

Letting our lives speak

Public Lecture by Nancy Irving
New Jordans, Buckinghamshire, 18 June 2009

I am grateful for the invitation to speak with you this evening. I realise that this is the last in a series of lectures about challenges within Quakerism. Last September, I happened to run across Harvey Gilman at Friends House and he was on his way here to give the opening lecture in the series. Having now read his talk, I hope to live up to the spirit with which he opened this series.

In his talk, Harvey said: *“The spiritual life is not about what we believe or how successful we are. It is about how we trust...How sad [it is] that creeds, intellectual formulae, have often taken over from the promptings of the Spirit which offer themselves to the human heart. Faith as knowledge so often takes the place of faith as trust.”*

In the intervening months, these lectures have explored some of the diverse ways in which Quakers meet the challenges of our world in specific ways such as through our work at the United Nations and other venues. Tonight I want to get back in touch with that Spiritual challenge that is the foundation of all else that we do in the world.

When I say ‘letting our lives speak’, it sounds like there’s a choice. In truth, our lives speak no matter what our intent or design. It’s not really a matter of ‘letting’.

In fact, advertising folks know that – and they work to make us self-conscious about our image – ad nauseum. And the sad thing is that they often succeed for all too many of us – the young in particular -- in setting the language our lives speak in. Political strategists know the power of determining the language we use to describe our world – supposedly the neo-conservatives perfected that in the late 1990’s and we got George Bush as president in the US.

It’s a scary thought – one I don’t like to dwell on. Unlike our early Quaker forebears, we choose for the most part to dress like those around us; we buy into their conventions and practices and to different degrees let ourselves be swayed by the world around us. Remember being a teenager and desperately wanting to fit in, to conform even in rebellious modalities? Back then our lives spoke to those around us – do we belong or do we not?

For the first 150 years of Quakerism, Quakers let their clothing and their speech be the outward badges of the lives they chose to lead. They were willing to stand apart in appearance as an expression of the simplicity they

professed. But it was more than simplicity they were letting their clothing speak about. It was a total package as we might say today.

Let's take a brief look at that package. Fundamental was their faith – and it was a Christianity that was neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic – the two choices of the time. It was truly iconoclastic and neither stream of Christian practice at that time welcomed this new expression of Christian faith. The basis of this new version of Christianity was a fresh reading of the Bible and what Jesus actually said and did. There were none of the trappings of the capital 'c' Church that evolved in the centuries following Jesus' death. Instead, the direct experience of the Holy Spirit informed by the teachings of the Bible was the core of their faith and that direct experience was available to everyone.

Jesus' teachings even today would be considered iconoclastic and counter-cultural – just as they were in the 1600's. His two commandments were to love God and to love each other. He gave advice about giving all you owned to the poor; he railed against moneylenders; he befriended outcasts of all types; and he promised ever-lasting life to those who were poor in spirit and the meek. He promoted a way of living in the world that was not quite of the world – the Kingdom of God already present on earth.

So early Friends took this message and turned it into a 17th century edition that was constantly informed and updated by the Holy Spirit and tested and supported by the Bible. They thought this new form of the Christian message would turn the world upside down and they wanted everyone to know about it. So they dressed and spoke and behaved differently – in a way they felt was inspired by and reflected their new faith. It was a new way of being in the world that reflected their message.

Imagine today what Isaac and Mary Penington went through – here he was the son of the Lord Mayor of London and they converted to Quakerism and its way of being in the world, adopting a new way of dressing and speaking all the time. They didn't take this on lightly as it meant estrangement from the people and lives they had been living until then. William Penn's conversion was much the same – remember George Fox's famous advice to him – to continue to wear his ceremonial sword 'as long as he could'. In other words, his conscience was to be his guide, but there was an expectation that he would eventually give up that remnant of his old life.

Early Friends let their lives speak by their work in the world – both evangelising and doing good works. Prison work began out of the necessity to take care of all those Friends incarcerated and then taking care of the ones left outside the prisons without means of support. These led to the

institutions we have today – Meeting for Sufferings, our service work both at home and farther afield. The recipients knew who were serving them – the Quakers dressed and spoke differently and cared for them no matter their spiritual condition.

