

Hope? Abyss, Faith, Kinship

by Jay O'Hara

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Good morning. I don't know if it is customary for you to have somebody with a podium in front of them at this yearly meeting, but I appreciate having one here – not because I'm trying to distance myself from you, but because I need something to hold onto as the seas swirl, and the spirit moves, and the waves rock. But maybe this is more rocking than I thought it was going to be.

And I was cracking up earlier, because the chairs in this room are like the creaking timbers of the ship. May we all be rocked and floated on those waters.

Before I get started, really I want to thank you, Friends, for having me. And thank you, Anna Fritz. And also thanks and introductions to Susan Davies, who's traveling with me as my companion and my elder. And thanks to West Falmouth Preparative Meeting in Maine, which supports me in my ministry. It is such a gift to have a wise, steady, and faithful friend to hold me to account, and for nurture and encouragement.

I am probably going to disappoint many in this room, in that I am not going to tell stories of climate action. And I apologize for that in advance. We can do that over meals. We can go out and have a beer or something and do that. But Friends, I am here with a call to try to invite us to something bigger.

And I hope that what will proceed here will be something of a love song to God and to this little segment of God's people called the Religious Society of Friends.

I want to start naming our condition a little bit. And I want to start with an inglorious story of protests gone by. This was during the lead-up to the Iraq war in 2002-2003. I was a student at Earlham College in Indiana, and I became a frequent traveler of the highways between Indiana and Washington, DC. Because in those days, there were many large marches and protests in the nation's capital, trying to get George W. Bush to change his mind.

What I want to share arises from that experience, my impression of marching over and over again through the empty corridors of large granite buildings on weekends with nobody in them, seemingly a chorus of hundreds of thousands of people yelling to the ether. It seemed to be an act and a ritual, which was supposed to be a building of our own sense of power and a gathering of our own sense of power and a projection of our supposed sense of power as a people.

I don't remember how many weekends I made that trip. But what once had been the exhilarating rush of the crowd began to wear off. Those streets, through which our chants reverberated, reverberated with a hollowness. I found myself leaving those marches more demoralized than when I arrived at them, depressed by the disconnect between our rhetoric – "Whose streets? Our streets!" and "This is what democracy looks like!" – and the reality that we were powerless, despite all the bluster. Despite the *New York Times* declaring that the second superpower had arisen – in the streets around the world.

I knew that, after our little weekend parade was over, we were all going to go back to our regular lives, and the status quo, where the rich and the powerful make the decisions, would carry on as usual. And not only did the powers-that-be return to the status quo and continue their march to war, we lacked the number of people necessary and capable of making the sort of push-back against the regime that was needed. We were also lacking that power within – that sense of integrated authority that arises from something beyond ourselves, beyond our ego, beyond the community that we are a part of, beyond the strength of seeming numbers. The power of the spirit. The power of God.

I found that same experience, that lack of power, after some years of non-stop organizing around climate change in Massachusetts. I burned out. I could see that we lacked that other sense of power. It was clear we didn't have the political power, the financial power, or the economic power to do what we wanted to do. But even more troubling, we lacked that inward spiritual power as well – that inward spiritual power that Jim Corbett and his awesome book *Goatwalking* open the way to. Corbett says, "Cultural breakthrough need not involve masses of people, but must be done decisively by someone."

I want to name our condition, Friends – that we are lacking power. And it is all well and good to fall back on Margaret Mead's beloved quip, "Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Etc." Well, we are small. But the committed part is lacking, Friends. It is commitment that brings out the spiritual power of lives transformed. Transformed lives that come out onto our streets, come out into our community, come among each other in meeting and in worship. New power, new life, and new energy is brought into being.

We have all sorts of indicators about the sad state we are in. I need not recite the statistics about global climate collapse. Or the statistics on rampant inequality. Or the statistics on racism and white supremacy rampaging, not only through the country, but through our very bodies.

I would like to suggest that we feel overwhelmed – perhaps harried, desperate – in part because we are stuck. We know the magnitudes of these problems and the depth of them, and we know not how to engage the sort of power nor use the tools that are at our disposal to rise to the occasion. And so we – whether in our committee structures and our committee work, or in our marches and protests and chants – rather than seeking that life and power that transcends and brings new life, we fall back on the way things have been in the past. We stick to the ways that seemed powerful before. We try to replicate, often because we don't know what else to do, those things that we have often seen to be powerful or we ourselves have even experienced to be powerful.

