

# What Can Quakers Offer in These Times?

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Friends, I'm also really blessed to be with you, and I hope I don't disappoint my co-presenter or you. I have been reflecting on how to address the queries in your call and how to place my remarks in that context. So I organized some notes, but we will see where Spirit leads me. I often stay from my notes.

The first query in your call was, "What do we have to offer as Quakers to the challenges of our times?" George Fox said, "Be patterns. Be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, where ever you come. That your carriage and your life may preach among all sorts of people and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone. Whereby in them you may be a blessing and make the witness of God in them to bless you." I want to say a little bit about how I came to Friends, so that I can answer, from my self and my experience, this query.

I was raised in a military family. My father lied about his age in order to serve in World War II, and he became a career military person. I grew up from the time I was about six in postwar Europe – in London, France, and England, and became an avid student of the history of World War II. I was the first person in my family to go to college. My family was definitely working class. And by the time I was 20, living in Cambridge, my life experiences had convinced me that I was a pacifist. After living in Europe, my family had arrived in Ozark, Alabama, in 1960. So I went to high school in Alabama at the height of the civil rights movement. And I was also greatly moved by the power of spirit-led Christian nonviolence resistance to massive injustice in the South. The war in Vietnam was beginning, and I came to AFSC through my opposition to that war. And because I also had discomfort with what I found in the antiwar movement – something was missing. And in Friends, I thought I found what was missing – the belief that in the practice of the Quaker faith, the inward spiritual journey and outward witness are inseparable. That faith is not whole unless both are present.

And after three years of serving in the role of General Secretary for the American Friends Service Committee, I am more convinced than ever that the American Friends Service Committee, Friends Committee on National Legislation, our Quaker organizations, need to work in close partnership with our yearly meetings, our monthly meetings, our churches, with our Quaker community. Because if we don't, we risk separating that inward journey from the outward witness. And I believe that in the Share Security framework we have drawn up and brought out, we are offering

an invitation and opportunity to come together as one family of Friends' organizations, meetings, and churches to work in this partnership.

I want to say that being part of a Quaker organization is sometimes challenging when you are among Friends. And one of the things that has always fascinated me about the origins of the American Friends Service Committee is that, in addition to addressing the issue of the US entering World War I, the Service Committee was attempting to bridge the theological divides that had separate Friends. This was an effort to bring Friends together across theological differences. And so, one of the unique things about AFSC, as a faith-based service organization, is that we were particularly enjoined from proselytizing because our founding yearly meetings could not agree on what exact faith it would be that we would proselytize. And we developed, as Woolman said, a living example of this – that conduct is more convincing than language. By our works, you will know us. And that is the way in which we have tried to work.

I would say that from the beginning, then and now, the discernment of the direction for AFSC's work has happened through a Quaker process. But the implementation of the kind of work that we do requires a kind of speed and organization that is a challenge for some of our processes. Some people are surprised to learn that AFSC was formed in April 1917, and by June 1917, more than a hundred young people were gathered at the campus of Haverford College for training in a number of skills they would need when they went to serve in France. And we had learned that you needed not only the pleadings of the Spirit, but you needed a kind of expertise – needed to know something about nutrition, needed to know something about carpentry, you need something that could work through the French bureaucracy that you were going to find.

And we began to work with British Friends who had been ahead of us in that work. But I want to say now what I believe I draw from that to be a key answer to what Friends have to offer. As we went to Europe, we exhibited a key characteristic of Quaker work, which was willingness to work with all sides. We treated German prisons of war with the same respect that we treated the French refugees we had come to aid. Interestingly to me, that stand was controversial in many Friends' meetings and organizations. In 1918, Henry Cadbury was forced to resign from Haverford College because he had worked to give aid and support to the German enemy, through his work with the Service Committee. Fortunately for Henry he was able to find a position at a small liberal arts college, Harvard, and his career didn't suffer.

