

THE WORK OF THIS MOMENT

A Reflection on the Quaker Approach
To the Crisis in the Modern World

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Civilization is not yet an accomplished fact, but only an aspiration, a kind of well-meaning intention.

Shall we ever transform the pandemonium we know as human society into a community of saints? Do all the horrors and humiliations of the twentieth century leave us with any basis for hope?

The latest attempt radically to transform human society now lies everywhere in ruins. This great attempt was based upon the social theories of Karl Marx. The social transformation which Marxism attempted it expected to see matched by a corresponding transformation of human nature itself! The communist experiment was certainly one of the most spectacular commitments of thought and labor ever devoted to the logically planned improvement of human life. What should be our own attitude of mind and heart now that this enterprise--an enterprise that at once challenged us, bewildered us, and frightened us--now has quite suddenly collapsed before our very eyes?

We can be forgiven for being slow to breathe a sigh of relief. For if we look at ourselves we see everywhere the evidence that our own market economy is producing increasing disparities in income among American families. We see that the same market economy which seems to work marvels for shareholders leaves workers increasingly bereft. We worry about the assumption that humankind's wants and needs will fuel an ever expanding mobilization of productive forces, an assumption which pits our economic life against the very biosphere which provides the basis for human survival. We see a world-wide tension between mobile multinational corporations, on the one hand, and territorially bound political communities which seem scarcely able to protect the public interest, on the other. We also see everywhere a threat to peace and freedom, and a snowballing erosion of human rights, wherever concentrated wealth collides with extreme poverty. This is true within the cities of the United States as well as in developing countries.

Yet, the failure of revolutionary movements to offer credible alternatives to all this is not merely a practical failure. It is a spiritual failure as well. There is scarcely any example in our time of a determined attempt to produce swift and sweeping change that has not resulted in tyranny, often in tyranny immeasurably worse than that perpetrated by the old social order.

In spite of all the pundits who have proclaimed that with the collapse of communism and the triumph of capitalism history has come to an end, I firmly believe that the fundamental question of how to distribute the product of the human community's collective work is a question of social ethics and of political economics which has yet to be solved. The first reaction that we as spiritual people should have in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Empire is an awareness that the situation points us, not to the end of history, but to an important historical task

which lies ahead. And so an insistent question arises: how do we move forward in the face of the practical and moral failures of both the victors and the losers in the present historical drama? Do Friends have any particular genius for addressing these dilemmas?

I know it may seem odd to say this, but one of the insights of early Friends which is relevant here is their insistence on the limitations of words. Friends know that the very Truth which illumines our lives comes to us wrapped in enigmas and mysteries, not in a set of sharply etched propositions which can be summarized in creedal statements. One can read in the Gospel of John how Jesus, when speaking to the Pharisees, observed that those who claim Truth as a possession are apt to become as blind people. So Friends have steadfastly resisted the reduction of their faith experience to a neat set of creeds and dogmas.

No one talks very much about religious creeds in the modern world. But a contemporary analogy to the creeds against which Friends rebelled exists in ideologies, and in the bumper sticker version of ideologies--politically correct ideas of the center, the right, or the left. Like the creeds against which Friends rebelled, ideologies presume to offer a total explanation of life.

In fact, modern ideologies have assumed even more than the traditional religious creeds against which Friends rebelled. Modern ideologies presume to offer a formula for lasting communal harmony by eliminating once and for all the root causes of all social injustice, of all evil. Moreover, this breath-taking project is presumed to be accomplishable without the help of God. Modern ideologies assert that perfect justice can be created by human beings themselves through political revolution, or social science, or psychotherapy. In short, they assume that human beings can be exalted through their own self-creating acts. Yet, ironically, modern revolutionaries, while willing freedom and equality for everyone, have seemed to create only desperation, and even terror. Intending human self-exaltation, they have sown human self-abasement.

