

LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN
ALASKA
HOME OF GOD, MAN & BEAST





On June 16th, 2010, I flew from Boston to Anchorage courtesy of my friend, Joe from the Library who bought my plane ticket. I went to visit my college buddy, Biscuit, and his wife, Ginger Harmon Hollwedel. It took 18½ hours from the time I left my apartment to the time I got to theirs. Below is the view from their apartment at around 10 pm.



I met Steve (Biscuit) in college my freshman year at W.P.I. We played cards and drank together a lot. I transferred to Tufts after one year, but we remained friends. In 1995 we planned a cross country journey that brought us to Seattle, where we planned to start our post college lives. Unfortunately, I was unsuccessful there, but Steve was. He worked hard as a welder's apprentice while I temped out of a hostel. Steve's first housemate in Seattle was a drug addict who eventually stabbed him in the leg. After all these troubles, Steve met Ginger, and eventually she became his wife. Together they embraced the Mormon faith and set out on a journey together to honor God as they knew Him. Steve worked for an airport which transferred him to Anchorage, and so three years ago they moved to Alaska.

I've had in mind to visit the land of the midnight sun since a little boy. My Mom rented the movie Dunderklumpen from the library for us and I really enjoyed how it depicted cartoon characters on a real life background which showed portions of Norway during summer. It was always sunny. Around 2000, I started desiring to go to Norway with my friend Adam, whose father is Norwegian. But that never panned out. When Steve and Ginger moved to Alaska, I saw my chance. They announced last year that they would be moving from Alaska this coming September, so I had to go now or forever hold my peace. I planned a year in advance, and prayed many times that God would grant me a way to go to Alaska, if for nothing else but the midnight sun.



As part of the excitement building up to the visit, I illustrated the city of Anchorage for a Graphic Design class (see above). I told everybody I was going. More than one people wondered if I'd gotten a one way ticket. My Granny asked if I thought I would move there. Sadly, I must say that I can not. My heart lies in Boston where family and friends help keep my life afloat.

The first think I noticed about the city of Anchorage was all the buildings I recognized from drawing them in my illustration. Like the Conoco Phillips building below.



I'll spare you pictures of buildings, but describe that it was so fascinating to see so much that I already knew about from the act of illustrating the city. The city was quite beautiful, but many parts of it looked like Schenectady, NY, a small, run down city. However, good neighborhoods looked like:



Steve and Ginger don't have a car, so they rely on their feet or the bus. Because Anchorage is not all that populated, the bus routes run only once per hour, so you have to plan your trips accordingly. We walked for the most part. Downtown was about a 15 minute walk from their home. Steve walks to work each day at 2:30 and works until 11:00pm. We stayed up until 2am almost every night. 2am is the time when there is the least amount of light, but even then it is still like dusk.



On the flight over, I did lots of reading for my online Small Business Management class. Anxious to continue the class, I set up shop at the library (above) for the first few days to study. This was the view from my desk:



In fact, almost everywhere you were in the city, you could see these mountain ranges to the East. Later, we camped among them at a yurt.

As I mentioned, much of our transport was by foot. Anchorage has the most lovely bike trail and nature path running through it's center. We walked on that trail almost every day to get places. People rode their bikes until well into 11 o'clock. I saw one group having a BBQ at 10PM.



Alaskans just do whatever they want, whenever they want because it is always sunny!



The trail is amazing. At many points in the city, cotton floats in the air from nearby cottonwood trees. There are dandelions and cottonwood particles floating all over.



In the middle of the city: a log cabin with a rusted out car. Not the only one either, many Alaskans collect junk cars. Lots drive trucks too. It was similar to New Hampshire.



One day we walked from Steve's part of the trail to the lagoon downtown. People were drinking, smoking and playing frisbee golf all at the same time. Shadows were long.



On the trail we saw a scale model of Jupiter. At different points in the city, you can see scale models of the Sun and planets. You walk at the "speed of light" to get to them.





Anchorage seemed a good temperature to me. It ranged from high 50's to mid 60's, sometimes hitting 70 degrees. Out of 14 days, it was probably sunny 4 days, rained 4 days and cloudy the rest.