But if we don't attend to the life and power in those things, rather than the structures and the forms that they take, they will lack both the transformative power for ourselves and the transformative power to reshape the world around us. Jesus talked about this in terms of putting new wine in old wine skins. Early Friends talked about this as forms without life.

I think it's okay that we grieve that we feel stuck. I grieve that in this time of desperate need, in this time of chaos and collapse, in this time when it is so outwardly clear that something desperately big and new is needed, that we as Friends haven't been able to rise to the occasion. And I confess I have not figured out how to rise to the occasion.

But I want to bring us some good news. Besides the ways that things have gone before, besides the structures we have inhabited, besides the habits that our Religious Society of Friends has taken on, there is another basis upon which to motivate ourselves. There is another power – that power within. This is the power that has gone by many names. It is a power that has shown up in our history over and over again. It has shown up as the God of Moses, a god of freedom, who proved the Empire and the Pharaoh to be charlatans. It is the power of Jesus that flipped the tables and made the Roman legions irrelevant. It is the power of George Fox and Margaret Fell and those who valiantly, several hundred years ago, saw that there was an opportunity for the system that they had been living under, a system of control and domination, to be turned upside down – an opportunity to find another basis for their lives together and our lives together, on the planet and with each other, to be founded.

I want to give us a framework for understanding a little bit more about where we sit. I have been greatly influenced by the theologian Walter Wink, who actually ended his life as a Friend, attending South Berkshire Friends Meeting in New England Yearly Meeting. Wink looks at the history of the Christian tradition and the Jewish tradition, and he sees it as an over-and-over, repeating eruption of the Spirit against what he calls the domination system. The domination system that many scholars have traced back some three-thousand-plus years, arising in what gets referred to as The Fertile Crescent. It began with warring city-states that turned to agriculture, then needed more land and so killed their brother Able to take more land and keep expanding. And that culture of domination has perpetuated itself in Manifest Destiny across this continent, voraciously consuming everything in its path, consuming people and natural resources that it encounters, to enrich the few at the expense of the many.

It is a clever system. It tolerates no dissent. It co-opts the most brilliant flashes of spirit that try and rise up against it. It is made visible in the outward calamity of climate change and in those inward cultures that we inhabit of white supremacy. Wink points out, however, that there is a history that is not just the domination system, not just consumption and destruction. And that history is our legacy, Friends. Sometimes it is hard to see, and I know that this crowd probably struggles to see where that tradition speaks through, whether the Bible, or Christian language, or even the heady Quaker talk of our Quaker forbearers. And that makes total sense. Why? Because that too, that tradition as well, has been well co-opted and taken by that domination culture. Every step of the way, the Emperor Constantine is there to see how he can take this and use it for his own.

Part of that co-option has been training us in the popular narrative, at least in this country, that religion is about a static and abstract proposition of beliefs rather than something intimate and vulnerable and risky and powerful.

And before I take a turn here to talk a bit more about the good news, I want to look at a phrase and show how it gets twisted. We talk about “belief,” and the popular version of Christianity talks about “Do you believe in Christ Jesus?” What does that mean, do I believe in Christ Jesus? We often interpret the question as, “Do I hold a set of abstract understandings about what Jesus was and who Jesus was about what he did and what it means that his life existed, that he suffered, died and was resurrected?” Is that kind of what you hear in the question, “Do you believe in Jesus?” That’s often what we hear.

But when I see a Friend who is preparing to do something scary and I say, "I believe in you," I mean something totally different. When we say, "I have faith in you," we mean something totally different. When we say, "I have faith in you," we are saying, "I see the power in you, and I see the resources in you, and I am ready and willing to follow your lead."

I have faith in a God that whispers in the silence. And I believe that still small voice is not just something nice to listen to. It's not just something to soothe me in my challenged times. But it's something that, if I put my faith in it fully, ought to rise above me. What if I treat that voice as if it is a God?

