

Unless God Builds the House ...

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Unless God Builds the House ...

I have been reflecting on the relationship between our rootedness in the Holy Spirit of God and our efforts to heal the world, to make God's peace and God's saving justice more accessible to a suffering creation.

*1 Unless God builds the house,
its builders work in vain.
Unless God guards the city,
the watchman keeps watch in vain.
2 In vain do you get up early
and put off going to bed,
eating the bread of anxious toil;
for God provides for God's beloved,
even when they sleep.²*

This passage from Psalm 127 was lifted up for me several months ago as I began preparing for this moment. In the weeks and months in between then and now I have lived with it in multiple ways: daily lectio divina, academic exegesis, guided meditation and reflections, and seeking divine guidance through prayer as to what it might mean today for me and for us together. I've come to feel that it is a word for all of us. These short lines sketch a way of life in harmony with God and the consequences of straying from that path: classic Biblical wisdom literature.

I always feel better when I feel grounded in Scripture. The Bible is not a reference book for looking up the answers, but it is an important tool for accessing the Holy Spirit which gave it forth, and it is a tool which Quakers have been using to find guidance on all sorts of matters for over 350 years. So as I prepared for this presentation, I was very happy to have this part of Psalm 127 lifted up for notice. The Psalm slowly became a doorway, revealing insight about the encounter you and I are having this morning.

² Psalm 127:1-2.

The first result of letting this Psalm soak into me, as I might have expected, was that I had to completely dismantle what I had begun to put together to say to y'all, and start again from a different and deeper perspective. Then I became aware of how much work I still have to do in my own life in the areas addressed by this Psalm. At last, however, I was left with the wonderful sense of Immanuel - the reassurance that God is indeed among us and supporting us in our journey through life.

Building a house and keeping watch over a city: both honorable, virtuous and important tasks. I can identify with both. I spent 20 years working in various roles to provide safe, decent, and affordable housing for low-income people. I have a keen sense of just how important it is to be warm and dry, to have working indoor plumbing, to be able to afford safe, decent housing. My stepson Ryan is a career law enforcement officer, and I know how needed that task is, and how difficult it can be to do rightly, and what sacrifices it demands of officers and their families.

This Psalm's imagery also brings to my mind Nehemiah's project to rebuild Jerusalem and its walls when the exiles returned from Babylon, working to restore the Temple and make the city a livable place once again. For a time the situation was so difficult Nehemiah divided his construction workers into halves: one half would work on the construction each day, and the other half would keep watch over the city, protecting the other workers and the work itself. God's project to restore Jerusalem involved both building and keeping watch.

Building a house can mean many things: a personal residence, the house of the Lord, an extended family, a royal dynasty like the House of David. "Keeping watch" brings to mind the images of keeping watch at night in a bedside prayer vigil, of the sailor in the crow's nest watching the horizon for sign of land or iceberg, or the watchful father looking far down the road for signs of his wandering son or daughter. What is set before me by these words is a wide range of actions and activities, all of which are good and honorable. The teaching is not to learn

which of these to choose, but to understand that they are all in vain unless the Prime Mover is God, not our own human initiative and will.

It is not up to us to simply choose a good work and go to it, the Psalmist warns. No matter how good the task may seem to be or how much we think God may want it done, unless God has actually chosen us personally to do it now and is working through us in this moment, we work in vain. We simply can't sign God on to our own project. History is full of instances where human beings have decided to do something and then pronounced "God is with us - God is on our side." Things have rarely turned out well when we do that. God leads; it is for us to discern where, when and how God wants us to be involved, and then to follow that discernment.

Our condition

This caution is particularly important to us in the present day, as we cannot help but be aware of the extreme brokenness of the world around us and wish to put things right. A human being with any compassion can hardly escape being heartbroken at the pain and suffering, injustice and oppression of our fellow human beings. As we become more aware of the ways human beings are an integral part of all Creation, the trauma caused by human abuse of Creation brings us increasing spiritual pain and a growing desire to set things right in that area also.