What Friends have in common with all other people of faith--with the various strains of Native American spirituality, with the great religions of Asia and Africa--is an awareness of mystery and a capacity for awe. This radical amazement in the face of the mystery of existence causes us to be in constant state of mal-adjustment to creeds, ideologies, and politically correct ideas, which would pin everything down with words and concepts. We are, in a sense, stunned by what cannot be put into words. We seek to live in a way which responds to the mystery behind the words, the mystery which the words are meant to reveal but which they often actually conceal. We see it as our supreme obligation to pause, to wait, to hear, and to respond to the continuing revelation of a divine voice, and so we are wary of set commitments and plans, wary of humanly-generated schemes and projects. We are aware of the tragic dimensions of history, of the fallibility of even the noblest intentioned of historical

agents, and of the demonic effects of the worst actors on the stage of history. We hope that our practice of silent waiting will rebuke the self-righteousness that threatens continually to subvert the compassion and good judgment of political activists such as ourselves. Thus we adopt a prophetic stance which is disposed to attack concrete and visible injustices; we have an intense desire to see particular, immediately visible wrongs righted; we are, frankly, summoned to piecemeal action rather than to becoming enslaved in an overarching ideology or creedal vision.

It seems to me that this marriage of a wariness about grand simplifications with a desire to do something prophetic regarding concrete and visible injustices, a stance which has characterized the Friends approach over the last three hundred years, is one which remains a valid approach for the future. I hope that we will continue in these times to cherish the stubbornly non-ideological nature of the Religious Society of Friends, to cherish our willingness to be constantly skeptical of the fashionable buzz word or the politically correct concept. Rather than being a quaint habit, this stubbornness is a great source of Truth and strength.

A group of non-ideological, non-creedal people prudently waiting for leadings as to what, in existing circumstances, must unfailingly be done, will engage in searching dialogue. Each person will speak the truth as she or he understands it; each will listen as others speak from their understanding. When love performs these two offices--speaking and listening, service rooted in Truth is made possible, and community happens. This is what, it seems to me, the Religious Society of Friends is all about--true service and true community nourished under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

In order to understand better the distinction between ideology and spirituality, or ideology and true religion, and to see how this bears on the matters of Friends' witness in the modern world, it is useful for us to look more closely at the nature of spiritual Truth itself, and at the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

But before examining these matters in detail, it might be useful if I share with you a small anecdote about something which occurred recently and which I believe illuminates the dilemma which concerns us. It is a story which involves the balance of freedom and order in human life.

About a year ago a group of people working for a small social change agency seeking to advance the cause of peace and justice in the human community gathered for their monthly staff meeting. One member of the staff had put the topic of the office refrigerator on the agenda. When it was the turn for that matter to come up, the staff member initiating the agenda item exclaimed that a day or two previously, when she had opened the refrigerator door, she was nearly overcome by the odor which emerged. She hoped that some way could be found to keep the refrigerator in a decent and sanitary condition. Several members of the group rolled their eyes, and

one person observed that this is a discussion they have every few months and that it never seems to do any good over the long run.

Nevertheless, one person made the bold suggestion that people take turns, so that every Friday one person would be in charge of cleaning everything out of the refrigerator, with no storage permitted over the weekends. Thus, each week could begin afresh, and the refrigerator's contents could be kept relatively up-to-date.

This proposal was immediately objected to by a staff member who kept sixteen-year-old miso in the refrigerator. He objected to any policy of periodic cleaning which would endanger this substance.

In response, another staff member asked if it was reasonable for anyone to keep something in the refrigerator which other people might find offensive.

The owner of the miso declared the person who raised this matter to be culturally narrow-minded.

The conversation went around in circles for awhile. It was suggested that no one put anything in the refrigerator unless it had his or her name and the date on it. That way, anyone inspired to deal with the refrigerator would know with whom to check before throwing out rancid bags of food. But this idea foundered on the disinclination of anyone on the staff to take on the task of chasing down the owners of offensive items.

Finally, one member of the group, in frustration, went to the refrigerator, opened the door, and began tossing mouldy brown paper bags into the nearby garbage pail. Those who were present were able to claim and save their own food, including the sixteen-year old miso. Those who were not present to defend their possessions simply lost them. In any event, the condition of the refrigerator was substantially improved. But when all was said and done, this group of people who presume to preach about establishing peace and justice on a global scale was unable to devise any plan to prevent the recurring deterioration of conditions within the two cubic feet of its own refrigerator!