My experience, Friends, of anchoring a little lobster boat in front of a big coal ship, of being in some dark, windowless room in Seattle calling pipeline companies as teams across the country are ready to break in to little fenced areas and physically close the valves that stop the oil from flowing; my experience as I called my partner the next day and made sure she called and talked to our lawyer friend about what would happen if the FBI knocked on the door; my experience is that when I follow that voice, when I treat it like something sacred, something precious, like something I would actually rather lose my life over than carry on the way I have been going, when everything else that I have – social status, money, relationships, friendships – when I put my faith in that voice rather than any of those things that are elusive and of this world and of that domination system, I am held and guided and loved. Every step of the way.

This is not the God of popular imagination that reigns with edicts and demands. The Hebrew prophets testify that God is sick of stupid little offerings. This is a God of freedom, who does what she wants and goes where she will and brings power in the unexpected places. It is a God that, as James Naylor says, "takes its kingdom by entreaty." By invitation. And that invitation is the opposite of domination. That asking and testifying and inviting is the reverse of control and oppression. That call, that whisper, cannot be domesticated and it is the scariest thing that the powers-that-be can imagine. Because Friends, when we turn ourselves over to it, we are no longer bound by the things that this culture expects us to be bound by.

Fox, of course, talked about this as finding that voice, that one even Jesus Christ, who could speak to his condition. Friends, how are we as a Religious Society doing? At spending our time, focusing and listening for that voice that speaks to our condition?

In the time I have now, and we can continue this in the evening, when we gather again, I want to lay out what I think of as the Quaker Core. I think that if we are to be powerful again as a community and as a faithful people, we need to recover some clarity about what it is we are doing here together.

There are a whole lot of reasons for doing that, but one is certainly this: If we aren't clear about what we are doing here together, if we aren't clear about the religious and the faith reasons we are here together, then all the cultural assumptions that each of us carries with us are going to be the dominating norms and expectations about what we are doing here together.

And I obviously am only starting to get to know this yearly meeting, but I know in my own yearly meeting, we are overwhelmingly white, we are overwhelmingly middle- and upper-middle-class, we are overwhelmingly well-educated and professionals. And so it's not surprising that without clarity about what we are doing here, that we attract white, upper-

middle-class, educated professionals. But I'm not convinced that those are all the people that God has for us, nor am I convinced that that is all God would have for us to be.

So I want to invite you to contemplate this possibility of what is at the core of Quakerism. I want to invite you to consider how newcomers enter a Quaker meeting and how they enter a twelve-step program. I don't know how it is at your meeting, but in my meeting, people are like, "Oh, sit down in silence, and then you'll figure it out." In twelve-step program they actually explain where they are going. They say, "It's okay where you enter, you can be anywhere along the way, that's great. But we also want to be clear that there is a path that we are following. And that path leads somewhere. And that path will not only probably have some transforming effect on your life, but it is also going to bring great gifts."

What if we were able to figure out what the twelve steps or five steps or three steps . . . ? Actually, I am going to work with four steps today – we'll see how four work – of the Quaker Core.

First, *there is a spirit that goes by many names.* You may know it as the light, the voice, the seed or truth, which is available to us at all times and all places. And we can listen to it and it provides us with the guidance we need to do what needs to be done.

Second, – this is the good news part – *if we give ourselves over to that voice, we can enter in a new relation with ourselves, with one another, with the earth, and a new relationship with God.* Friends and others throughout history have testified this feels like being saved – saved from the cycles and the traps of being stuck in this world that continues to grind out oppression and usury.

Third, *we need a community for discernment.* We need a community that helps us sort out the spirit from all the bullshit circulating around in the world, both outside of us – traditionally, Christians have called this temptation – but also traps inside of us, those voices that say, "I'm not good enough," those voices that believe that we are not worthy of love and inclusion. We need a community to sort out the distractions for us and help us hone in on the real voice.

Fourth, *we need a community for liberation.* It is hard work to free ourselves from the things that hold us back from following the voice that leads us. Friends in the past have helped free each other not only in spiritual terms, but in physical, concrete terms, liberated each other from things which hold them back.

I hope that none of these four pieces feel foreign to you. For me, without these four pieces, all the rest of the things we do in Quakerism don't make much sense. Without that spirit that is bubbling up and that we are trying to listen to, clearness processes don't make much sense. Committee processes don't make much sense. The testimonies don't make much sense. We can talk about that later. I love talking about testimonies.

