

Faith, Change, and Courage

A Keynote Address by Barry Crossno

Intermountain Yearly Meeting, June 14, 2024

Greetings, Friends.

It is wonderful to be with you today. I'm deeply appreciative for the opportunity to share a little bit with you today, and I hope to be of some service in that.

After I was asked to speak with you, in prayer, I heard a word, which was, "surrender." And in hearing that word, it occurred to me that I would begin today by sharing a story from my own life. Then I will share an abbreviated version of a presentation that I shared with FGC's Executive Committee recently, about where we find ourselves as Friends, the world in which we are operating, our monthly meetings and yearly meetings.

On July 4, 1999, I was hiking atop a mesa in Chaco Canyon in New Mexico when I was overcome with heat stroke. I was 29 years old, and I was on a two-week vacation from Dallas. After struggling to get from the mesa to the ranger station, I collapsed at the station. As I started drifting into shock, the ranger EMS on duty put an oxygen mask on me and reassured me by saying, and I quote, "Today is not your day to die." I must admit I did not find that reassuring. But I did appreciate the enormous care.

After taking a few minutes to get my body temperature stable and hydrated, I scraped myself off the floor and walked out of the station under my own power. My then-partner was baffled by my behavior, but loaded me into the car, and off we went. My belief, after fighting off numerous childhood illnesses, was that I decided when my body had a problem, and on that day, I decided I did not have a problem. I was in control, so I up and left. After two days in terrible shape and at the insistence of my then-partner, I landed in an emergency room in Los Alamos. Once again, after talking with the doctor and some tests, I stubbornly walked out of that ER, again under my own power, and went to go camp with my partner on the side of a mountain in Taos

When we arrived at the campsite, it was twilight, and I saw the silhouette of someone sitting by a fire nearby. The person waved me towards them, and for reasons I still cannot explain I dropped the gear I was unloading from the car and walked silently over to them. This person whom I had never seen before in my life said they were on a spiritual pilgrimage, and they talked about life and death for the next hour, sitting by the fire. I said very little. He ended by saying that he had a message for me, "Control is not the way to God." In that moment, I felt the blood drain from my body. My best friend in Dallas had said those exact words to me during an intense conversation the week before. My life was built on the idea of control, control and discipline. That's what had gotten through a number of childhood illnesses; it's what it allowed me to achieve a number of things in my early

twenties. I had decided I could deal with whatever amount of stress was necessary for me to achieve what I thought needed to be achieved.

But I had experienced a number of warning signs previous year that told me I was writing checks that my body and mind couldn't cash. It all came to a head in the wilderness in New Mexico. I finally broke down. With God's help, through the faith of two messengers, I came to see clearly for the first time that the rock I had built my world on, the idea of control, was actually an illusion. My health was shattered for the next year. I could barely work. I had crippling anxiety attacks that made my life very small. After a year suffering, out of sheer desperation, I finally surrendered to God. I stopped running. I stopped controlling. I acknowledged I did not have the answers to my life.

My health slowly started to return, and I also made the decision to move from Dallas to New Mexico and start over. God had shown me in dreams that I was to find a Quaker meeting and to commit to Friends, which I did. I was very lucky to become a member of the Religious Society of Friends through the Taos Worship Group under the care of Santa Fe Monthly Meeting. For the next four years in Taos, with the help of Quakers and others, I surrendered over and over and over again to God – painfully peeling back layer after layer of control until I learned how to listen to something that was not my own ego and was not based in fear.

In the process, I learned to trust people. I learned through Quakers that you can trust Spirit to see around the corners you cannot see around. I learned to trust process, I learned to trust community, and I learn to trust God. By my mid-30s, my life had become something I had never imagined. I was grateful to Spirit that I had been taken on that journey to a place that I did not know it was possible.