On the actual day of Summer Solstice, 6/21/10, we toured the Alaska Native Heritage Center and went to the Ulu Factory and I bought an Ulu knife for my Mom. Ulu knives are semi-circular knives coming from the natives that can be used for chopping. The Alaska Native Heritage Center was very nice. Natives acted out special dances, feats of strength and there was a tour of the 6 major tribes which showed their homes and how they lived.

We did go downtown plenty and investigate tourist type stuff. We mostly ate in, but sometimes ate out. I had a reindeer hotdog in downtown. Reindeer is Caribou. It wasn't anything special, and now I may feel guilty around Christmas if my niece finds out I ate reindeer. My friends are vegetarians and, at the time I was with them, it really seemed to make sense to eat only organic foods like they did. Someday I'll try that. It seems healthier. Ironically, even though Alaska is known for fish, it is very hard to find good fish in the supermarkets. You have to go to special, expensive markets to get what we have in our seafood section in Boston. They ship fish from Alaska along with passenger luggage on outbound flights.



Ironically, I'd come for Summer Solstice, which was on a Monday, but I found out Alaskans celebrated it on the prior Saturday. And it was raining that day. And the festival attracted a lot of smokers and drinkers and disenfranchised youth. This was different than I expected: Godly people just out celebrating the Sun. So I came seeking light but found the night. However, a Christian Goth band played to the youth and so the Son was found in the night in the light.



On Summer Solstice Night, the day I had been waiting for, we went to the Village Inn for pancakes at 1:00am. I had joked on Facebook that I had found “The Denny’s”, but in the end, decided to try something new. It was very charming watching Steve and Ginger share their meals together, and be cute. However, I did notice that their form of sharing usually entailed Steve taking Ginger’s food and not the other way around.

During the meal, Ginger suggested we watch the movie Dunderklumpen, which I had brought with me. I thought that was very sweet of her, because I had forgotten all about it. At around 2:30am we started the movie. It was pretty simple, but with too many characters, and it was really weird. Not quite like I had remembered. But it was the perfect end to the longest day I’ve ever seen. I went to bed at 5am.

After a few more days at the library, we went camping in a yurt in those mountains you saw above. I was quite apprehensive about it because I have sleep apnea and there was no electricity for my C-Pap machine. So I had to go solo, snored so loud I kept myself up, and everybody else.



We cooked each meal on the little patio near the yurt, and walked down to the river to wash our dishes. Having not camped in forever, I did not bring enough food and had to eat Steve and Ginger’s food. And all they ate was mashed potatoes all the time. At the end of the trip, I didn’t want to see another mashed potato for the rest of my life! Ginger was very good at chopping wood. Steve is a blessed man.



Alaska was incredibly green. Practically no space under trees was left uncovered. Steve, Ginger and I went for many walks and one more serious hike that took 2hrs:41mins to hike about 4 miles. This, too, was hard for me because I am so heavy and way out of shape. But I did it!

Ginger's friends met us at the yurt for our second night of camping. We had a very warm fire going in the yurt because the night before I was rather cold under just a fleece sleeping bag. Fraser, the husband, is a mechanical engineer at a company that makes robots which X-ray oil pipelines for corrosion. I was so amazed there are mechanical engineers in Alaska, with low population, but the product makes sense.

The next day, Liz (Fraser's wife), Fraser and I went ahead of the pack on our hike home. Liz, also a Mormon, had all kinds of questions about what Lutherans are like. So I explained it and we talked for a long while about it. Here in the Northeast, we have a lot of atheists. Ministering to them seems to entail refuting a ton of totally bizarre ideas about God. Ministering to a Mormon is quite different, because they already believe in God. In fact, they believe that Jesus is God and died for their sins, so they are in fact Christians too. They have a lot of extra beliefs too, but at the core, they worship, adore, and pray to the same God we (Protestant Christian) do. And throughout my whole stay with my Mormon friends, the Holy Spirit was really evident.

On my first Sunday with them, I attended Biscuit and Ginger's Mormon Church. I'll talk more about that later, but it was a very interesting experience. On my second Sunday, they made a point to come to my Church, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (Synod indicates a certain type of Lutheran Church). We were both able to share our faiths with each other and we didn't fight about it over who is right and who is wrong. We prayed together and loved each other.



