

Deep Hope in Optimystical Times

A Keynote Presentation by Carl Magruder

North Pacific Yearly Meeting, July 14, 2022

Jana Ostrom, Presiding Clerk:

This year we have invited Carl Magruder to North Pacific Yearly Meeting to be our Friend In Residence. He's coming to us from Pacific Yearly Meeting. Carl and I talked a number of times about the message that he's got to bring us, and as you have seen, he's calling it "Deep Hope in Optimystical Times." As part of Carl's ministry, he starts with a song. We had discussion about that, because with great sadness, we had decided that we would not be singing indoors at this yearly meeting. But, because this is a way he delivers his ministry, he will sing. And I would again ask that Friends in attendance at North Pacific Yearly Meeting not to sing indoors.

Carl Magruder:

My life goes on in endless song, above earth's lamentations
I hear the real though far off din that hails a new creation
Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear it music ringing
It sounds an echo in my soul
How can I keep from singing?

While though the tempest loudly roars, I hear the truth it liveth
And though the darkness 'round me close, songs in the night it giveth.
No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that rock I cling
Since love is lord of heaven and earth
How can I keep from singing?

When tyrants tremble in their fear and hear their dead kneel ringing
When friends rejoice both far and near
How can I keep from singing?
In prison cell and dungeon vile, our thoughts to them are winging.
When friends, by shame are undefiled
How can I keep from singing?

Good morning, Friends, thank you for indulging me.

My name is Carl Magruder. I'm a member of Strawberry Creek Friends Meeting in Berkeley, California. I'm a cradle Quaker. I work as a palliative care chaplain at a very large urban hospital, sometimes called a safety-net hospital, where you go when you don't have options.

For decades, I've been talking with Quakers and others about the gathering catastrophes of climate change and social injustice, and the way the two are enmeshed. And also, the decline of the Society of Friends. Sounds pretty gloomy, I know. My day job as a hospital chaplain entails sitting at the feet of those very powerful teachers that were named in Buddhist tradition: Old Age, Sickness, and Death. In my hospital, a trauma one center, I also get to sit at the feet of a very frequent guest lecturer, Trauma. The most frequent response I get when I tell people my job is "Oh, I could never do that. So much suffering!"

I might seem like an unlikely person to talk to you about hope, but that's precisely the ministry that I've been carrying. We can and must find deep hope in these optimystical times. What does it mean to be optimystical, I hear you asking? How do I practice optimysticism? Can I be an optimystic if I'm not naturally an optimist? Is Chaplain Carl just making up words? All will be revealed.

Optimysticism is what enabled Saint Francis to give up his fortune and his position to follow Christ. And it's why Jesus fell with his face to the ground and said "Papa." – He says, "Abba," that's how he addressed his God. It's not "father," it's "papa." It's familiar. – "Papa, if it is possible, make this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will," which he prayed before he went to the cross.

Optimysticism is what enabled Etty Hillesum to pray for the young Nazi officers who eventually murdered her at Auschwitz, saying, "It still all comes down to the same thing – life is beautiful, and I believe in God. I want to be there right in the thick of what people call horror, and still be able to say life is beautiful."

Optimysticism can be heard in Martin Luther King's mountaintop speech, the day before he, too, was crucified. "I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we, as people, will get to the Promised Land." And it was the everyday optimysticism of Dorothy Day that enabled her to live her life in service to the poor, despite the meager rewards and the intractability of what the optimystic Gandhi called the most pernicious form of violence: poverty.

It is the optimystical force of God-as-Love that John Woolman refers to when he writes "Love was the first motion." When we surrender enough of our fears, our worries, our doubts, our resentments, judgment, and control, to heed Isaac Pennington, and "sink down to the Seed," we find that we rest in Spirit so completely that we cannot help but rejoice, and hope and work as we are led. Ours is an optimystical faith. No storm can shake my inmost calm, when to that rock I'm clinging. It's an optimystical ride.

So I want to say a few things about my talk today. First, it's a real honor and a pleasure to be here, and thank you so much for inviting me to be your Friend in Residence. I found the process of gestating this ministry to be pretty torturous, but not without several rewards to my own spiritual deepening. Ministry requires that, so that's a benefit.

I also want to make visible my spiritual accompaniment. I have an anchor Committee from Strawberry Creek Meeting. We've been meeting together since 2009, I think. My elder, Valerie Nutman is somewhere in the Zoom, holding us—in the lower right corner, in fact right there. And my spiritual director, Anne Pomeroy, has been an ongoing support and

counsel. My NPYM elder and annual session liaison, Euclid Bautista, has been very, very helpful. My partner Mica Estrada is accompanying me on this trip. And I have people I have been collaborating with—Jana Olstrom and Mim Coleman—in preparation for sojourning with you all. And I spent some very sweet time with NPYM's Ministry and Counsel. These relationships are what enable me to stand before you today.

If you think about yourself walking in one of these beautiful coastal northwestern forests, I'm the mushroom above the forest floor. I see there are some biologists, some mycologists, here. But it's these Friends and these conversations and these relationships, and this current holding-in-the-light, that form the mycelium, the mycorrhizal net, that exchange of knowing and nutrients. That's where the real action is. It's the neural net of the forest. And that is a real action of which the visible fruit is only a byproduct. And yes, I did just refer to myself as the visible fruit!

A thing I want to tell you, by way of a preamble, is that I have tried to center this offering for the young folks among us. As a 53-year-old, people in Quaker circles sometimes think I'm a young person. But I was born in 1969. So, I am part of the first generation of Americans that was born with legal racial equality. Actual equality is still a work in progress, as you know.

Despite a very early childhood knowledge of nuclear weapons, racism, poverty, war, sexism, and environmental degradation – thank you, fully engaged Quaker parents – until 2008, I deeply believed that the world was solving these problems, that progressivism and freedom for all were pretty much inevitable. I thought that I personally would be able to be safe and thrive throughout my adult life, despite having been told in high school that I was Generation X, the first generation of Americans that would be less prosperous than our parents. The situation was really problematic and dire, but I was blissfully able to ignore it. That is what is called false hope.

