

## Worship and Action Update, 12/4/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting,

The world is tipping toward the sun in the South, longer days, summer coming. In the wintry North we light candles in anticipation, open our hearts to the meaning of Light coming into our dark world. Fresh energy, awareness of large shifts happening, course through this familiar pattern this year. We reach deep, set aside time; some every day?

Friends know that faithfulness means following where we are led, not outrunning our Guide. We expect to wait in worship, and when led, to test our clearness. We also know that events unfold, whatever we do or do not do. There are consequences, for ourselves and for others. We can see some consequences, even some patterns, and yet "Such knowledge is beyond my understanding, so high that I cannot reach it" (Psalm 139:6, New English Bible). We find ourselves exclaiming, "I just don't know."

We are called to worship with attention to action for peace. We hear the dual call: "Be patient. Do something." We understand the importance of both faithful practice and flexibility, spiritual nimbleness. We live the engagement with these questions in our daily lives. Some Friends "talk about God," exchange e-mails, even, about their experiences. We share the following recent informal exchange on "worship and action" among members of a NYYM monthly meeting as daily talk about centered living and action. We seek ways to share deep worship and daily talk about God, our practice, choosing to wait or to act.

Peaceable greetings,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, Fred Dettmer  
NYYM Worship and Action working group

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**FIRST FRIEND:**

### **Social Change - in the Gall of Bitterness?**

And when Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, Saying, Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost. But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.

*Acts 8:18-24 (KJV)*

I am led to hold up the story of Peter's encounter with Simon Magus as a parable for all of us that wish to do God's work without first making ourselves fit for it, and then waiting till we are called to it.

It is clear that our country is in the hands of lying and murderous tyrants, and understandable that we wish to change that. But faith tells us that those lying and murderous tyrants are themselves in the hands of God, who can raise a great wind and blow them away when God thinks best. Faith also tells us to love our enemies. If we forget that God is firmly in control of creation, we can only be in the gall of bitterness when we consider the evils done by the government we were taught to believe was ours. How could we not be bitter?

And if we fail to pray for the repentance and redemption of the people that have hijacked it, tricked us into what may be our nastiest war to date, and rounded up Muslim and other Near Eastern immigrants like cattle for deportation and detention without due process, we remain in the bond of iniquity ourselves, and our own hearts are not right with God. We may be angry, but we must love George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and all the rest, just as God loves them. "The Lord . . . is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." 2 Peter 3:9 (KJV)

Healing of the terrible sickness that has come over our country and the world can only come as a gift from God. Do we hope to purchase it with money? Are we naive enough to think that supporting the right candidate against Bush in the 2004 elections will cure an illness with deep roots in consumerism, global capitalism, media monopoly, gross inequality of wealth, and, most of all, our forgetting of God and our stewardship over one another's souls?

Do we think that we have to have all the answers about how to end the occupation of Iraq and repair our relations with the rest of the world? That, I suggest, is another form of thinking that the gift of God might be purchased with money - the money of our own cleverness. No: if God raises a great wind to blow through the United States, the same great wind will blow through Iraq. Our calling is merely to tell the rest of the people opposing Bush and his odious war: trust God. God lives and will lead us. Merely be obedient.

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## **SECOND FRIEND:**

Yes, but . . .

The thing is, as I understand it, yours is the kind of message George Fox White was preaching at New York Monthly Meeting in the face of Isaac Hopper's abolition work.

White and his followers prevailed in the meeting. Hopper was disowned for fomenting disorder in the Society. White continued to preach and pray while Hopper continued to attend meeting every First Day. We don't know all that much about White. We have records of Hopper's getting 1,000 slaves to freedom.

I think of the street fight I witnessed shortly after 9/11 where one man was brutally kicking and beating another. I stood and watched them, trying to reach down for my AVP training. The assailant did stop upon becoming aware of my simply watching him. And I became aware of a deeply aggressive, even raging, internal component that was powering my outward stillness and steadfastness.

It looked right on the surface - still, calm, and open. And it was effective.

But I know that it was rage. I was not in that condition which takes away the occasion. I was doing a trick, using a technique, one-upping the assailant, as it were, because my rage, aggression, and "power over" was even more titanic than his and outlasted his - because I was still and calm, and riding it.

