

## Publishing the Truth of Experiential Faith

Plenary message of Don Badgley to New York Yearly Meeting, Summer Sessions 2015,  
Tuesday, July 21

I remember my first appearance before this body 60 years ago in this very auditorium. I remember it because I was in my pajamas. It was an evening session and I was looking for my parents. I think I'd had an argument with my older brother and had come to seek justice. I marched into this huge room to search and I am sure there were a few chuckles. It's a good memory. My mother probably scooped me up and the rest is lost to history. Now, I could be off by a year or two but 60 years fits nicely into our theme.

As I looked around that warm summer evening I would have seen a room full of really old Quakers. Back then, though, nearly all the men were in suits and ties and the women all in dresses, very serious, and very 1955. William Bacon Evans of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting would have been here, but not in a suit and tie. That old Quaker would have been wearing a wide black hat and plain Quaker garb, his gray jacket without even lapels. He was born in 1875 and he spoke in the plain language of thee, thy, and thou. He used to sit in the Inn near where the elevator is now, selling puzzles and always had an arrow through his head. It's true. You can Google him. It's the first picture shown. I wonder what he'd think of Google.

The Orthodox and Hicksite Yearly Meetings were meeting together, united for the first time since the split in 1828. My father and other *young* Friends had been working toward this reunification for two decades. That was 60 years ago and we have been one Yearly Meeting ever since. And here we are again!

*Last summer we heard these words from the epistle of the Young Adult Concerns Committee: "We are called to action. Our God is dynamic. We must respond to continuing revelation among us and support the new leadings of the Divine working among us. Our Faith is active. How can we live deeply into our Faith? We sense that it will require much more than what our current structures offer. This energizes us."* End Quote. That seems like a good place to begin this year.



Our Theme: 320 Years, One Faith. 60 Years, One Meeting. Today, One Vision. *Really?* My initial reaction to our theme this year was that it was aspirational at best. I have to confess that when I first read it I was puzzled. Now, these many months later this theme has turned out to be exactly the right point of departure for the thoughts I am about to share. One faith, one meeting, and one vision! Let's consider that . . . together. I am going to speak along three distinct lines of thought this evening: **1) - Experiential Worship** – *The primary Source of Truth* **2) - Friends as Publishers of Truth** – *An active ministry in and to the world.* **3) - Unity Within Our Diversity** – *A meeting gathered by the experience of Divine Love.*

I'm hopeful that when I'm done these will be braided into something stronger than the individual strands, maybe strong enough to lift up and hold "one vision."

It seems clear to me that while we Friends are quite consistent in descriptions of our Quaker testimonies and proud history we would struggle to agree on a unified basis for our present day faith and worship. That was not always so—and we are weakened as a body and weakened as a

meaningful force in the world by our present day failure to publicize to the world the good news of the Divine Presence that enables us, motivates us, and leads us directly.

I also believe that “one vision” and diversity of faith expressions are not mutually exclusive—if that “one vision” refers to the direct Experience of the Divine Light. *That* experience enables—in fact guarantees—diversity. George Fox *once* said this: “*Though the way seems to thee diverse, yet judge not the way lest thou judge the Lord. Several ways hath God to bring his people out by.*”

Having just quoted Fox, it also seems clear to me that reliance on our history and past good works as the foundation, unifying force, or justification of our present faith community or witnesses is to build upon sand. (Matthew 7:26) To advance our so-called testimonies as the essence of “Quakerism” is creedal at best, and by themselves, those “SPICES” are ironically bland. “*That salt has lost its savor.*” (Matthew 5:13) The Japanese poet and a contemporary of George Fox, Matsuo Basho, pointed to this truth by saying, “*Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise men of old. Seek what they sought.*”

Without the direct and present leadership of the Divine Source, our testimonies crumble to ancient dust. Absent that One Source they are little more than religio-political posturing, relics—and impossible to justify, especially within the context of the actual evil extant in the world today. Nonetheless, when we testify to the whole world about the life-altering Truths that originate in our experience of the Divine Presence, that testimony is imbued with a vital, even miraculous power.

Are we still willing to publish the Truth we *experience*? As I wrote in *Spark*, one unspoken modern Quaker testimony is “Never Proselytize!” It’s unlikely that Quakerism would have survived the 17<sup>th</sup> Century if those Friends had felt constrained to share the transformative experience of living in the Light. And remember, they shared it at grave risk to their property, families, and even lives. Today we “Quakers” hardly ever discuss, beyond the meeting house door, our encounters with the Light. The grave risk to us today? We might be called proselytizers or offend someone’s delicate sensibilities. We are very comfortable. No, we tend to keep our experience of the Light well covered (Matthew 5:15) except perhaps in our witness work. Even in that, we sometimes fail to mention the Divine *Experience* that inspires that witness. We’re far more likely to share our Quaker history—as if that conveys credentials or authority. It doesn’t.