Now, many young people today are in a state of despair. We know this. Ennui, nihilism, denial, rage, hopelessness. Accruing debt for education seems like a trap. A record number of twenty-somethings say they don't want to have children because they don't want to subject new humans to the world that they see on the horizon. And the most regrettable vote of no confidence: suicide is on the rise among young people.

If you are feeling suicidal, Friends, please reach out. Ministry and Council Committee is here to provide pastoral care, and to offer spiritual and emotional support.

In 2003 through 2005, I worked at the John Woolman School in Nevada City, and we taught a book called *The Secret Life of Stuff: A Manual for a New Material World*. It's by Julie Hill. It traces the cradle-to-grave ecological footprints of everyday things like TVs, hamburgers, clothing, and cars. And we watched our students grow in horror and alarm as they realized that all of their consumer goods and most of their activities contribute to the destruction of the biosphere and the exploitation of people.

The reassurance that we could shrink our ecological footprint, perhaps even create a zero-waste or steady-state material economy, that we could empower labor and organize for better conditions, if only we would counter the forces of runaway capitalism with sufficient political will – this was weak sauce, and we knew it. In the late nineties, my step-brother, Zachary Moon, roped me into doing a weeklong summer workshop with Pacific Yearly Meeting kids who were moving up from high school to college. The group of us young adults talked to them about the Valiant Sixty and the other early Friends, about dynamic

witness and the mystical roots of Quakerism, living in integrity and being a people of faith on fire.

They asked us, "Where is this dynamic Quakerism you describe? It's not at my monthly meeting. Where can I find it?" It's aspirational, we said. It's possible, but we can't find it either. We're longing for it.

And we told them, the first century Jewish teacher said to his people, "The kingdom of heaven is among you." Perhaps the beloved community dwells among you, young people. Perhaps you can bring it to fruition. They didn't know that we were saying, perhaps YOU can save US. Give US hope.

The young people went into the kitchen, asking us to leave them alone and give them space. We knew we'd let them down. We had talked about living waters, but not given any that could quench their thirst. Most of those young people cannot be found in Quaker circles today.

Perhaps this topic will be an opportunity to deepen dialogue with young people. That's my hope. It's not empowering or fair for older people to strike a wise and magnanimous pose, saying, "The younger generation of millennials have such insight and tools at their disposal. We are looking to them to fix the world." That's a cop out. As Janelle Monet sings in her song "Turntables," "if you mess up the kitchen, you should do the dishes."

My own child is the same age as those kids that we did that work workshop with, and is going off to college next month. And though very kind and caring and smart, and generally a cheerful person, they have asked me many questions that I didn't have good answers for.

And so that's part of my guide in offering this talk. The time for pat answers and rosy blandishments is long past. We must instead heed Rilke's advice and live the questions now. That's what my wrestling has been.

Now this is really an appalling amount of preamble, and I apologize, but there's one further thing I want to add here, in the interest of integrity, and that is that I have never been a happy-go-lucky person. The study of ACEs – Adverse Childhood Experiences – now leads developmental psychologists to believe that crisis or trauma in the first year of life may be orders of magnitude more difficult to heal than trauma later in childhood. My first year of life was a bit chaotic, with various foster care placements. And although I was adopted by the age of one into a stable and loving and perhaps even boring Quaker family, the initial sense that the world is a good and beautiful place, where I will be taken care of, where my needs would be met with unconditional love abounding, was not seeded in me from the earliest days.

Mine is a wintry personality, perhaps too governed by the query, "What could possibly go wrong?" Living life in this society as a Person of Color reinforces my sense of danger. Injustice and hatred may pop up anywhere at any time. What I mean to say is that I come to this subject of "hope" by the *via negativa*, the dark road. The dark night of the soul.

You learn the value of things in a very profound way when you experience the lack of them – the lack of friends or love or food or health. My hard start in life grew my desire for life-bringing hope, which has been my guide in this turning towards deep hope for an optimystical faith. My love and sense of awe for the natural world, for human love and the potential of transcendent joy – these are just too great not to experience despair and grief as I watch humanity turn away from these things that I love.

So, let's talk about sorrow, grief, and lamentation. This is the secret place where the road to hope begins. Do you know Rumi's poem, "The Guest House"?

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
Some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,

...

Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent
As a guide from beyond.

These are the shallow forms of hope:

It's all gonna be alright.

A free-market system will always correct itself.

Politics swing from left to right. It's part of a natural process.

Nature is resilient and can repair all this damage.

The oncologist says that chemotherapy is working on my metastatic cancer.

Science will find a solution.

These just don't satisfy. It's not that they aren't ever true, but that they aren't adequate. I believe that we resort to them as an ineffectual hedge against despair and grief.

But one of the things I've learned by working with the dying and their loved ones is that despair and grief are not pathologies to be cured and medicated away, overcome with the proverbial stiff upper lip and willpower. Who wants to work that hard?

These are waters that we must learn to swim in intentionally, with frequency in solitude, and in solidarity with others. We must not avoid grief and lamentation, these visitors to our guest house, but welcome and entertain them all, even if they are a crowd of sorrows.

When we elect not to feel our grief, we attenuate all feeling, all passion, all pathos; what our thinking brains label positive or negative feeling. To be without feelings is to be without pathos, to be apathetic, to be flat. We cannot hope, if we will not grieve.

In his work, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, Francis Weller teaches:

Welcoming our sorrow eases the hardened places within us, allowing them to open and freeing us to once more feel our kinship with the living presence around us. This is deep activism, soul activism that actually encourages us to connect with the tears of the world. Grief keeps the heart flexible, fluid, and open to others. As such, it becomes a potent support for

any other form of activism we may intend to take. . . Our activism is directly connected to our hearts ability to respond to the world. A congested heart, one burdened with unexpressed sorrow, cannot stay open to the world and, consequently, cannot be fully available for the healing work so needed at this time.

You have certain places within you, Friends, and I have them – hardened, calcified places within. Allowing them to open frees us to once more feel our kinship with the living presence that's all around us.