We saw three moose and a wolf! We also saw a bald eagle later when at the lagoon. Steve had never seen a wolf before. The wolf ran away before I could get a picture, but it just appeared on the trail ahead of us and looked at us for a little bit. Later, upon the closing of the trip, I bought some of Steve's framed photography: a picture he'd taken of a wolf, to remind me of our shared experience in Alaska.



The Anchorage Lutheran Church was very similar to Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church (my home Church). They even had a funky looking building! They use glass cups for communion wine. They are friendly, like my home Church. No trip to Alaska is complete without meeting the Pastor, so I got a picture with Pastor David Reinke! He was warm and funny, like Pastor Knapp. Although Pastor Knapp is better.

Sunday, 6/27, was also Steve's birthday, so we celebrated. Ginger made him a hand made card, and bought him an iced cream cake. She also bought him a portfolio for his photography business.

One thing which really amazed me about the Hollwedels is that Ginger is really a Godly wife. She encourages her husband, not belittles him. She is wise and patient. When they had turbulence, Ginger deferred to Steve rather than point out she was right or arguing. In the same way, Ginger encouraged Steve, who is a great photographer, to pursue his artistic calling. She gave him the faith when he didn't have it in himself. I thought to myself, I could really use a Godly woman like that in my life, as I struggle with self-esteem issues especially regarding my calling as a cartoonist. Through Ginger's encouragement, Steve and Ginger, together, printed hundreds of photos of Steve's nature photography and participated in fairs and other methods of selling his photos. In fact, while they still have a large box full of unsold photos, they have earned the money they paid to produce them.



I could really relate to Steve as he talked about his passion for photographs, which he claimed started when we traveled to Seattle in 1995. Steve feels that it is part of his soul he is sharing with his photos. Even, Steve feels that God leads him to take the photos that will most passionately share what is on Steve, and God's, mind. Steve feels that he points the camera and God tells him when to click.

That is exactly how Toon in' used to be. I felt sad hearing him talk this way, because the miracle of Toon in' has been lost. I stop drawing cartoons because I didn't feel the need to draw another cartoon about bipolar disorder and anxiety. Does not the experience of God consist of more than constant anxiety? Anyway, I could relate to Steve because, at a time, I drew my cartoons with God too. I remember that, praying as I went along and laughing and praising God when He gave me good and funny ideas.

It was a tense time between Steve and I for a moment, as he declared he, too, was going to pursue what was most important to God first: his photography. He pointed out that he wasn't doing it for money, but for God. I knew his commitment: I've done the same. I've followed God intently and my life has been marked with ruin. Except for the trips to Alaska, TeXas, and all the other good places God sends me. Anyway, the point is that I followed God with my cartoons and I have ended up bankrupt and totally unsuccessful at living a normal life. I saw Steve's idealism in his declaration to follow God alone, and preach for no money. But I remained skeptical.



At some point during my stay, we played a Mormon board game called Settlers of Zarahemla. Initially I was quite reluctant because I was prejudiced against Mormon games. I thought I would be indoctrinated. But it turned out to be a quite nice game: full of strategy and excitement. It didn't

have much to do with Mormon at all unless you analyzed all the pieces, cards and the board game. Basically, it was just a strategy game. I came close to winning the first game, but Ginger advanced ahead. The game was such that if you are not positioned right at the start, you don't stand a chance and die a slow death. In that way, it reminded me of Risk. Biscuit won the second game by a long shot. I was busy trying to make deals with whoever was losing so I could get ahead. Steve and I had a race to fill the temple with stones and he won.



This is a picture of the 24 hour grocery store I used. Steve and Ginger call it "Freaky Carr's" because weird stuff happens there like one person shot another over an argument at the cash register. I don't enjoy grocery shopping, but it was fun shopping here because I didn't know where everything was. They don't have as much variety of products. Also, despite being in Alaska, they don't have a good selection of fish.



This is a picture of the mud which makes up the beach around Anchorage. If you walk on it, it can suck you in and take off your leg.



This is where Steve works. He is a security guard dispatcher. His job consists of monitoring the security systems in various properties and responding to security guard reports. He says it involves a lot of communication and action items, which is why he prefers to unwind and play Farmville for a few minutes when he comes home.