At the same time that I got your tract I was also getting a wave of posts from a meeting attendee that derided and ridiculed Bush. That's not going to work either. Sometimes you do just have to blow off steam. (And some of these things are witty.) Other times, it feels like self-indulgence in the face of despair.

I don't know. I just don't know.

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#### **INTERLOCUTOR:**

hmmm.

I'd like to learn more about George Fox White vs. Isaac Hopper. Somewhere I had picked up the impression that the opposition to Hopper was less theological than a matter of personal defensiveness: weighty Friends didn't like being publicly dissed for business practices that seemed to Hopper complicit with slavery. I also thought that the issue, at least officially, was not whether Hopper should do abolition work. However, my knowledge of the whole matter is pretty superficial. Can you point us to some good sources on this, from both sides of the dispute?

Meanwhile, it sounds like our Second Friend is reading our First Friend as saying we shouldn't take action against evil unless and until we are completely pure ourselves. I'm not sure that was the intent.

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#### **SECOND FRIEND:**

I've looked at the primary documents - from Hopper's side - in the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library. And I've seen, in the Swarthmore archive, a provocative exchange of letters between Hopper and White that predated the disownment by about ten years. White comes off - in that exchange - as one of our familiar "difficult" Friends. Not quite coherent, not quite making sense when pressed (gently) to be clear and logical by Hopper.

The disownment - as I recall ( I'd need to refresh my memory to speak authoritatively) - was about an article that ridiculed White that was printed in an abolition paper that

Hopper was one of the editors of. He claimed that he hadn't read it before it was published, but did allow that he was one of the editors.

I don't recall seeing any mention of theological points in the primary documents I've handled. My sense is that these two men had been pushing each other's buttons for a long time - after the manner of Friends. My sense also is that the conflict really stretched the monthly meeting, the quarter, and the yearly meeting. All three bodies labored with it, calls were paid, letters were exchanged, but in the end for reasons that are not clear in the record White prevailed. The yearly meeting minutes do record all the names of those who upheld the disownment and all the names of those who wished to rescind it. In other words, they recorded the vote - and my intuition (meaning I can't support my feeling with logic and reason) is that the clerk did that with intentionality, meaning it to be understood by later Friends as something extraordinary and troublesome.

A real Quaker Hot Potato.

Incidentally (or not), Hopper had been disowned by his Philadelphia meeting much earlier in his life for imprudent business practices (debt). He cleared the debt within a few years and was reinstated in the meeting. Later he moved to New York City, apparently solely for financial reasons. He thought he could make a better living here - the kind of move that was not that common in the middle classes at the time. Who knows what that history has to do with the whole thing here in NYYM?

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**INTERLOCUTOR:**

Thanks for mentioning the materials in the New York Public Library and at Swarthmore.

In the light of your summary, though, I guess I still don't see any connection between anything George Fox White was preaching and anything our First Friend was saying in his "tract." (You had written "yours is the kind of message George Fox White was preaching at New York Monthly Meeting in the face of Isaac Hopper's abolition work.") What was the connection that you saw?

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**SECOND FRIEND:**

I can hear George Fox White (who was opposed to slavery) saying that slavery is an evil that only God can correct. Getting individual slaves to freedom doesn't address the roots of the problem. The best way to help the country and change the slaves' condition is to pray and to deepen worship.

I am haunted, right now, by an experience on the subway last night coming home from Quakerism 101. I was deep in my Bible, riveted by Ezekiel. The train was crowded. I was vaguely aware that there was a young woman who got on at 34<sup>th</sup> Street standing in front of my seat. When I pulled my head out of the Bible to get off at 86<sup>th</sup> Street I saw that the woman must have been at least seven months' pregnant. She had been standing in front of me for about ten minutes.

I apologized - said I was so busy reading my Bible that I couldn't see immediate need in front of me. She laughed graciously and said it was okay. But that incident is going to stay with me for a while.

I'm suggesting that there are dangers like this enmeshed in what I understood our Friend to be saying in his tract. Is there a way that we can address such dangers - if we, indeed, feel them to be dangers?