What are you grieving, Friends? And what are we grieving together? Let us take some time now to name some of these losses. If your grief is very tender, you might want to just name it to yourself.

Hold it in your heart. Help that heart to soften a little bit. If a grief would benefit from being shared, speak it in a word or short phrase, into this space, and I will repeat it so it can be heard. Let's just take a moment. Grief and sorrow are holy. What sorrow weighs on your heart this morning?

Friends shared:

I grieve the certainty of my future because of what's happened with the climate.

The lost presence of our children.

The dwindling of the Religious Society of Friends.

Women's agency over our own bodies.

Childbirth loss and childbirth trauma.

Living in poverty.

The death of my husband.

Our refusal to provide housing to those who need it.

Perhaps a hundred million refugees around the world without homes

The sadness and fear that I see in our children.

Big trees.

The inexorable and accelerating destruction of the web of life which supports all.

The murder of Black boys and men by police.

The disaster in Sudan.

Hate of the other; in particular, homophobia.

Divisiveness in our country, between conservatives and liberals, blue and red states.

Wars and layers of violence fueled by the greed of merchants.

The invasion of Ukraine.

Those who are isolated by disability and simply by being different.

People who are silenced within prisons, detention centers, refugee camps.

The frailty of my ninety-year-old mother.

The growing divide in internet access, particularly for school-age children.
The demonizing of others – trans, migrants, republicans, or businesspersons.
The possibility that our country will not rise to the challenges we face.
The effects childhood trauma that pervades life into adulthood with PTSD.
The threat to our democracy.
The many illnesses I see.
Those who do not see the decline of insects and birds.
Aging and disability of loved ones.
Living in the city with violence and racial and economic injustice.
The loss of my daughter, and the many that are trapped in the cycle of addiction.

Divine mystery, let us hold these sorrows, these losses, this grief, with reverence and care. Let us honor our grief, our willingness and ability to experience grief, our broken heartedness, and the power of love, divine love, which is the seed of our love for one another. Bring light, to warm, to make visible, to suffuse our suffering, to render it a living sacrament. Make it holy.

Help us to open wider the channel of compassion within our hearts as we welcome the suffering in this NPYM body, that we may journey this week with Isaac Pennington's invitation, "Our life is love and peace and tenderness and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another, but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand."

Amen.

There is much to say about grief and much grief work to do. I really want to thank you all for being present to that. This is good and holy work. But I do want to mention that if you're feeling overwhelmed – again, it's often when we pause our everyday pattern that we really start to feel our feelings, when we go on a retreat, when we come to our Yearly Meeting – if you're feeling overwhelmed, your Ministry and Counsel Committee stood up earlier. Why don't I ask them to just stand up again? These are people who have been chosen to offer spiritual and emotional support to individuals and to the body. So, please do not be embarrassed or ashamed to reach out to these people. Do not imagine that you are not worthy of the care and attention of these Friends. No one is an island. There is no such thing as a solitary Quaker. We need each other. We are a communal phenomenon.

So, we started this journey toward hope with grief and now we must look at the map to see where we are. For almost twenty-five years, I've told classes and gatherings, and workshops, and even annual sessions that humanity is standing on the cusp of a radical discontinuity. That's how system thinkers describe a system where reinforcing feedback loops are about to send the system off the rails. A functioning feedback loop is one where the system maintains its equilibrium.

An example of this is what you do in the shower. You balance the hot and the cold water to get the temperature that you want. And as the hot water heater starts to run out of hot water, you need more of that hot and less cold in order to maintain your optimum temperature, right? At least until you run out of hot water entirely or somebody flushes the

toilet! So, a positive or reinforcing feedback loop is neither good nor bad inherently. Positive doesn't mean good; it means it's reinforcing itself.

One person that I work with in a skilled nursing facility experienced these two different reinforcing, or positive, feedback loops in opposite directions. First, her hip started to hurt, so she moved around less and didn't go hiking in the woods anymore, and this made her depressed. And so, she ate to comfort herself, and she got heavier, which made her hip hurt more. That's a positive feedback loop, even though it wasn't really a positive in her life.

I met her in skilled nursing after she'd taken the plunge, summoned her courage, had her hip replaced, and was doing physical therapy to strengthen her body. With the pain reduced, and with her new Teflon and titanium hip socket, she did her therapy every day. And then she went home and she kept walking with her walker until she didn't need it anymore and she could return to her long walks in the woods. The trees restored her soul. And as she felt less depressed, she changed to a healthier diet, which helped her to be stronger and more confident. She joined a hiking group. She made new friends. She got a dog and was planning to hike the John Muir trail the last time I talked to her.

That progression is also a positive feedback loop. Now the feedback loop that we are trapped in globally is what our wise elder, author, and eco-warrior Joanna Macy calls the Industrial Growth Society, which includes the military industrial complex for sure. And one way to describe the governing principle of this system is in the words of the green economist, Paul Hawkins, who wrote *Natural Capitalism*, and said "We have an economy where we steal from the future, sell it in the present, and call it gross domestic product."

The actual stores of fish, and soil, and salt and petroleum, carbon sequestration, power, air, water, etc. are stolen from both the global commons and from the earth itself. They are stolen from the future. With the efforts of often exploited workers, it's turned into profit, which accrues as the system continues, to an elite few individuals and unaccountable corporations which are insulated from the destruction that they cause by their actions, and use their power to change the rules governing the system to increase more and greater exploitation.

Colonization, as described in NPYM's Draft Minute of Support for Indigenous Peoples, means stealing resources from indigenous people all over the world, the damage of which the dominant culture is only now beginning to look at honestly. To the extent that labor is needed to exploit these resources – to develop them, to turn them into gross domestic product – systems of race, gender, class, ableism, etc. are kept in place to maintain the imbalance of power. These are inherent aspects of the Industrial Growth Society, or late-stage capitalism. It's a runaway feedback loop.