There is a natural tendency to believe that those who preceded us—“early Friends”—were in some way more authentic or more in tune with the Divine Source. This misconception may cause us to inflate their importance and discount our present experience of the Light. Their words and deeds, for good or ill, reflect *their* experiences in their *own* moments and may have great value, but *only* to the extent that they inform our present experience. This is true of scriptures, as well. Though treasured guide books, claiming scripture as holy, inerrant, and perfect is . . . absurd. We should not make saints of anyone or idols of their words. Neither should we demonize or apologize for their errors. We only need to “*seek what they sought*”. . . and so become finders. I’m convinced that the Religious Society of Friends will continue to fade into *justified* oblivion if it does not return to, and share with the world, radical ministries that arise in Experiential Worship. To outside observers, if they notice us at all, Quakerism today is mostly just . . . boring . . . or maybe a vaguely interesting historic anachronism; Oatmeal.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and beyond, Friends published Truth through letters, tracts, and with bold, challenging, and radical ministries that impacted much of the English-speaking world. They

traveled by walking and on horseback. Imagine the number of people we could touch and perhaps influence with today's technological opportunities. However, even a well-meaning witness ministry is sterile unless it is ordered by the principles revealed in The Divine Light, the same Light by which we order our lives. That One Source should always be publically identified as the origin of our witnesses, and if the Light isn't the source . . .

Before I expand on that, let's get some perspective on the significance of 320 years. For younger Friends, even 60 years is hard to grasp, especially if you've only existed for a third or even half of that time. And, for *everyone* here tonight, 320 years is a timeframe that shifts our brains into the mists of historic times, sort of a grainy black-and-white image without real substance. 300 years, 600 Years, same thing. Well, 320 years ago Benjamin Fletcher was governor of the New York colony. He underwrote and supported piracy as an engine of economic growth. I suspect there were no Quakers in *that* government. But who cares? They're all dead now.

In 1695 Mozart was still sixty-*one* years in the future. Quakers in New York, northern New Jersey, and western Connecticut. had organized their own Yearly Meeting, separate from New England. George Fox himself had visited Flushing Meeting just 23 years before, in 1672. History; it's interesting but distant and amorphous. Gathered here tonight, 320 years seems to be a vast expanse of time.

So, let's refocus on 320 years from a slightly broader perspective. It takes eight minutes for the sun's light to reach us. 93,000,000 miles, eight minutes. After passing earth, that same light won't arrive at the other end of our galaxy for another 100,000 years. When my father was a young man, he knew of only one galaxy, ours, and he was taught that it was the entire universe. How many galaxies are there in this universe? Nobody knows. Estimates range from as few as 225 up to 400 . . . billion. We continue to learn. I wonder what we don't know. *I wonder* . . . and wonder itself is an absolute miracle, a manifestation of the Divine! Think about it!

Over the billions of years of *ongoing* creation, in the midst of infinite cold space and fiery matter, the atoms of this universe have somehow arranged themselves into *life* and then into sentience, into sentient beings, into us. This is an absolute Truth from either a scientific or spiritual perspective. Here we are! We think! We consider. We wonder. We know. We love. We are aware. So? The universe has become aware of itself. And that, Friends, is the Prime Miracle! The entire universe, both physical and non-physical, is complete within each of us—with conscious awareness. Thus a man once wrote: "*And God saw that it was good.*"

Now, with that broader view, consider again 320 years. (*Finger snap.*) In the context of Divine awareness time has no meaning. *This* moment is the *same* moment as the beginning and as the end. Paul Tillich called this the "*eternal now.*" Someone else once said, "*I am the alpha and the omega.*" (Rev. 1:8)

For me, Quakerism does not conflict with science; in part because both science and Quakerism are dependent on direct experience. Neither science nor modernity threaten or challenge my faith. They embolden my faith, as both require empirical proof. And it's there, in the *experience* of the eternal that flows through all things. Call it what you will.

My personal Faith and the experiences that nurture it are ephemeral. There are occasions of crystal clarity and unspeakable joy and also occasions of of profound doubt . . . and occasions of disconnection, guilt, regret and loneliness. In those rare moments of timeless clarity, what some call "peak experiences," as I perceive infinite and timeless Divine Light; I discover nothing new,

but rather the opposite. In those moments I find myself in a heightened awareness of the timeless eternal that is and has been part of me since my first breath, perhaps even before.

