contributed, and moved a slightly battered piano loaned by Dick into one corner. We kept the ubiquitous coffeepot bubbling and sending out its welcoming fragrance, as we grappled with the question of what we could do to respond in a practical way to those who lingered in our company.

My spontaneous impulse was to conduct a Support Group for the Unemployed, and I enlisted Don's assistance in this. Judie Spitz, a woman who had been in one of my groups at the YWCA Women's Resource Center in Framingham, had followed me to Many Mansions and was hanging out with me and the others there, intrigued by the energy and dedication of the folks assembled. She quickly identified the need of group members for something more substantive than support. "What these people need is a Workshop," she said. Dick welcomed the initiative. Together, Judie and I convened a pilot workshop. We never dreamed it would turn out to be the first of a long series of forty workshops led by Dick Faxon, Don and me. We began with a bare bones curriculum, predictive of a more elaborate design that would emerge out of our experience.

The very first person to join a workshop was a young man named Chris Waugh, who had left a lucrative job in computer programming in the Midwest to find a calling that would more directly connect with his relationship to Christ. He was in the process of weaning himself away from "a corporate man image."

Chris quit his job in Illinois and traveled through the country in his beat up Volkswagen, convinced that his lifestyle was "an insufficient expression of who I was in Christ." He made his way to New England and was a student for a while at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. He became involved in a prison ministry at Deer Island, which he referred to as "a lynchpin in my life." He also served as choir director of a church in Boston. After a year of this, he said, "It was becoming clear that my vocation in Christ was not that of a selfless do-gooder, a suffering saint. I was trying to justify my own existence from the people I served, demanding that those I served enjoy it."

The workshop helped Chris see that he could do what he wanted—namely singing—and enjoy it. "Some might say that work is the sweat of your brow. I learned that work is a form of love." Singing expressed Chris at the deepest place of his being.

During his time in Boston, Chris found many ways to develop his considerable musical skill. One innovative adventure took him into Boston's subways early mornings with two members of a madrigal singers group. They performed at Harvard Square, Downtown Crossing, and Government Center, singing for impatient commuters waiting for the subway. Chris now serves as cantor at his church in Quebec City, where he and his family live.

Chris and his fellow participants liked the workshop and told their friends who in turn begged for another. The second one was offered in January at the Shrine, then in rapid succession, we ran a third, and a fourth. It was at the fourth workshop that Scott Walker arrived as a participant. He had visited Many Mansions the previous summer, with his CUJ college student interns in tow. Now he appeared in order to meet his own needs for vocational direction, taking readily to our approach to life work exploration.

A Serendipitous Moment: Scott Walker Enters the Story

I followed a path of need and curiosity to the door of Many Mansions in downtown Boston. I was twenty-four at the time and riding the wave of post-college vision into pursuits that were both compelling and perplexing as I considered where they were leading me.

Little did I know then that the threads of my life and those of this organization would gradually be woven together. What I found was rare and vital.

I found regard for my being in relation to my doing. I was offered a place to stand back from the front lines of my pursuits (at that time in an inner-city ministry and church planting experience) to give attention to what I was learning about myself—what God was revealing in me, beneath the surface of the doings that could so easily preoccupy me. Here, mainly through the patient process of telling and reflecting on my life story, I began to recognize that my way of joyful service was in teaching.

I found a rich, collaborative perspective. My fellow pilgrims and I had the ear of three distinctly different people: Don and Eunice Schatz and Dick Faxon—a poet, an educator, and a priest—who had thrown their lots in together in mid-life to offer guidance to souls like me. The result was a full-bodied blend of perspective gathered not only through their different words and questions for me, but through the energetic give-and-take I witnessed between them. Apart from a common commitment to Jesus, there was no party line here but a diversity of insight that invited me to wonder about my own distinct nature and capacity for collaboration.

I found access through creative simplicity and community. It was 1981, a time of recession and high unemployment. Fees were kept low so that people like me who were between jobs or not making much in the first seasons of work exploration could afford to come.

Life/Work Direction is Incorporated

Because the work attracted people like Scott and Chris, we could see that the fire of enthusiasm had been ignited and was spreading. By February, it made sense for us to incorporate separately from Many Mansions as a legal non-profit entity, chartered by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. We settled on the name "Life/Work Direction" and wrote a simple statement of purpose in the charter:

"To provide spiritual direction through an ecumenical context rooted in the historical Judeo-Christian tradition for persons wishing to integrate their faith with their whole life/work."

On February 12, 1981, the suggested Scripture reading for the day from the Book of Common Prayer ended with II Corinthians 4:12: "So now death is at work in us, *but life is at work in you,*" which confirmed our choice of a name. I could feel a new beginning, and it buoyed Dick's spirits considerably. A phoenix was rising from the ashes—a ministry that was characterized by the spirit of his humble approach to service. He was beginning to count on Don and me, and a spirit of community was forged between us that would endure.

Coming Home to a Dorchester Storefront

We were now set upon a new path. We continued convening new workshops of five or six, as people requested them. By late spring, we knew the program was viable and began looking for affordable space for this fledgling ministry. This took us back to Dorchester, where a storefront two blocks from our home became available at a reasonable rate. On the afternoon of the annual Dorchester Day Parade in June 1981, we moved to Savin Hill Avenue. We constituted a triumphal procession, bearing old shoe store shelving and stools, an array of plants and beat-up desks and chairs, which had been given to Many Mansions. While we lugged the furniture inside, rows of Dorchester drill teams, war veterans and decorated floats passed by headed for a festive community celebration on Savin Hill beach nearby.

Dick was delighted that this storefront was on the Red Line allowing an easy commute from his home in Cambridge. He never complained despite occasional breakdowns on the T, which might leave him stuck in a tunnel. He also took great pleasure in settling into a neighborhood that included working people and families who were struggling or dispossessed. It was part of his character to refuse to take advantage of the privilege that came with his family's station in life.

Don and I felt that this move of the ministry close to home was redemptive for us. We had a comforting place to come each day right in our neighborhood, a reprieve from the initial harshness of our surroundings in a Dorchester neighborhood struggling with tensions.

A new life and work had begun.