But what I want to say is that – when we go out to witness in the world, and we actually try to live these values, we often do things that are challenging to those who have sent us, telling us that these are the values we should exhibit. So I think that there is this need for our engagement with each other around what our witness, our faith to our values, really looks like in the world. And in the 1920s (I'm fascinated to read early minutes of meetings, board meetings and other meetings at AFSC), and as early as the early 1920s, the transformed young people who would come back from

France and would look in this country, the US, at the seeds of war that they saw. It had to do with immigration; it had to do with racism; and it had to do with the prison system. And that was not always a welcome message to bring Friends' meetings. In the 1920s, there were Friends meetings that had members who were also members of the Ku Klux Klan.

I feel that part of my job is to help us know the reality of our history. Friends are not all of a piece, any of us. We're not only the myth and the uplift. I want to say that in the 20s, the safe work was considered to be relief work. So we did a lot of relief work in the Soviet Union, which was just forming. And that actually was popular among Friends. It was not popular with the FBI, and it caused our first entry in our rather extensive FBI file – for giving aid and comfort to the Communist enemy. But I want to say that this is another thing that I think Quakers have to offer, another piece of what we bring. We see the connections between peace, equality, community, and justice. Lasting peace is only possible with justice. Woolman saw this clearly. John Woolman saw the connection between slavery and the economic systems that required slavery. And he worked to end slavery and to help those who labored in those economic systems to understand their role and contribution, even when they were not slave owners.

The second query in your call is, "What are the sources of uniquely Quaker gifts we have to offer?" I'm a little bit paraphrasing. Are we distinguished by our spirit-led approach to action? When I reflected on this, I thought, well, of course the Source is the Divine. That is that is what we say we do, we do spirit-led action, we do spirit-led witness, we look for the Divine to guide us. But I ask you: Is that uniquely Quaker?

This is a quote that I like from John Woolman. A Woolman scholar has written a little paper about what we're doing, and so it got me to go back and look again at Woolman with some care. This is from Woolman. "There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages has had different names. It is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no form of religion, nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation whatsoever, they become brethren in the best sense of the expression."

One of the things that I observed in looking at the history of the Service Committee and the peace movement is that, during the 30s and 40s, the practice of nonviolence that was rooted in spiritualism was developed not so much by Christian peace churches, but by Gandhi, working in South Africa and India. In the 50s and 60s, in the wake of World War II, there were many movements in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America, that were trying to throw off the yoke of colonialism. And in the 50s and 60s in this country, the civil rights movement was born. And it was not the historic peace churches that let the way there, but the Black Christian churches that worked so hard on understanding what it would mean to love someone who so oppressed you, what it would mean to be willing to die for justice, but not lift a finger to harm for justice.

And the power of watching the demonstrators who came into Alabama when I was in high school, and seeing them not flinch, that was so powerful to me. Those were not Quakers, but they really inspired this Quaker to see where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. I would just say here that AFSC watched the work of Gandhi, work that was going on Indian – many Quakers were involved in and saw that work. And in 1950, I don't know how many people know this, AFSC actually sent Martin Luther King to India to study at Gandhi's ashram, to study nonviolence. And we have a wonderful exchange of letters, between Martin Luther King and the head of the international programs at that time, that are a mix of wonderful reflections on that experience and questions about how to submit receipts.

AFSC's international presence brings us in contact with spirit-led peace makers from many traditions. People come to work with us because they share our values. It's true about the staff; it's true about our partners; it's true wherever we are. And they use their faith, including faiths that have come to be associated with things like terrorism, to support the peace making. One of the most wonderful partners we had in Africa was a woman Dekha Ibrahim Abdi. A Kenyan Muslim woman who was known worldwide for her work in peace making, which came out of her commitment Islam. And she unfortunately died in a car accident last year, and it was a great loss to the world because she was a real inspiration for many.