The structures, the shell that we were given, the traditions that have been passed down and that we try to inhabit, in my view – there are a lot of metaphors for this – they are not the water. They are the pipes. I think of all the structures that we have – business meetings and committees – those were formed in the 1600s. The Naylor experience taught early Friends that they needed to have some things in place for making sure they were listening to the right voice, not just the voice of crazy or ego or comfort. And they set up those systems because the spiritual pot in England in the 17th century was boiling. And they need to make

sure that things were, maybe not under control, but at least not exploding. So they put a little bit of a lid on it. But if we only attend to the pot and if we only attend to the lid, and we haven't realized that the fire has gone out, then there will be no boiling, and there will be no great, rapturous explosions of joy and newness in the world.

I want to highlight two tools from our tradition that I think we need to use, I think we need to recover, if we are going to take this more seriously. Two aids that our tradition has passed down to us – to help us hone in and support and breathe life and fire and power among us.

The first is the concept of spiritual authority. Spiritual authority is another example of a tradition that has been co-opted and contorted and warped by the dominant culture, so that it gets used to abuse and control other people rather than help liberate them. But spiritual authority, as a concept, at its base is saying, "There is only one authority out there, Friends. It is not the clerk, it is not the committee, it is not the yearly meeting, it is not the monthly meeting. It is Spirit." And I have seen Friends who possess authentic inner authority, and I am sure you know many of them, too. They don't need to justify their actions with long lists of citations or studied treatises. They live it powerfully, confidently, and boldly.

This is the essence of possessing rather than professing, as the early Friends said it. How do we in our meetings and in our lives see where the Spirit is moving, and how do we notice, encourage, and fall down before it in gratitude when it shows up?

The second tool is the gift of naming. This can be really simple. When we can name, we can see the power show up. When we articulate seeing that power show up, we can take it more seriously. We do talk about it. But our tradition of naming goes beyond just naming when God shows up. We have a tradition of naming gifts when they show up in individuals, gifts that support the life among us and support the continuing nurture of the spirit in us. We do this when we name gifts of ministry, when we name gifts of eldership.

I got married in October, and for me, that experience was a naming. It was making explicit and clear among us what the relationship is, where it is going. Naming it publicly among Friends gives it power – both to us as a couple and to my partner Meg and I to be who we are in that relationship – and it does this in the context of a community that can support us, nurture us, and hold us accountable when we go off the rails.

It's probably one of the few places left in liberal Quakerism where we actually do a naming process. This is another place where the domination culture has warped our understanding. Because many Friends carry a misunderstanding that naming gifts in ministry or eldering is like saying certain Friends are better Quakers than the rest. That misunderstanding doesn't hold about marriage, though, right? Just because the meeting recognizes a marriage, that doesn't mean it's saying, "This relationship is better than the other relationships in this meeting." And it's also not the couple saying they're better than everyone else because they are married. It's just drawing on the particular strength that comes in naming that truth. In recognizing truth when it shows up. There's benefit to the couple, and there's benefit to the community. We say it out loud with one another. And we celebrate it.

I want to invite us to think about what it would look like for us to do the same sorts of things with gifts that support and nurture the cultivation and eruption of the Spirit among us. Our Religious Society, when I look around it, is in desperate need of something new and

something to change. There's a lot of gray hair out there. And that's not a condemnation. But it should be an indicator for us that it is time to wake up and do something different. When we look out into the world, we should see no shortage of burning bushes telling us to wake up and do something different. And our challenge in these times, Friends, is to not just try and go through the motions that we have gone through before, not just try to recreate what power looked like in the '60s or the '70s or the '80s or the '90s. Or the 1650s or '60s.

We need to rediscover that fire that burns within, and recover our outward and joyous relationship with that voice. To celebrate and recognize those in whom the fire burns brightly, who are conduits for that Spirit. To nurture and encourage those who are coming to meetings on step one. To admit that we have our own domination system problem.

I am convinced that this is not a burden we have been shackled with, but a gift in this time, this challenge to see if there is still some use that this Religious Society will play in this world, as it has in centuries past. I am grateful to be on that journey with all of you.

To close, I want to teach you a song, and then when the song is, when we are done singing, I want to just center down into some silence for a bit.

I'll sing it once through, and then we'll line it out, and then we'll all sing it together.

This song came to me from my friend T. Martin, who lives in San Francisco, and was written by her friend Lisa Little Bird.

In desperation, we found freedom.
In freedom, we found love.
In love, we found devotion.
And in devotion, spirit found us.

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