

“Leading Me to Still Waters”

In March 2013 Jean wrote a letter to a certain South Indian man, a victim of human trafficking who, after desperate attempts to be granted justice, and a green card in the U.S., had finally given up and left to see a dying family member in India. After a couple of months there he left his family again—heading to become a pipe fitter in Abu Dhabi—still trying to get out of the tremendous debt and threats caused by the creditors tied to the trafficking. He had given up fighting for justice in regard to his case here.

Jean wanted him back. He was particularly bright, his English and other necessary Indian languages of Malayalam and Tamil and Hindi were all perfect, and he had the patience of Job, which you needed if you were going to work with Jean Stockdale, late into the night, night after night, unpacking the details to win T-Visas, Trafficking visas, for victims of the largest labor trafficking scheme in U.S. history.

By this point Jean Stockdale had put 3 years into coming to understand a scheme by a Marine Construction Company that had exploited workers and underbid the competition to win U.S. contracts worth hundreds of millions related to rebuilding oil rigs after Hurricane Katrina. You can promise to do work at a lower cost—and still provide yourself and corporate cronies with a windfall—if you don’t have to pay laborers. Over 500 workers had been recruited from India, given lots of promises about green cards and happy futures, and then they were treated as indentured servants, were paid unfairly and were given none of the promised immigration perks.

I cannot, this morning, tell you the full extent of what happened, but what I can tell you is that Jean Stockdale, from May of 2010 until March of 2019, gave her life for approximately 200 of these men, and their families, who has the *hardest cases*. In the end, *all* won their cases. In one particular 2-year period T-Visa cases that Jean prepared and won—without a law degree—made up over 20% of all human trafficking cases granted in the entire United States. The company she (and others) relentlessly pursued, seeking justice, eventually went bankrupt and workers were given a large settlement.

She didn’t want fame or glory or media. She hardly wanted the big win talked about. She didn’t want repercussions for trafficking victims from mafia-like hit men in India. But, privately, she basked in that massive victory. She did all that work as a volunteer.

But today, I want to tell you about that particular letter in 2013, which she wrote before she succeeded in winning even one of the cases. Jean wrote to this man and said, “Sir, I’m inviting you back to the USA to be the first participant in our new **Still Waters**

program.” There is no model to follow. This seems to be a “first,” to show the nation that churches will rise up to defend trafficked victims and call out the companies that hurt them. And the church has twin goals -- to deter future trafficking and to restore the spirit for victims of past trafficking – Still Waters is unique, but we hope that other faith-based organizations will operate similar efforts when trafficking is exposed and victims are already dispersed.

Jean created a letterhead that included our church name and had an official looking title ‘Still Waters Program’ title. And, underneath, she had in italics, “he leads me beside the still waters, he restoreth my soul.”

Regarding your assignments, she wrote in the letter, we will discuss them thoroughly after you get here. Basically, Still Waters is set up to help you

- explore any legal recourse you may have against the people who trafficked you
- confront your traffickers in a way that is comfortable to you. (We provide various examples and scenarios. You can enact them as role-play, or actually do them)
- gain deep physical rest in a stress-free environment
- heal your self-concept
- restore your self-confidence
- rebuild your family relations
- strategize to recover your financial well-being
- find God’s grace in what happened to you

All of that is what you will find beside the still waters of our church and program.”

Jean shared this letter with me and said, “Seth, we’ve been doing the work, and we have never had a name. Is this name okay?” “Of course, Jean. It’s a beautiful name.”

Armed with this letter our Indian friend went to the embassy in Abu Dhabi and his visa was approved to travel to the U.S. for the totally unofficial, now breathed-into-existence Still Waters Program, that Jean had so convincingly presented.

When he arrived at JFK Airport this friend was met by an Immigration and Customs Patrol Officer who asked a lot of hard questions. Our friend didn’t know if he’d get through the airport without being detained. Then, the gruff man looked at the letter and said out loud, “Still Waters: He leads me besides he Still Waters. Yeah, I think I’ve heard of that organization. You go ahead.”

That gruff man, with badge and a gun and cuffs, when he was a child somewhere, had heard the promise, “he leads me beside the still waters.” He couldn’t place it—but he knew it. He knew those comforting words from Psalm 23. I imagine he’d first heard them in Sunday school Somewhere, where the words of Psalm 23 and a picture of Jesus the Shepherd are brought together, like they are on this stain glass window of Jesus the Good Shepherd that Jean loved so much. We are sheep in need of a shepherd.