In December 2012, a man who we had worked with for many years, a Laotian Buddhist named Sombath Somphone, was disappeared from his home in an Laos, probably taken by the government agents. He was a long-time partner with AFSC in work following the Southeast Asia wars, and had worked on many different projects and was still involved with us, had been at a gathering we had only about two weeks before his disappearance, and I fear in my heart that his work with us actually contributed to the government's deciding to remove him. But he was an Engaged Buddhist, and that's a term of art in in Buddhist circles. It means a Buddhist who is seeing that the inward journey and the outward witness need to both be there. And after his disappearance, and we still aren't sure of the outcome of his story, the engaged Buddhist leader Sulak Sivaraksa wrote an article about Sombath and commented on the Quaker influences on Sombath's life and perceived in Quakerism a focus on *Kalyana-Mittata*. It's a Buddhist term that roughly translates as "spiritual friends." So this Buddhist thought that we Quakers were a community of friends that help cultivate the spiritual strength needed to be active in the world. And I think that that is something we can do and must do, in our work, to cultivate that strength, in ourselves and in each other.

I want to move to the third query from your call. "How do we move from a greater society based on Empire to one based on building the Beloved Community?" An obvious answer that I could offer for this is – to begin to work together around this new concept of Shared Security. We Quaker organizations and meetings, working in partnership, can do so much more, and we will make changes in the world based on the work of individual meetings under the same framework and analysis; it will have more power, and individual witness kind of fits into the bigger picture.

But when I reflected on this, something else came to me. Gandhi said we have to be the change we want to see in the world. How do we US folks really address empire if we don't look at what we're doing in our own country, how we're doing it, what we're doing to each other, how we live that? And this is the hard part. I believe that if we really want to do something to bring about the beloved community in the world, through Shared Security, we have to look to finish the work that John Wooman started, which is to bring an end to racism and the economic domination of the many by a few. I don't bring this to you as a statement that I am against capitalism and for socialism. It's not a political statement. I worked in the People's Republic of China, and let me tell you that socialism has a lot to learn. So does capitalism. I bring this to you as a spiritual leading, that we have to look at how do we make economic systems that take care of that needs of everyone? That's the shared security concept; we have to do that.

And right now, we have systems that methodically do not do that. We have more disparity between the richest and the poorest. We have more concentration of wealth than we have had at any time since, actually, since Marx and Lenin were looking at what was going on in the world in their day. Something is wrong when people who want to work cannot work.

Now, the message that I have is difficult because it's not easy to see, for any of us to see, the privilege that we inherit through the accident of birth. But we inherit huge privilege. I work on the board of a foundation in California, the California Endowment, and they've got a campaign right now to try to end health disparities in the state of California. And have this very telling ad that it says, "Your ZIP Code should not determine your life expectancy." And there's a picture of a child's face – half of the child is in black-and-white and half in color. The black-and-white half has the ZIP Code of a poor community in California and the life expectancy is 10, 12, 13, 14 years less than that the rich sections of the state. It's not easy for us to see though, and it's not any easier for Friends than for anyone else. And I know that we have a testimony of equality, that we have good intentions, but when I go around to yearly meetings, and this yearly meeting is included, I see mostly white, middle-class people. Why are people of color not worshipping with us, when most Quakers in the world are Latino and Africa?

It's nothing about the faith. What is it about our cultures and our systems? What is it that keeps us from becoming a vibrant multicultural community? I notice this so much now because every day I work in a Quaker organization that's 50% people of color people who share our values. And many of those people of color have become Friends, through their exposure to the witness in the work.

I want to try to help us move as a Religious Society of Friends to understand privilege in a way that is empowering for all of us. Because we find it easy to see that men and boys of color are discriminated against. We don't find it so easy to see the other side – if somebody is discriminated *against*, then somebody else is getting an unearned privilege. So I'm going to tell you a story from my experience about that, that I hope will help make it real.