People of many faiths share this awareness of the suffering and injustice throughout creation. Quakers occupy an unusual position among them because our faith tradition emphasizes that this can all change, that it can all be healed, that the Realm of God,³ the Blessed Community, the Peaceable Kingdom - whatever name one prefers to use - can be established and sustained in this world in the present day. Many Christians preach the Gospel in one form or another. Many teach that God's peace and justice cannot prevail until the end of this world. Quakers understand that the Gospel is the power of God to change lives now, to unshackle us in the

³ The Kingdom - there are other names (blessed community) - is organized and operates on a different set of principles than "the world". Its source of authority is different, it gives its allegiance to God, not to human institutions, its standards of behavior and success are different, its goals are different. The kingdom strives to enable each part of creation to become its fullest expression of God's intent and desire; the world strives to prevent some parts of creation from actions it deems as unhelpful.

present day from what has kept us trapped in old habits and destructive ways of life; and Quakers have held that as people are freed in that manner, that Gospel Order expands, and can keep expanding until it includes all of Creation.

So, we feel the pain of a broken world and have an especially intense motivation to be at the work of healing it because we believe that total healing is possible now - and is in fact promised. There is so much work to do that it seems foolish to waste a single moment. Let us get started right this second, in whatever area is calling to us. If thee and I disagree on where to work or how to get started, that's OK because there is so much to be done in so many areas. Of course I may feel thee is a little misguided for not choosing to work on what I myself see as most important, and sometimes I feel a little burned out because it is so hard and no one really understands what I am doing or how important it is or how much time and energy it takes. There is no time to waste, though, no time to rest - back to work!

There are dangers here. "Here there be dragons," as the old sea charts used to say along the edges. In our haste to be doing as much good as possible, we may be working someplace other than where we would in fact be most effective; in our numerous individual commitments, we may be losing the power that the concerted efforts of an entire meeting could muster. We may be neglecting our own spiritual nurture, and therefore failing to become the effective healers of creation that we could be. We may become guilty of putting our own image of how to heal the world at the center of our story.

Application of the Psalm

How then, does this Psalm address our condition? It's all about discernment. Discernment is a word that was much more widely used 200 years ago than it is now. In this present context it means the act of or process for determining God's desire and receiving God's guidance in a particular situation for a particular person or group of people. I might seek discernment of what God would have me do about a potential marriage, or employment, whether to attend a particular public protest; whether I should stand in vocal ministry during meeting for worship or keep my seat in silence.

Psalm 127 speaks to us strongly of the importance of seeking discernment and following its guidance in all we do. The Psalm does not tell us how to guarantee success in our endeavors - it warns us of a guarantee of failure. Unless our efforts are divinely guided, unless we're doing what God yearns for us to do, we strive in vain. Not everything will succeed - we're called to be faithful, not successful or effective - but what is not undertaken faithfully, with God's direction, is ultimately fruitless. Discernment is fundamental.

I can illustrate this with an image from my own interior life. This is a metaphor, not a literal description of my theology of life after death, so please curb your positive or negative reactions and listen in tongues. Since I was a teenager, I have had a repeated waking dream. In this dream I have died and am approaching the heavenly gates. My life is under review. After reviewing my life record, God says, "This was not the life I intended you to live, Lloyd Lee." My heart sinks. The number of sins I committed or of good works I've done is not at the center of the matter. What is vital is whether I have followed God's guidance to do the work God knows I am best suited for to advance God's plan, or have I substituted other stuff that in my own judgement seemed to be good and needed. Have I substituted the good for the gospel? That discernment is fundamental.

Helps in discernment

There are various formal processes of spiritual discernment. The *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola is one of the most well known. Developed about 500 years ago, it is often presented as a 30-day, highly structured retreat of prayer and contemplation. At the other end of the spectrum of structure is Franciscan discernment - what Richard Rohr calls "bumbling around," feeling for God's presence. Other methodologies of discernment of God's desire for us include "Bible Roulette" and study of the lives and teachings of exemplary people of faith from days past. Each has strengths and weaknesses, and each is suited to particular spiritual paths and conditions.