So, system thinking is part of our Quaker inheritance. The Quaker Kenneth Boulding was a co-founder of General Systems Theory in the 1950s. But long before that, a systems approach is very clear in the writing of John Woolman, for instance. You see it in his concern for the poor New Jersey farmer who escaped religious oppression in Europe to farm in America, where he's had to borrow money at an exorbitant rate, which encourages him to be too hard on his animals, the soil itself, and his own children, as he tries to pay the loan at the expense of his spiritual life.

Do you remember that little section in John Woolman's journal? It's a complex system, and he's able to see and critique. Woolman even glimpsed the injustice of a European farmer owning land that really belongs to the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape, but he didn't call that out

the way he did slavery. I wonder how things might have been if he'd been able to call that out.

Now obviously things are not all bad. The system provides citizens of developed countries very high-quality bread and circuses. Charitable gifts of food and gruesome entertainment – bread and circus – were part of how the Roman emperors tried to keep their populace complacent. Excessive discontent, you see, creates inefficiencies in the system of wealth and power concentration. So, it's important to keep revolutionary tendencies at an optimal rate, where they foster in-fighting among some interested parties – such as, for instance, poor whites and marginalized people of color – but don't result in a massive sustained coordinated effort such as an effective Occupy Movement or attempts to solve the problem of elites with the guillotine.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who managed to sign Social Security, said, "I've kept capitalism safe for another generation." If we just give them enough, they'll stay passive.

So, technology is a child of ecological exploitation, and it brings us really important real things like better medicine, transportation, communications, entertainment, right? Everyday it hooks us into the Industrial Growth Society project and tricks us into believing that without the Industrial Growth Society, these good things would be impossible.

Personally, one of the places I'm hooked in is that I'm super excited to see the pictures from the James Webb Space Telescope. Is anyone else asking, "When is it gonna happen?!!" Right? This will actually enable us to look back through time. That's a product of the Industrial Growth Society, as was that Teflon and titanium hip that enabled my friend to get better.

I was exposed to this application of systems theory thinking to the ecological crisis through the work of Joanna Macy, as I mentioned, who writes about the Great Turning of the Industrial Growth Society to the Life Sustaining Society. Macy is a student of Boulding's General Systems Theory. Now, I initially paid little attention to how Macy says that the Great Turning starts. It starts with the Great Unraveling. When I first heard her work, I think I heard the Great Unraveling as some kind of thrilling adventure rather than a depressing malaise of inexorable decline, a dissolution into mendacity, the failure of institutions, ecological destruction, hypocrisy, violence, exploitation, and missed opportunities.

So, when are we now? When are we? This is the Great Unraveling. Futurist Alex Stefan calls our current era the trans-apocalyptic. We are now transiting the apocalypse, traveling through it, traveling across it. I will weave three Unravelling contexts throughout my talk today. They are all in the context of Creation, the biosphere, our living planet. The first is the Industrial Growth Society. Then, the Society of Friends, and the Unravelling and Great Turning at the individual level that we call death.

We have a great deal of religious mythos and popular culture that's fascinated with the idea of a very short sharp shock. Right? Nuclear annihilation, or alien invasion, or zombies, whatever it is. In evangelical Christian religion this is all colloquially called the Rapture, and it's rooted in the Apocalypse, that is the revelation of John of Patmos. That's the Book of Revelation, and it's ushered in by the four horsemen: pestilence, war, famine, and death. Is it any wonder that a faith that sees existence as an anthropocentric linear trajectory that culminates in total annihilation of life on Earth, has been so key in forming the doomed culture that fulfills that worldview?

In Hollywood you've got these Terminator movies where AIs destroy the world. What could possibly go wrong? And you know, *The Matrix*, *Red Dawn*, *The Road*, *Independence Day* – all those films. We think of apocalypse as a disaster, even TEOTWAKI, which is an acronym for The End Of The World, As We Know It. R.E.M. was wrong. It's the end of the world as we know it, and I do not feel fine. So, it's Armageddon, cities on fire. You can ask Friends in Portland about cities on fire.

But apocalypse doesn't actually mean catastrophe. In New Testament Greek, the word “apocalypse” simply means to uncover; poetically, to lift the veil, to see what is within. When the CAT scan shows a tumor, that's apocalypse. That's revelation. It's the lifting of the veil. And when the ultrasound shows a healthy, little tiny human being that we're super excited about, that's an apocalypse. It's a revelation. When the jack pines cones are opened by fire, and a new tree takes root, that's revelation.

There are four essential characteristics to understand about this trans-apocalyptic time, the Great Unraveling, or what I also simply call “The Crumbles.”

The first characteristic is that there is really no longer the possibility of a non-chaotic transition from where we are to a sustainable reality, what Macy calls this Life Sustaining Society, and our Quaker religious tradition calls the Peaceable Kingdom or the peaceable kin-dom. We cannot get there from here. We have passed too many off-ramps. Those parallel universes have spun off from ours already, and we are now when we are. We are part of an ongoing process that will likely last longer than most of us present today will be alive. The chaos that really started to grab your attention in 2016 will be ongoing. Please remain seated and keep your arms and legs inside the car at all times.

Secondly, our ways of knowing, especially for those of us who grew up in analog times, are out of date, and won't always accurately describe or predict reality during “The Crumbles.” So, this doesn't mean that we should abandon our epistemology. We've seen enough of that: I get to believe whatever I want. Alternate facts have really been a problem. So, we shouldn't abandon that, but we should hold those things a little more loosely and be ready to course correct faster. The bumper sticker I love that reminds me of this is, “Don't believe everything you think.” So, we'll have to be quick in our adaptation.

I want to feed in this question of Quakerism again, this stream of Quakerism. Quakerism – rather than chaining itself through dogma or creeds with fixed beliefs almost four-hundred years ago – hitched its chariot to a comet called “continuing revelation.” Revelation. There's that word again, revelation. It might have been called “unending apocalypse.” We just keep pulling these veils away. At one point, Friends thought music would take us away from Spirit. So, we pulled the veil on that at the right time. Our theology is a process. It's not stasis, and this gives us resilience and creative possibility in the face of this cataclysmic change. Ours is a faith for these times.