Steve lived in Seattle for 12 years before moving to Alaska. He worked for an airline and they transferred him to Alaska, so Ginger and he moved. They have lived in Alaska for three years, and plan to move to Utah in September. Steve has not had a car since 1995. The two of them take the bus everywhere, or get rides from their Ward (their Church). The last time I saw Steve was at his wedding in 2004 in Seattle. Steve doesn't return my phone calls, emails or letters, so I have to come visit him in Alaska to say hello.



Biscuit and I before we parted ways: he to work, me to the airport home. I was in Alaska for 15 days. I was not anxious. I did what came naturally to me. I enjoyed the deep, rich love of my Mormon friends. We prayed together every day and the Holy Spirit was present amongst us.

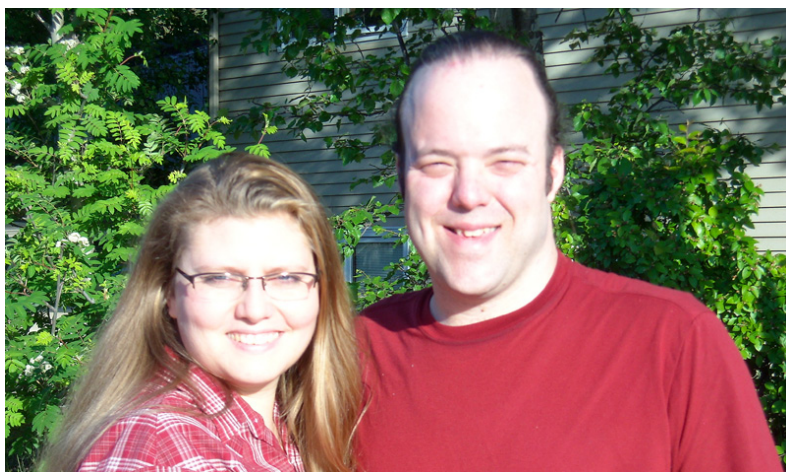


We prayed a lot, Steve, Ginger and I. They knew I wanted to get a picture of the city from the same point as my Graphic Design Illustration. That point was near the airport. So on my final day, Ginger took me to the airport, we stored my bags, and walked over a mile to the point. See the city behind me? That is the same city as the illustration below:



It turned out Ginger and I had both prayed privately that God would lead us to take the photo from the point. We'd tried to go the previous day, but it did not work out.





On June 30th, I flew from Anchorage to Boston at 9:30PM. I can't sleep on planes because of sleep apnea, so I was awake for 31 hours straight. When I got to Boston, Tim Boilard picked me up. With all the traffic, we stopped in Inman Square, Cambridge, to eat. I used to live there. Having just been a tourist to Steve and Ginger, I felt compelled to give Tim the tour of where the great Jim Bures used to live. I showed him my apartment. We ate ice cream from Christina's. While sitting on a bench, I looked up at the sky. It was 7:30pm. I said, "I feel like I am in Alaska at 10pm." To which Tim replied, "You know, for some strange reason I feel like I'm there with you." I cried the whole way home. I had such a good time in Alaska.

OUR HEAVENLY FATHER

Mormons call God their "Heavenly Father". When they pray, they pray, "Dear Heavenly Father, we are so very thankful for thy great love for us." Their prayers are formal, like the King James Version of the Bible they use, and the Book of Mormon. I prefer to call God, "God" or my favorite "Lord", but they pray to their Heavenly Father.

I am from the Protestant faith and, although I have had many positive experiences with Mormons, I was prejudice against their belief and thought they believed something different. Being in the Protestant Church, you hear all sorts of crazy rumors about Mormons like how they believe satan was Jesus' brother or worse. However, all these notions were dismissed when I actually went to meet them, and tried to discover for myself, from a Mormon, what they believed.

The Mormon Church is extremely organized. For that reason alone, I would probably never feel comfortable being a Mormon. In their Church, they try and get all members involved by giving them "callings" or tasks that they do to serve one another. Ginger doesn't work, but instead volunteers for her Church (called a Ward) doing not one but 4 callings. One involves designing the announcement bulletin board, and I forget the others. Her main calling seemed to be to organized food storage. The idea is for each home in the Ward to store up a 3 month supply of dry food in case the food supply stops in Alaska. She organizes events

where other families or Ward members gather together and pack one kind of food into large canisters for the rest of the Church, who buys them. After so many events, they have prepared many varieties of food, and everyone in their Ward ends up with a 3 month supply of food in case of emergency. Ginger seemed to keep very busy with this.