Quaker discernment is different from all of these, although it includes many elements in common: it is intentional, based on experience, extends beyond the realm of the rational mind, and it is inspired but not constrained by the example of those who have gone before us.

“Unless God builds the house, the worker builds in vain.” In Quaker vocabulary, we should not outrun our Guide, taking on work that God is not leading us to take on at this time. This passage also implies we should not lag behind our Guide, busying ourselves with familiar activity when God has moved on, leading us to other service. It is important, in our life with God, not to run ahead. But to rest motionless in that faith-filled relationship is also not sufficient: faith without works is dead, as James wrote in his epistle.

The warning applies equally to the advocate for peace and justice and to the quietist soul who wants only a more complete sense of the constant presence of God. We are all tempted to rise early and work late in order to accomplish our goals: eating the bread of anxious toil, in the Psalmist’s wonderful phrase. Yet that is in vain, for we cannot control the outcomes of our efforts, while God provides for those who put their trust first in God, even while they sleep.

It is not enough to have the right intention or to set out to do the right task, the Psalmist says. We labor in vain unless God is the one at work, in us and through us.

Easy to say, but hard to accomplish. Human beings all over the world are in great need of assistance of all kinds. They are all my neighbors, but I can’t do everything for everybody - how do I choose what to do? Creation itself is suffering from its human parts - how do I know I’m doing all I should to help it heal? I myself need attention in so many ways. And sometimes it seems like we’ve worked for years and there is no visible improvement - how can I find confidence that I’m still doing the right thing, and in the right way?

There are some effective Quaker helps in sorting things out. The importance of being led spiritually before and while doing a particular service is central, of course. Hugh Barbour and others have written helpfully of the various ways one may test a leading for authenticity.⁴ Friends are making better use in recent years of clearness committees to help with individual discernment.

There is still much we can learn about leadings; we tend to think of them and about them in narrow ways. We should remember the old story about William Penn standing on the dock, unsure whether to board a ship sailing for the New World. Penn dithered and dithered for a long time, saying he just wasn't sure whether he was led to get on the ship or not. "Why doesn't thee get on board, William," advised one old Friend finally, "And see whether thee is led to get off!" A change of perspective can do wonders about the way we see things.

Barry Morley wrote about the plumbing metaphor of leadings, reminding us that just as way may open to carry out a leading, way may also get clogged, and that is just as important a sign.⁵

We sometimes forget that a leading is not forever, and may not be for very long at all. "I was led into this service 20 years ago" is by itself no reason to still be doing the same thing today. In the 1760s Comfort Hoag was led to go to England in religious service. After getting the approval of her meeting, finding a traveling companion, making arrangements to sail and finally setting off on the ocean voyage, Comfort was told inwardly that her willingness to travel had been taken as equivalent to the journey itself, and she was to return to America. She shared this news with her companion as they sat in worship on board the ship, and they settled into silence again. Comfort's leading may have been removed, but they were still

⁴ Barbour, Hugh, *Five Tests for Discerning a True Leading*, Tract Association of Friends, <http://www.tractassociation.org/tracts/tests-discerning-true-leading/>, accessed 5/14/2015. The tests included

- 1) moral purity (was the leading contrary to self-interest/self-will);
- 2) patience (did the leading persist over time);
- 3) Consistency (was this leading consistent with other leadings Friends have felt and followed);
- 4) agreement with Scripture; and
- 5) Inward Unity (did the leading bring Friends into greater unity).

⁵ Morley, Barry, *Beyond Consensus: Salvaging the Sense of the Meeting*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #307, 1993.

in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, still aboard a ship sailing for England. A few moments later, as the women considered their new situation, they heard their captain hail a passing ship, saying their own ship had sprung a leak and would have to turn around and head back home.

