

Standing on the Rock: A Faith Conversation with Conservative Kin

Love was the first motion, and then a concern to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of Truth amongst them (p. 127).

This passage from the Journal of John Woolman describes so fittingly a desire I have felt to visit among NCYM - C Friends. For some time I have noted a tendency toward the Conservative within myself, and my thought was someday to spend some time where that tendency might be nurtured, where I might soak up and learn more of the life and spirit Conservative Friends live in.

And then I was invited to come and bring a message here to your YM sessions. It was with a mixture of awe and gratitude that I responded “yes”, that I might have an opportunity to visit with my Conservative kin. Very quickly then arose the question, “but what have I to say to them?”

For some months now I’ve been thinking about you, praying for and with you, reading your monthly newsletters, your Book of Discipline. It has felt like preparing to meet a not-too-distant cousin who I’ve heard about, not yet met, but at some level feel I already know. After all, we are of the same tradition, share the same genetic material.

So what do I have, what have I been given to say? First, I want to tell you where I come from – something about the cradle of my formation, the monthly and yearly meetings in which I live. I want to speak of some matters that have been on my mind and in my heart, that I believe are central to our individual and corporate lives as Friends. And then I want to explore the question of how we stand upon the Rock, holding fast to our faith, beliefs, convictions - our God - in the midst of today’s invasive waters of the pluralistic, the secular; in the midst of these often dark times.

May (let) the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer (Psa. 19:14).

I came to Friends twelve years ago, having been baptized a Methodist and having attended the Presbyterian Church for a time as a child. For a number of years in my adult life I was not part of a faith community, although I know with certainty that God has been ever-present, ever-faithful, throughout all the years of my life.

I first attended meeting in December of 1986, and joined this same meeting, Croton Valley, in May of 1989. In my letter of application I traced my spiritual journey, recalling and reflecting upon the roots of my formal religious education as well as those

things that I had come to know experimentally. When our daughter read my letter she remarked, “Mom, you always were a Friend, you just didn’t know it”.

Croton Valley Friends meet in a little stone meeting house in the woods of Mt. Kisco, NY. We have heat and electricity, but no running water. The meeting was established in 1804, and our current meeting house was built in 1902. Two prior structures now lie under water, having been sold to accommodate the enlargement of the Croton Reservoir. This reservoir is part of the system that provides water to NYC, some forty miles to the south.

A small stream runs behind the meeting house, a welcome and constant reminder of the stream of Living Water which refreshes our souls. Friends and others who come to worship with us at Croton Valley often remark upon the “deeper rest they find in that still room”; one Friend has described it as a millpond.

So it’s to this meeting I first came twelve years ago, somehow knowing exactly what I was coming in to, and I have been learning what I have come into ever since.

A first bit of instruction was given me the second time I came to worship, and it’s instruction that continues to inform me everyday. I arrived early to worship, planning to spend some time by the stream, taking in the sights, sounds and smells of nature in early winter. Three or four others had arrived just before for a committee meeting, and I was encouraged to come and join them. With this invitation I learned that coming to meeting was not just about my own private devotion; rather it was about coming into a community of faith. I am so grateful for that gentle, yet clear, instruction.

I very soon came to recognize Croton Valley as my spiritual home, the adult cradle of my formation, for it is here that I continue to be formed.

Perhaps you know something about NYYM. We are considered a Liberal yearly meeting, comprised of 65 monthly meetings, 5 worship groups and 9 prison meetings and worship groups. Of the 65 meetings, 4 are programmed. NYYM is a member of both FGC and FUM. In 1994 we celebrated our tercentenary; in 1995 we approved our new Book of Discipline.

Now there’s nothing like the revision of a Faith and Practice to bring theological considerations and questions of practice and individual conduct to the surface. We lived through some tumultuous times during that period, struggling over issues of faith and experiencing the personal pain so often engendered by such struggles. And we lived through a time of tragedy three years ago which served to put many of our differences into perspective. With the grace of God, we have come through.

NY, I believe, is a more diverse yearly meeting than NC -C. Our membership includes Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Sufis, New Age proponents, agnostics, atheists. Some might ask, I confess I often do, “wherein lies your unity?”, “what is it you are seeking in your meetings for worship with a concern for business?”, “who or what do you worship?” Good questions; questions we need to more openly and honestly take up.

