

NYYM Programmed Worship
July 25, 2003
Silver Bay – Lake George, NY

“Therefore, my beloved...be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your work is not in vain.”

I Corinthians 15:58

My copy of *Quaker Life* came just in time to coincide with our NYYM gathering. The theme of the recent edition is “Leadership Challenges for Friends” which parallels *our* theme here this year of “Quaker Leadership in these Times.” And so this important issue of leadership is before us now for our consideration and discernment.

In a *Quaker Life* article by Larry Spears, Robert Greenleaf, the Friend who coined the term “servant – leader”, is quoted as saying something that I found curious when I first read it. In the context of talking about building viable human communities Greenleaf said, “All that is needed ... is for enough servant-leaders to show the way, not by mass movements, but by each servant-leader demonstrating their own unlimited liability for a quite specific community-related group.”

Often the derivation of words illuminates their meaning, and this was the case for me with Greenleaf’s choice of the word “liability” in connection with leadership. The word “liability” is derived from the Latin root “ligare” which means, “to bind together” and it has the same root as the word “religion” which means, “to bind back together.”

Isn’t it interesting that this concept of leadership, this “unlimited liability” of one for others, would be so close in meaning to the word we use to describe our human attempts through faith and conduct to connect our lives to the divine? What might this say about the awesomeness of the task of leadership? What might this say also about the binding nature of the relationship between leader and those led?

There is no way to separate leadership from liability or responsibility – but “*unlimited*” responsibility? Alexander Hamilton, in the *Federalist*, wrote that responsibility in order to be reasonable must be limited to objects within the power of the responsible party. We in the U.S. pretty much have stuck by that standard of “reasonableness” as our legal standard of individual liability. But, Greenleaf’s conception points beyond the legal realm to the moral, ethical, and spiritual realms of human experience where we are bound to one another and answerable to one another in, yes, unlimited ways. Again and again in his parables Jesus calls women and men to action that goes beyond cultural norms and requires of them unexpected and seemingly unreasonable standards of truth, love, compassion, generosity and forgiveness. We work to witness to those standards still.

In worship at Representative Meeting last fall, a Friend stood and spoke out of the silence. He wondered whether in addition to being places of refuge, our meeting houses ought to be places of labor. In a very real way, it seems, the wider body of Friends is laboring to give birth to new and vivid evidence of the life of our testimonies. Yet, such new life cannot be forced or contrived by our will alone.

We in the Religious Society of Friends may have differences over the location and the distribution of spiritual authority among God, the Inner Light, the Spirit of Christ, and Scripture, but we are *very* clear that such authority does not rest with the will of our leadership. To our leaders we entrust the corporate process. We ask them to faithfully hold for the community a context in which the continuing revelation of Spirit can occur. While our leaders can ask, "What is our vision?", they should not by themselves supply the content of that vision. Each among us is expected to be responsive and responsible to the motion and leading of the spirit. To be responsive and response-able is to be alive just as to be unresponsive is to be dead. It is more than just a play on words; it has to do with our very life and death in spirit. Our process of worship, of prayer, of discernment and clearness - all of the aspects of our faith and our practice - either can be fused with life or can lapse into the irrelevancy of sentimental and empty form.

The writer, A. S. Byatt, began one of her stories with these words: "Once upon a time there was a woman who was largely irrelevant and therefore happy." This is tongue-in-cheek, of course - to be relevant, to matter, it is one of our deepest human longings. But, there is a certain relaxation we can enjoy when we are temporarily and periodically irrelevant, that is, when we are not answerable to someone or counted on for something. But none of us is spiritually irrelevant. None of us is "off the hook" when it comes to a direct line of communication with the spirit of God. To diminish the possibility of our own contribution is to diminish the very power and presence of God working in us and among us and through us.

The concept of the servant-leader is rich in its paradox. To take the role of leader is also to give oneself over to its responsibilities and to lay down a portion of one's own personal life in service. And to raise someone up into a leadership position requires the group to hold up and support him or her in that position of vulnerability. Both actions require trust. And when we speak of trust, we are in the terrain of one of those many intersections of the human with the holy, where our mutuality and our unity is evident; where our true self-interest is seen to be in the interests of the one body; where the spirit of God which binds us together is revealed.

And, yet, the labors of leadership and service can be difficult to sustain. We must remind ourselves and one another "deliberately and often", as Brother David Steindl-Rast puts it, that our work to make manifest in the world the love, compassion and peace of God is not irrelevant or sentimental. It matters in very real and practical ways. Everyday it effects the quality of human lives and the quantity of human suffering.

Last Mother's Day, I was responsible for two programmed services: the usual service at Poplar Ridge and another at Kendal of Ithaca that afternoon. It had been already a busy start to the spring, and I was feeling tired and a little bit sorry for myself as I began to get ready for what would be a long day of work for me, especially when I imagined in my self-pitying thoughts that every other mother would be enjoying themselves with breakfast in bed, or a family brunch or dinner.

My prepared message for the first service was about the admonition of Jesus that we must be reborn and in it I posed the questions, "Who attends our rebirth in spirit? Are we not mid-wives to one another in this spiritual labor and rebirth?" When I arrived at the meeting house, there was on the pulpit a personal letter addressed to me. I opened it and read in a beautifully scripted card the words of Paul to the Corinthians: "Your labor is not in vain." As Friends like to say, this spoke to my condition. Not only was I uplifted, but all those gathered could share in this ministry and be encouraged by it also. And so I say it here, to encourage and remind us all as we labor - both in leadership and service - to respond faithfully to what is presently before us:

"...be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your work is not in vain." I Corinthians 15:58

Ruth A. B. Bradley