Third, failure is an option. It's not great and wise to say, “I just hope it will all work out.” If we're paying attention, disaster is on the menu. We're very, very insulated from disaster. Part of the reason, I think, we've been so captivated by Ukraine is that we see ourselves. You don't usually see – I've got to just say this – you don't usually see a long line of exhausted people with all of their earthly possessions, who look white. That is really alarming. Even to me as a person of color, I go, “Now that's really weird.” Usually those lines of miserable-looking refugees are brown people. So we're noticing that's a disaster. It's a real disaster. It's ongoing. It may get worse.

Lastly, this is a generative time. Individually and collectively, we do not change things until they become uncomfortable enough to warrant change. And I'm going to respect the tradition of anonymity here, but if you are or know an addict, you know something about keeping on doing something until the cost is sufficient to get off the train. Right? So, we are so resistant to change that we would rather "bear these ills we have than to fly to others we know not of," as Hamlet suggests.

The Great Unraveling makes a change trajectory more possible, even as systems are beginning to fail, precisely because systems are beginning to fail. It's no coincidence that new ideas and new technologies – okay, our Zoom meeting – new social organizations grow out of times of change. Quakerism itself was born at a time of volatile politics, right? It's Cromwell! It's the King! It's Cromwell! Well, you'd get whiplash. And it was also a time of intellectual and economic growth, of social and religious upheaval. There was even a mini-ice-age happening in the UK at that time, and so there was food insecurity that hadn't happened before. And these forces created the conditions for a new truth to be published. We inherit that truth. So, volatility is good news. And still is.

And that brings us to wise hope. Wise hope, deep hope. We started this whole journey in a place of grief and loss, and you can see it there on the map. This is our grief journey map and it says, "Pit of Despond." We've established that The Crumbles, though, are the territory that we are going to traverse in the space-time continuum, and that we are navigating our way to the optimystic.

Meanwhile, we need a navigation system for our travels, a practical one. It's not mystical. It's not esoteric. And that system is wise hope, deep hope. This is a hope that you can grasp with your thinker, remind yourself about it in hard times, gain strength from and use as a compass or a star map to find your way. Optimystic hope, which is more completely spiritual, is what I will consider last.

I suppose that wise hope brings the question of unwise hope. Hope is not wishing. Hope is not wishing. We should respect wishing enough to say, "This is a wish," and give it its due, and not pretend that it's hope, which is more important. I love wishes. In fact, I often turn wishes into prayers. Often when you are working as a palliative care chaplain, you're accompanying people who have serious illness or are approaching their death. And you're accompanying their families. And it's this sort of gentle support that allows people to approach the awareness of their mortality and their impending death.

The hope that many have in the beginning of their illness isn't really hope, it's just wishing. Wishing that the chemotherapy would work against an advanced and metastatic cancer. Wishing that the trial at Stanford would reverse their ALS. Wishing for a transplant they are too sick to survive, or that never comes. With acceptance of the approach of Santa Muerta, the saint of death, comes wise hope, deep hope for those people.

"I hope to be at my nephew's graduation."

"I hope that my estranged daughter can hear my regret, my heart's apology, for being too caught up in my addiction to be there when she needed me."

One patient told me his hope as death approached was "to demonstrate grace." Guess what? He did. Wise hope is, in part, rooted in the ancient wisdom of knowing that we don't know what we don't know. Plato credited Socrates with saying, "The only true wisdom is knowing that you know nothing." This gets easier and easier as you get older.

Well, The Crumbles is an era when things are too chaotic for us to be certain about many things, including our doom and gloom predictions. You can probably think of many wonderful things that became possible as a result of the disaster of COVID, right? Big cities suddenly housed unhoused persons, which was previously impossible. Hospital chaplains started doing pastoral work over Zoom, because suddenly we were providing all of this telemedicine. I don't prefer it, but it provides quality care to people who otherwise couldn't get it. Maybe it's a mixed bag, but there's some really good stuff that's coming with it.

In another area of collective life, the cumbersome, overpriced, and excessively elitist institutions of higher education are rapidly changing, making dramatic efforts to be more inclusive. Otherwise, they're going to be superseded by more affordable, accessible, and egalitarian forms of higher ed. That's a good thing. Nature showed us some of her resilience as we drove less – there were deer walking down main street in places. Also gardening and pet ownership increased, and that has to be good, right?

So, part of the problem of a dismal perception of so-called reality is neurological and part of it is electrical. We're too prone to believe – those with the wintery personalities even worse – too prone to believe what we think, particularly if it's bad. I gave a workshop at Ben Lomond Quaker Center years ago and afterward, my anchor committee said, “Well, what was the feedback?” I said “Well people were very positive and liked it. But one person wrote, ‘I was hoping for more practical tips on how I might shrink my own ecological footprint and not so much about ethics and spirituality.’” So, I had passed over all those positive comments, but I could quote you the one negative one verbatim. I had hyper-focused on the negative.

Our minds have a natural, about 1:5 ratio, focus on threats. You can see that there would be an evolutionary advantage to that, when the threats were bears and poisonous mushrooms and rival groups. But most of us don't have so many immediate physical threats as our ancient ancestors did.

Though many of us marginalized folks, and let me say this – people of color and persons with disabilities, LGBTQIA folks, female-identified persons – we may be feeling much these days, that there are those who mean us direct, immediate, physical other harm. When Ohio police shot Jaylen Walker sixty times, I definitely went into a fugue state, very tired, hard to think clearly.

So, for the most part, modern threats are more abstract, larger, slower. It's one of the reasons it's so hard to get a proportional response to climate change right now.

So, our heightened sense of fear causes us to be even more hypervigilant, stressed, and miserable on this 1:5 ratio. Deep prayer, meditation, and spiritual practice are needed to give us a break, even temporarily, from feeling these threats consciously or unconsciously. Or believing what we think. We need the optimystical.

Meanwhile, the social media algorithm and attention economy bias is about a 1:20 good stuff to negative, scary, scandalous bias. Facebook, Twitter, etc., are carefully designed to capitalize on our natural 1:5 negativity bias by grabbing our attention and preying on our fears. Combined, the two biases - the 1:20 bias of social media and our natural 1:5 bias - give you a 1:100 bias to focus on everything that's wrong and also to create division.

