

Sacred Messages in Secular Language

by Burton Housman

I am aware of the words of Octavio Paz: "Poor Mexico! So far from God, so near the United States!"

Here I am, as a United States visitor. Here after a devastating election of a US president who insults all the citizens in the largest Spanish-speaking country in the world,

I admire your courtesy and bravery in inviting me.

I have been a member of an unprogrammed Friends Meeting all my life. I am meeting for the first time here at RGAM pastoral Friends. We have not had a chance to discuss our differences -- we have been too busy enjoying each other. Now that I am here I realize that before I arrived I carefully studied WHAT Paul said to the young church in Colossia. After the election I began to think about WHY he said it. I realized how timely his words are. Sometimes we think too much about WHAT and too little about WHY things happen.

Paul wrote to a small struggling body divided by different priorities and personality conflicts. He also wrote about a small church troubled by varied views of authority and ongoing arguments. This sounds familiar to me and perhaps to you.

I am persuaded that God has called all those assembled here. I am persuaded that God led me to the Society of Friends. However, we may have different convictions about how to form our organization and leadership. We may have different views about whether we talk or sing rather than listen. We may not share the view that our praise must be expressed in words or music.

What brought me to the Society of Friends was the seventeenth century discovery by George Fox and the early Quakers. The discovery was, as Thomas Kelly put it, of God's putting in each of us the always-open inner springs of access and revelation: ability to reach God and for God to reach us.

Both ways. Directly. I realized that this openness is there for every single person in the world. That God speaks to us when we are alone and when we meet together.

Too often we let our differences get in the way. Too often we do that by not even talking to each other. For example:

I have been a member of my present Quaker Meeting for 15 years, but I do not recall a single time we did anything together with a pastoral Friends group. But here I am, your guest. We may find each other in disagreement about some basic matters, but I am celebrating deep bonds with you.

How can we look together at this fragment of a letter from Paul?

Here it is in this ancient Oriental sacred document.

The Bible is not a collection of teachings but a gathering of histories, myths, poems, hymns, stories, visions, images, parables, and letters gathered over a thousand year period.

In Colossians we have a letter written by the apostle Paul during the days of the Roman

Empire. The Greek word for Lord, KURIOS, was a political term reserved for Caesar alone. For anyone to say Jesus the Messiah is Kurios, or Lord, was a seditious act. It was a denial of Caesar as Lord. The penalty for this was death. The only reason Paul had not been executed was that he was a Roman citizen. He could demand to be tried only in a Roman court. The letter was written when he was in prison in the early 60's, some 30 years after Jesus' crucifixion.

Paul had never been to Colossia. He had sent a fellow member of the emerging body whose members recognized Jesus as the Messiah. They declared him to be the Lord, the Son of God. Paul has heard there has been arguing about conflicting and false teachings. That is, Paul's letter is a message to a small struggling community.

Like ours.

Here we are, a fragmented body. With differing views about authority and order of worship. With differing views about messages from us or to us in worship. With differing views of institutions or individuals -- and more.

Here is Paul, a Greek-speaking Jew, determined to deliver a crucial message, called by God to do so. The message is about a poor Jew who wrote nothing, who did not travel far, who had been given the Roman execution of spikes in limbs and had been left in the sun to die. And this struggling little group had given this Jew the title reserved only for Caesar.

And here was Paul on his way to a trial and an execution. He is trying with a letter from prison to declare Jesus as the awaited Messiah and God's instrument to reorder the world and forgive and accept all as God's people.

And, with you, I am listening, an 89-year old Quaker for 60 years. I've lived in four Yearly Meetings. I am one of the pilgrims and fugitives from other communions that make up Pacific Yearly Meeting. I am a member of a Meeting in San Diego.

Here we are as Paul chides us about pride and about sharply held views. Here we are struggling with small numbers and limited growth. Here we are straying from the example of Jesus' frequent gatherings with those with whom he didn't necessarily agree.

I do not have the wisdom to say how God speaks to us. But I can report to you how God has spoken to me. Our tradition as Quakers is to speak from our experience. That is what I want to do now.

Over the years I find that I have at times been called occasionally to speak in ministry, most often to deliver any sacred message given to me by using secular language. That is the case today.

I went to college after military service during WW II. I knew nothing about the Quakers. In my last year of college I didn't know what to do after graduation. I knew, however, I wanted to do something that would try me, that would test my abilities.

A girl friend I ardently sought broke my heart by choosing another boy friend. She, however, spoke about going to Japan in the service of a church. She had urged me to think about it. Wow! A chance to go to a country that had been my enemy a few years before! Out of a broken and failed relationship came an unexpected comment I acted upon.

In my life I have now spent seven years in Japan. Some of my closest friends are there. They

are in a former enemy land quite different from mine. Very different. There in Japan no two persons are ever equal. Even identical twins born a few minutes apart will forever use language forms different from each other because one is senior to the other.

I like to think I chose Japan. In fact, the idea came to me out of a broken relationship. God speaks in wondrous ways. Not always in spoken language. Not always directly to us. Not always in a sacred setting.

