

Courage, Fear, & Care: Creating Resilient Communities to Meet Climate Justice

by *Cherice Bock*

North Pacific Yearly Meeting, July 15, 2021

What is an appropriate response to an emergency? Think about it for a moment. How does your body respond? What do you do? In many emergencies, we have to react immediately in order to survive. Our bodies fill with adrenaline and respond in a split second with what we hope is the most appropriate response to that situation, sizing up the threat and our own abilities, and usually selecting fight, flight, or freeze. Our fear keeps us safe, helps us recognize danger, signals our bodies to respond to save our lives.

But what do we do when the emergency is not instantaneous, but is slow moving, drawn out, a low-lying and impending level of threat that continues for months, years, lifetimes? What is an appropriate response?

In the last year-and-a-half, many of us have probably faced more of these types of emergencies than we have in the rest of our prior lives. We have experienced so many major events that I have noticed an unprecedented increase in the use of the term unprecedented.

2020 and 2021 have been challenging years. Take a moment to reflect on what you've been through. In Western Oregon, where I'm located, we have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic along with all of you, an upsurge in the movement for racial justice, the worst wildfire season ever recorded in this region, an ice storm that knocked out power for many people for days, a really scary and tense election season, a riot at the US capitol building with the apparent purpose of overthrowing our country's democracy, armed white supremacists being let into our state capitol by a lawmaker, shifts of power from local school boards to the Supreme Court that aim to remove legal protections ensuring safety of LGBTQ+ people, women, and people of color, and then a few weeks ago, the most intense heat wave ever recorded in this region.

What do you feel when you start reflecting on all these things? What is happening in your body, in your spirit? I notice my shoulders tightening, my jaw tensing, a roiling in the pit of my stomach, a hollow feeling in the back of my throat as if my voice has fallen away. I feel afraid, powerless, anxious. My mind runs from scenario to scenario, wondering how in the world I can meet the needs these situations, and future ones like them, will require. We saw how people in the United States deal with these low level emergencies over the last year, right? Do you remember how there were shortages of toilet paper, pasta, and dry beans? People were concerned they wouldn't have enough and that they were going to have to survive on their own, so they started hoarding, trying to get enough for them and theirs so

they would survive, regardless of how everyone else fared. And there's some rationality to that, right? It's an appropriate response to the situation we're in, with a cascading set of emergencies due to mismanagement of our planet, cultivation of a society that lacks empathy and praises selfishness, and where each person is imagined as an individual rather than in a web of interconnected relationships.

I've titled this message: "Courage, Fear, & Care: Creating Resilient Communities to Meet Climate Justice," because I'm hoping that although fear and anxiety are very real and rational responses to the intersecting web of emergencies and injustices we're facing, I'm hoping that we can learn to enact courage, care, and community building. Fear and anxiety are appropriate responses to this situation, and if we have to respond by ourselves, there's not much we can do but hoard and fight or run away to someplace safer. But it's those reactions that have gotten us into this mess. In US society as it is, we have to be afraid we won't have enough, to fear we won't make it on our own, to compete for scarce resources, to climb the ladder to try to dominate others so we won't be dominated.

But it doesn't have to be this way. In this last year, in addition to the challenging and scary events I mentioned before, I've also witnessed and participated in the most widespread movement for racial justice I've seen in my lifetime, I've seen mutual aid groups and faith communities helping others during the wildfires and ice storm, and I've been encouraged by the massive mobilizations in activism and advocacy around climate justice. A story of courage, care, and resilience is emerging and we can be a part of it.

What if we dream together and enact this emerging and hope-filled way? What if we live courageously in the face of our fears? What if we have the audacity to build a community in which we remember we're inextricably bound up with the health and wellbeing of the other people, creatures, and landforms around us? What if we reintegrate ourselves as partners in the community of all life, recognizing that when we care for others, we create a space in which we can all thrive? What if we have the courage to share in this time of hoarding, what if we strengthen our empathy muscle and practice radical and mutual care?

Now notice what happens in your body and in your spirit when you imagine yourself in such a world, in a world where you're part of a community where you help meet others' needs and your needs are met by others, where you can trust that when you share what you have today, others will share when you have a need tomorrow. What happens in your body? How does this imagined world impact your spirit? I find myself breathing more deeply, settling into my space with a satisfied and indulgent smile. I feel an incredible expanse opening up in my heart, so vast that there is room for all.

This is what some people call the Kingdom or Kin-dom of God, what some call the Beloved Community. This is what we will need in order to weather what is coming in these next decades as we face into the increasing impacts of climate change, and as we experience a reckoning after centuries of extractive and exploitative actions by our ancestors (particularly our European American ones). We have set in motion planetary systems, some of which we can no longer reverse, but we do have a choice of how to relate to one another in the midst of the coming challenges.