The essential problem seemed to be that no one was willing to compromise on their personal way of using the refrigerator in the interest of allowing an overall order to emerge. The staff members of the social change organization gave evidence of a kind of absolute commitment to their own freedom which could not be eclipsed by some vision of the common good.

In reality, there is really no neat and precise way to define the balance between freedom and order. The problem has to be readdressed almost on a daily basis. Overcoming the illusion that we are separate and independent, and that we

are somehow free to act on an agenda which is entirely our own, is the essential task of all spirituality. To confuse Quaker spirituality with the establishment of personal freedom as an absolute value is simply to misunderstand it.

Indeed, all sanctity is born of conflict--of contradictions resolved, finally, into union. For the landscape of humankind's spiritual world, the world in which we realize our most noble accomplishments and in which we suffer our most crushing defeats, is a landscape of intellectually unresolvable dichotomies: freedom versus order; self-help salvation versus grace, or even predestination or karma; tradition and innovation; the simultaneous fallenness and exaltedness of human nature; stability and change; justice versus mercy. (Saint Thomas Aquinas observed that justice without mercy is cruelty, while mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution.) In his many wonderful paintings entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom* the Quaker artist Edward Hicks charmingly symbolizes for us an ideal of sanctity which involves the reconciliation of such opposites. The logical mind is offended by these dichotomies and seeks to come down on one side or the other of them; the same dichotomies provoke and stimulate the higher human faculties, the faculties without which human beings are nothing but very clever animals. People of great sanctity somehow transcend these dichotomies without abandoning the truth on each side of them.

Humankind's particular vocation, then, is a precarious balancing act. It is a vocation that can be carried out successfully only with wisdom and love. It is a vocation which cannot be guided by simple, dogmatic assertions, which by their nature tend simply to prefer one side or the other of these dichotomies. The gospels have in common with the techniques of Socrates and of Zen Masters the fact that they question us, rather than telling us things. Legalism, lawyerliness and literalism are the enemies of all true spirituality. Poetry and parable are its friends. When spiritual discourse is reduced to lawyer-like debates, everyone loses.

It is interesting that Jesus never claimed to be a philosopher or an analyst. Indeed, very few of his sermons, as they are passed down to us in the gospels, could even be said to follow an outline. It is hard to imagine these sermons being spoken without long intervals of silence interspersed. Often Jesus spoke in somewhat obscure anecdotes and parables. On several occasions he simply said, "I *am* the Truth." He did not say I have come to give you great ideas or penetrating philosophies. He simply said, "I *am* the Truth." One of these occasions occurred during an interview with Pontius Pilate. Pilate's response to this strange assertion was to ask the question, "And what is Truth?" In asking the question this way, Pilate was, perhaps, revealing his background in Hellenistic culture, with its penchant for philosophizing. And as if to indicate that there was little possibility for rapprochement between one who claimed to "be" the Truth and another ready to dispute about it, Pilate, without waiting for any response from Jesus, turned away, and, ultimately, washed his hands of the entire matter which ensued.

There is a wisdom which is from the Lord, created from eternity in the beginning, and remaining until eternity at the end. It is a wisdom which we are told the Lord has poured out on all his works to be with humankind forever as his gift. (Jerusalem Bible--Ecclesiasticus 1:9,10) But this eternal wisdom is not something we can know with out minds only. Rather, it is something we are, it is a quality of being. Our minds cannot contain what contains us nor comprehend what comprehends us. We can enact this Truth, but we cannot adequately articulate it. Those who have a grasp of this are very wary of debates about spiritual matters. They know that the Truth is to be lived, not merely to be pronounced by the mouth, and they know that by their so living, that which is unutterable will be rendered visible.

It is true that Christianity can be abused by Christians. Christian fundamentalism is essentially the transformation of a wisdom tradition into an ideology. Many today would have us believe that a series of brittle faith propositions drawn from post-Victorian, middle class, middle American biases constitutes Christianity. But we must dismiss any idea that Jesus was so simple a figure, or that what he preached is so easily co-optable by the Chamber of Commerce.