However you may name them, these experiences are part of each of us and, though ephemeral, are the root cause of every religion. When we Friends seek this experience together in stillness, absent notions and forms, we move together into glimpses of the Ocean of Light, and so gathered, the experience unites us, even as the Light covers us in its peace. This is what our predecessors sought and it remains . . . unchanged. How might we share this with the world? With silence?

That quotation from Genesis—“*And God saw that it was good.*”—is the third time tonight that I used the word “God” and all were from quotations. I struggle with the word God. It’s one of those words that always triggers a reaction, whether you are deeply devout or a committed atheist. It’s a word that carries immense baggage and yet is wholly inadequate to express the ineffable experience of the Light. Thus, someone once said; “*Be still and know that I am God.*” (Psalm 46:10) In silence we seek communion with our Source and inner stillness is the medium in which we perceive the whispers of the infinite. This unites us.

What George Fox and others proposed in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the revival of experiential primitive Christianity, was altogether unique in its time. What Fox discovered experimentally was the direct experience of the Spirit of Christ, alive and eternal within him. Then, with the confidence of Jesus Christ standing with them, Fox and the other founders re-ordered their lives in ways that directly challenged the churches of the day. They abandoned the creeds. They abandoned priests and their dogmas, hierarchies and outward forms and notions. They had re-discovered a higher order of spiritual experience. When Fox wrote that he heard a voice saying, “*One, even Christ Jesus could speak to thy condition,*” he was reporting that he had encountered the *Spirit* of Christ.

Now, as I spoke those heavily freighted words I fully understood that many in this room are not easy with “Christian” language. Many become Quakers to escape it. Language can cause wounds regardless of intent. This has divided us. It’s worth noting that while Christ-centered language may make Universalist Friends or non-Christians uncomfortable, Universalist language is far less likely to cause similar discomfort in Christians or others. Why? It seems to me that discomfort with Christian terminology is most often caused by the burden of Christian church history that inevitably stains the traditional words, often in blood. It also seems that some Universalist Friends may reject Christ-centered language today for reasons not unlike Fox’s rejection of the dogmatic teachings of the priests and professors of his time. By Fox’s time the churches, Catholic or Protestant, had become wholly dependent on priests and/or interpretations of scripture. The cannon was closed and the direct experience of God was wrongly considered a thing of the distant past. The church had ossified. This has not changed.

In the statement we Friends most often quote, in his letter to Charles II, we find what for me are the 12 most important words Fox ever wrote, “*The Spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable.*” *That Spirit* . . . is not changeable. Fox would not cede to the churches what he experienced and named the Spirit of Christ. Neither should you. As I see it, what Fox discovered in his enlightenment was the living Spirit present among us, the Christ Light that nurtures the Seed present within everyone, teaching us directly. The truth is, no words are adequate and no one religion can contain this. What we seek and discover in waiting stillness—is what it is—no matter what we may name it. It is this same eternal Divine Source that Yeshua ben Yusef, Jesus,

the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish wisdom teacher also experienced and was guided by—and he never once called it the Spirit of Christ. If it exists, and I know from experience that it does, then it is eternal and, indeed, unchangeable. My faith arises there.

So, if you hear beloved Friends or anyone else using Christian language, listen for the true meaning. Listen for the *experience* their words reflect. Listen with love and more deeply, listen in tongues. What you hear may not actually be that post Constantinian orthodox Church language that promises you heaven and threatens you with Hell if you disobey their doctrine and vengeful little god.

If it *is* that, then the speaker may simply be unaware of the *living* and present *Spirit* that some call the Christ. Even in those cases, you know to answer with Love and answer to the Divine Seed in the speaker. This is living call and response. I wish that conservative Christians . . . and liberal Friends . . . could be as universalist as Jewish Jesus certainly was.

So when you hear beloved Universalist Friends speaking of the Inward Light—listen deeply and always with love; perhaps to discover that they are invoking the One Eternal Divine Spirit that we know empowered Jesus . . . and Fox and Woolman and Barclay and Fell and Gandhi and King and sometimes, you. In affairs of the Eternal, mere words are never more than a best effort that attempts the impossible and words fade to insignificance in the radiance of Divine Light. We should not allow prescribed words to anchor us to the shores of the Ocean of Light. The true journey begins in stillness.