We are at a decision point as a planetary human society, and I believe the Religious Society of Friends also needs to make that same choice. For those of us who benefit at least somewhat from the status quo of life in early 2020, we are probably feeling the siren song

of wanting to return to “normal,” which was a pretty comfortable time with a booming economy for those who benefit from the system. But we know that January 2020’s “normal” is not sustainable, nor was it just toward people and other creatures. The murder of George Floyd made that very clear, if it wasn’t already. We were all broken open and feeling vulnerable last May, even many who normally are pretty comfortable, so we weren’t as willing to ignore that injustice—the Light was able to break through in a way that many of us often close ourselves to.

But we’re at this decision point now that the pandemic seems to be easing here in the US: will we continue business-as-usual for as long as possible, continuing to ignore the warnings from our planet and from various people groups who are being oppressed? Will we continue living into a culture that pretends we can have unlimited growth forever, even as we use up and despoil natural resources at an alarming rate? Will we continue living into a culture that pretends we’re individuals without accountability or responsibility to one another? Will we continue living into a culture that requires selfishness, that requires each one to try to dominate and control others in order to have enough? Will we continue living into a culture that values and protects property over human life, that treats life as a commodity to be bought and sold, that treats care as a naïve and laughable trait only good for exploitation?

Or will we have the courage to live into a different way? Will we have the guts and the faithfulness to live out radical care? Will we do our part to build communities of care that can withstand the coming storms together?

If this sounds good to you, Friends, if you want to be part of building these resilient and just communities that can face these very real fears of climate change and oppression with courage and care, I ask you: what is our part in this work, Friends? What are we as Friends being called to do in this moment of decision, where healthy life on this planet hangs in the balance? Are we willing to do this work? And how would we get there?

In the rest of this message, I’m going to offer some preliminary ideas about these kinds of courageous and caring communities by placing this in context of the Friends tradition and the Christian tradition, then show the places of hope I have seen in this last year, and then share a few closing thoughts about what it looks like to do this work as Friends today.

Friends have dreamed and attempted to enact the type of Beloved Community I’m talking about since our denomination first began, and they based it on what they saw in the Bible—they noticed Jesus’ message of true peace that can only happen through justice and love, they noticed his good news for the poor and the outcast, they noticed the early Jesus movement selling all they had and taking care of the needs of all comers. They noticed in the biblical witness a community that stood in radical resistance to the Roman Empire’s claims of property and power, instead forming communities of care. Ephesians 4:1–4 says,

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,³ making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling....

The author of this letter was a prisoner because he had been resisting the empire’s claims and inviting all people into a community of belonging, where everyone is part of one body.

Early Friends continued this tradition, standing up courageously in their day for equality and radical faithfulness. They, too, wrote letters from prison, encouraging the building up of that same communal body, knit together in the Spirit through love and peace. They saw themselves fighting the Lamb's War, which was not a war with outward weapons, but a war with the same powers we are fighting today: an active resistance to hate and greed, active resistance to selfishness and the myth of individualism, a war in which the tools are love, care, patience, humility, and gentleness practiced by those with the power to choose these actions.

Now, early Friends did not get it all right, and although we have much we can celebrate about our denominational story, we yet have much to learn and much repair work to do as a Society of Friends. Friends did not create the Doctrine of Discovery, a set of Catholic statements that form the basis for European land claims in the Americas, followed by similar charters by the English, but white Friends did benefit from the Doctrine of Discovery. Friends did not create slavery, and after a while did not participate in it, but white Friends benefitted from being white in that our ancestors were not enslaved, they could own property, and they were not discriminated against on the basis of their skin color. Friends did not create immigration and labor laws, but Friends in the United States benefit from the work of undocumented migrant workers, even while we advocate for fair pay for citizens. The list could go on, and if you want to unpack those concerns a bit more, you are welcome to come to the interest group I will be hosting tomorrow and Saturday at 3:30 with Nancy McLaughlan called, "Re-membering Our Stories: Friends and Land, Race, and Economy." Suffice it to say here that European American Friends still have much learning and repair work to do in relation to living in right relationship with people and land.

But, early Friends followed the example of early members of the Jesus movement in implementing the Lamb's War to the best of their understanding, and other generations of Friends have sometimes also lived into that same community-building, Spirit-led care. They have sometimes looked strange and intensely countercultural to their contemporaries because they are standing up for justice through love in ways that are threatening to the economic and social status quo. Are we willing to do the same, and even more, in our own time?