I recall an especially difficult session in the course of revising our Faith and Practice. The clerk of M&C at one point posed the question, “What is it you know to be True?” What came to me was the following, in this order: “I know that my Redeemer liveth”, and “I know that we are one”. These two responses, which came up from the depths, have stayed with me and in some very real sense capture the reality in which I live within my beloved yearly meeting – enough to drive me crazy sometimes, beloved all the same. It’s the larger pond in which I live -- where I am nurtured, challenged, raised up and sometimes knocked down. I will add that these two responses: “I know that my Redeemer liveth” and “I know that we are one” also have served to inform my relations and work in the wider world, beyond the Religious Society of Friends.

To me they speak of a dynamic tension between what I experience, believe, know to be so, and the experience, beliefs and knowings of others. They also speak of a dynamic tension between the desire for unity and the potential for growth that often comes with diversity. Certainly not an easy or comfortable tension at times.

Regarding fundamental issues of faith, I expect we have all, at some time, been asked “What do Friends believe?” I often find this a difficult question to answer, given the diversity of belief in my own yearly meeting and the larger Society of Friends. Of late, I find myself first describing the range of Friends’ beliefs and practices, insofar as I know and understand them, and then I proceed to speak of what I believe. Most often I find that folks are really interested in both of these answers.

I know that when I ask a similar question of another, what I am also asking is: how is it that we are alike? What do we have in common? How do we differ? What might we learn from one another? What are the limits of my willingness or ability to understand or accept? To what do I say absolutely, unequivocally “no”.

One of the struggles, for me, is between the desire to speak, indeed proclaim, that which has been revealed and given in the depths of my soul, and the desire to be invitational, to bring others into the faith. Perhaps this has something to do with the range of beliefs that are prevalent in my wider faith community. And yet I wonder if this is not also a concern for you, perhaps to a lesser degree. One meeting newsletter responds to the query on Love and Unity, “When questions divide us, as they often do, we remember that our meeting is the spiritual home of Friends with a variety of understandings about Christian belief and practice”.

Sometimes when I am asked to lead a retreat or workshop on some aspect of Quakerism, I feel it important to begin by sharing the underpinnings or basic assumptions of what we will be talking about -- the core principles that undergird and tie together the work we will do. One might say I'm revealing my biases; I would say I'm making explicit the reality into and out of which I attempt to live my life. Furthermore, and here's where another one of my struggles comes in to play, I am attempting to articulate and make explicit something of the Life and the Power experienced by early Friends. At times, and I say this with both reluctance and boldness, I feel I've been given a glimpse of that reality and I deeply desire that, as Friends today, we rediscover, reclaim and partake of it as heirs and descendants of the great people who were gathered some 350 years ago.

So at these retreats, I begin with the following:

There is a God at work in the universe who continues to reveal himself in history. (It's at this point that I invite people to feel comfortable in speaking the language of their souls. If God is experienced as Divine Spirit, Holy One, Christ Jesus, Friend, Mother of Creation, I encourage people to speak that word. And I also ask that as we listen to one another, if another's words do not resonate with our own experience, that we can try to listen to where the words come from).

This God will provide our faith communities with what is needed to sustain us and further her work in the world.

There is a pattern of life, a gospel order, which is one of harmony and order and which encompasses change. There are also other forces at work in the world.

Each of us has a place in this pattern of life; God has a plan for each of us. Here I am not talking about predestination, but about a living, breathing dynamic relationship with our Maker.

The Creator is calling us into deeper relationship with him and the divine order, both as individuals and as a faith community. In our meetings, we are not individual meditators, we are not a secular humanistic fellowship nor a social service agency, we are a people of God, coming to know ourselves to be so.

God ministers to us by bestowing spiritual gifts upon members of the community of faith. In our meetings it is our responsibility to call forth, recognize, name and develop these gifts -- our own as well as those of others. They are for the good of the community and do not belong to us alone.

It is Christ who has gathered us together in our meetings and he who sustains us. God wants to nurture, guide and instruct us, both as individuals and as a faith community. He hears our requests and cries for assistance.

Prayer is real. It's necessary and desired; it's effective.

God calls us to faithfulness, to cooperate with the divine plan. Our job is to seek and discern God's will for our lives and to live into it. We are called to be co-creators, with God, in the unfolding of history, of life.

Discernment is part and parcel of an authentic spiritual life; and it's ongoing. We can get better at it with practice, both individually and as a corporate body. Discernment is both a gift and a skill.