What we have in the Gospels regarding the teachings of Jesus is more a series of glimpses than a clear code of doctrine. There is certainly no simple set of handy rules that can be unreflectively applied in today's daily life. Jesus started a spiritual movement based on dialogue, exploration and experiment, a movement which invites comment, interpretation and elaboration in a spiritual quest. The radical elements in his teachings are balanced by conservative qualifications. There seems to be a constant mixture of legalism and antinomianism; there is an emphasis which repeatedly switches from rigor and militancy to acquiescence and the acceptance of suffering. Some of this variety reflects the genuine bewilderment of the disciples and the confusion of the evangelical editors to whom their memories descended, but some of it undoubtedly truly reflects Jesus' awareness of the insoluble dichotomies of which we spoke earlier, and thus is essentially a part of his universalist posture. As Paul Johnson observes in *A History of Christianity*, "the wonder of all this is that the personality behind the mission is in no way fragmented but is always integrated and true to character. Jesus contrives to be all things to all people while remaining faithful to himself."

The theologian Paul Knitter writes:

As we deepen our awareness of what we may have encountered in our faith experience, as we search after the hidden face of God, we realize that every discovery, every insight, must be corrected and balanced by its opposite. As we discover the personality of God, we realize that God is beyond personality. As we penetrate into the immanence of divinity, we become aware of its transcendence. As we awaken to the "already" of God's kingdom in this world, we become more conscious of its "not-yet." Every belief, every doctrinal claim, must therefore be clarified and corrected by beliefs that, at first sight, claim the contrary. Realizing all this, we are disposed to look on

different religions, with their "contrary" experiences and beliefs, not as adversaries but as potential partners.

Thus, in the mundane world of ordinary affairs, the opposite of the truth is a falsehood. But in the sphere of religion, the opposite of a great spiritual truth is often not a lie (although sometimes it is), but often it is another great spiritual truth.

Let us, then, understand our task as Friends. First we must realize that we are now living, not at the end of history, but at one of history's most profound turning points. This is an era in which the old ways of doing things have become exhausted, having been overtaken by developments which they are inadequate to meet. It is a time when a new ordering of human thought, feeling and affairs is necessary, not only that we may experience more satisfaction in life, but for survival's sake itself.

Second, we must realize that if we are ever to cultivate that minimum degree of world fellowship necessary for humankind to survive, it must be done on a religious, not an ideological, basis. Friends avoid involvement in grand schemes which envisage some sort of external rearrangement of the same morally tired human material. Friends look for a change of heart more than for a change of systems. This is not because Friends do not understand the need for social change, for they certainly do, but because they realize that people can never create a family, a community, or a nation which exceeds in wisdom and goodness the wisdom and goodness they have a grasp of within their own heart. This deepening of spiritual perception is the key to social change; the rearrangement of society will follow naturally enough when a new spiritual culture takes root.

The portion of the Sermon on the Mount which we know as the Beatitudes expresses the spirituality which underlies Quaker service and social activism. The blessedness proclaimed in the Beatitudes is not a final reward for a certain kind of accomplishment; rather it is something which attaches by the inherent nature of things to a way of living, to a new spirit, to a new type of person. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right, not those who succeed in transforming vast social empires. Those who hunger and thirst for justice, who are merciful, who are pure in heart, who are peacemakers, who are gentle, bring the realm of God into full sight. The beatitude lies not in the successful attainment of external goals, but in the way, in the spirit, and in the search.

Howard Brinton, when he was its director, described Pendle Hill as a Quaker study center seeking to make possible within itself the kind of life which should prevail throughout the world. He acknowledged that this small-scale solution to large-scale social problems might appear too limited in scope to be effective, but he also insisted that it should be borne in mind that the history of life on this planet shows that all real beginnings have been small. Arnold Toynbee, in his study of history, finds that the creative minority is the mainspring of progress. It seems

universally a characteristic of the things of God that they begin on the scale of a mustard seed.