I bring us back to the questions I asked at the beginning of this message: What is an appropriate response to an emergency? And what if that emergency is slow moving and long, such as racism or climate change? How do we deal with the very rational fear and anxiety that we feel?

My answer is that we need to build strong, courageous communities of care that are up to meeting the challenge of intersecting climate injustices. How do we do that? First, we get involved. It's easy to let fear paralyze us, and one of the main things that can help us feel and have actual collective power is to move out of our paralysis and take a step in the direction of the world we want to see.

Over this last year, I was able to become involved in the Portland protests for racial justice as a "clergy witness" with the group Portland Interfaith Clergy Resistance. (Yes, Friends don't have "clergy," per se, but as a recorded Friends minister, I'm honored to serve in the streets alongside other interfaith leaders.) What I witnessed was often closer to the

Beloved Community than anything else I have seen in my lifetime. People formed a strong community. They looked out for each other. They formed mutual aid groups to help one another, creating blocs for everything from car repair to art therapy, from gas masks to food distribution. As I have watched this community from the periphery, I have seen them stand up and keep showing up for racial justice, to support people without homes, and to work against gentrification. When the fires hit, it was the mutual aid groups that had formed out of the Portland protests who were offering respirator masks, food, and other necessities to those who were displaced. When an Afro-Indigenous family was going to be evicted, activists came together to stop the eviction. Food and other donations poured in and people occupied the space for a couple of weeks and raised money to purchase the home back, staying until the situation was resolved.

So showing up is the first step, finding out where people are acting to implement radical care for one another, and joining the work of the Spirit in those places. That has been so hope-filled for me this year.

Second, particularly for those of us who are white, it's important to show up in solidarity and ready to learn, ready to partner and collaborate and not to lead. It's European Americans who largely got us into the mess we're currently in, with its focus on extraction, exploitation, and domination. It is not likely to be European Americans who can see what needs to be done to get us out. White people in this country are acculturated to believe we can fix things, we are the ones who know, we are the heroes of the story, but of course this is not the case. White people are no more or less worthy than anyone else, and in this case, because we have become so attuned to the culture of white supremacy, often our ideas are steeped in white supremacy even when we don't realize it. (I recognize the irony of myself as a white person giving this advice right now, and there's definitely a balance—I do think it's my work as a white person to speak to other white people about this stuff and to take the emotional labor off people of color, and I also recognize that I may be missing the mark myself, so with humility I ask to be corrected if I say things that are not helpful.) But to reiterate, it's important for those of us who are white, and probably even for those who have been steeped in white culture, to show up with the attitude of learning, partnership, and solidarity.

In my experience this year, I noticed this as important when I attended the Treaty People Gathering in Minnesota last month to stop the construction of the Line 3 tar sands pipeline. The Anishinaabe people invited everyone to come join them in stopping the pipeline, and they called it the Treaty People Gathering because if we live here in what is now called the United States, we are all treaty people. We are all party to the treaties made between Indigenous people and the US government. If we are settlers or forcibly displaced people living here, are we going to have the integrity to live up to those treaty agreements? This flipped the script for white activists: rather than being able to show up as white saviors who can save Indigenous people from these evil corporations, it requires white people to recognize the responsibility of our relationship with Indigenous people and the land. We can't build that pipeline, because it would infringe treaty rights. How would it infringe the rights? By making the hunting and gathering rights impossible to fulfill because the land and water would be so polluted, the air so filled with greenhouse gases that people and other species can no longer live comfortably on this planet. Rather than coming in believing I can fix this thing, I can save people, I had to enter in with an attitude of repentance, with

the awareness of the need for repair. When entering in with this attitude, it becomes crystal clear that the rational and reparative thing to do is to lock ourselves to pipeline equipment, to occupy the pipeline route, and to do everything in our power to get in the way of this pipeline being built. When we enter in with an attitude ready to learn, grow, and collaborate, rather than to dominate and be right, we can see the big picture more clearly. We can see what needs to be done to build more authentic community and to enter into the work of repair that is the only reasonable response to the climate and social justice emergency we're in the midst of.

At the Treaty People Gathering, I again witnessed a beautiful expression of the Beloved Community as over 2,000 people gathered. We sang together new movement music that was deeply spiritually grounded in protecting the sacred, the first time I had sung with people since the pandemic began. We blocked progress of what the Indigenous people call the "black snake," oil pipelines. At the location where I was on the day of direct action, we occupied a boardwalk so that heavy equipment could not cross it to drill and place the pipeline underneath the headwaters of the Mississippi River. Some activists stayed and occupied that boardwalk, halting construction for 8 days. Activists at another location locked themselves to equipment and were arrested, helping build a legal argument against the pipeline and for treaty rights and environmental justice.