That's not very helpful. We need this wise hope to cut through the smoke and pall of negativity. I heard some sweet ministry in this room last night about joy. Thank you, thank

you. Joy is deeper than happiness, and is wide enough even to encompass grief. When you open to joy, you cultivate the conditions for joyfulness. Early Friends used an intentionally created hedge, a way of living as part of their faith in their practice to create the conditions for spiritual wholeness or wellness. Right? That simple dress. Simple dress just sort of reinforced your Quakerness. It kept you in line.

People were encouraged to take some time of retirement daily – meditation or contemplative prayer. You think that you're going to achieve a healthy spiritual life without a daily practice? You could get lucky but you probably won't. In *Some Fruits of Solitude*, William Penn referenced wholesome recreation. So, we need to add some things to the hedge for our time, also. I want to heartily recommend that having some parameters around use of social media is one of them. Doom scrolling through your Twitter feed is not bringing you closer to God.

Now I don't like the SPICES acronym for Quaker testimonies. I think it is too cute and too pat. It's not dynamic or juicy enough. But if we take the SPICES testimony, I often say that I feel Community is the runt of the litter. Integrity and Equality and Sustainability get a lot. We don't talk about Community all that much.

In healthcare over the last few years, both as burnt-out providers and as those who are receiving care, we've gotten to understand very real benefits to community. And I'll tell you anecdotally that sitting at the bedsides of hundreds of dying people over the years, as they review their lives, the bulk of the things on the list of what matters comes under the heading of relationships.

Intentionally cultivating relationships in a society which is corrosive to those bonds builds our resilience and is the heart of wise hope. It's part of the purpose and function of our Quaker meetings. There's big, bad stuff going on: sixth great planetary extinction event, the dying oceans, the climate crisis, the rise of autocracy, the decline of democracy, wealth distribution inequality, refugees, the Red State/Blue State divide, increased hate crimes, wars and rumors of wars. In Oslo, Norway, where my sister lives, people are stocking up on potassium iodide pills in case of nuclear fallout. And indeed, the doomsday clock for nuclear disasters is set at 100 seconds to midnight. We do have trouble right here in River City, and everywhere else for that matter.

But here's the thing. There is awesome stuff going that our hunter gatherer fear mind and the look-over-here social media algorithm are distracting us from. Take Jackson, Mississippi. I didn't know anything about this until I was just recently talking to a friend, and he was so excited. Particularly in West Jackson, which is predominantly African American, there's an organization called Cooperation Jackson, and it's an umbrella organization which is sponsoring what they call municipalism, a kind of direct democracy for towns and cities. And this has given rise to development of the Ida B. Wells Plaza where the People's Grocery Cooperative will put a dent in the food desert there.

The People's Network for Land and Liberation is decolonizing land ownership. They're teaching workshops on the trifecta of colonialism, supremacy, and capitalism. Cooperation Jackson is planting seeds and building structures that will advance to develop outposts of the Life Sustaining Society, even as the Industrial Growth Society rots and crumbles, composting into the nutrients needed to build a better world.

These are the stories that we also need to hear and celebrate as things fall apart. It may be possible for other structures to form. Indeed, story is an essential part of deep hope. Victor

Frankel, who survived Nazi concentration camps, found that he could choose or create meaning and purpose, even in the most horrible conditions, and that this gave hope, motivation, and sense of autonomy.

A story that I tell myself is that one way to hold the mythos of this time, is to see the groundswell of new ways of being – which are peaceful, inclusive, subversive, and celebratory – as much stronger than the horrifying and drastic headline-grabbing actions of power-abusing individuals and institutions.

My chaplaincy walked in the Pride Parade in San Francisco last month, and at one point, there was kind of a rise in Market Street, and I could see all the way down, and it was just, you know, rainbow fun everywhere. And I thought, “Sorry Supreme Court. This is not going back to the closet.”

Diversity coming together is what’s really happening. I remind myself that the horror show of gerrymandering, voter suppression, and supreme court activism we see these days is really just the last desperate death throes of an atomistic, individualistic, white supremacist, power-over world view that is threatened by the Peaceable Kin-dom breaking through the cracks in the pavement everywhere. Because love wins, and Nature bats last.

Story can also help us to understand concepts that we might lose track of. For instance, I was presenting this very dichotomous notion of good stuff / bad stuff, right? Wise hope asks, “What is good or bad?”

My sweetheart loves to tell the story of the philosophical farmer. You may know this story as well.

Once upon time a farmer had a valuable horse that ran away. “Bad news!” said the people.

“Good news, bad news – who knows?” said the farmer.

Later, the horse returned to the farm corral with many wild horses accompanying him.

“Oh, good news!” said the people.

“Eh. Good news, bad news – who knows?” replied the farmer.

Sometime after, the farmer's son was training one of these wild horses, and he fell and badly broke his leg.

“Bad news,” said the people.

“Good news, bad news – who knows?” replied the farmer.

And the army came through town, conscripting all the able-bodied young men, and the farmer’s son was passed over because of his leg.

“Good news!” said the people.

“Good news, bad news – who knows?” replied the farmer.

In a very complex system, things are often not clearly good or bad. Something bad, George Floyd’s murder, made possible a huge increase of awareness of police killings, even some meaningful policy changes in some places, and an awareness of the durability of the racist legacy in this country. Institutions of every kind are expending resources and making

changes to increase diversity, inclusion, and equity – including us, right? That's what the “Ouch, Whoa, Oops” practice is an iteration of.

The realization that our federal government is unlikely to ever provide universal health care, such as can be found in every other developed country in the world and even some less developed countries, has now motivated California to provide this at the state level, even including undocumented immigrants. This will establish a precedent for other states, which might eventually lead to a nationwide system of universal health care.

Good news, bad news? Who knows?