All this was well and good while there was that zeal to show the world that there was another way of being a Christian and they were fighting the powers that be. In their book The Quakers in the American Colonies, Rufus Jones and Isaac Sharpless said:

Beneath these ventures, there always existed a deeper purpose – to make a fresh experiment in spiritual religion – as the living pulse... These American Quakers believed, with a white-hot intensity, that they had discovered, or rediscovered, a new spiritual Principle which they thought was destined to revolutionise life, society, civil government, and religion. The Principle (and they always spelled it with a capital P) which they claimed to have discovered was the presence of a Divine Light in man, a radiance from the central Light of the spiritual universe, penetrating the depths of every soul, which if responded to, obeyed and accepted as a guiding star, would lead into all truth and into all kinds of truth. They thought that they had found a way to the direct discovery of the Will of God and that they could thereby put the Kingdom of God into actual operation here in the world. [page xvii]

Now if we still believed that, our lives might be speaking in a different way.

So what happened to us? My own family might be somewhat typical. The Shippens [my middle name] were Yorkshire Quakers who emigrated in the 1670's. They prospered and multiplied and did well. So well, that by the late 1700's and early 1800's, they were no longer Quaker. They were no longer fighting City Hall – they were the establishment. I'm the first Quaker in the family since then.

Both my parents grew up in a town outside Philadelphia called Haddonfield, established in the 1600's by Quakers. My mother and her sister went to a Quaker boarding school and then my older sister and I did too. Of the four of us, I was the only one who ended up a Friend. My mother always enjoyed coming a long to Meeting with me and once I asked her why she didn't become a Quaker. Her reply was that it was too hard. She didn't explain further but I believe she still held the notion that Friends lived their lives differently and my mother was very much one who worried about 'what will the neighbours think?', although she devoted her time and energy to volunteer work.

That notion that Quakers are different lingers with us, but I sense some confusion about what it means. I fear we have lost touch with that vision

that inspired our forebears and I know so many are uncomfortable with the language and metaphors that they used. In many respects, we have thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

In my own spiritual journey, since my introduction to Friends at boarding school and my decision during university days to go to Meeting to try to find some grounding in the turbulent 60's, I have been aware of the distinctives between Friends and the rest of the world. There's an attitude, even a self-consciousness, that relates to what my mother deemed being 'hard'. I spent many years in the business world and had a sense of my life being split with one foot firmly in the 'real' world and the other foot in the 'idealised, striving for good' world.

In some ways having that contrast helped me deepen my understanding of my faith and the journey I was on with it. It is always easier to look at what you are not rather than to out of the blue describe what you are. We can say we're anti-war, anti-racism, anti-corruption and so forth. But Margaret Fell had it right when she queried us, 'what canst thou say?' what are you for?

Like most of us, I dabbled in my Quakerism comfortably most of the time, feeling a sense of belonging to a good group, a group that nourished me and my soul, a group that challenged me from time to time, a group that could use my skills.

But my spiritual life took a steeper turn after I attended my first FWCC regional gathering over 20 years ago. In 1982, I had moved from Philadelphia to Portland, Oregon to attend law school. There was only one unprogrammed Meeting in the city at that time and to my astonishment and dismay, there were several Friends churches – fairly big ones. I didn't connect with that one meeting; despite introducing myself more than once, no one talked to me at the rise of Meeting week after week. I gradually drifted away and even started attending another church which had an inspiring pastor. But I would still go to Meeting several times a year.

In 1988, on one of my infrequent visits, there was a notice of an FWCC regional gathering featuring a woman from my Meeting in Philadelphia. Wanting to see her, I ventured to that weekend gathering at the large Friends church. Over the 2 days, she and I never had a chance to talk much so she invited me to crash a pot-luck dinner that Sunday evening at her hosts' home. With some misgivings, I arrived on this strange doorstep, hot dish in hand.

