

**Worship and Action for Peace Letter**  
**September 23, 2004**

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

This is the first in a planned series of three letters by members of the NYYM Worship and Action for Peace working group. This week's letter discusses the vision of the peaceable garden as a sustaining metaphor for our life and witness in faithful community. Following letters will discuss God & Government, and Mediated Relationships. The Worship & Action working group welcomes your responses, your stories & visions. You can respond through the NYYM office by email to paul@nyym.org or by regular mail at 15 Rutherford Place, New York, New York 10003.

**The Peaceable Garden**

Elise Boulding has written in several publications of the cultures of peace and cultures of violence to be found in all faith traditions. In *Cultures of Peace: the Hidden Side of History* (Syracuse University Press, 2000), she describes a culture of peace common to the traditions of Judaism, Christianity & Islam as the peaceable garden (at p. 22):

The peaceable garden culture is nonviolent. One of its most notable characteristics is that men and women move about in it with equal freedom. The elderly and the very young are also visible. Love of God and love of nature go hand in hand. The highest experience in this culture is the unitive experience — oneness with God, creation, and humankind.

Early Friends believed that they were gathered as a people called to live in the Spirit of right relationship between "every part of creation, however small, to every other part and to the Creator." (Lloyd Lee Wilson, "The Quaker Vision of Gospel Order" in *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, p.3.) They described this experience of right relationship to be "gospel order," understanding that "every human being is capable of achieving that spiritual maturity, or perfection" which enables us to live in right relationship, today, rather than in a future end time. (Wilson, p. 8.)

When George Fox in 1651 refused to accept a commission in the military, saying "I told them I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars," he testified to the transforming power of God in his life. "He did not just say that war was morally wrong and we should try not to be part of it. He did not say that the Sermon on the Mount prohibited fighting and that we were to obey its precepts, so as to usher in God's kingdom. Rather he said that he lived in a power (God's power) which eradicated the causes of war from his heart. War was no longer possible for him because he already lived in the peaceable kingdom, not because he hoped to bring it about with his efforts." (Sandra Cronk, *Peace Be with You: A Study of the Spiritual Basis of the Friends Peace Testimony*, p. 11.)

Spirit continues to speak to us today, to transform our lives. We attempt to live in gospel order, to live into the peaceable garden, through practices and structures that affirm our beliefs and create spaces for us to put them into practice in our daily life.

### **Personal Practice & Meeting for Worship**

Sandra Cronk understands peace as both a gift to us and a process we undertake in our lives. "This understanding of the peaceable kingdom as already present (at least as a seed) takes the wrongly-held burden of accomplishing peace off our shoulders. For we do not create the peaceable kingdom with our power. We enter into God's kingdom which is emerging in our midst. . . . Our lives as peacemakers are rooted in a life of contemplation, a constant, living awareness of our relationship with God." (Cronk, p. 15.) When our lives are rooted in relationship with God, the peace communicates itself to others throughout our lives; in meeting for worship, that rooted peace is the basis for the grounded centeredness we experience as a gathered meeting.

### **Schools for Peacemakers**

We in America live in a particular culture of violence, a domination system that is intertwined with commodification and individualism, in which the market is extolled as our ultimate determination of value, our arbiter and yardstick. We have grown up learning the ways to get by in that system, and those ways are deep-sown, unconscious, and habitual. We have learned through experience and education the skills of navigating this power structure; we have acquired the mindsets of consumerism and individualism.

Learning to live into the peaceable garden requires radical change: it requires us to learn new ways of being, of relating, of sharing, of working together, of doing business. It requires us to learn by doing; to teach by example; to create new habits and integrate them into our being. Anyone who has learned a new skill knows that it takes practice for it to become automatic, and practice to keep it so. Learning to live into the peaceable garden requires honesty, truth-telling, and loving care of one another as we try to learn and change. It requires faithfulness. It requires a paradigm shift, a new model that is based upon different values: the values of the meeting rather than the market; the individual in faithful community rather than the supremacy of the isolated individual.

Our meeting communities are a space in which we can practice living into the peaceable garden. Sandra Cronk calls our meetings "schools for peacemakers." We have structures that encourage living into the peaceable garden, and traditions of dealing with one another lovingly even when we may be in conflict. Our practice is risky, because we are all at different places in a learning continuum — not just in learning about Friends' beliefs and practice, but in our learning to live into the peaceable garden, in discerning our gifts and calls, and in being consistent. Our practice requires a level of commitment to communal discernment which is unusual in other faith communities, and therefore unexpected by newcomers. We ask all in the

meeting community to minister, to participate in the life and work of the meeting. We ask all to be available to learn from one another and to teach one another.

## **The Life & Work of Our Meetings**

We know historically that one reason that Quaker women were so important in the abolition and suffrage movements is that they were prepared for ministry, public speaking and organization by their faithful work within their meeting communities. Chuck Fager speaks of how the life and work of the worshiping community prepares and underlies the witness of individuals: grounded worship, pastoral care, religious education, maintenance of meetinghouses, welcoming and orientation of new attenders, etc., all help to create the peaceable community which can be the seedbed of witness. (Chuck Fager, *A Quaker Declaration of War*, a presentation to Illinois Yearly Meeting, 2003, <http://www.quakerhouse.org/declaration-01.htm>.)