I went to college in 1964, and went to MIT. I was one of 40 women in a class about 950. In 1964, pretty much all of the men I encountered said to me, "You really shouldn't be here. You're taking the place of a man. You won't use your education." But you know, I kind of went on. (I have a degree in mechanical engineering, which I only use these days to build guitars, but still, I think that's using my education.)

Shortly after we graduated, my roommate became part of the Admissions Department, and the Admissions Department decided they should look at what would happen if they did gender-blind admissions at MIT. Because until then, there had been a quota: forty women. When they looked at what would happen with gender-blind admissions – and they didn't actually admit these people, they just looked at the records that way – they would have admitted 225 women. Okay, this means that 180 of the men in my class were taking the places of better-qualified women. One in five, twenty percent, of the men in my class probably shouldn't have been there. They had an unearned privilege. They didn't know it. I couldn't tell you which of them was a person who shouldn't have been there. But there it was. And of course, when MIT finally did go to gender-blind admissions, there was an outcry from some of our male alumni about not having room for as many men. And that is part of the problem with unearned privilege – when it goes away, it's a loss. It's a very hard loss.

Now, it's easy for me to tell you this story because I was being discriminated against in it. I was watching the story from the point of view of somebody harmed by that. It's harder for me to see my white-skinned privilege. It's harder for me to know how many times I've gotten to be someplace when a more creative, harder working, smarter, person of color didn't get a chance. It's much harder for me.

So how do we end this empire in the world and build the beloved community? I think we have to start in the Religious Society of Friends and within our Quaker organizations. I have another quote from Woolman. This is from "Plea for the Poor." Many people don't know that Woolman had another title for this. "A Word of Remembrance and Caution to the Rich" was his alternate title. "Oh, that we who declare against wars and acknowledge our trust to be in God only, may we walk in the Light and therein examine our foundation and motives in holding great estates. May we look upon our treasures and the furniture of our houses and the garments in which we array ourselves and try whether the seeds of war" – and I would say here, the seeds of empire or the seeds of racism – "have nourishment in these our possessions or not."

So I think part of my work, in what is a fairly diverse Quaker organization, is to help the Religious Society Friends embrace what it means to be white and to understand the history of that. The whole concept of whiteness is about creating privilege. It started in 1790, when the first act was passed was to decide who could become a naturalized citizen – white people. In those days, white people were English, pretty much. And over the years, the definition of who was white got expanded. But even in the 20s, when we were worried about immigration, those

who were discriminate against included Asians, Mexicans, and Italians. So Italians got white later. Any of you out there who are Italians, we're "white come lately."

One of the things that we did at our corporation meeting this year was to use a piece of art that my daughter found in Seattle called, "39 Questions for White People." It's great because Quakers love queries. And I won't read all 39 questions, but to give you a flavor for this: "How do you know you're white? When did you first realize you're white? Do you ever forget you're white? Do you ever forget other people are white? Are white people forgetful?" I think what's hard, and I think I had this experience being a woman at MIT, when you're in a subordinate group, a group that's on the outs, you learn to watch everything that's going on in the dominant group. But the dominant group, they don't need to pay any attention to you.

I had this exchange at MIT, where a friend kept giving me books to read, and I gave him Sylvia Plath, this book to read, and he handed it back the next day and he said, "How could I read this book? The narrator is a woman." I looked at him, and I said, "Have you ever given me a book that that didn't have a narrator who was a man? And you expected me to read it. Might you learn something if you read this book?" So I think we need to learn to see how part of our privilege is not having to think about a lot of things in life that others have to think about.

And I think we have to let go of our sense of exceptionalism, not just the US exceptionalism, but I would say Quaker exceptionalism. I think that it's hard to learn this lesson, but I'm really encouraged. Colin Saxton is the new director of the Friends United Meeting, and he's given a lot of thought to the way in which US exceptionalism has harmed what was the Africa mission, and the independence and the growth of the self-determined African Quaker churches. So there now is a Quaker seminary in Africa. African pastors don't have to come to the US to be trained to be ministers any more. So I think we're learning this.