Though we must ever return to words, Zen wisdom teaches us: “*Do not mistake the pointing finger for the moon.*”

In her journal, Margaret Fell reported that George Fox once said these words regarding experiential faith and scriptural dependence: “*You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this: but what canst thou say?*” For me, the difference between simply believing there is “A” God and experiencing The Divine is like the difference between watching a travelogue and summiting the mountain. So, we gather to seek this Experience together as a community. Jesus of Nazareth proposed no religion and simply said to Love God and one another. I believe that’s what he meant when he said to follow him. We can argue about what he was or what he did but without question, his ministry changed the world. That ministry and its Divine Source are directly responsible for the creation of the Religious Society of Friends and without both of those—Quakerism rightfully dies.

Jesus’ ministry of absolute and all-inclusive Love arose from his *Experience* of the One *he* called Abba, his Father God. Jesus didn’t impose beliefs but rather taught *principles*, principles for living in unity with God in what he called the “*Kingdom of Heaven*”—available immediately. “*The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*” (Matthew 3:2) We Friends would do well to share *that* singular Truth about him at every opportunity, not only *because* he said it but more because our own *Experience* arises from the same Source and confirms it.

That profound, radical and all-inclusive insight, the unrestricted availability of the Divine Presence, is the essence and the genius of Friends doctrine and there is an enormous and receptive group of seekers waiting to discover it, both outside and inside of meetinghouses, churches or other temples. When we share these simple universal Truths with the world, it allows us to represent The Religious Society of Friends as completely modern, timeless, compelling, open, and accessible—and not as some oddball historic artifact called Quakers.



Polls tell us that a majority of young Americans have already abandoned traditional congregations and yet most of *those* still identify themselves as spiritual and as believers. Thousands of those were raised among Friends. Even though they have rejected a theistic god, archaic structures, doctrines, and creeds they remain open to the experience of the Divine. Of course they do . . . they're human. Our task is to simply point toward that Experience . . . as we also speak to the Light within them and so make them aware of that Light. And then . . . welcome them among us as Friends.

We are called to speak to the Divine in others, to the inner language and understanding of those we touch. For more than two billion people Christian terminology is the language that will reach their hearts most effectively. What an opportunity. For millions of others, Universalist language is what their hearts may most easily hear and for millions more it may simply be the words and Spirit-ordered-behaviors that nurture the Divine Seed within them.

The language we choose to express our spiritual experiences is merely the human lens that allows us to point to the eternal Divine. Miraculously, the language of experienced Divine Love is universally understood. When we become fluent in that tongue and speak it to the world—the Truth will prosper.

I can confirm from experience that when a ministry or message is delivered with love, in a faith setting or even in a secular setting, it will be received in the spirit offered. Such outreach ministry should *not* be to recruit new Quakers. Rather let it gently point out a well-lit place of inward Peace; a place of immeasurable Compassion and infinite Love. No other goal is necessary.

On a more difficult front *some* blessed souls have embraced fundamentalist, scripturally literalist, and doctrinally exclusivist churches that offer a welcoming faith community and “salvation” in the life to come. Millions find great comfort in belonging to a congregation that declares the one true path to God, guarantees heaven to those who walk that narrow way, and promises eternal damnation for everyone else. This is both seductive and toxic.

When *any* faith community claims that they possess the only true path to God or salvation and that all others are doomed, no matter how lovingly that message is delivered, the seeds of violence and warfare begin to grow. We *must* say this! We must say it as a body and as individuals at every opportunity. Say it with Love.

The so-called Christian Right has captured and imprisoned Jesus, misrepresented the Spirit of Christ, and they wield the resulting religions like blunt instruments. And they crucify him again with every syllable they utter in support of nationalism, militarism, and war. How can we confront this concern with Love? In silence? Claiming a peace testimony, while also keeping silent regarding nationalistic Christian support of war, is just as profound a hypocrisy as supporting war while claiming Christ. To testify implies that we speak.

To be effective, such a challenge must trust to the authority of Divine Love and also be firm and gentle. Is our experiential conviction sufficient to provide us the courage to lovingly articulate radical challenges to politicized religion? Will we once again confront falsehoods and idolatry with the *inward* weapons that Divine Love provides in abundance? This is my prayer. This is my call. Love the warrior, love the generals, love the politicians, and love their enemies. Model Truth with Love.

We Friends have devised a religious society that is simply a point of entry, not the destination. The Light we seek, The Presence we experience and trust, transcends any religion or intellectual construct. The immanent Divine that simply is, the Divine we discover and rediscover in the stillness of worship, is present in the very “ground of being” and present within the very heart of our entire existence. Right here. Right now. Forever. Unchangeable. Humanity has been given the gift, the blessing, and the grace to perceive it. Will we Friends be motivated once again to proclaim it and open our hearts, our mouths, and our doors to share it?