What do we experience in our meetings? Is the work of the meeting (whether done in committees or in the meeting of the whole) centered in a spirit of deep worship that affirms each of us and invites all into participation? Do we welcome newcomers and children into our work? Are our committee meetings opportunities for worshipful discernment and good order in record keeping and faithful reporting? Do we uphold one another, and help each other learn good practice?

Are we faithful in lovingly working with one another when some aspect of our individual or corporate life is out of right relationship? Do we ask for, give and accept forgiveness? Do we acknowledge that conflict within the community is the concern of all? "[T]he individualistic assumptions of our society do not lead toward Truth in the peaceable kingdom.... It is not possible to have the fruits of the peace testimony without the willingness to challenge and be challenged on the ways we live which block the coming of peace." (Sandra Cronk, *Peace Be with You: A Study of the Spiritual Basis of the Friends Peace Testimony*, p.28.)

## **Discernment of Spiritual Gifts and Leadings**

Both our activity in meeting work and our witness in the world is a matter for personal and corporate discernment; our level of activity in either will vary in scope and level at different stages in our lives. At times, obligations to work or family may require our first attention. Are we open to the nudgings of the Spirit? Are we open to the discernment of our spiritual gifts and leadings by the community of Friends? Do we listen together for individual and corporate calls to witness? Do we ground our individual witness through the corporate discernment of the clearness process and place it under the care of the meeting rather than keeping it separate from our life in our faith community?

How do we understand the community implications of corporate witness? Chuck Fager has documented Friends' historical inconsistencies in holding up the Peace Testimony in times of war. (Chuck Fager "The Friends Peace Testimony Reconsidered,"

<http://www.quakerhouse.org/pt-reconsider-01.htm> and "Speaking Peace, Living Peace: American Quakers Face the Civil War," <http://www.quakerhouse.org/civil-war-01.htm> .) In meetings that may have many newcomers to Friends traditions and testimonies, how do we encourage individuals and the community to come to new or renewed understandings and support of our corporate testimonies?

Nadine Hoover of Alfred Meeting, in an article in *Friends Journal*, asks "Should War Tax Resistance be a Corporate Testimony?" Nadine describes NYYM's stance on payment of war taxes as "about individual conviction, not the corporate conviction we have against bearing of arms. We are squarely in the Pennington tradition of advising Friends to testify against war by 'endeavoring to exert an influence in favor of peaceful principles.' We commit to the conversion of hearts and minds, one at a time, 'seeking the good and welfare, and doing that which tends to the peace of all.' Patience and persistence are employed in our participation with government." (Nadine Hoover, "Should War Tax Resistance be a Corporate Testimony?" *Friends Journal*, April 2004, p. 5.) Nadine reminds us that:

It's been a long time since we acknowledged a new corporate testimony: this practice has fallen away. So let us remember. Friends experience a Living Presence among us and commit to being taught, guided, and shaped by the Living Spirit, placing great reliance on spiritual discernment. Meeting for business was organized to test the spiritual discernment of its members, affirm or suggest further laboring, and support those suffering for conscience' sake. If a Friend's testimony were affirmed, the questions was, "Is this true for them alone, for others as well, or for all of us?" If it were true for everyone, then it was a corporate testimony. (Nadine Hoover, "Should War Tax Resistance be a Corporate Testimony?" *Friends Journal*, April 2004, p. 5.)

## **Work in the World**

We are called to be faithful not just in the context of the community of Friends. It is much harder to live into the peaceable garden in the world outside our safe space, when ingrained habits are more likely to engage automatically. When we are grounded in the practices of Friends and loving support of our meeting communities, we are strengthened to be witnesses in the world.

Shirley Way testified to Friends in her letter from prison to New York Yearly Meeting:

My faith tells me I must seek Truth and when I find it, I must speak it, live it. It is really quite simple and easier than we sometimes allow ourselves to believe.

My experience shows me that when I say 'yes' to the Spirit, way opens and the service becomes a gift, not a burden. As Caroline Fox

(1819–1871) said, "Live up to the light thou hast, and more will be granted thee."

\* \* \*

In peace and with much love and gratitude, for without my faith community I cannot hear, cannot follow.

When our individual witness is shared with our faith communities, we give each other the example of being faithful. Witness such as Shirley's is not only a witness to the world, but a call to Friends, calling us to the discernment of Truth, calling us to say "yes" to the Spirit, reminding us of our own power as individuals based in faithful community.

The domination system is hugely integrated into our lives, and has tremendous power to make us doubt ourselves. It is all too easy to see our individual or community efforts as fragmented and unconnected. For Friends, the peaceable garden provides a vision of wholeness that we can look to when we feel isolated. We seek to create the peaceable garden through our individual spiritual practices and through Friends' corporate practices: non-hierarchical structures for corporate discernment; testimonies; understanding that the Spirit is available to speak to all; discernment of spiritual gifts; and support of leadings. When we are called to faithful witness, we bring parts of the overall design to Light.

There is also a vision of divine order which does not require each of us to take on everything. There is a sense that in a world under gospel order, or divine guidance, each person's appointed tasks would fit together organically, moving toward God's unknowable goals for the universe. There is a sense that we are not responsible for the outcome. We are responsible for faithfully discerning and performing our own personal parts in the process, leaving the outcome to God. (Patricia Loring, *Spiritual Discernment*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #305, 1992.)

*Lu Harper, Rochester Friends Meeting, for the NYYM Worship and Action for Peace Working Group*