

General Secretary's Report

New York Yearly Meeting, Summer Session, 2015

The following is a reconstruction of what I shared in a message to the body. It is very close to what I said, but may vary slightly from the actual words spoken.

I have been reading a book strongly recommended to me by a General Secretary of another yearly meeting, Edwin Friedman's *A Failure of Nerve*. Friedman started out as a marriage and family counselor, and then went on to work with a myriad of churches and synagogues, helping them with the problems in their communities. He noticed that he was seeing the exact same problems and patterns in the religious communities that he had been working with as in his family counseling. He later did consulting work for large corporations and non-profit organizations, seeing the same patterns in those systems, and doing leadership training based on his experience of how all these systems work. He eventually went on to serve as a consultant to two US Presidents. He saw the same patterns in all these communities, from family to religious community to large organization to a national government- what allows for growth, and what undermines it.

A Failure of Nerve was his last book, a culmination of his many years of experience working with these systems and issues of leadership. In one chapter, where he was decrying the then (1996) trend for all different kinds of new leadership techniques and a reliance on gathering more and more data, he said his advice to all leaders was to forget all the technique stuff, stop trying to amass more and more data, and for each leader to differentiate him or herself in their respective system by giving their "I Have a Dream" speech.

As I was less than two weeks away from giving a General Secretary's report to this body, I held the question: what might I say as my "I Have a Dream" speech? As I held that question, a night or two later, I had a dream where I essentially gave that speech. So today I will share my "I *Had* a Dream" speech, and then after, will give you a bit of a "I Have a Dream" one.

So here is the dream: *I am at a Quaker gathering. There has been a group of 4-5 women who have been working together on a project- looking at the question of revitalizing the Religious Society Of Friends. I sit down to the table where they had been diligently working, and a well-known Friend from this YM tells me they will be coming back soon to resume their work, and that they need that space. So I vacate, and go into a large spacious room, and reflect on the fact that at every Quaker gathering I go to, I find a deeper, more open, more loving, spiritually connected aspect of myself or way of living, but when I go back to my regular life, I lose that.*

I go back into the room, and say I think I have something to offer their discussion, if there is room for that. They say that they had wanted and expected my input, and even though it is almost lunch, they definitely want to hear what I would say. I talk about how before I leave for any Quaker gathering, I spend a lot of time and energy catching up all my affairs, getting everything in order, and that this takes a lot of energy. I come to the gathering, and by degrees, open to my heart and spirit, and come to a place of spiritual depth that I want to live from always. I go home with great resolve to change my life so

that I live more from that place, but it isn't very long before I find myself caught up in my old pace.

I am about to go on with my talk, when a man across the room, grumpy and impatient, says "It's 1:00; lunch is starting," and abruptly gets up and leaves. I then talk about how my General Secretary report after my sabbatical had two main points: that our practice as Friends has deep and transforming power to it, how we need to look at how our use of time affects our ability to practice it better; and the dire need for all of us to stop burning hydrocarbons, based on my research and my work doing local organizing against hydrofracking.

At this point, a young girl, perhaps 8, loudly proclaims a desire to go sit with another, and with her mother's consent, crosses the room to happily sit on another woman's lap. I then go on to say that I had many, many comments on the hydrocarbon part of my talk, but no comments on the part where I talked about us needing to embark upon inner transformation through the practice of our faith- not one.

The woman who had been recording for the meeting shows me her yellow legal paper, on which she has only jotted 4-5 words to capture what I had just said, and asks if I would be willing to write up what I had just said for the minutes. Friends are appreciative of my comments.

So that's the dream. In the days after it, I was inclined to identify strongly with the "I" character in the dream, and to challenge us to engage with the transformative power of our practice as Friends. But in the last day, and especially this morning during Meetings for Discernment, it became clearer to me that I carry all the characters of the dream within me. I carry the very busy committee. That's a part of me. I carry the man who really doesn't want to hear about transformation. He's a part of me. I carry the little girl who isn't much interested in transformation, but is happy to leave her mother's lap, for the arms of another matronly woman. And I even carry that mother, and the other woman, as well. And I see us all carrying these different characters, as well. This is our community. This is all of us.

So what are we to make of this?

Our capacity to work diligently and earnestly can be a virtue, but it can also be displacement activity, keeping us from the much more difficult work of inner change and growth. I see a lot of us in that committee, working so hard, so busily. One of my favorite bumper stickers is "Jesus is coming, look busy." It is less frightening to attend to a lot of work than to undergo transformation.

The man who really isn't interested in transformation, but would rather go eat lunch, that guy is in all of us. In the many monthly meetings and individuals I work with, I encounter a deep, deep spiritual hunger. I also encounter an equally powerful fear of change and of losing control. Much as we consciously want to change and grow, there is a part of each of us that fights against it. There is also a child in each of us, able to be joyfully present and loving, but not much interested in this message, or perhaps even what our practice might mean for them.