Friends of God, and friends of Jean Stockdale, I have never, in all my years, met someone who was more committed to participating with God and with Jesus and with the Holy Spirit in leading *all people* to Still Waters so that their souls and their lives can be restored.

I have never met someone who can meet with gruff officers and turn them gentle, who can meet with overly analytical attorneys and find their hearts, who can visit detained individuals week after week, convincing them they are loved, who can learn about a desperate case of someone who went through a particularly hard time and can give them the time and care they need for healing, who can sit and listen to someone on the phone, half way across the world, long enough for them to believe that what they have to say really matters, who can dream big enough to convince someone who has been wronged, time and time again, that their lives and situations can be saved! Who can comfort the abused, the neglected and slowly help them find hope and optimism again. who can love those who have made mistakes that seem totally unforgivable and who can help them believe that they are worthy enough to belong beside Still Waters again.

But she didn’t just help them **undo**—so they could *rest* by Still Waters—she helped them **redo**.

After she helped people believe they were worthy enough, or free enough, or liberated enough, or wise enough, or youthful enough, or beautiful enough, or good enough, or courageous enough to live by Still Water with God and each other again, she would *then* invite them to *build a world of joy and healing* with her by those still waters.

She would care about the quality of the green pastures, and the health of the water, she would care that there be Fair Trade that helped women owned cooperatives by the Still Waters, that there be affordable healthy food by still waters, that there be solar panels

on churches and non-toxic cleaning supplies in the cupboard by the Still Water, that there be affordable summer camps by the Still Waters, that there be creativity and songs and bands from various cultures, that there be prison visits, and church-based mental health programs by the Still Waters, that there be puppet shows, strawberry festivals, and children's choirs, and original theater productions and nature hikes by Still Waters.

Jean's twin message about the program Still Waters, that she wrote in that 2013 letter—"to deter future trafficking" and "restore the soul," is really an accurate way to describe her entire life among us, in this community at least, this past quarter century +. Jean fought to stop evil, fought to break the chains that bind...and, then, she planted new seeds, and with gentleness, time, a nurturing spirit, resources, community, energy, passion and fun, she enjoyed the fullness and beauty of life.

This room is filled with people who were set free and were filled with peace, and taught to truly participate in a restored kind of life, by Jean Stockdale. She did that for her family—Suzy for the last 32 years, and Carlos, for 8, and she did that for all of us.
(Pause)

Jean was frenetically doing both of these things (fighting to undo damages, and fighting to build up the positives) all the time. I spent some time reading through some of the 4,000 emails I had with Jean, lots of them LONG, just in the past 15 years. Here is just a glimpse from a 4-day stretch in 2010.

June 29th, 2010

Dear Seth,

I am testing my theory that Elizabeth Detention will release almost anyone we ask for. Tonight I have sent letters asking for release of six people. At least five of them would be reuniting with their families, (not coming to us to provide food and shelter). The 6th will need to come to us. Have left a copy of the packet in your mailbox. That would make 9 releases in the last month, if we are successful.

Had a long phone copy w/ American Friends Services today. Told our recent experience, —the difficulty lies not in getting people out of detention but in getting them access to a responsible lawyer once they are out. She said she would fax to our church an updated list of pro bono attys. (Hasn't come through yet.)

On July 8 & 9 I will be in DC w/Suzy for college visits, and want to make an appt w/ Phyllis Coven, Ombudsman for Homeland Security Customs and Immigration Services about the trafficking situation.

June 30th

Dear Seth,

The immediate needs for Francis, our newest released detainee are: take a shower, wash his clothes,

Also I set an appt with his atty Jeffrey Steinfeld (201) 343-3500 jsteinfeld@jsteinfeld.com Court date is July 13. Stenfield has came to EDC to see him 3 times: 2 visits and court. T

Seth, I will give Francis \$10 for food and phone card for today before I leave town. I told him he can sleep in Quiet Room (now prayer chapel) until you get him into a house, and to keep his stuff in my office during the day. Please see to food money for each of Eb, Aziz and Francis for the days I am gone. Thank you.

July 1 (sent from her college tour trip with Suzy)

Dear all,

Our proposal --to construct a green-tech building on Raritan Ave. containing A Better World Cafe and affordable housing -- will be introduced to the Board of Commissioners of the Highland Park Redevelopment Agency at their regular quarterly meeting at 7:30 pm Wed. July 7, 2010 at Borough Hall 221 South Fifth Ave. Highland Park. One hour of time has been allotted on the agenda, near the beginning of the meeting: 20 minutes presentation by the architect, and 40 minutes for questions from the panel of Commissioners.