Years later, I realized that surrender is a way to empty ourselves so that we might be filled again. Which is why I am sharing this particular story with you. I've been talking with various folks in your yearly meeting, and I have been sitting in on some of your sessions. It seems to me that IMYM and many monthly meetings in it are confronting circumstances that are not completely within your control, requiring choices and changes that ask you to surrender to a future that at this point only God can see. There's a lot of trust and openness needed now – and in the days ahead.

In particular, the way that we as Friends have organized ourselves, as a largely volunteer body structured in committees that evolved out of an egalitarian a theology, has worked reasonably well for us for a very long time. It worked particularly well for us through the early-to-mid twentieth century, with the rise of the middle class, increased volunteerism based on expanded leisure time, and new technologies like phones, planes, trains, and automobiles. We established new meetings across the continent, and new organizations like FGC, FCNL, AFSC. We have never been a large denomination compared with others around the world, but the economic and social institutions of that era were favorable to the white middle class that largely comprised liberal Quakers.

Over the last four years, however, economic, cultural, and institutional foundations that underpin modern Quakerism have shifted so much that we can't help but notice that there are fewer Friends, Friends have aged, committees are harder to form, and there are few

children in meetings. How to address these experiences is one of the major conversations you've been having this week and you'll be having over time to come.

Over the last ten years, much like me at Chaco Canyon, some of us as Quakers have chosen to double down on doing more of what we have always done. – We just need more clerks' trainings; we need to help the Nominating Committee more. And in some instances, these things do help and are important. But there are some more fundamental things that we need to look at.

I want to give you a view into some of the underlying cultural and economic structures that underpin what I believe are some of our challenges.

Unlike me at twenty-nine, we need not lose everything to see the truth and embrace the change. What I'm seeing in these sessions of IMYM is that you are already open to the divine and open to change. I've even seen that many of you are open to the idea that we might change, we might fail, and we will change again. Surrendering to God can be painful, and it can also be liberating. My hope is to help inform your discernment. Surrender, after all, is a radical form of listening. It is a path to new life.

As I mentioned earlier, what follows is an abbreviated version of a talk that I gave to the Friends General Conference Executive Committee last year. I hope it will help us understand how a hundred years of relative stability is giving way to a new and different future for Friends, and that requires us to understand a new and different world in which we are operating.

I want to present you with a somewhat holistic view of some of the issues that we are journeying through, what I am calling "the water we swim in." The water is the economic and social context of our century.

I want to begin by simply reaffirming some things that are really important that Quakers have to offer. I think things that are motivating many of you to do the hard work that you're doing – trying to reimagine the yearly meeting and reimagine how you might move forward together as a body. I want to highlight that there are really important, valuable things about our faith tradition. We know this. I think it's also important to say them out loud – that the affirmation of the full equality of all genders and races, the affirmation that there is that of God in everyone, that each person can access something larger than themselves – God, Spirit of Christ, the Divine. All of life is sacred and interconnected. Community enriches and enlarges our experience of God. Revelation is ongoing, and our experience of Spirit can transform us and transform our behavior. The way we live our lives is more important than what we say we believe. I believe these beliefs are incredibly relevant to the time that we live in and they undergird the important work that we're doing, trying to reimagine ourselves in terms of how we move in the world as Friends, as a spiritual polity.

So even with all that, even with the fact that there is so much of value here, we know something is going wrong. That's much of what your conversations and discernment have been about. The total number of friends in North America is declining. The pandemic has for some meetings – not all – has accelerated attendance losses. At many events, in many different Quaker organizations, and in many yearly meetings, the attendance has been

falling. Fewer children at our monthly meetings. Harder to bring committees together, to form committees. And, as one Friend put it to me, "We have grayed."

One of the things that I want to lift up is the way we have often organized ourselves over the past several decades. Much of the way we structure ourselves and do our business, relies on people who are middle class, who have disposable income and free time. It relies on people who have significant awareness of Friends' cultural spiritual practices and history. It often requires Friends who can commit to regular meetings for program implementation and for the governance of the monthly and yearly meeting. It also asks people to be comfortable with committee work that is sometimes deliberative and centralizing, and sometimes has multiple levels of seasoning and accountability. And, at least in the United States and Canada, given that Quakerism has been a largely white polity, people are often asked to navigate white, middle-class norms and biased. We've been doing lots of anti-racism work as a body to try and move beyond that last point, but I think it's also true, something that's been very true in our community.