God is the prime nurturer or minister. We nurture authentically only through his gifts and his grace. We are instruments of his nurture, channels of his ministry, willing co-workers in the vineyard.

We are not alone. There is a living God, a Risen Christ.

Often I want to say more; usually I stop here. Sometimes I sense even this borders on too much for some. And so I must tell you how deeply moved I am when I read, lectio-divina style, the Advices from your Book of Discipline (Advices 1,2,3,5,final). What a gift you are to those followers of Christ within another strain of Quakerism today. You give voice to the often unspoken – words so many long to hear or desire to speak themselves. Thank you. (Here I think that we are witnessing evidence of the shared tradition and genetic material I mentioned earlier).

Having told you something about the monthly and yearly meetings from which I come, and having talked a bit about issues of faith, I want to speak now about the matter of authority. You may remember a popular bumper sticker a number of years ago which read, "question authority". You tended to see them on the cars of young people and those who retained a healthy suspicion of hierarchical or outward authority.

In my mid- to late thirties I began to feel some annoyance with this, as well as other, bumper stickers. At that time, I believe, my inward bumper sticker which read "question authority" was beginning to come unstuck, peeling back from the edges. It was at about this same time that words like obedience, faithfulness, discipleship and grace began to take on new meaning for me. My understanding of authority made a radical shift from the outer to the inward, and I began to seek out, reflect upon, and say "yes" to relationship with the One who I was coming to know as the source of my authority.

The source of religious authority and how God reveals Truth to us has always been a fundamental concern for Friends. Fox and Barclay spoke of the primacy and immediacy of the Holy Spirit, the Light of Christ Within. Truth, for us, is based on first-hand religious experience, unmediated by priest or minister.

The Bible was a primary source of guidance in the religious life for early Friends. It's been said that had all existing Bibles been lost or destroyed, Fox would have been able to speak the words. But, he said, the Scriptures must be read in the Spirit in which they were given forth; and, for Barclay, they were the "declaration of the fountain, not the fountain itself."

Wil Cooper, in [A Living Faith](#), describes how over time Evangelical Friends have come to emphasize the letter of Scripture and stress the outward work of Christ rather than the inward transformation by the Spirit of Christ; Liberal Friends have come to rely on the Light within with occasional support from the Bible; and Conservative Friends have retained the primacy of the Holy Spirit balanced with a reliance on Scripture.

Quaker community and tradition, and the wider Judeo-Christian tradition of which we are a part, have also served as a source of guidance and means of testing the inward experience. The legacy left us by early Friends is a rich one which includes waiting worship and our distinctive manner of attending to business; individual and corporate processes for the testing of leadings; traveling in the ministry; the community stewardship of spiritual gifts. We have been blessed with a variety of means to individually and corporately seek and discern the Divine will.

When we speak about authority, we are speaking about that which is genuine, authentic, true. We are speaking about that which is rooted in the Author and Perfector of life. We know from Matthew that Jesus "taught as one with authority", making manifest the power, truth and love of God.

Try as we may, we cannot speak of religious authority without taking up the difficult subject of evil – evil being that which is inauthentic, false, out of the Life and the Power. I believe an authentic life in the Spirit is not possible without a world view that acknowledges the existence of the darker forces – within ourselves, in the other, in the institutions and structures of the world.

Fox clearly saw both the ocean of darkness and the ocean of Light. For early Friends the Light had the capacity to reveal evil. It first challenged and convicted, then worked its power to bring us into unity with God and one another. The Light was the instrument of salvation.

Early Friends had a term for the struggle against the forces of evil and destruction in the world – the Lamb's War -- so named for the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. The Lamb's War was not a battle against human foes. It was about spiritual warfare against the principalities and the powers; against the world rulers of darkness and wickedness in heavenly places (from Ephesians 6:12).

The Lamb's War first takes place inwardly, as we are called to surrender to God and live a life of revolutionary faithfulness. It is to be waged in society at large as well, against attitudes and structures of iniquity – political, social and economic. James Nayler wrote that the faithful are to war against:

“...whatever is not of God, both in themselves and wherever they see it. Indeed their war is against the whole work and device of the god of this world, his laws, his customs, his fashions, his inventions, and all which are to add to or take from the work of God which was in the beginning.” (The Lamb's War, Early Quaker Writings, ed. Hugh Barbour, p. 108).