This is an open public meeting. It is not a time when the Redevelopment Agency will vote on anything related to our proposal. Nor is it a time for public testimony (that's later in the process, at meetings of Borough Council). We are not seeking a groundswell of people to come to this July 7 meeting as it is not possible to enlist public opinion until the proposal has been heard; however, interested Board/volunteers/staff, of WIMNI, EP, RCHP-AHC, & ABWC, are more than welcome to attend: your presence may help get the dialogue between the Borough and the project coalition off to a good start.

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Jean Stockdale
Who Is My Neighbor? Inc.
19 S. 2nd Ave.
Highland Park, NJ 0

July 2, 2010

Dear Nick (from our Immigration Committee,

The name of the nonprofit where Aziz worked in Tajikistan is Nasly Navras, and their newsletter is also called Nasly Navras. It may be advisable to request all of the 2008 monthly issues. We are trying to obtain the Feb. 2008 issue and perhaps it will deflect suspicion if we get additional issues so it is not obvious what article in the newsletter we are trying to obtain.

It would be fine to scan the newsletter and email it to us. Aziz's mother told him she went to the Nasly Navras headquarters at Shotemur Street in Dushanbe and asked the director (Aziz's former boss) for a copy of the newsletter and was told they don't have any copies of that issue left. Other places it may be are at public library on Rudaki Propsect (street name) or at School #20 in the center of the city. (Aziz said everybody knows where School #20 is.)

July 3, 2010

Material Goods

The Thrift Shop has had no shoes in Aziz's size so we used a little of the asylum program \$ to buy him shoes. Ebenezer obtained a wrist watch. Francis would still like to get a bike he could use around HP. Is there someone who could show them how to use Craigslist or Freecycle to locate things they may need?

This is the kind of world Jean wanted, and that she worked for... beside the Still Waters.
(Pause)

When I went to see Jean in the hospital on Friday morning, the day before she died, she was very weak. I didn't know if her weakness was from medication or if it was the cancer. I invited her to just close her eyes and to not talk a lot. It was too tiring for her. I prayed with her and then I asked what she'd like me to sing.

First, she said, “Peace is flowing like a River”. “Peace is flowing like a river, flowing out of you and me, flowing out into the desert, setting all the captives free.” Jean, that’s you. You’ve given your life to setting people free, and giving the truest forms of peace. She smiled at that. “That’s our church,” She whispered

Then, I asked, is there a song that you loved most as a child. And she immediately turned to me and, in a choked up voice said, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariots.” Swing Low, Sweet Chariots, Coming for to Carry Me Home....I looked over Jordan and what did I see, coming for to carry me home, a band of angels coming after me.”

Jean, I’m sure, as a kid, you pictured “home” as ‘heaven,” right?

She nodded through tears. “Well, Jean, that vision is still true. God is going to swing low, at some point here and God is going to carry you home, in the ultimate sense—as your days here end. But, Jean, I can’t help but think that God and Jesus and the Spirit have been swinging low and inviting you inside the chariot through your entire life. The Chariot brought you home to heaven right here on earth each day.’ And, you, Jean, together with God in the chariot, have been ‘swinging low for everyone else—carrying them home to a more beautiful life on this earth. She smiled widely, with eyes still closed. (Pause)

The story of God’s arrival in the Christ is the story of God swinging low, into the world—to stay for a while—in incarnate form—and to lead the world beside Still Waters. Jean Stockdale lived a lifetime beside those Still Waters with God and she loved it there! She loved it with the family of her birth. She loved it with her dear daughter Suzy and son Carlos. She loved it with all the housemates she had over the years. She loved living with her church family in the Still Waters of worship and bible study and the fellowship events and the kid-focused programming.

The story of Elijah is that he was taken up, eventually, in a heaven-bound Chariot of Fire, by a Holy River, while his disciple Elisha, and others, watched on in amazement. I feel like Elisha today. Maybe you do too. We have been disciples of Jean, and Jean has gone ahead of us, in a Chariot. She is raised up to life eternal.

Today is a day to catch our breath. It’s a day to watch that Chariot ride into the heavens. And Jean will join the communion of saints who have gone before us. In fact, I feel I can sense her there already.

But I also sense that Jean, together with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, will keep ‘swinging low’ by *these* Still Waters. I imagine she’ll help keep swinging low, sometimes to bring

you to Still Waters, and, sometimes to ask you to jump in the chariot, and to go look for the lost and broken who need the Waters. As you lead them away from trafficking and pain and into freedom and joy, you will feel her there with you—maybe you'll even be beside her, in God's chariot, singing of the God who is a fount of every blessing, singing of a God who makes peace flow.

Thanks be to God.

Amen