And I need to say that the part of the dream which spoke about my post sabbatical report was true. Not one person, not one, engaged with me about my naming us as being called by God into transformation through deepening our practice as Friends. We are that scared of it. We need to be aware of that truth about ourselves.

So what do I dream about for us?

- **I dream of a yearly meeting where many Friends engage deeply in our practice as Friends**, and go through “the flaming sword,” the “tempering fire.” As I read through our State of the Meeting reports, I kept hearing from meetings “We are old, we are gray, we are tired, we are afraid for the life of our meeting.” I did not read “We may be old, but we are on fire with the experience of God. Our worship is powerful and uplifting. We have much to share with the world.”
- Katherine of Sienna said, “If you are as you should be, you will set the world ablaze.” **I dream of a yearly meeting setting the world ablaze.**
- **I dream of us being a yearly meeting which recognizes, and lives from our strengths.** We have many. We have incredible strength of vision and action. We created AVP, which has taken off and is transforming people literally around the world. The Bolivian Quaker Education Fund came from us, an incredible work in this hemisphere. More recently, the work of our Conflict Transformation Committee has gone viral across this continent. And our ARCH program is being picked up and emulated in other yearly meetings throughout North America. And in the works, we have new initiatives in the workshops on spiritual nurture for monthly meetings launched by our Spiritual Nurture Working Group and the planned Outreach Roundtable. And then there is the Youth Institute, teaching better ways of nurturing the spiritual lives of our children, and some Friends initiating the exploration of using marketing techniques learned from business experience to spread the word of who we are as Friends. We are a powerhouse. Can we own that?

We also have great economic strength. After the 2008 economic downturn, unlike many yearly meetings and Quaker institutions, we did not have deficit budgets. When the Powell House boiler broke down, Powell House was able to raise \$50,000 to fix it, in a very short time. We have tremendous economic resources.

We are blessed with great spiritual strength, as well. We have a network of Friends who are deeply engaged in our practice, who have reaped some of the benefits of that, and who are able and willing to teach from that experience.

We are incredibly strong. Yet I rarely see us living from that self-image. **I dream of a Yearly Meeting which knows its great strength, and lives from it.**

- **I dream of a yearly meeting where Friends come from across our yearly meeting to attend our Spring Summer and Fall Sessions.** I noted with deep discouragement and sadness how many meetings, when we did our roll call last night, were not present with us. It was about half of our monthly meetings. And many others had only one person here. I’m sure I was not the only person deeply disheartened by this. We have to do whatever it takes to change this. A part of us is not present. This is not OK. We must change this. I dream of a yearly meeting where that is the exception, rather than a painful norm. And I dream of being a yearly meeting where the terms “yearly meeting Friend” and “monthly meeting Friend” no longer have any meaning.

- **I dream of a yearly meeting which is not trying to maintain or recreate who we used to be, but is living boldly and powerfully into the future.** Over the years, I have watched many monthly meetings, at a time of contracting membership, devote all their energy to maintain who they just were, or even to try to recreate who they used to be quite some time ago. There is no life in this. When I have seen these meetings let go of trying to recreate or maintain, but open themselves to who they are in the present, with their gifts and blessings, I have seen those same meetings, again and again, that were stagnant, thrive. **I dream of a yearly meeting living boldly into the future.**
- **I dream of being a part of a yearly meeting that is skillful at setting limits with those in our midst whose behavior is destructive of community.** In so many of our monthly meetings, the fabric of our community is torn asunder by the actions of one or two Friends. We need to learn how to become skillful at saying “We love you. We want you to be with us. And, these specific behaviors must stop.” We don’t know how to do this. And we need to learn how to empower our Ministry and Counsel or Pastoral Care committees to know that they have the authority to do this work.
- **I yearn to be part of a yearly meeting which deeply engages with the reality of racism in our culture,** so painfully laid bare by the recent murders in Charlotte. We need to be an active part of addressing this scourge in our society.
- **And, I dream of a yearly meeting which is comfortable talking about money.** In so many of our monthly meetings, and at our sessions, I witness a great discomfort and reluctance to talk about money. This is not an aspect of Quaker culture, it is upper middle class white culture. We need to learn how to do this differently. At any session, one of us may be asked to serve on a committee, or we could be asked for a contribution. In each case, we are asking that person to share their time, talent, and treasure towards our common enterprise. We are not offended to be asked to share our time, talent and treasure when we are asked to serve on a committee; if not led to do so, we simply say, “No.” Can we approach the requests for time, talent and treasure that involve money with the same degree of candor and openness? We need to learn how to do this.
- Finally, and **first and foremost, I dream of a yearly meeting which sets the world ablaze.** Go set the world ablaze. Go.