

Oral Portion of the General Secretary's Report to Spring Sessions 2008

Some Friends asked that the content of my oral remarks be made available to the Yearly Meeting. What follows is close to what I spoke in Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business during Sunday's session.

Friends, we are building the Blessed Community. We are building the Blessed Community. Not in any kind of linear fashion—more like two steps forward and one step back—but we are creating the community we are called to live into.

We are continuing to attend to the work that is needed. Around two years ago or so, I named areas I felt were crucial for our life and growth as a community: care of our children and youth, integration of newcomers, spiritual nurture/religious education, conflict resolution, coming to a common vision and healing the divide between our monthly meetings and the structure of the Yearly Meeting. My sense is that we are making significant progress in all these areas. Overall, I feel that we are going in the right direction. I see that born out in the State of Society reports. There is a lot of energy and movement in the areas of advancement, witness, nurturing our children and youth, and the spiritual nurture of adults. My sense is that we are coming together as a body.

Within that context, there are three areas I feel a pull to bring forward.

Recognition of how “generations” of Friends within a meeting plays out, and how that impedes our life and growth. One of the most interesting conversations we had at the last Advancement consultation was about how Friends who have joined our meetings in different time periods tend to gravitate to one another, often forming “generations” of Friends based not on age, but of duration in the meeting. This can result in stratification which impedes community. We need to work intentionally to “destratify” our meetings. In one meeting, when Friends who had worshipped there between three and seven years realized that the “newcomers” they kept hearing references to were, in fact, themselves, they were pretty upset. That meeting then sought to come together through “Friendly eights” where the “newcomers” were mixed in with the “old-timers.” That effort preceded a period of unprecedented growth.

In many of the meetings I visit, I witness difficulties in integrating the new ideas and energy of newcomers. Too often, frustrated, these Friends leave. We need to do a better job of welcoming the new energy and innovative ideas of Friends who have been with us one, two, or five years, even when it means change for a meeting that has been something precious to Friends who have worshipped there for thirty, forty, or fifty years. There is a tension between change and preserving something precious. Too often, innovations are met with remarks like “That doesn't seem very grounded.” I have been guilty of those words in the last

months, myself. Perhaps the most chilling and alienating words someone new to Friends can hear are “We don’t do it that way here.” If we are going to fully integrate those who are drawn to our way of worship and way of life, we have to do a better job with living out the tension between change and preservation. The addition of one new member changes the dynamics of a community. If we try to add people without allowing change, we will either stifle the life in our community or so frustrate our newer members that they will leave.

What we might learn from wrestling with our relationship with the rest of FUM. Several times I have alluded to how I think our wrestling with our relationship with the rest of FUM [Friends United Meeting] affords us the opportunity to deepen and grow in very significant ways. But I have not articulated what potential I see there. At the core of it, we have an opportunity as a community to wrestle with how we unconsciously create factions called “us and them,” and how in our hearts and minds we hold some people as “other.” To do so is endemic in the human condition, so I am not inviting us to feel badly about being so human. But such a hardening process is part of what Martin Luther King called “spiritual violence,” and as we learn to recognize the roots of it in our own selves, we will become more capable to be a force for peace in the world.

It is a rare opportunity when we can bring that unconscious process out into the Light and see what God would have us do with it. This could be an opportunity for all of us to become more aware of the thoughts and emotions which move us towards hardening our hearts to our fellow human beings, and how we can learn to keep our hearts open, even while emphatically disagreeing with the premises and conclusions of those we differ from.

Regardless of what clarity we as a body eventually come to in what I believe will be a protracted process, if we do not also learn this about ourselves, we will have missed out on a priceless opportunity—one in which we might “see what Love can do.”

Electronic Communication and our practice as Friends. I have carried concerns for some time about how we as a community use electronic communications and how that supports or undermines our faith and practice as Friends. As a means of simple communication to a body spread a far ways geographically, the benefits are obvious. But I am concerned about three different ways I see us using e-mail which I think are not in keeping with our practice. I have carried these concerns for a long time and hesitated to bring them forward out of concern that some individual Friends might think that I am directing this at them. I have kept waiting for a time when there haven’t been any recent uses of e-mail in these ways so that these concerns might be heard apart from any individuals or their concerns. There have been no such lulls, so I would urge any who hear this who feel that I might be directing this at them, to know that is not

the case. I feel it is time for us as a community to look at how this very, very prevalent part of our life together fits into our faith and practice.

1. Trying to vet difficult and divisive issues through large scale e-mail “conversations.” Our practice is to labor together, face to face, spirit to spirit. As we do so, misunderstandings and umbrage tend to decrease, and we find our way forward in the Light together. Often I see very difficult and challenging issues brought up to a large body of Friends via electronic media, with long rejoinders going back and forth. Sometimes these “conversations” are quite grounded and thoughtful. Other times they are anything but. One good example of the former might be the blogging “conversation” between Johan Maurer and Marshall Massey relative to the significance of the Richmond Declaration. Some would argue that that kind of vetting of issues is productive preparation for later meeting together. I have also seen conversations with massive “reply all” lists carried on about similarly difficult issues that fomented discord more than they laid any groundwork for our corporate discernment as Friends. The resulting tangle can often be sorted out when we gather together and lay our concerns before the Spirit, but have we made good use of our time in the process? Can we come to some corporate understanding of how to use e-mail and blogs in this manner that is consonant with our practice as Friends?

2. E-mail “sniping.” Twice in the past few months, Friends have forwarded to me e-mails sent to them about things that they had done—e-mails which were, to put it kindly, very mean spirited. They asked me for advice: “What do you suggest I do with this?” I don’t believe that we would treat each other that way face to face. E-mail allows us enough distance to say things to each other that can be deeply hurtful which we just wouldn’t do if we had to personally witness the impact. This long-distance mud-slinging is damaging, causing great distress to those who receive it, and consternation as to how to respond. I believe that us trying to share our concerns with each other in this manner is outside of our practice as Friends. At the same time, we do not yet have clearly defined ways of responding to this form of abusive behavior that are understood to be a part of our practice. We need to give this some thought.

3. Arguments with an “audience.” With e-mails with large “reply all” address lists, sometimes one or two or three Friends within that larger group will engage in disagreement, sometimes pretty significant disagreement. In this kind of situation, Gospel Order would ask us to seek out the individual or individuals in person and to address our concerns with them directly. But in our use of electronic media, too often the disagreement goes back and forth, with ten or twenty other Friends “looking in” on it while it is going on. Is this consonant with our practice? Is it a good use of our collective time and energy? Does this build community?

Communication builds community. If used poorly, it can also tear it down. We, as a body, need to come to some collective understanding as to how to use electronic media in a way that builds community, rather than is corrosive of it.