Steve and Ginger are vegetarians. They buy organic food to eat healthier. This made a lot of sense to me: it is wise. Regular grocery products are processed and have all kinds of chemicals. Someday, I'd like to go organic too, but it seems like a hassle to a guy who doesn't like to grocery shop. The Mormons don't smoke or drink alcohol and many do not use caffeine. All wise choices to avoid vice. I would make a fine Mormon because I've already given those things up.

The Mormon Church service was interesting. They have a long service, which would annoy me. It is broken into three parts: Sacrament, Old Testament lesson, and Men's (or Women's) Group. Sacrament is the part that resembles Protestant Church. There are hymns and singing. There are no Pastors in the Mormon Church because they believe each and every individual member is part of the priesthood. So various Church members get up and give small talks that they have written. This particular Sunday was Father's Day, so only women spoke and they talked about love and appreciating the family and various things like that.

Mormons are extremely family focused. There were so many kids at this service. They, like some conservatives, believe that the family is the base structure that makes up society. Mormons are also extremely community minded. They serve each other in tremendous ways that rival anything I've ever seen at any Protestant Church. This is because their Church is structured to keep people connected with each other. In my Protestant Churches, we are community minded as well, but it is more volunteer based. In the Mormon Church, although no one is forced to volunteer, they are strongly encouraged by the Church structure and the "callings". I remember when Steve and Ginger got married in 2004, their Mormon friends completely installed all the decorations, tables and food for their reception, and then broke it all down in the end. I mean, we are talking at least 8 volunteers there. Steve and Ginger had a fantastic, but very cheap, wedding because of how Mormons treated each other and maintained their value of community.

After a few talks from the Church members, the Mormon's had communion. This involved passing around baskets of bread and little cups of water. Since the Mormons don't drink, they do not use wine (or grape juice) at their services. They pass these baskets around just like we (Protestants) pass around collection plates. I abstained from communion.

As I mentioned, it was Father's Day so the women honored the men by preparing little gifts for them. The women walked around and handed each man a gift, a little bag of homemade cookies. They even gave one to me, although I am not a father. I thought this was very touching the way the women were so visibly willing to serve the men. In my neck of the woods, the women are all so headstrong that men and women (of my age bracket) really do not get along.

In subsequent days, as Ginger described what it was like being in a woman's group at the Ward, she made me realize that the women do not tend to gossip about each other, but tend to discuss with each other ways to help other women with problems. For example, one woman's husband is very busy all of the time, and doesn't focus on their family. So they support this woman and find ways to help her to cope by talking about it amongst themselves. Unfortunately, no amount of sweet counsel can make up for a missing husband, but they try very hard to be there for each other.

Mormons seem very big on love. Love is the product of their faith. Mormonism is similar to Catholicism in that there can be a lot of lukewarm or inactive members. In the Catholic Church, maybe people consider themselves Catholic, even

though they do not go to Church at all or may not even believe in Jesus Christ. In that way, some Mormons fall away from their faith and cause ruin to the reputation of the Mormon Church as a whole. However, my Mormon friends loved me as much, or more, than would have some of my most mature Christian friends back home. Of course, I have known them almost 20 years.

Mormons do have a bit of "works" component to their belief system. Protestants, for the most part, believe that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone, not by works. However, like many Catholics, Mormons have some notion of the combination of faith plus works. This can be attributed to the fact that the Bible can be contradictory about this subject. In Ephesians 2 it says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works." But in James 2 it says, "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."

I heard one Mormon, at Men's Group, explain it this way in a story. If a man's son hits a baseball and it goes through a neighbor's window, the son feels bad. He wants to repay and fix the window, but he can't: he doesn't know how and he has no money. So the father says, "That's okay, son, this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to fix the window for you, and you just go home and eat your vegetables and do your chores." In the same way, Mormons believe that Jesus takes care of their major problems (their sin) but tells them to be obedient and do what is good for them.