I want to underline that these characteristics do not characterize the people in the United States in general at this particular moment. I want to talk to you about external and internal reasons that this is happening.

One of the pieces is that, over the last several decades, the United States has become a country where most people who live as couples are in dual income, working couples. With that, we have seen a fall in volunteer hours. While there's much that's good about dual income households, much that's important and positive, it's also true that the dual income couples, especially if they have children or adult family members to care for, they feel very pressed for time. There's been a significant shift, comparing rates of volunteerism from the 1970s until about 2015. There's been a significant shift in volunteer time by age bracket. The amount of volunteer time that was available in the bracket of 25-years-old to 54-years-old has really fallen, and there's a significantly higher share of volunteerism that's being done by people who are essentially retired. We have seen that movement within the Religious Society of Friends, in our meetings, but it's been true in the broader society.

So, some of that change has been driven not only by time availability, but we also see it driven by economics. I think we're all aware that income inequality has increased dramatically over the last several decades. Income inequality reached its lowest point, we were the least unequal if you will, in the 50s, 60s, 70s. It started to climb remarkably going into the 90s and 2000s.

Now, income inequality is not happening across the board. Social mobility is declining with each generation. For those who were born in 1940, the Silent Generation, what's kind of astonishing is that the majority of their generation outearned their parents, vast majority. Then if you look at subsequent generations, those born in the 50s, 60s, Boomers, first wave of Gen X, second wave of Gen X, each generation is seeing its economic mobility fall. By the time you get to Gen X, it's almost a coin toss as to who earned more than their parents and who earned less than their parents. For Millennials and Gen Z, they tend to earn less than their parents. So volunteerism, which Friends are so reliant on, is not only limited by time availability, but we're also seeing a situation where the people who have the time and money to participate in various ways are retired. Fortune magazine in its March 2023 issue

reports that 46% of Gen Z hold two jobs. That can't help but impact, on a statistical level the level of participation in volunteerism.

It's important for us to consider the overall trends within which we operate. When we talk about children's participation in Quaker organizations, we need to consider that the birth rate simply has changed. This is a complex and multifaceted phenomena. There are many positives and also challenges. The birth rate has changed significantly in recent decades. In the 1950s and '60s, couples were having at 3.7 children per couple. That has fallen fairly consistently below the replacement rate, which is considered 2.1 children per couple, that's been going on since the late 80s. And, it has fallen even more through the period of the pandemic. So, a piece of what we're seeing in falling participation in our meetings is simply a reflection of a change in demography.

But there are other things at work as well. One of those things is a society-wide shift to less leisure time for teens. They're spending more time with their education and less time overall on leisure.

Also, there is a heightened sense of competition. One of the things that happens in a society that has a lot income inequality is a heightened sense of competition. This has led families with college aspirations for their children to pressure those children to be more competitive. Many more people are applying to colleges each year and admissions rates are falling. That competition feeds the sense that kids need to be spending more time in various educational activities. I can't tell you the number of parents who have told me they need to choose between taking their teens to the FGC Gathering or enrolling them in a robotics camp or in X, Y, or Z.

Then on top of all of this, as we have been seeing in the news, along with all these economic and demographic trends unfolding, the appeal of Western religion is fading. This is from Pew Research Center, which will show you the overall trend: As recently as the early 1990s, 90% of people in the US identified as Christian, but that had fallen to 64% by 2020. And they're not sure, but they're projecting somewhere between 54% and 35% by 2070. Part of what's really important to understand is what's happening generationally. As we go on, generationally, higher and higher percentages of youth are unaffiliated with any religion. You can see, among 18- to 29-year-olds, 38% are unaffiliated.