When we think about the climate emergency and intersecting justice issues we're currently facing, these actions are the most reasonable ways to spend our time, even though they may seem extreme when looked at from the vantage point of "normal" (middle class white American) life in early 2020. Marching in the streets and keeping attention on police brutality and racial injustice is the reasonable response to centuries of race-based oppression. One could even say that these tactics are not radical enough, are actually fairly tame compared to the enormity of the emergencies in which we find ourselves.

So we show up, we are ready to learn and collaborate, and we are ready to take radical action. Taking radical action requires, for most of us, shifting many of our assumptions and ways of living. We have to shift our assumptions about what is normal and what is radical, and we have to open ourselves up to questions that may feel like they get at the very heart of what we thought to be true as a culture. This last part is mostly the work that white folks need to do (particularly those who are cis-gender male and straight, not to pick on anyone, but because the status quo is designed to your benefit it is often harder to see its problems). We have to think about where our right to land came from, think about our understandings of property, and interrogate our assumptions about wealth accumulation.

We show up, we're ready to learn and collaborate, we're ready for radical action, and we shift our worldview and actions as we become more aware of the harm we've caused. This is how we begin the courageous work of building communities of care and resilience that can help us endure the coming literal and figurative storms.

Last but not least, we cannot do this work alone. We have to have others to go on this journey with—we can't form a community by ourselves. And communities are hard work. As descendants of settlers in the US, it is really hard for many of us to build real and lasting community because our initial thought when things get hard is often to move away, to start over somewhere else—but now there is no more frontier. We can move away, but guess what? There are people there, too, and people are difficult. Although the communities I've

seen form over the last year have been beautiful and have filled me with hope, they have also at times been really petty and challenging. People have personality conflicts and do hurtful or annoying things, people break trust in myriad ways.

So, I think this is really where the Quaker community comes in. With already built in networks of care and relationships between your members, how are your meetings called to do the work of radical and resilient community care that is needed in this moment? Are you up to the challenge? What is your small piece of the overall work? To bring it back to the Ephesians 4 passage I quoted earlier, in what way is your meeting called to participate in the one body and one Spirit that we all form together? Biblical writers talk about the different parts of one body, and how each person has a different gift, and these work together to help the whole body function. 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 says:

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

So in this passage, we have gifts, services, and activities—I think this is like public ministry, acts of service and administration, and activism. Each has a different part, to some are given the gift of prophecy, teaching, preaching, and so forth; to some are given the gift of community organizer, of activist, of gardener, of engineer. We do not all have to be able to do all the things and we shouldn't try. We are simply invited to do our own part, our one small piece of the overall work of forming the Beloved Community.

If you think about early Friends, some were called to be traveling ministers, but not everyone. A Friend in my meeting talks about the Valiant 60 and the Boring 600. There were the Valiant 60 who went out and had the adventures and shared the good news of the life in the Spirit they had found, but then there also had to be the Boring 600: the people who stayed home, who helped take care of their kids, who kept their farm or shop running, and who made it possible for that public witness to be able to happen. Maybe you are called to be part of today's Valiant 60 and be out there on the front lines, or maybe you are called to be part of the Boring 600—but either way, it's up to you to get involved and to do your part. The Valiant 60 could not have done their public work alone and the deep and intense movement of the Spirit that coalesced around their ministry would not have been able to happen if others had not played those supportive roles in creating a community for new people to join.

Being able to act with a strong community takes away the need for some of our fear and anxiety. By acting together, we give one another courage, because we no longer have to fear that we won't make it on our own. We no longer have to be anxious that we have no safety net, because we have one. This work of mutual care is challenging and countercultural work for many of us, but it is the work in which we must engage if we want to survive and thrive in the coming decades, and if Friends want to have a meaningful part in the work of our time.

To recap, there is a lot of legitimately scary stuff going on in our world right now, and we're at a decision point. As Friends, will we dig into the work, acting in radically caring ways grounded in the Spirit so that we join resilient communities that can weather upcoming challenges? Or will we revert to the pre-pandemic status quo? Do we have courage in the

face of fear, and can we be these kinds of communities with one another? I leave you with the following queries for our time of waiting worship.

Queries:

Where in your life are you feeling fear?

Where in your life are you noticing the Diving breaking through in glimpses of the Beloved Community?

How are you feeling invited to courageously take a next step toward participating more fully in that community?

What is currently holding you back?

With whom are you being drawn toward deeper relationship so you can partner to form a more just and resilient community?

Cherice Bock works as a Creation Justice Advocate with Oregon Interfaith Power & Light. She is a recorded minister with Sierra Cascades Yearly Meeting of Friends.