Let me digress to explain a bit about FWCC – Friends World Committee for Consultation. A couple generations after all the theological splits among

Friends in North America throughout the 1800's, there arose a need to have conversations over these divisions. So starting in the early 1900's, there were several conferences. At the third world conference in 1937, they agreed to set up a committee with no theological authority whatsoever but with the purpose of keeping the conversations going – that is FWCC.

In North America, the FWCC Section of the Americas sponsors regional gatherings that, in the Pacific Northwest where I'm from, bring together evangelical pastored Friends and unprogrammed Friends from Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia every other year. Out of these gatherings has come a level of cooperation in many areas between the respective yearly meetings.

In 1987, a few women from Reedwood Friends Church and from Multnomah Meeting started getting together for discussion and that was the group having the potluck that I crashed that Sunday evening. Subsequently, they invited me to join them and I got back involved in Multnomah Meeting and the rest, as they say, is history.

The gift of this group of women that relates to my message this evening is that for the first time, I was challenged to articulate the basis of my faith. In this group, we read books together, answered queries together, and talked a lot about what we shared and what we didn't share. Hearing other perspectives and deeply-held beliefs challenged me to examine my own. There were a number of areas that I was reluctant to shed light on – for instance, the Bible and Jesus, to name the biggies. In time, I realised that I had to find my own way in relation to these fundamentals and I took the time to come to terms with them.

As you are probably aware, we can sit next to the same people Sunday after Sunday, year after year, and not have a clue of what they believe and we'll never have to say a word about our own faith either. We lack the attachment to the vital Principle that early Friends shared, according to Jones & Sharpless.

According to them, the Quaker movement lost its vitality when Quakers became attached to the self-conscious notion of themselves as a 'peculiar people.' They said,

In the creative stage of the movement the leaders were profoundly conscious that they had discovered a universal truth which was to permeate humanity, and form, by its inherent demonstration and power, a World-Church – the Church of the living God ... then gradually, at first unconsciously, in the face of a very stubborn world that not only was not persuaded, but further went positively to work to suppress the alleged 'fresh revelation', the

movement underwent a radical change of ideal...the world vision faded out, and the attention focused on 'Quakerism' as an end-in-itself. [page xxiii]

We lost something. Yet we continue to believe that our lives speak. So what is it that our lives are speaking about these days? It's not the same as those early Friends.

Maybe your Meeting is like many I have visited on both sides of the Atlantic. During notices or from reading newsletters, I hear that so and so is looking for someone to sponsor her on a walk for one charity or another. Or there's someone mentioning a concert that would benefit some charity or another. Or this week's collection is to benefit a charity that someone else is involved with. And of course, please remember to contribute to Meeting funds or for Yearly Meeting bursaries. I shouldn't forget all the disaster appeals – and of course, the appeal for FWCC! But what is your Meeting or doing – how is it letting its life speak?? Is it just one or two people? What are you doing for each other? Do you let your Meeting care for you?

Six decades ago, Friends were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize which was accepted on our behalf by Britain Yearly Meeting and American Friends Service Committee. The Nobel committee, for the first time, acknowledged a multi-generational body of work by a religious organisation – the relief work Friends did following each of the world wars and the other conflicts of the early 20th century. It wasn't just a group of individuals -- it was a body of corporate work. Have we lost that sense of shared work as well??

While the material aid that we got the Nobel Prize for is generally beyond our means these days and larger, better funded organisations have taken it on, I challenge us to think about work that we can do together, that we can be the world experts on. There are plenty of 'green shoots' that we might grasp together.

For instance, prison work has been a concern of Friends since the very beginning. While most of us have no desire to darken the doorways of the local gaol or prison, there is much work that could be done outside the prison itself while others take on the prison work such as prison chaplains. At the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva, the human rights and refugees work is focussed on issues relating to women in prison and their children. This is a bit of niche work that no one else has taken on and our goal is to get this on the agenda of the Human Rights Commission and to eventually be a part of international treaties and conventions.