Recent pieces in the Atlantic and other media describe the fading moral authority of churches. Gender discrimination, sexual orientation discrimination, racial discrimination – there's a long list of ways in which youth perceive churches to be failing. There's been an incredible association over the last few decades of politically right-wing evangelicals being identified with Western religion broadly. And a number of studies from Pew have demonstrated that in past generations, young adults from those right-wing churches would find their way to Unitarians, find their way to Quakers, find their way to other religions that were perhaps more theologically left leaning and politically left leaning. But more recently, those young adults are just opting out overall, because their association of Western religion with the Evangelical Right is so strong that they're not looking for alternatives; they're just leaving religion. Also, the denial of science has driven many away from religious participation.

Another point, which has been lifted up by number of you, is the changes in modern work hours. This has also made traditional church going more challenging, as many people need to be working at times when others are meeting for worship.

Let's move on to the values gap. Partisanship and the gap in political values continues to grow. From 1994 to 2017, it grew far deeper. Young people were asked in a survey, "What do you care about in terms of these particular values, and what do you think Christians value?" And there is an enormous gap all the way down between what they care about and what they think what religious folks care about. What a number of you probably noticed is that a lot of these values are ones that Quakers care really deeply about. But the perception of young adults is that people who are religious do not care about these.

When young adults, millennials on down, are asked what they need to see from a religious community, they say they need to see an intergenerational, multiracial community that matches their values system.

I think it's very important for Friends' theology, among many other Christian branches, that we are non-proselytizing. We believe there are many ways to Spirit. I think it's one of our strengths. At the same time, it has gone to the point for many Friends of not saying anything at all about what we believe to the outside world.

I will share with you a story that illustrates this the point. I was on a flight several years ago when people were talking to each other instead of staring at their cell phones. The woman next to me struck up a conversation with me, and she asked me something about religion. I said that I was Quaker. She was kind of startled, and we talked about it for a while. At a certain point, she said, "So, can anyone be Quaker?" And I said, "Well, if you were convinced that's the right path for you, of course." She said, "I grew up in Philadelphia. I thought Quakers were close society. I didn't know you could become Quaker. I thought you had to be born Quaker."

What we have relied on is this idea that people would find their way to us. I think the data are showing more and more that – while people do still walk through our doors, they do still find us, millions of people read about us online in various ways – it's also true that there is a confirmation bias that people have to overcome, you have to overcome their ideas about who we are and what we are, for people to walk through the door.

As we think about what is the future of the Religious Society of Friends, both in how we structure ourselves but also how we interact with the outside world, those old ways of being – like the idea that our outreach is our activism, that people will see the good works that we do and they're attracted to that and they walk through the door, or they independently find us. More and more that's not happening because it doesn't clear the barrier of the cultural biases against Western religion.

Also, I've heard a lot of people talk about outreach as visibility. There lots of things that the various Friends organizations do, including FGC, that are really valuable in terms of visibility. I define "visibility" sharing information about who we are. But it does not necessarily clear the hurdles that people have their mind. As an example, I will mention that some of the things written in the newcomers' area of the FGC website have been read more than 100,000 times; some of the videos have been seen hundreds of thousands of

times. On their own, these things do not necessarily translate into people walking over the threshold of a Quaker meeting.

I will share something from my own life to illustrate the point. I was not raised Quaker. I came to Quakerism to an adult. Part of the way I came to it is that I had a professor who mentioned an interest in Quakerism, and I started reading about it. I read about it for seven years. I did not cross the threshold of a Quaker meeting until I ran into someone who was volunteering at a theater where I was also volunteering, and they said the words, "That speaks to me." And I had read enough pamphlets to ask, "Oh, are you a Friend?" And they said, "Oh, yes. But why did you ask?" Well, it ends up that they took me to my first Quaker meeting. And they took me because after we'd talked a little bit more, they said, "Would you like to go with me on Sunday?" And I went, "Sure." It took that invitation for me to stop reading about it and to go. And part of it was that my own biases reflected what people were hearing in the broader society – everything I've read sounds amazing and fantastic, but I am not at all convinced that this is going to be the experience when I walk through the door. So, I needed a nudge. I needed an invitation.