Cycle of action and contemplation

Let us look at a method of discernment and guidance for long-term faithfulness that is hidden in plain sight in our own Quaker tradition. This method doesn't have a name as such in the Quaker tradition, but in other parts of Christianity it is sometimes called the cycle of action and contemplation.

Put very simply, contemplation means a state of "resting in God." It is not a prayer of petition, or intercession, or even thanksgiving or praise, but simply a resting in God. It is the condition toward which we Quakers are moving whenever we center down, or enter into the silence. It is a timeless moment of perfect stillness.

By experience Friends know that we are at times led into Spirit-filled action which is intended to incarnate the Truth which has been given to us in the stillness. We are called to embody the love God offers to every human being, called to care for the rest of creation with the loving attention God has entrusted us to embody, called to hold true to these understandings with integrity when there is so much pressure to abandon them. We test these leadings, individually and corporately, and then we act as we have been led.

This is faithful work, but in an important way it seems to me to be incomplete. We need to close the loop, to end our actions with the same stillness and reflection with which they began. Then we are prepared to begin again, to be freshly led and to act anew. The movement of the Holy Spirit is not one-way, from leading to action, but back and forth between the Spirit-led action and the inspiration and reflection that come in our times of simply resting in God.

This is particularly relevant for us as Friends because we have identified so strongly with the prophetic tradition throughout our history. By prophetic we have

meant not the foretelling of the future, but the telling of the truth about the covenant relationship between God and all of Creation, where it has been weakened and what needs to be done to restore it to wholeness. From George Fox and the Valiant Sixty, through John Woolman and Elizabeth Gurney Fry, to the Friends concerned about Earthcare Witness and Voluntary Service in the present day, Friends have been a prophetic people in both words and deeds, calling for the restoration of the gospel order.

That is a wonderful tradition, and it is both joyous and deeply humbling to step into that stream. There are difficulties along that way, of course. One of the most challenging is how we know when we've been rightly led and have spoken or acted faithfully.

When I was twelve, I stormed into our kitchen at home and with an emphatic slap on the kitchen table announced to my mother that I would never be a minister. Within two years I was preaching in public worship, at times in multiple churches on the same day. I've never really stopped. After more than 50 years, the question I must face every time I speak is whether my words, in a prepared lecture or in waiting worship, have been faithful to God's desire for those people at that place and moment. I never know ahead of time.

All Friends who have been called frequently into the vocal ministry know how important that time is after we stop speaking and sit down again, when we reflect on what has just happened and whether, in retrospect, we have been faithful or could have been more faithful. From that reflection we learn how to be in greater harmony with God when next we feel that uneasiness that indicates we may be being led toward vocal ministry. Reflecting on what has gone before is a key dynamic to being more faithful going forward.

Scripture supports this understanding of prophetic ministry explicitly. In Deuteronomy the people ask how to tell true prophetic ministry from false, and get this response from God:

You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?” If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.⁶

What jumps out at me in this passage is that you can't tell truly Spirit-led ministry, words or deeds, ahead of time - you can only tell after the fact. Our ministry is truly intended to be prophetic, advocating for the right relationship between God and Creation and among all the parts of Creation with each other. No matter how strongly we feel the leading of the Holy Spirit toward a particular witness or testimony, we can't be sure ahead of time whether we understand the leading fully or are carrying it out appropriately. That only becomes clear after the fact.

If our words and actions have strengthened the covenant relationship, if they have illustrated the right relationship among human beings, between humans and the rest of Creation and between human beings and God, that becomes clear in retrospect and we will feel that centered, settled peace of faithful service no matter what the apparent outward results may have been. If not, the places where we have strayed from the pure leading will become apparent to us and the rest of our faith community as well. So the movement that begins with the initial leading to speak or act, continues past the words or actions themselves to a period of reflection on what we've done or said; a sort of spiritual examen.