[By the way, our Quaker work at the UN is done in the name of FWCC because no other group can represent the broader family of Friends. Britain

Yearly Meeting takes on the responsibility for the Geneva office while American Friends Service Committee does the same for New York and FWCC appoints half the members of the respective committees.]

Have you heard of the Alternatives to Violence programme? AVP is now operating all over the world, not just among Friends. It grew out of Quaker response to prison riots in the 1970's in New York State and it has spread widely both in and out of prisons. The QPSW Circles of Support programme is more of our prison-related work. Prison work can be as simple as collecting books for prison libraries to serving as prison visitors to working for prison reform at the national political level to the UN work I mentioned. It can be integrated both vertically from the local meeting right up to the world-wide level and horizontally across the full spectrum of Friends. After all, who doesn't have a prison or a gaol nearby??

Is this a way we can let our lives speak?

I have come to the place in my own sense of testimony and witness where whatever I do needs to come from a place of being positive, of being 'for' something or someone. Strength comes from a deeper place within me of unity with the Divine. There's an exercise in the Japanese martial art *aikido* in which you test your strength when you simply firmly extend your arm and then do a meditation exercise where you envision your strength coming from your centre [*ki*] and extending down through your legs into the ground and up your spine to the top of your head and beyond and out through your arms. Then you test your strength again by extending your arm and it is much more firm and strong without any more effort.

So I think it is with bearing witness to what's important. For instance, right now I am not vegetarian. I understand the arguments and rationales for going vegetarian. I enjoy eating vegetarian, just not all the time. I will become a vegetarian when I get to that place that it comes from within – not from being persuaded by arguments or peer pressure or guilt trips.

I no longer join demonstrations, wear buttons, or sign petitions that are against something. If it is for something, then I will consider it. It was easy to be against George Bush and his policies for eight long years – but I was strengthened by the challenge to articulate what I was for when I found myself in knee-jerk reaction to whatever he did.

In our lives both individually and corporately within our Meetings, we get pulled in many directions. Think again about the variety of notices, of the requests for contributions we receive – all for worthy causes. Think of our deeply felt desire to be part of our communities, to show our support. Then add whatever causes you feel called to – Darfur, the homeless, Amnesty International, tsunami victims, the yearly meeting, FWCC, you name it. It's draining just to think about them all, isn't it?

But I am inviting you to go deeper than just your interests and heartstrings.

I am especially interested in our corporate exploration of how we let our lives speak. In North America, we have revived the practices of threshing session and of clearness committees as means of discernment at the corporate and individual levels. According to The A to Z of the Friends (Quakers), “threshing sessions are a form of business meeting where only one issue is considered, and, usually, recommendations are brought to the regular business meeting for decision.” It is a way to clear the air and unpack all the dimensions of a thorny issue that a Meeting may be facing. Clearness Committees serve many purposes but the one I have in mind is to test an individual's leading with a group of Meeting members, listening to the individual's sense of call and probing its many dimensions to help both the individual and the Meeting reach clarity. I have used them several times in my life very helpfully. There are corporate ways of discernment that can address the scattered activities of the Meeting and individuals.

Using a threshing session or a clearness committee is an acknowledgement that we are seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, an indication of the Will of God in moving ahead. It is reminding us that we gather as a Religious Society with the mystical goal of listening to the Divine and letting our lives be led by it. It is our direct connection to that Principle that meant so much to early Friends.

Let me remind you what that Principle was according to Jones & Sharpless: *The Principle (and they always spelled it with a capital P) which they claimed to have discovered was the presence of a Divine Light in man, a radiance from the central Light of the spiritual universe, penetrating the deeps of every soul, which if responded to, obeyed and accepted as a guiding star, would lead into all truth and into all kinds of truth.*

So I invite you to accept the challenge to go deeper into your life and to renew your sense of yourself as a spiritual being, as a child of God.

I want to close with a quotation from Harvey Gilman's talk last September:

My vision is of a community that is open to the possibility of transforming encounter with Spirit...my premise is that we become our full selves in communion with others...Spirituality is a mutual process.

May God bless us all. Enjoy the journey!