So, part of what I want to talk with you about is invitation-based outreach. Our message needs to be clear and proactive for people. The very things that I said in the beginning I think are things that we need to be saying to the brighter world. It's out there, people can access it, but we really need to be saying these things more. Our theology is not the problem, expectant waiting, our core of worship is not the problem. Thousands of people visit Quaker meetings each year. Our issues, in terms of the number of people in our meetings, are really twofold. One is that we do not engage an invitational outreach. The second is some of our structures that we have built over long period of time don't match the times within which we are operating.

I talked about that through the lens of what I've been calling "the meeting experience." The meeting experience is not just expectant waiting, it's not the core of worship. It's the total experience of participating in the community. It's the container that frames and strengthens silent worship; it's childcare; it's spiritual formation; it's community building; it's pastoral care at critical life moments and transitions; and it's opportunities for meaning-making and participation. When we look at the total Quaker experience, we can begin to deconstruct and reconstruct the Quaker experience for the times that we live in.

So, the top need of many spiritual seekers – and this has come out of program work that has been done has been done across many yearly meetings, it's been done across FGC, it's come from really important work that Emily Provance, an independent minister, has done, especially with parents and children during COVID – so, in a time-pressed, stressful world, there is a need for consistent pastoral care, especially related to childcare and children's programming. Also important are: opportunities to build connections during meeting for worship and at other times a week; and pastoral care during major life moments: coming of age, conviction, weddings, aging, memorials.

So, I just want to lift up some things that have been experimented with by various meetings over the past several years. All sorts of things have been tried. I'm not going to say that there's any universal solution because every meeting is different, every circumstance is different. What I appreciate is the people have been trying various things. They are having

success and trying various things in order to try to create a meeting experience that works, that gives access to more people to have this powerful experience that we call Quaker. So, one of the things that some meetings have done is paid childcare, I've been hearing about that since Covid. What we've been hearing about, and from parents especially, parents of small children who do want to come to Quaker meeting, is that this period of time has been enormously stressful for everybody. The idea of being the parents who run the program for their kids in the midst of all the stress that has been occurring is an additional challenge. And so, some meetings have been turning to paid childcare and paid children's religious education. And they've actually been finding that more families have been sticking, when they have made childcare available.

So, one-person volunteer roles . . . So often, we organized by committee, but there are some things that, really, one person being charged to do something works, if they have the capacity. It works fairly well, especially if it rotates. It's a lower burden than committee service and can allow certain things to happen in a consistent way that people need.

Another thing that has occurred – I won't say a great deal, but the experiments are ongoing – has been a semi-programmed format for some meetings who have been completely unprogrammed. For one meeting, they said that coming out of Covid, when people started coming back to meeting, they found community cohesion was really low. Everyone simply going to meeting for worship, sitting down, getting up, and leaving – it was not deepening the community experience. So, what they decided to institute was they made meeting for worship 90 minutes and the first 30 minutes was worship sharing with queries, before they went to settle down in expectant waiting. They said attendance shot up, and the community experience improved. And one of the things that that did for them was that it gave people an avenue to know and understand each other without having to show up at another time of the week or do you community service to get to know people. It was an avenue through which they could access people within the existing structure.

Also, most meetings have tried – or they have – worship on Wednesday night and on First Day. Some meetings have really expanded on this idea of actually having three, four, five worship times spread out through the week. The challenge that they found is that some members of the community never really meet each other, but on the other hand, overall attendance has grown because they're meeting people in the times when they can actually be there. And they're finding that people are finding their way to meeting, based on different times.