But it's hard for middle-class people everywhere. It's hard for a middle-class doctor to treat a poor immigrant person without education, and to understand what it is that they can actually do, what they need, what they can sustain. There is a wonderful book, when I work in healthcare, that we used to use to help encourage a sort of cultural sensitivity. It's called, *When the Spirit Catches You, then You Fall Down*. It's a story of doctors trying to treat epilepsy in a Hmong girl, and their total mismanagement of this because they were so culturally incompetent, and the pain that it caused the doctors and the family.

So when we don't let go of our exceptionalism, we can impose, without meaning to, without even knowing it, because the other party seems to have just gone along. And yet we have imposed something that is not what is wanted, not needed, or not able to be sustained.

I want to say that one of the things I feel all the time, and we are working in a lot of committees of color with young people who are really under the weight of poverty, violence, racism, lack of education, but who are advocating nonviolent means to address these injustices. Advocating patience with adversaries is easier when you're

working at a distance, when you're protected by privilege, and when you can walk away from those circumstances. It's one thing for Martin Luther King Jr. to go into the black communities in the South and say, "We have to be disciplined and not use violence. This is what will sustain us. We have to be true to our Christian principles." It would be something else for Shan Cretin to go into that community and say the same thing. I don't have that experience or that authority, if you will, that spiritual authority. And even Martin Luther King, when he addressed black churches, as opposed to public speeches, he was much more forceful and much clearer about the anger, the pain, and the problems of living under the system of Jim Crow that was in the South of those days. There's a book on the "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" that has access to tapes from all the different talks that King gave at the time. It's a wonderful and interesting analysis of that difference, and I recommend it you

Learning to be effective allies, learning to use our privilege in positive ways, is not easy. And white guilt is not helpful. I was at a meeting just recently with a young African-American man, and he provided this image of well-meaning white folk: "I am lying on the street. The Man has his boot on my neck, and you come and lie down beside me, and say, 'I feel your pain. This is so unjust!' Well, 'f that. I want you to get the boot off my neck." So laying down beside people and feeling their pain is not where it's at.

On the other hand, you know, it's also not about taking over and doing things for people. It's not about taking over and imposing. So there's a seeming paradox here, but I believe that there is a way out of that paradox.

And I think that our Friends' practices, and many things like the Alternatives to Violence Project, lead the way. Because they talk about how you work with people where they are, about letting them experience for themselves, the ability to listen and what that brings for them, the ability to work together and what that brings for them. And there's actually some new evidence coming out of developmental psychology that supports – when you work with youth who are living with this kind of extensive daily burdens of oppression and violence, the experience of being able to be heard and then being able to work to make a change in their circumstances, even a very small change, is very powerful in many ways. These young people become more optimistic and hopeful, which is necessary in order to actually go out and do things in the world. They seek broader civic engagement; they begin to look beyond your immediate circumstances; and they're even more likely to succeed academically.

I want to try to make that real for you with a story, a quick story of a young person that we've worked with at AFSC. His name is a Elmo, and I have told Elmo what I say about him, and have gotten his permission to share it. I just want to say that, because that's important.

Elmo came to us when we began working in a continuation high school in Los Angeles. The continuation high school is where you go when you've been expelled from all the other public schools, your last chance to get a degree. He got there



because he had been shot three times in front of his old high school, part of gang violence in the school. We came in, and we had been working with the teachers in the classroom. We began doing things that looked a lot like some of the AVP exercises, for those of you who have been through them. Kind of listening and having people learn how to hear each other. But we also asked the kids to work with a partner to find a person they admired and do what we called a digital story about that person. It's kind of like the Ken Burns effect – you take photos, and you use slide them around, and you narrated it.