There are several metaphors that have been used to describe this movement, but I prefer the image of a freely swinging pendulum. Consider a group of Quakers as the weight at the end of a pendulum. Lift this weight to one side, hold it motionless for a moment, and then release it. Slowly at first and then with increasing speed the weight will swing down, across, and up again, till it slows to a stop. After an instant of complete stillness it will begin to swing back in the other direction.

⁶ Deuteronomy 18:21-22, NRSV

That moment of stillness at the end of its swing is a timeless moment of contemplation. This is where, setting all our own will and opinions aside, we sit waiting for instruction. This moment is part of what is called in my yearly meeting “the immediate and perceptible guidance of the Holy Spirit” in all things.

After that timeless moment, if we have been truly listening, we are led ever more forcefully in a particular movement or action: that place at the bottom of the swing where the pendulum weight is moving most quickly. After passing through the bottom, we begin to slow down, to re-enter a space of contemplation, to reflect on what has just happened. When our reflection is complete, after another timeless moment of stillness, guidance is given about our next action and the cycle begins again.

This cycle, if followed consistently, can guide us to the particular efforts to heal the world for which God knows we are individually and corporately best suited and most needed. It prevents the utter exhaustion and simple burnout that seem always to be threatening those who are most dedicated to activism, and it lets us know, gently, when it is time to lay down active participation in a concern, just as it lets us know, gently, when it is time to step forward and lend a hand. Importantly, it can guide us to change and improve our actions over time so that they are more effective, because they become more nearly the actions God knows are needed from us at this moment.

A time of intentional corporate reflection following each period of Spirit-led action allows us to hear and receive the “Well done, faithful servants,” that is so nurturing and restoring to the soul. We do our work without completely understanding how our witness fits into God’s overall intention for healing the world, and the apparent slow effect, or sometimes lack of effect, of our witness can be discouraging.

Receiving God’s inward assurance that we’ve been faithful to the tasks set before us raises up our souls, so that we can continue to run and not grow weary, to walk the hard road and not faint.⁷

⁷ Isaiah 40:31.

At this time we can also hear our Guide's gentle release from a particular witness which has held our attention, liberating us to take on the next task which needs our attention and energy. Sometimes we are called into a long obedience in the same direction in a personal discipline, witness to the world, or service to our own faith community. Equally important are the times we are called to faithful obedience for a shorter time, and then released into new fields of witness and service. Sometimes our release of a witness or service allows the next Friend, or the next generation of Friends, to take up their intended role. Sometimes the work and witness to which we are first called is itself part of our own preparation for future service, as I learned one fateful night on Afton Mountain in Virginia.⁸ If we cling to what has been faithful service too long, both it and we can wither as a result.

Intentional corporate reflection on our actions and witness allows us to perceive those places where we have been most faithful as well as those places and times when we perhaps haven't reached to the bedrock of the leading or haven't followed our guidance as closely as we should have. This is true of both individual and corporate leadings.

Corporate reflection on individual witness can not only improve one's discernment of right action but also reveal ways in which the entire faith community can be more involved. Only one person in the meeting may be led to labor directly on behalf of the endangered purple ibis, for example, but the entire meeting can be actively involved in support of that work in various ways from underwriting the cost of postage or printing informational fliers, intentional prayer times, or cutting that Friends' lawn and feeding the goldfish so she can be free to travel on the purple ibis' behalf. In this way the witness is strengthened and the earth is healed.

Corporate witness also benefits from corporate reflection. As a people of faith we've fallen into a bit of spiritual laziness, it seems to me, in the use of minutes of concern or letters to legislators on a wide variety of subjects. The addition of a

⁸ I pulled into a scenic overlook on my way home from a job interview and began praying for guidance on whether or not to accept the offered job. A Voice answered, "If you can't take this job I'm offering now, how can you be ready for the next job I have for you?"

regular practice of corporate reflection following these actions would, I believe, reveal new ways of expressing social and other concerns that address these subjects more effectively and invite others to join in our witness.