I prefer Protestantism. It is simpler. I just have to believe in Jesus, and He does the rest. He takes care of what I should do or where I should go. No matter what I do, in the end, I'm going to Heaven. It is very simple to me. I was raised Catholic and I see their faith is much like faith + works. Have faith in Jesus, but obey the ten commandments and follow the Church rules. If you sin, go to confession to be forgiven by a priest. Many Catholics may think they are better than each other because they are better at "works". In Protestantism, people judge based on how much "faith" they have. I view Mormon religion as a bit of faith + works + fairy tales. I won't go into the details, but the fairy tales are the stuff that makes for good rumors in the Protestant Church for discrimination, although we share the same faith. We pray to the same God, we share the same Holy Spirit, and we both believe that Jesus is Lord and that He died for our sins. In my opinion, as I will get to later, we (Protestants) should start looking for similarities to capitalize on rather than highlighting differences used to dismiss other faiths.

Another thing that I find fascinating is that Mormons believe that Scripture is still being created. Please suspend your notions of Scripture being the inspired Word of God for a moment. Protestants believe that God wrote the Bible through direct inspiration of the authors who wrote it. They believe that no one can add or take away from the scriptures by anything else that is written. However, Mormons focus on the view that man wrote the Scriptures, than man wrote their experience of God through their own eyes. The Book of Mormon is considered Scripture because it is the continued testimony of God as recorded through man's eyes.

Steve doesn't journal, but Ginger does and she believes she is writing ongoing scripture. She doesn't view it in a divine sense, but in the sense that her story is part of God's story, and her written journal will document how God worked in her life to become part of scriptures. Her view is that people will look at her journals and see how God worked in her life.

The Mormons are very big on family, as I have mentioned. They are organized. Because of this, they compile huge records about anyone who has ever lived. If you ever want to know more about your family tree, visit the Mormons, because they will probably know. My Granddad did this to research his family. The Mormon genealogical records are used more by outsiders than Mormons themselves.

The last thing I will mention is that Mormons believe in prophesy. Protestants do too. In Protestantism, from what I have seen so far, a Prophet will exclaim some encouraging, yet vague, words over a person. Mormons can go to a Patriarch, whenever they are ready, and get their Patriarchal Blessing. Steve and Ginger's patriarchal blessings are each two sided letters with their full names, date of birth and parents' full names. The patriarch prays the blessing to them over their head, which is recorded and transcribed for them to keep. They consider it a road map to their life. I found these blessings to be somewhat vague in nature, but encouraging. However, both Steve and Ginger's patriarchal blessing mentioned the characteristics they would have in a mate. And those characteristics are true in each other. You can hear the blessings talk about each other, and they were transcribed almost ten years apart! The Mormons really believe that God has their lives planned out, and that God reveals the plan as they pray and seek him.

I went to Alaska to see my friends, skeptical about their religion. But as I stayed, prayed and learned about them, I came to the conclusion that God is working on a bigger scale than I can possibly imagine. Doris once told me

that God loves each of his children in different ways, and through different religions has different relationships with them. I sensed something complex in how God relates to different religions.

On the flight home I was reminded that Jesus goes out and seeks the lost. He meets them where they are at, and doesn't require that they come to him. The Goth crowd that celebrated Summer Solstice did so to a Christian Goth musician. Who am I to judge the way God works? Who am I to assume that my way is the only way to God?

In Romans 2 it says, "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?"

Does not this apply to faiths as well as the individual? If I claim Protestantism is the only, true faith, but overlook the flaws my beliefs have because I don't know God fully in this life, do I not violate this command when I judge a Mormon's faith as invalid? The Protestant Church shuns homosexuals, Mormons, Jehovah's Witness and Unitarians, all without ever once visiting their temples or getting to know one individual from their faiths.

Isn't the greatest command to love the Lord your God will all your heart, mind, body and soul and to love your neighbor as yourself? How can we, as Protestants, say we are loving our neighbor if we cast judgments upon them that preclude ever getting close enough to know one?

I reject what I have learned so far and I seek to be brought to the higher places, because it is God who made this world, and He who knows how it works. I do not want to be in the position of judging God when my call is to love. The Mormons loved me without prejudice, why didn't I? This trip, I learned not to discriminate on basis of faith.

I asked for a miracle: "God send me to Alaska though I have no money". And He did! And what a wonderful time! But for God's next miracle, I've asked that He send me on a one month mission to Africa, where maybe I can be more useful to Him when I travel and enjoy His large, beautiful creation.