Then these young people decided that what they really wanted to do was to take a little weedy patch outside of the school and build a garden, an organic garden. They didn't have permission to do it. The housing project within which the school lived was not really a great fan of the school, as you can imagine. They saw these kids as problems. But the kids got together, and we work with them. We brought in Friends, AFSC volunteers. A woman who is a professor at Santa Monica College came to talk about composting, how to prepare the soil for organic gardens, what it took to be organic. We had a carpenter come in and teach them how to build raised beds. We had a staff person come in and work with them on how to organize and how to present publicly, so they could make a presentation to get permission.

The garden opened and it was transformative for Elmo. He really talked about this garden as a place where he found peace, that it open him up. He became evangelical about gardens, and he started taking cuttings around to his neighbors to see if they could grow vegetables in their gardens, and discovered there's a Federal Housing Authority law that says you can't grow vegetables in the garden in front of your house. And so, that let him to a larger organizing effort, to find out why this was the rule and what could be done and trying to get changes made so that there could be a community garden in that in that housing project, which there is today.

So Elmo left AFSC's view; he graduated from high school; he succeeded where nobody thought he would. Then about two years later, in my role with the California Endowment board, I was at the Labor and Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles, hearing a report about a statewide organizing effort that had gone on to try to end zero tolerance policies in California schools. And zero tolerance policies, for those who don't know, are things like – you had a butter knife in your backpack, you're out; you had aspirin, you're out; you were willfully disrespectful to your teacher, you're out. And "out" means: not to the Principal's office – because they long ago got rid of the Vice Principals and guidance counselors and stuff – it means you're out to the juvie system, to the juvenile justice system. So this system of zero tolerance, which is supposed to protect teachers and make them safe, resulted in more students being suspended and expelled every year from California schools than graduated. And the California Endowment was working in fourteen communities to end discrepancies, health discrepancies, to reduce violence. And the students that they were working with really wanted to tackle zero tolerance. It clearly affected young boys of color, boys as young as nine and ten who were being sent away.

So I was hearing the presentation from the Northern California organizer and the Southern California organizer of the high schools statewide who were bringing six bills to Sacramento to get passed. And I look up, and the Southern California organizer is Elmo. Elmo has organized all of these schools in Southern California. They go to Sacramento. Five of the six bills are passed and signed into law. And they were so smart, they worked with the teachers' union to see what they needed in order to feel safe – they had money in there for training teachers, restorative justice methods, positive behavior reinforcement, using peer mediation. A year later, I got in my email a newspaper clipping that said that after one year of the new policies, suspensions and expulsions were down 12% and 14%. It was the first they had gone down in a really long time.

So, Elmo had made this huge difference to the thing that had probably contributed to his being expelled in the first place. But it's not over. Elmo came back to AFSC as an intern, and last October, I took nineteen young people with me to Warsaw, to be at a meeting of the Noble Peace Laureates that's held each year, and to be part of the youth civic academy that's part of that gathering. And Elmo was one of them. And he was not only was able to inspire others, but to be inspired, and to meet people like Mohamed Nunez and Mairead Corrigan Maguir, our staff from Palestine. And he has come back, and he sees now so clearly that his issues, the things that kept him down in East LA, in West LA, are not that different from the things that are going on in Palestine and Myanmar and Burundi and Zimbabwe. And so he sees himself as part of a global movement.

So I just want to say that AFSC sees this Shared Security paradigm not only as a way to reimagine foreign policy, but also as a way to reimagine our life in these United States, in our life in this Religious Society of Friends. That shared security means taking care of the security of everyone, understanding as meetings why it is that we are not seen as more welcoming to people of color who come to us, and understanding what our role could be in trying to be welcoming. Because you know what? I can tell you this: We are not whole; we are missing a really important piece of our humanity when we don't have that kind of diversity in our midst. We are missing life experiences. We are missing a piece of what we need to be faithful Friends.

So I do think that as we set out to change the world, we need to be patterns, be examples, in all countries and in our own country and in our own meeting and our own heart.