We close the cycle of action and contemplation when we engage in the contemplative practice of reflection after we have taken action. This is the process of settling again into the silence and reflecting on what has happened. Did our action authentically follow our guidance? Where did things appear to work out? Where did unexpected obstacles appear? Did our actions have the effect we hoped for? How does it feel afterward - are we collected and centered, or disconcerted and jangly? How might we have done things differently? How might that have changed the outcomes?

One outcome that has been dependable for Susan and me over the years is that reflection on our witness changes us. Susan tells a story that illustrates what I mean. Some years ago we were regularly engaged in the outdoor breakfast line run by the Catholic Worker House in Norfolk, Virginia for homeless people. After being roused from several more populated locations, the breakfast line now happened on a side street bordering a large cemetery, because no one lived there to complain. Susan tells of getting out of bed early one rainy morning, thinking about the unpleasant weather and the busy day at work that was waiting for her after serving the meal. Breakfast that morning consisted of a bowl of grits or oatmeal plus a sandwich, served from folding tables on the sidewalk, and the servers were bundled in their rain ponchos and hats as they distributed the food to the line of people waiting in the rain. As Susan gave one man his bowl of grits, she asked him how he was doing that morning. He was a small man older than his years, hunched over in an overcoat several sizes too big for him, trying to protect his bowl of grits from the rain. "Oh, I'm blessed!" he replied with a big smile.

This touched Susan deeply. She was the one who woke up in a clean, safe, dry home, she was the one who had eaten her choice of breakfast foods in comfort that morning, she was the one who had a satisfying paid job to go to after breakfast was over - but this homeless man was the one with a deep sense of being blessed.

Reflecting on this event after the fact led Susan to reevaluate her context of what it meant to be blessed, and to understand her relationship with God more deeply. She was changed more profoundly than the man she fed.

In our time of reflection we may see how we could have followed our Guide more closely, or understood the leading more clearly. Sometimes we find that leadings we thought were scary or risky turned out much better than we feared or hoped. Almost always we can see how God has led us in our actions, in part because we have had the settled intent from the beginning to follow our Guide and not rely solely on our own intellect. From this period of reflection on past action we can move easily into listening contemplation once again, ready to receive more and clearer guidance about next steps, next actions.

The cycle of action and contemplation fits readily into the spiritual patterns of individuals and of faith communities like monthly meetings. The traditional Quaker practice that illustrates this cycle best is travel in the ministry: the process of releasing someone for a religious journey, making the journey itself, and receiving that person back into the faith community afterward.

In earlier generations, this process nearly always began with the leading of an individual, who became increasingly convinced that she should undertake a trip, to visit people at a distance from her home, on spiritual business. Usually the people to be visited were Friends, but occasionally the leading was specifically to visit non-Friends. Eventually the leading would become so strong, so personally convincing, that she would share it in meeting for business. The community would take that leading into the silence, sitting with it until some sort of unity was received. This is individual and corporate discernment.

If the individual and community were united that our Friend was rightly led, the meeting for business would issue a travel certificate. This is a minute of the meeting saying that it has heard the leading of the individual, unites with the leading as authentic, and liberates the Friend to make the intended journey. It further indicates that this Friend is a member in good standing of her meeting, and

that the meeting knows of nothing that would stand in the way of her faithfully carrying out her intentions.

The traveling Friend took this certificate with her on her journey. Wherever she ministered among Friends, the local meeting would endorse that certificate, indicating what service the traveler had offered and how it had been received. When she returned home, the traveling Friend submitted the certificate and its endorsements to her monthly meeting, where they were read and reflected upon. The nature of those endorsements formed a large part of the foundation for discernment around whether or not to liberate this Friend on any similar journeys in the future.

