

Being Home: The Blessed Community *Is* Our Inheritance of Love

Niyonu D. Spann, July 2006

Give over thine own willing, give over thine own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything, and sink down to the seed which God sews in thy heart and let that he in thee, and grow in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee, and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of life, which is his portion.

Isaac Pennington

The blessed community is our inheritance of love. We remember it—deep within each and every cell of our body. We hear the whispers of our ancestors who were also yearning to see it in its full manifestation. They made efforts toward it and bumbled it up—big time.

This blessed community is awesome and wonder seeking. We get to experience the taste of it here and there and occasionally; in the still of our worship we sink down into that river and allow ourselves to be home together, to fully remember who we are—the Blessed Community.

It is awareness of this interconnection that I sensed as a child and the call to acknowledge wholeness that I now understand as truth yearning for itself in fuller and fuller expression. This fuller expression, of what one of my teachers calls 360-degree truth, is deeply yearned for yet is sorely missing within the Religious Society of Friends. To tell the 360-degree truth, you've got to tell the truth about yourself and what you were up to and you've got to tell the truth about yourself and what you *are* up to.

For me, wholeness is not an abstract notion. It is the reality of our interconnectedness. This reality is a powerful force that will not be denied conscious recognition. Friends have partially re-recognized it in stating that “there is that of God in everyone.” When we re-cognize ourselves as the spiritual beings that we are; when we acknowledge wholeness, *act from the knowing of wholeness*, we stand in truth—we stand in love.

So now I come to the primary message of the evening: If we are to be whole, if we are to be at home, or to unleash the blessed community, we have got to destructure the barriers to this unfolding. For *all of us* to be at home here will require a courageous and consistent truth-telling. We must unearth all that would say, “One is more entitled to this home than another one.”

Yes, in worship we return together to that river that knows no separation. I have experienced no home as blessed as that that we share in silent worship. So yes, that worship is home. But frequently once words are spoken—in our business meetings, our workplaces, our schools, and so on—what we experience is a broken home.

What will it take to dig up the roots that feed our continual acts of separation? Breaking apart the hardened earth to free dysfunctional roots which were established centuries ago?

Sarah Douglass wrote:

My brother Charles was naturally sensitive, and felt more keenly than any of us, the prejudice against color; but most of all the conduct of professing Christians was a stumbling block to him, particularly their behaviour in their Meeting-houses to our people. It drove him to the very verge of infidelity.... When quite a child, he with the rest of the family went to Friends' Meeting; but as he grew to man's estate, the Cross, of being seated on the back bench, on account of his complexion was too heavy to bear, and with Mother's permission he went to Meeting with Father, among the Presbyterians....

Oh, if Friends only knew the anguish this one common expression of theirs "This bench is for the black people; This bench is for the people of Color" inflicts on the sensitive and tender amongst us.... (cited in Margaret Hope Bacon: *Sarah Mapps Douglass . . . View from the Back Bench*, p. 16)

Our roots are full of lies, blindness that was of short-term benefit to many ancestors in this room while inflicting the deepest wounds upon others of our ancestors present here today. Wake up people. In truth, we were all wounded.

So, this query: What does the "back bench" look like today? How does it function amongst us? I would offer that today the "back bench" has come to look less like blatant institutionalized discrimination and more like what I have recently witnessed and experienced as "process discrimination."

I would offer that we as Quakers have mostly, though by no means entirely, learned how to avoid committing acts of blatant discrimination based on class, race, sexuality, age, or gender. Now, to maintain the status quo, we do, in fact, turn to controlling through process and procedures. I have paid attention over the years to how Friends, presumably yearning for the blessed community, ask to be shown the ism (separation based on power-over). Yet, as soon as there is an attempt to hold up a mirror so that Friends can see just how they have created and continue to maintain these systems, folk get mad.

As a woman of color—a black woman—I have experienced among Friends some of the most unfriendly and shocking treatment of my life. But part of my recent work has been changing my relationship to shock. Instead of shock that results in anger, fear, or confusion, I invite the shock to wake me up! I invite the shock to wake us up.

I want you to join me in looking dead smack in the face of every crooked pattern, every breach of trust, each and every foul-smelling situation.

We want so very much to believe that we are a Friendly people, leaders in the movements for justice and a welcoming home for all. And indeed, there is much truth there. Likewise, I wait

with you to hear the truth that of our friends Vanessa Julye and Donna McDaniels are bringing in their upcoming book, *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship*.

Prepare yourselves, Friends, for it will seem overwhelming.

In unleashing the blessed community there is truth to be told about how classism is alive and well amongst us. There is the story of our dishonoring native peoples back then and right now today and about the homophobia that is acted out within our circles.

We must face the truth and the resulting cognitive dissonance that has been a primary reason for denial. How can we be the Friends of the underground railroad and the Friends with the "back bench"? 360-degree truth-telling requires us to hold both parts of reality. We must face this dissonance head on. For without those parts of the truth, we cannot be whole, we cannot get home.

When we sink down in worship together, I believe that we tap into that wider order, that heart space. I believe that Spirit is available to help us face the truth and then to help us act on the knowingness with open hearts. Then we will not only be home, we will fully embrace our inheritance of love—our blessed community.