Pretty strong stuff. The Lamb's War is not a term I hear used among Liberal NY Friends. I wonder if it is a part of Conservative Friends' understanding. Where I come from, military language is avoided because it is understood to be an expression of outward or carnal warfare. It is not in keeping with our peace testimony. This is apparent to me as I listen to our careful selection of words, especially during times of disagreement and conflict; also when we edit the words of hymns or eliminate some hymns entirely from our repertoire.

Nor, for the most part, is there discussion of matters such as sin, evil, repentance, redemption, salvation. Of late, I find myself wondering whether in abandoning the military and apocalyptic language of the Lamb's War, we've lost our understanding of the struggle between good and evil; we've domesticated and begun to deny the convicting power of the Light.

Like Fox, the God I know is a God of infinite love and compassion, made manifest in the life of Jesus. But this infinite love is not indiscriminate or sentimental. On the one hand it invites, encourages, upholds; on the other, it challenges, confronts and convicts. Ultimately it transforms.

To me, the mature spiritual life acknowledges both the ocean of darkness and the ocean of Light. In so doing, we need not fear that the darkness will overcome the Light. Like early Friends, we can be assured of the ultimate victory of the Lamb. The redeeming work has already begun. As Fox proclaimed, “Christ is come and coming”.

Nor should we confuse the military language of the Lamb's War with carnal warfare and weaponry. James Nayler echoes Scripture when he writes:

...the Lamb...puts spiritual weapons into their hearts and hands; their armor is the light, their sword the Spirit of the Father and the Son, their shield is faith and patience, their paths are prepared with the gospel of peace and good-will toward all the creation of God; their breastplate is righteousness and holiness to God, their minds are girded with godliness, and they are covered with salvation, and they are taught with truth (Ibid., p. 106).

To the contemporary ear, this way of speaking may sound psychologically naïve, superstitious, or irrelevant. It may raise concerns about an unhealthy interest in the powers of darkness. To those Friends, I would say, “try to hear these words in the spirit in which they were given forth; how might they speak to our condition in the present day?”

There is something in me that wants to say, “Forgive me for getting so heavy, especially in the middle of summer”. But there it is. As I understand it, ours is neither a “feel good” nor “feel bad” religion. It’s about Truth. We were never told that the spiritual walk would be easy or without cost. We are, however, heirs to a peace that passes understanding, recipients of the resurrection promise. That should be enough to keep us going.

What I’ve tried to do tonight is to raise up what I believe to be some central concerns of our faith. I’ve tried to do it in a way that would help us to think about commonalities and differences. And I should say that as I speak tonight, I do so as an individual Friend, one voice among the many voices of NYYM. My desire has been to begin a dialogue so that I might “haply receive some instruction” or in any degree “help others forward by my following the leadings of Truth among you”.

I’d like now to take up the question of how we, as individuals, and as a community of faith, might stand fast upon the Rock in the midst of the invasive waters of the pluralistic and the secular – both within the Religious Society of Friends, as well as society at large.

For me, it begins close to home – within. To stand fast upon the Rock requires intention and discipline and, is ultimately dependent upon Divine grace. It means daily times of prayer, devotional reading, study; periods of solitude, holy leisure, holy work. And there is someone with me this week who knows in exquisite detail just how often I fall short.

It involves the corporate disciplines of waiting worship, worship sharing, spiritual friendship, accountability within a formation or covenant group. It has meant tracing the paths of my spiritual journey and discerning the pattern of God’s work in my life. As a convinced Friend, it has meant reconnecting with those teachings, people and events which were important in my formation, and letting go of what is no longer relevant.

Standing fast upon the Rock requires a committed community of faith, and here I hark back to the important lesson that was given me on my second visit to Croton Valley. Even though my experience was one of having “come home”, ever since I’ve felt the need to study, and learn the history and traditions of the faith community that I’ve come home to.

This has been and continues to be a source of great joy to me – rather like being given the opportunity to spend time in a spiritual attic, reading letters and journals written by the

cloud of witnesses who are my spiritual ancestors. I expect that this learning of history and the basis of tradition is important for birthright Friends as well.

Standing on the Rock, I have found, requires cultivating a relationship with the living God, the historical Jesus, the Risen Christ. It has also required me to look outside my immediate tradition to see how other faiths might inform the Rock to which I cling. By this I do not mean the adoption of another's belief or practice, only that I might be assisted by another's lens on the camera of my faith. Let me give you an example.