What broken or failed relationship have you had in which God spoke unexpectedly to you? When has there come to you in a surprising way, an urging from beyond yourself to do something you had not thought of before?

At another time in college I was the leader of a Student YMCA group. With leaders from other schools I listened to a Student YWCA national staff member talk about her wartime experiences. She had volunteered to drive an ambulance to carry the wounded from both sides during the civil war and revolution in China.

She could only take one suitcase with her to China. There was only room in it for two books. She said one was the Bible. Afterwards I privately asked her what the other book was. It was Thomas Kelly's *Testament of Devotion*, the classic devotional work.

That chance remark was my introduction to the Society of Friends. It has been a major inspiration to me all my life. I would not have learned of it if I had not followed up on a chance remark by a speaker.

What chance remark have you caught -- or ignored -- that might have carried a message for you?

In my first trip to Japan as a young man I lived for a couple of years in war-torn Osaka. It was five years after the end of WWII. You could walk a mile and never see a tree. They had all been destroyed by fire bombs.

I was organizing work camps on the model of Pierre Ceresole, a Swiss Quaker. Youth from different backgrounds, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Japanese outcasts lived together and worked to repair or build together. Getting to know one another was a grand way to begin to reduce the hostility that had once divided them.

We were clearing away the rubble from a bombed hospital. The hospital had had a kindergarten. As we picked up debris, I picked up something I could not identify. It wasn't charred wood or shattered brick. I learned it was glass, melted glass, glass from the windows of the kindergarten. The glass had melted in the heat if the firebombs dropped from the B-29's circling the city. I could barely imagine the terror of the children that day before being incinerated.

I had come to Japan by the chance remark of a girl friend who had spurned me.

I had learned about the Quakers from the slender baggage of a volunteer. She had stuffed a Quaker classic book into her bag as she traveled to war-torn China.

Now I held in my hand melted glass. It was the remnants of windows of a kindergarten in a hospital. Both were destroyed by fire bombs in a war in which I served. And this happened in a work camp based on a Quaker model.

I was about 25 years old. I was a member of a Christian church, but I was not a Quaker. I

resolved to find a religious body that would declare war to be the tragedy it is. After I returned to the US after my three years there, I went to Pendle Hill, a Quaker worship and study center in the US. I joined a local Quaker Meeting and became a member of the Society of Friends.

What accidental or surprising experience have you had that was a sacred message for you in secular language?

Sixty years passed. I had had a professional career as a teacher. It was six years after what we Americans call 9/11, the date of the attack on New York City. We had initially had the sympathy of the world, but now we were attacking a country we could barely find on a map. I became seriously distressed about the direction our leaders were taking my country.

We have in common with Mexico the number 43. I felt then the same shame and rage about the administration of our 43rd president that many of you feel about the 43 normalista desaparecidos in Guerrero here in Mexico.

I was consumed by anger and helplessness. I was losing friends. They would see me coming and cross the street to avoid me. I spoke of nothing else because I was so distressed. I was helpless. I was ashamed. I was lost.

I read in the newspaper that the local naval hospital in San Diego was going to receive the badly wounded from the Middle East preparing especially for those who had lost one or both legs. The newspaper article jarred me into wondering how I could help rather than complain.

I went to the huge hospital to ask how I could help. All the volunteers at the hospital were managed by the YMCA and the director there gave me a chance to choose my tasks. We met every family of incoming wounded with needed items and up-to-date changing information to survive in a giant hospital.

We prepared phone numbers and maps for discouraged and distressed families locating places for them to stay. They asked me to meet weekly with the doctors to make sure we did everything possible for the wounded.

They asked me to get the wounded to write about their lives. I struggled -- a long time -- and only after many failures finally succeeded -- to find a way to get them to put down on paper stories even though they hated to write and had never had success doing so. I worked and worked and finally found a way. We got over 100 stories by the catastrophically wounded written down.

I spent seven years there.

The welcoming YWCA Director saved my life. I had been on the way to becoming a bitter old man. I read in a newspaper of an opportunity I discovered only after I became a volunteer. I was transformed as a result.

In olden times, up to the 17th century men tried to turn lead into gold. It was called a quest for transmuting, changing one element into another. My rage and anger were transmuted into providing help and developing deep respect for the resilience of wounded young men.

How has God spoken to you in what you have read? How has God spoken to you when you have presented yourself at a threshold of need? How has something you thought was

distant but was brought close to you by what you have read?

These are some ways God has spoken to me. I do not regard myself as unusual. Relationships -- perhaps failed or broken -- may carry a voice that speaks to you.

Reflections on current history, reading your Bible with alternate lines from it and a newspaper-- any of those could be God speaking to us.

Chance remarks -- that you at first have no sense will become personal; all these can be God speaking to us.

Of course, God speaks to us through the Bible, in our corporate worship, in our individual prayers -- but not always in sacred settings.

Sometime sacred messages come in secular language.

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