I have cancer patients tell me they wouldn't wish cancer on anyone, but it's been a gift, a revelation, an apocalypse, even a blessing in their lives. Superseding binary judgment is part of taking a spiritual approach to our earthly conditions. Acknowledging that we don't know what we don't know, acknowledging that there is a love force working in the world. Rumi reminds us, “Out beyond our ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.” That's a field where the mystic goes, where conventional morality and judgment of good and bad don't apply.

Another important aspect of wise hope has to do with agency. I don't feel I have to say a lot about this because we're Quakers. Hope isn't really hope if it doesn't get me off the couch. If it didn't, we'd be back in Wishingville. Again, I believe in wishes; don't get me wrong. And I even believe in miracles, because I believe I've seen some. But we need a hope that gets up in the morning, puts on its overalls, and goes to work in the world.

I recently heard a Mary Oliver poem that I didn't know previously, “What I haven't learned so far,” performed on The Growing Edge podcast by Carrie Newcomer and Parker Palmer, which I highly recommend. The concluding line of the poem states, “Be ignited, or be gone.”

We have to get ignited. I don't suppose that the idea that anyone who is passionate about the just, the ideal, the sublime, and the holy would commit some labor to its cause is surprising in this company. In fact, I think a fun exercise would be for us to do a little asset survey of all the awesome stuff people in this room are already involved in.

I want to make two quick points about our deep hope activism. One is affirmative and the other is a bit cautionary. First of all, the hope that moves its feet gives us more hope. If you do something to, say, save the whales, and there is really no perceptible increase in the safety of cetaceans, you will still feel more hopeful. And, if you do that action of cetacean love, whale care, in the company of others, who have a shared passion, you will find that it is contagious, and that that community also gives you hope. This is where Mother Teresa's words, “We cannot do great things, only small things with great love,” can inform, enlighten, and enliven us. We are not in charge of the outcome.

The cautionary point is that there is a Puritan logical fallacy that one must be miserable, angry, dour, cynical, judgmental, and finger-wagging in order to be a real activist in the world. Or to be woke. This does not serve us. It does not serve us as individuals. It does not serve us as a collective. It does not serve a Life Sustaining Society. This is the day that love has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

We must wait, wait, wait for the Still Small Voice. Love is that first motion to engage in the work that Spirit lays particularly on our heart. We must carry that love into our work, and how we do that work. A burned out, joyless activist who judges and berates others is not doing their work from a centered place, the work of *tikkun olam*, the work of healing the

world. When our work ceases to be love made visible, we need to step back and take some time and prioritize reflection. Maybe call together a clearness or an anchor committee.

So, what distinguishes human beings as members of the biotic community is our capacity for self-reflective consciousness. We can watch ourselves think. We can watch ourselves hope. We can choose wise hope intentionally as an operating principle, as a spiritual practice, as an orientation to existence, because it enables us to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.

Hopelessness is self fulfilling; but hope is likewise. Tradition has Moses declaring in the Book of Deuteronomy, "This day, I call the heavens and the earth as witness against you. And I have set before you, life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live." Now choose life. Now consciously choose Hope. Your spirit-led action is hope on the move.

So back to the optimystical. When we arrive at a mystical awareness, a cosmic consciousness, God-mind, the peace that passeth understanding, we have, in a sense, transcended even deep hope. Deep hope is a useful guide for me when I don't have access to being in that place of blessed assurance. It's that assurance that frees us from the fear, the hate, the judgment, self-obsession, the defensiveness, shame, the pain, and the delusion. It can come to anyone anywhere at any time, but time spent in meditation, contemplation, prayer, and worship seem to open and prepare us for this inbreaking of Spirit. In *The Eternal Promise* by Thomas Kelly, a book that too few have read, he describes mystical at-one-ment this way: "Power flows through us from the Eternal into the rivulets of time. Amazed, yet not amazed, we stride the stride of a tender giant who dwells within us, and wonders are performed. Active as never before, one is in the passive voice, alert to be used, fearful of nothing, patient to stand and wait."

William James wrote one of the most widely regarded Western texts on mysticism in 1902, *Varieties of Religious Experience*. I studied it in seminary, and it's a study in human nature. In it, he gives four salient characteristics of the mystical experience, one of which is ineffability, which is, we can't adequately "language" the mystical experience, because it occurs in a place beyond language. When we do try to "language" it, we have only the metaphors and the concepts in the language of theology that we have, to try to capture it in words. So, the Hindu calls it *samadhi* and the Quaker might call it the Inward Christ. All the languages are inadequate, but also necessary; and poets often come the closest.

Perhaps that peace of passive understanding has washed over you in waiting worship. Or hoping worship. You sit down and you begin to center, a Friend rises and speaks a message into your heart and you feel broken open, grateful, and utterly beloved in that peace. And then suddenly, the Friend next to you is trying to shake your hand. "Meeting's not over, it's only been ten minutes!" you want to protest. But looking at the clock, you see, the meeting has actually gone a bit past the hour. You've been in that liminal space where *chronos*, clock time, has given way to *kairos*, God's time. You've had an encounter which we call the "covered meeting."

This peace finds many people in their time of dying in a very durable way, so that they come to live more in this stream of mystical consciousness than out of it. Mortality has finally put the howling ego in its place, and blocked passages or stuck baggage and entrenched ideas about self and existence soften and dissolve and make way for new revelation; perhaps joy.

The last time that I saw a very dear patient, Sam, who had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), after two and a half years of our journey together, I asked him how he was feeling inside himself. Painstakingly blinking at a grid of letters on a computer screen, Sam blinked twice at each of the letters that he wanted to choose as the retinal scanner followed the movement of his clear eyes. When he was done, he blinked at the little speaker icon and then an electronic voice intoned one word in response to my query, "How are you feeling inside yourself?" He said, "Fortunate." He died at home in his own bed two weeks later.

I've come to believe that terminal illness sometimes replicates the experience that John Woolman had when he was so sick that he lay near death and heard the words, "John Woolman is dead." He got better and came to understand that it was his will, we would say ego, that had died. It died to self, and he'd been set free. My own journey to real faith came in my late twenties, when all of my own clever plans and manipulations had come to nothing. I had made myself alone, penniless, depressed and resentful. I discovered that trying to self-medicate depression with alcohol is like putting out a fire with gasoline. I could not climb out of that hole by my own will or cleverness.