Several years ago I felt led to spend Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday (or should I say 5th day to 1st day) at an Episcopal Benedictine monastery on the Hudson River. I was in prayer, eyes closed, as three monks processed in carrying a large wooden cross. I'm not sure I remember the details just right, but when they reached the altar, I was startled by a loud thump which then echoed throughout the silent chapel. Looking up, I saw a monk lying prostrate, flat out, before the cross. In that act I was given to understand the inward condition of life lived prostrate before the cross. I haven't since felt a desire to become an Episcopalian, haven't tried to bring a large wooden cross into the meeting house; probably won't ever join a monastery. But I'm deeply grateful for having been a part of the worship where this outward demonstration connected with and informed an interior disposition.

Thus far I've spoken primarily about the inward life and our lives together as members of a faith community. But as Penn wrote:

True godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavors to mend it.

We have been instructed to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, visit the ill and the imprisoned. "If you love me", said Jesus to Simon Peter, "feed my lambs".

The Rock on which we stand does not orbit somewhere off in distant cosmic skies. It is positioned squarely in the midst of the often turbulent waters of reality. In my work, I have clung to the Rock in the presence of violent and abusive family situations; at the bedside of a young Hispanic man who lay dying as a result of gunshot wounds sustained during a drug deal. The Lamb's War is still being waged. The Rock also invites me to dance the "Macaraina" with Head Start parents as we celebrate their accomplishments at an annual multicultural dinner.

The God I know is not partial to tame situations. He sometimes asks us to join in an unfamiliar dance. He walks, some would say, most often at the margins of life where there may be no articulation of faith, but only despair.

Precisely because we are part of the mystical Body of Christ, we are called to participate in the work of Jesus. From the book of James:

Only be sure that you act on the message and do not merely listen; for that would be to mislead yourselves. A man who listens to the message but never acts upon it is like one who looks in a mirror at the face nature gave him. He glances at himself and goes away, and at once forgets what he looked like. But the man who looks closely into the perfect law, the law that makes us free, and who lives in its company, does not forget what he hears, but acts upon it; and that is the man who by acting will find happiness.

So how does all we have considered tonight reflect on or speak to our condition as Friends today? We've spoken about issues of faith; the question of authority; the need for discernment and acknowledgment of that which is in the Life and the Power and that which is not. Lastly, we've talked about how we might stand fast upon the Rock as we engage and bear witness within our community of faith as well as in society at large.

I confess that our present dilemma regarding our identity as a Religious Society of Friends, the place of Christ in Quaker faith and practice, and our source and understanding of religious authority at times causes me deep distress and concern. I find myself returning to the words, written to the angel of the church at Ephesus:

But I have this against you: you have lost your early love. Think from what a height you have fallen; repent, and do as you once did (Revelation 2).

When I read this passage, I weep, for it speaks to me of our present day fragmentation, where once there was unity.

I think, Friends, we have real work to do – work in the form of dialogue that takes account of both the questions of faith and practice that separate us, as well as those things on which we agree; work in the form of worship and fellowship so that we might come to know one another both in the particularities of our everyday lives as well as in those things which are eternal; work in the form of deep listening and humble, expectant waiting. This work might also require us, at times, to put aside our dialogue and go forth together, in faith, to witness and minister to a broken world. I call this “getting on with things”.

Such work, I believe, requires deep roots and an open heart. It, first of all, requires us to learn about, grapple and come to terms with, and ultimately embrace the Rock from which we are hewn. Continuing revelation, by definition, is just that. I believe, too, that such work requires a kind of semi-permeable membrane, whereby we might be open to new light even as we bear witness to the Light, present from the beginning, which shines in the darkness and which the darkness has not overcome.

Perhaps what I'm about to say is more of an issue for Liberal than for Conservative or Evangelical Friends, but I believe also that such work will require the recognition that all points of view need not be given equal weight or equal hearing; there are those upon

whom God has bestowed gifts, so that through the exercise of these gifts, the community of faith might be built up. As humble students, we need sit at the feet of their ministry.

I believe the work that lies before us, as Friends today, includes that of seeking and exercising spiritual and theological integrity, not settling for mere “correctness”. Most of all, like the church at Ephesus, we need take note of the height from which we have fallen, and once again begin to walk in unity, having reclaimed our early love.

Then we might sing, along with the Psalmist:

Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; as the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore (Ps. 133)

Linda Chidsey, July, 1998