The nature of travel in the ministry has changed in recent decades, with a larger proportion of visitations originating in an invitation from the meeting to be visited to a particular distant Friend. The same cycle of discernment and action is applicable. Discernment and leading move from the inviting meeting to the individual invited, and then to that Friend's monthly meeting, where unity results in a traveling minute or certificate. I am among you all today under just such a travel certificate, and would not be here if my meeting had not been in unity to issue it. Since this particular journey involves travel outside the bounds of my yearly meeting, my certificate is endorsed by my yearly meeting as well.

When I return home, the endorsements of the Friends I have visited will be read aloud in the face of yearly meeting and monthly meeting, and those gathered will have the opportunity to reflect on those endorsements and compare what happened with what we together expected might happen. Their reflections will determine whether I am liberated to travel in the ministry the next time an opportunity presents itself. Friends will note that the yearly meeting endorsement for my certificate to visit Pacific Yearly Meeting reads in part: "His travel among Friends has proved to be helpful." When reflection on the results of my travel among Friends leads to a different conclusion, I expect that my meeting will cease to issue any more travel certificates for me and I will cease to travel in the ministry.

We ought to be following this cycle collectively, as a community, in a whole lot of areas in addition to travel in the ministry. Not doing so robs our activities for Truth and justice of the strength of united Friends, and prevents us from gaining valuable insights into our actions and their effects that would enable us to be increasingly effective over time.

Conclusion

We are meant to be at work in the world, have no doubt about it. As William Penn famously observed,

True godliness don't turn [people] out of the world, but excites their endeavors to mend it, and enables them to live better in it; not hide their candle under a bushel, but set it upon a table in a candlestick.⁹

God's intent for creation is quite different from what we can see and feel all around us, and each of us has a role to play in the healing and restoration that is so gravely needed. God's intent is so different from what surrounds us now that it has been described as a whole new world, a different realm both here now and not yet, characterized by loyalty to God replacing loyalty to human rulers, family ties, and even loyalty to ourselves. What God intends, what Friends have called Gospel Order, is a place where there is no longer conflict or tension between God and government, family and authentic leadings, or between God and self, because all will be part of a new harmony, a new relationship that will indeed be gospel - good news - for everyone and everything.

The peculiar insight which Friends offer the world in this regard is that this world transformation is possible here and now. We need not wait for an end times upheaval to treat the Creation with respect, to end injustice and oppression, to root out the hate and cruelty, greed and selfishness that inhabits human hearts. The ocean of light indeed flows over and overcomes the ocean of darkness, and there is no person, no part of Creation that cannot be redeemed, that does not have a place in the Blessed Community, that cannot begin to take its place in that Gospel Order in this present moment. We know experientially, and testify to the world, that God

⁹ Penn, William, *No Cross, No Crown*, 1668.

is guiding us, to instruct us, equip us and enable us to do the work of mending the world and restoring the order God has always intended.

At the same time we must hold on tightly to a healthy humility. Humility is an essential character trait for the person who intends to help heal the world. We may feel we see everything clearly now, but in fact we are still looking through a darkened and limited window. We have not been brought into a perfect condition ourselves in a moment, but have embarked upon a journey into ever greater light, and that journey is still incomplete. Every new insight becomes the pushing-off point for yet another period of growth and greater understanding.

Each of us must overcome the illusion that we know on our own what is best and that we can do it without any help from outside. An old term for this is self-will. When we live and act out of our self-will, Friends have learned, we often make choices that seem good but really aren't, and are frustrated because the outcomes are not what we expected and desired. It is time to overcome our self-will or self-centeredness and put God at the center of our story.

God has already done God's part. All that remains is for us to be willing to listen and to follow God's immediate and perceptible guidance in each moment of each day, trusting in our Guide fully. When we do that, we know that we are engaged in the right task in the right way, and that God's holy mountain is becoming more substantial moment by moment.

In that day,

When God builds the house, we will not labor in vain.

When God watches over the city, we will not keep watch in vain.

We will no longer eat the bread of anxious toil, for we will be coworkers with God, who will give us exactly what we need for the task ahead, even as we rest in the Divine Presence.

Amen.