Another idea I want to lift up is that committees are a tool not the religion. Ben Pink Dandelion talks about this idea – that modern Quakerism sometimes can be an orthopraxis meaning it's our practices and structure that hold us together, not our theology so much. I've actually had friends say to me that they're worried that if we change the structure, the meeting will fall apart because we don't have any common theology. But I want to say to you that we actually are informed by a breadth of theology and breadth of experience, and within that breadth, there is a core that is deeply and widely shared, that hold us together. That's one the enormous strengths of Friends – the way that we are informed by wide experience of the divine. We have the ability to shift our processes and shift our structures, and we won't fall apart. Ultimately, what keep us together is our relationships, our

relationship with spirit, our relationship with one another, and how we ground each other in that. So, there is room for us to try and be new things.

I think we have an opportunity to reimagine how we co-create the consistent experiences we want, without solely using the structures that have worked well for us in the past. And part of what I'm heartened by is that this is part of the discussions you all are having right now at IMYM. There's an enormous openness. And I think that openness is part of the key. How IMYM will look in the future, you will decide. And I'm just grateful to see the way that you're trying to approach it.

In order to be faithful, we don't have to have a complete plan that's infallible. Something that I've seen at FGC on a number of occasions is that when difficult things came to the floor, there were those within the body who wanted an incredibly detailed plan of how all this was going to work, that we basically covered every contingency, and imagined every pitfall and every success that might unfold from this shift. And of course, part of what occurred when we did try to go there, is that other Friends found issue with many of the details of the plan, and we got stuck. So, part of what I think I've learned from these experience is there is that we have to give up part of that central control, that we have to give up the idea that we're going to have a plan that's going to anticipate every problem and overcome every obstacle. We can do our best; we can imagine together what's possible; and then I think there's some measure of trust that we need to exercise for each other that we can change and shift; that after we've made a decision, there is still room for us to adapt to what we experience. We can get past that set of decisions, and then we can make more decisions. It's an iterative process.

I also want to say something that a friend said to me once that really stuck with me. Sometimes we can only see as far as the next good step. We can gather lots of data; we can study things immensely; and there are times when we just don't know how this is going to work or not work. Rather than trying to imagine how these ten things are going to work out in the end we can simply take the next good step. And trust that after we've taken that step, we'll be able to see with the next one might be.

I also want to say something about courage. Courage is knowing that we're in uncharted waters. As a religious body, we're in uncharted waters. There's a certain way of doing things that we have done for a very long time, starting in that period around 1900 and rolling into the 1920s and '30s and into a lot of the structures we used today, which were reimaged and reformulated. Rufus Jones did a tremendous amount of work, helping us imagine how we run our institutions and how we run our meetings. We are reimagining now, and we're going to be reimagining for a little while – to see what actually speak to people now and helps them live a deep life walking in community and walking with God. Courage is simply to acknowledge that we're in this liminal time, and that we can trust Spirit, and we can trust each other. Courage is to move through this period of time despite the missteps, because we're going to make missteps. There will be mistakes along the way as we reimagine. It is also true that some things that will work for some meetings won't work as well for others, and that's OK.

I think also of community cohesion as we walk together through this period of time. It's been my experience that the community that thrives during times of uncertainty is the one

that treats each other with love through both our successes and failures, that says our joys and our tribulations are ours collectively. That encourages us to surrendered to Spirit rather than falling back on our individual ego and ideas. There been a couple of times that I have really messed up at FGC. I think it's inevitable in your work life that there are just days that you really didn't get it right, and there have been some times I really didn't. Part of the learning lesson for me was to have clerks who actually sat down with me, prayed with me, and they talked about us, and they talked about ours, and they talked about how we are going to change this and correct this and move this. It wasn't mine alone. We moved as a body. I think that is a particular strength of Friends and it's something to remind ourselves as we move through these periods of time – both the joys and the challenges belong to all of us. Our commitment to being a body is committing to do as well as we can individually, but also committing to do as well as we can as a body. And being forgiving as these things unfold and we learn,

So, as you continue to meet this week, I'm feeling very confident that you have the openness and the tools to discern together what comes next. I've heard a number of things that have really buoyed me, and I'm really grateful to have had this time with you