*I'd like to pause now for a period of stillness to contemplate that question or just to open ourselves to the Presence that guides us. Out of the silence I'll offer a few additional thoughts on what we might do as a Yearly Meeting.*



A proselyte is one who is newly convinced and committed to a way of faith. Most Quakers today are “convinced Friends.” What responsibility comes with convincement? The “Lamp” is already burning on the lamp stand. It always has been. We are simply challenged to point toward and be guided by that Light in our interactions with the peoples of the world. This focus, if renewed and vitalized, will lead to ministries, and these ministries—pastoral, witness and prophetic—could be raised to new heights by the committed and worshipful support of this Yearly Meeting. This is my hope.

What is the right role of a yearly meeting? The following was published in *Christian Faith and mpractice in the Experience of the Society of Friends*, London Yearly Meeting, 1973.

*I quote: “To follow the highest purpose always involves the setting aside of many things which in themselves are good, whether by individuals or by the Yearly Meeting as a whole. To find the purpose of God in a gathering such as this involves the bringing together of every one of our differing points of view to that place where they may be united in the power of God. If in our hearts as individuals we maintain barriers between ourselves and other Friends, we cannot be finders; and if we maintain such barriers between ourselves and our fellow men we shall not find our part in working out God’s will in the world.” End quote.*

Envision our Yearly Meeting newly devoted to enabling structures that will test and support the ministries that arise in our worship together and that also lays aside historic artifacts that are no longer empowered by living ministry. Envision a Yearly Meeting that enables Quakers to once again be known as Publishers of Truth. Envision a proactive focused outreach using 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology combined with good old-fashioned ministry that rises out of the body and is now nurtured and *publically supported* by the Yearly Meeting.



I understand that some of us are not easy naming gifts of ministry in deference to our testimony of equality. This conflict is a remnant of the separate Hicksite and Orthodox meetings and it remains a concern. I offer this query. *How might we be most faithful to the Source of right-ordered ministry?* None of us believe that the arms can do the work of the eyes, or the eyes the work of the heart. I believe that we can trust to the discipline of our monthly meetings, our elders, and our care committees to lift up our ministries and hold them in good order.

We here also need to recognize that there are many Friends from all corners of this Yearly Meeting who have never been here with us, who have never attended any session of New York Yearly Meeting. For a majority of our members the workings of the organizational Yearly Meeting are obscure and largely irrelevant. We here gathered need to keep that in mind as we

consider implementation of our Priorities Working Group recommendations. Change can be daunting and structural changes will require well-led human management under the care of the Divine Guide. These are already in place.

Another reality that may strain us or potentially cause disunity is more subtle. Maybe it's occurred to you as I have been speaking this evening. The truth is that nearly all of us have entered into Quaker membership because of a deep sense of belonging in this community and a heart-felt affinity with the causes and witness work of the Religious Society of Friends, but not necessarily because of an epiphany or mystical experience. I suspect that this has been true throughout our history. When I re-joined Friends it was because I sensed there was something precious waiting for me beyond the entry. I waited, I trusted, I sought, and sometimes I have found. Regardless of our personal experiences of the Light, we are all seekers and we all serve as essential members in the functions of the body. As seekers we are all equal and as *sincere* seekers we are also certain to be finders. This is my faith.



The faith and practice of Friends can be as radical, as vital, as exciting, and as relevant as when it was first experienced in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. When the power and authority of Experiential Faith is revealed, it is just as potent as it ever was—precisely because it is *not* dependent on history, ancient doctrine, dogma, scripture, creed, hierarchy, or priestly fear-mongering. Or committees!

The faith and practice of Friends is powerful because it depends entirely on that which is unchangeable, infinite, eternal, and accessible to all who seek it. We Friends are not called to “preach” this Truth as the right religion. We are simply called to live it . . . and to share it as led. Some people will be drawn to this Light and a few will also burn to reveal what they have discovered. Will you support them?

Under the care of Divine Presence you possess miraculous strength, especially when gathered with others. Trust this, proclaim it, and order your life and witness under its authority. If the witness you are called to is racial justice and healing, let it be led by that Light. If it's care for the aging or for the young, let it be led by that Light. If it's earth care or labor for peace or the fight against mass incarceration, let it be led by that Light. If it's a call to pastoral or prophetic ministry, in the prisons, in the streets, or in the meetinghouses—let it be led *only* by that Light.

I quote Friend George Fox one last time with a slight modification into 21<sup>st</sup> Century language: “*Do nothing for God by earthly power nor trust to that, but wait in the power of Divine Love and be ordered by that to its own glory. You will never be right until then.*”

My final words this evening are from William Wordsworth:

*And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.*