Of course, we do wish to help others and to contribute to the establishment of justice through all that we do. But we must be very careful not to become shrill and compulsive with grandiose plans and projects which imply that we must save the world all by ourselves. At the deepest level, we help through the kind of people we are, and through our direct experience of the Kingdom of God, of Realm of God in gender-neutral vocabulary, as we establish a beloved community among ourselves, just as Howard Brinton described Pendle Hill as trying to do. We contribute to others best by appreciating the connection between the service we do and our own progress on the journey of spiritual awakening. We work on ourselves in order to help others, and we help others as a curriculum for working on ourselves. This in no way diminishes the need for special skills, for experience, or for vision, but all these will be of little use if we do not have at the center of our being, and among us in our Quaker community, a deep sense of reconciliation and peace. Rufus Jones correctly insisted that the first step in the rendering of service is the spiritual preparation of those who would serve.

On the inner spiritual level, the Quaker social activist conceives of her or his service as the giving of a gift. In personal affairs, a gift is impure if it is offered in the hope of currying favor, or in the expectation that the person to whom the gift is given will alter her or his behavior in a way favorable to the giver. We readily recognize such a gift as flawed; indeed, it is not an act of generosity, but it is more akin to a bribe. That gift in personal affairs is pure which is given without expectation of results, but which is given because of the fitness of the gift at the time, in the place, and to the person involved. Such a pure gift does not corrupt either the recipient of the giver, and is consistent in every way with the beauty of ultimate things. Quaker service and Quaker social activism have the character of such a gift, offered because of its fitness as an expression of truth, and not as a stratagem for having one's own way with the unfolding drama of the Creation.

Knowing that there is no time but this present, the Quaker social activist stops to listen, to pay attention, and to be aware. The Quaker activist understands that there is no truly beneficial, liberating or healing service which is not spiritual in quality. To such a Quaker activist, the tyranny of past, present and future gives way to a joyful awareness of the Eternal Now, to an awareness of how universal and eternal things are revealed and can be fully apprehended in every present moment. While Friends genuinely want to help others and change society, we do not look for results like a merchant expecting payment. Rather, we have an unshakable commitment to make of ourselves a free gift to that Spirit, that Inner Light, which, always abiding within ourselves and others, patiently awaits our discovery of its power and beauty.

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(Earlier in the worship Paul Jolly had offered a reflection about an elderly contributor with whom he had met who faced the diminishment of age with great resilience--a pianist and music teacher now suffering from severe arthritis who has refingered the pieces she plays and who practices with new appreciation the elementary exercises she used to give her students. "I must have been a good teacher," she said, "for the exercises work even for me in my condition.")

It happened that we were having a discussion this morning over the pots sink about the diminishment of age. We were lamenting our noticeably failing memories. This is a diminishment the bright side of which seemed to elude our discovery. I sent the conversation into a tailspin myself by relating a story which happened in my family. My now elderly uncle, who had been the pastor of a large Roman Catholic parish in New York City, and who still lives there in retirement, found himself unable to recall the name of the parish when in a conversation with a stranger who inquired about it. Needless to say, he found this very upsetting.

Irene' observed that she once was able to keep track not only of the details of her own job, but also of the details of everyone else's job. Now she feels lucky if she remembers what it is she herself is supposed to be doing any given moment. But she went on to say that it has taught her that in reality the most important thing in life is not what is going on in ten different places other than where you are, or what will occur tomorrow, or what did occur yesterday. Rather, she has come to understand that the most important thing in the world is to be in the presence of, and to give your attention to, the person with whom you are dealing at any given moment.

It also happens that this morning I was reading a book about presence, and the particular chapter I was studying had to do with the presence represented by the Blessed Sacrament in the Roman Catholic Church. The author, although not himself a Catholic, offered a very lovely reflection on the meaning of this form of divine presence in the experience of the people in a large portion of the Christian Church. But, after offering this explication, the writer concluded with a startling question which I think, as Friends, we can find useful. He asked: "Can there be any devotion to the Blessed Sacrament which rivals in its beauty and meaning the simple consideration of one human being for another?"