I was "down from hope," which is the literal translation of the word despair. I had to surrender to despair or to God, and falling back on my Quaker upbringing, I surrendered to God. Here's the thing: I never did climb out of that hole. You know, I fell out the bottom. And I found that I was borne up on angels' wings. Slowly, life came back into me, new energy and new companions for the journey. New leadings, new work, and a new grounding in Spirit.

Margaret Shepherd says, "Sometimes the only available transportation is a leap of faith." That's where we are in The Crumbles. Like cancer, like depression, like addiction, The Crumbles invite us to apply this lesson that we learn when we go through a transition that feels like, or indeed is, a kind of death or ending. We take up our cross, and are tendered enough to open, open, open to Spirit. The ultimate experience of being subsumed by Godness takes us to an optimystical consciousness. This is the balm that's sourced in Gilead. This is the rock to which our inward calm is secured in the storm and the hail. We've transcended good/bad thinking, ceased to be lured by moralizing judgment, and accepted that we are not in control.

But here's the thing: Ours is an optimystical faith. Yes, it is. Yes, it is. Mysticism is the spiritual orientation that is based on direct experience of the mystery, or Oneness. Cosmic love. Sometimes anthropomorphosed, sometimes called God. A mystical faith is based on the direct experience of the Divine. That's why we sit in silence. We are waiting for the Divine to enter in among us. Expectant waiting. And I've got to tell you, the word "wait" is related to the word hope. The word "wait" in Hebrew is "to bind together, to collect, to expect." In Spanish, the word is "*esperare*," in which you might hear "aspire," and the word for hope is "*esperanza*." Our waiting worship is hoping worship, hoping that Spirit will come here into this place to touch us and heal us, to cover us and connect us, one to the other, into a whole.

We could have been called the Religious Society of Hope. The Quaker-adjacent Howard Thurman wrote, "In the stillness of quiet, if we listen, we can hear the whisper of the heart giving strength to weakness, courage to fear, hope to despair."

Cosmic hope born of direct experience sometimes follows the map of the *Via Negativa*. Consider this well-known quote by George Fox, where profound despair leads to joy: "But

as I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those esteemed the most experienced people, for I saw there was none among them that could speak to my condition.”

That’s despair. Imagine if you've been to all the doctors, all medical specialists, and all of the experts, and they still couldn't tell you what was making you so sick or what you might do about it.

He goes on: “When all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do; then, O! then I heard a voice which said, ‘There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition;’ and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.”

That is the exigetical kernel of Quakerism. That's the moment in Fox's life when the movement was born. We were forged in that pit of despond and went from despair to joy just exactly in the moment that was darkest.

An important aspect of our optimystical faith that I want to highlight is that Quakers were, and to some extent are still, preposterously optimistic about the potential of human perfection as a process – not as a rigid state – and the potential of *tikkun olam*, which is repairing or healing the world into a peaceable kin-dom.

Fox said “Now, as I come up in Spirit to the flaming sword into the paradise of God, all things were new, and all the creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter.” Remember how I said you have that mystical experience and it’s beyond language. But this is the language that he used to try to explain to his fellow travelers. The flaming sword is the sword that’s held by the angel who’s set to keep us out of paradise. The angel was commanded to kick us out, to keep us out of Paradise. Fox came up through the flaming sword into the Paradise of God. He reversed that exile. If you don't like that original sin thing, I encourage you to read some cosmologies from other cultures; a break in the world is a very common feature.

Quakerism itself is not immune to The Crumbles. Our numbers are dwindling, meetings are laid down, our work is sometimes inward and mundane. We quibble over new chairs or the wording of a minute, and we agonize over when and where we meet or whether it should be on zoom or in person. In recent years we have opened to accepting that, despite our track record and our deeply held testimony of equality, we're about as diverse as the typical suburban country club. We raise our kids, only for most of them to leave the meeting. Hopefully they hold on to their Quaker values as they go. We seem no longer to be a laboratory for things like the abolition of slavery, or women's suffrage, or the co-op movement, or public radio, or conscientious objectors, or Greenpeace – all of which Quakers gave life to. Well, death is part of life, and perhaps Quakerism will die. I don't know. But death is only a transition, it’s only an apocalypse, a revelation of something new. We have to be ready for change, to listen. Quakerism has only ever been a means to an end. It’s not an end unto itself. That end is direct communion with the divine. If Quakerism is not serving that purpose of drawing us into Godness, then perhaps it should yield to some new revelation.

We are freed up by being able to entertain that possibility. Perhaps part of our Quaker crumbles is because Quakerism has succeeded too well. The Quaker belief that there is that of God in everyone is more commonplace today. Quakerism is, after all, a story. It's a narrative. It’s a story that my life has opened into. My life goes on in endless song, in the

song of creation, but the particular harmony that resonates in the cello of my soul, is this radical faith, this possibility, this evolving exploration of the mystery that we call Quakerism. The water of Spirit flows all over the world, land and water and sea, but Quakerism is my watershed. It's my home place. Here is the holy ground where my roots go down, so that I may stand in the storm.

So, that's what I've got. There doesn't seem to be a neat ending to this piece of ministry. I tried, but it was forced. "Outrunning one's guide" is what we traditionally call that. So, to recap, you're living in The Crumbles, the Great Unraveling, precursor to the Great Turning. Starting with befriending our grief, we can cultivate and practice deep hope and wise hope, remembering that things are not going back to normal, that we don't know what we don't know, and that new possibilities are made possible as things fall apart.

Optimysticism is the profound hope that comes from surrender, the right-sizing of the ego, and the direct encounter with God, which reframes entirely both what hope is and what we hope for. It enables radical witness. And ours is an optimystical faith. Quakerism also has The Crumbles, but may just be on the cusp of a profound transformation. We are the inheritors and stewards of this gift, and that may bring a great adventure.

Thank you.