

# Joy in difficult times

**Brian Drayton, at Illinois Yearly Meeting, 2013**

For a few months after accepting the invitation to speak here, I was at a loss for a place to begin. I can't say that I panicked, but I realized that this was one of those situations which I have learned to recognize, in which I need to wait until the confusion, the feelings of inadequacy, fear of failure, and temptation to offer impersonal bromides, all trickled away, leaving me with the certain knowledge that I was quite empty and helpless.

When I got to that condition, not very long ago, I found that the void was filled up with a welter of questions, ideas, and voices which all felt meaningful, but not any kind of coherent story, at least not one worth inflicting on poor Illinois Friends. I had no journey to offer.

The other day, though, the penny dropped when I was sitting in the midst of a crowd of people at a school assembly, and I realized that "joy" has been a problem, or goad, or challenge, which has bothered me now for several years. When the paradox of joy in the spiritual life first captured my attention, through the passage from the Gospel of John that we'll get to shortly, it sort of became spiritual practice to figure out how joy works. I have trained myself to check in, as often as possible, whatever's happening, good or bad, to see if I can feel the joy at all then. But I had not connected this private experience of mine with this invitation from Illinois YM at all.

So, sitting in the auditorium, with the happy noises of a graduation celebration surging around me, I recognized that your invitation to me was in fact a challenge to examine what I have found, in my private searching about joy, which I have rarely spoken of to anyone, but which has been for me a path deeper into an understanding of the Gospel life. So I think I have been brought to a place where I can speak in my own voice about some important things. It makes me nervous, because it's the sort of conversation in which you can reveal something, some hope or ambition or belief, that when uttered becomes a challenge and a commitment, setting something irrevocably in motion — sort of like a marriage vow.

I have conceived of what follows as 4 meditations, as if given by a "retreat master" in a formal retreat:

1. Something about our condition
2. An anatomy of joy

3. Art thou at rest? Cultivating the Plant of God

4. To the life of God in all

After each of these, I will pause for a brief time, and invite you to take something from what I have said into stillness for a while, adding meaning and perhaps feeling questions for yourself arising. If words arise, please hold them until we go into extended worship after I have concluded for good and all.

It is with no sense of apology, but mere courtesy, that I should declare that I will make use of Christian language quite freely, because it is my native spiritual tongue. In modern Quakerism, there are a lot of Friends for whom that is not the case, but most Friends have developed skills at translation. Now is a chance to get those out and warm them up a bit if needed.

Over the years, I have come to understand better and better this truth: A minister may speak effectively or not, may open or console, thresh, plough, or water: but whether large or small, clear or cloudy, effective or halting, every utterance offered in the Spirit has at bottom one message, and I here offer it plain and unadorned: God is love, you are beloved, we are bound into one body and one life, if only we can see and accept it in truth and power. The loving God, who is also the God of Truth, is here with us now. It could be enough.

## 1. Something about our condition

There are lots of things to worry about. Jesus tells us not to worry about people who can kill the body, but to fear the Lord who can hurl body and soul into hell. Now, I am an ecologist, and I worry about systems. When I think about the systems at work in the world, so fascinating, beautiful and powerful, and little understood, with their own dynamics and imperatives and constraints, I can get pretty terrified.

Much of my time is spent in the world of educational research and policy. Because education is an endless process, and confronts ever renewed problems, it is an area that always has been eager for new things, use strategies, new tools. Moreover, in the past 14 years or so and increasingly recently, education has been pulled into the mainstream of the market system, I do not say free market system, and the massive media conglomerates, and technology companies, and defense industries, and many other of the major players who shape our society by their control of wealth and opportunity have seen education is a promising new market.

In this context, one is bombarded with announcements of indispensable new products upon which schools and governments for parents or children must spend as much of their available income as possible. The increasing pace of technological innovation, also market – driven, has only added stridency and importance to such announcements of indispensable commodities.

A standard ingredient of this rhetoric is the claim that with the advent of this new thing learning, and teaching, and life itself may now, must now, move forward in a way fundamentally different from all the ways in which they have gone forward in years past. To the young, very many things are new; to the young or those without memory. It is part of the work of this kind of rhetoric to exercise memory, to make such strong claims of novelty and necessity but we are led to forget. We are told that in this new era is foolish to look back and useless to examine too closely the nature of the claims of novelty, transformation, indispensability.

I suspect that we do not realize the extent to which the need of commerce, and its attendant need for social control, have infected the way we evaluate innovation and creativity. Although it is true that there is a corrosive invasion throughout our public discourse of the language of war, coercion, and control, the language of commodity, consumption, of ownership,

and of individual satisfaction, and acted in and through commercial mechanisms, have infected us just as thoroughly, and have had just as corrosive and effect upon us.

It is interesting to consider this, in comparison with the optimism which reigned in this country in, say, the 1920s and 30s. I have spent a fair amount of time reading the philosophical and educational works of John Dewey, and educational research across the past century. There is something bracing in the attitude with which thinkers of the time, and doers, confronted the enormous challenges which people always face, because they felt that despite human limitations, despite the corrupting influence of power, and money, and militarism, and the will to power, that there was time and will enough for people to work together to build a refreshed, more humane, world. There is the same sense of down-to-earth, boy ends, and direct vision coupled with action pervading the works of people like William James or Jane Addams or Norman Thomas or John Dewey or Rufus Jones, whose mysticism seemed wholesomely grounded in the realities of day-to-day work, family life, and the earth. There's something delightful in Rufus is confidence that a true mysticism and a true merely arisen could inhabit the farmer, the tradesmen, the housewife, as well as the scholar, the visionary leader, and even the visionary businessman. None of these people was unacquainted with the miserable side of their times. All felt the need, the imperative to engage in the corporal works of mercy: caring for the sick and those in prison and the widows and orphans and the poor – the prophetic virtues of justice, mercy, and compassion.

These people with their grit, and their realism, and their transcendental optimism and energy foresaw the trends that have been bearing fruits in our times and in our generations. They foresaw the dangers of immersion in commercialized amusement, which distracts people from confronting their times in a way that engages compassionate action and witness against injustice. They all foresaw the dangers of our society's increasing delight in the victories of war. They all foresaw the blessings and the temptations of a globalizing world, of capital, crossing boundaries freely while the captains of industry control carefully the flow of humans seeking better conditions and cross fertilizing cultures. Like Isaiah or Amos or Jeremiah they were people of their times but because they looked closely at their times they and others of course known and unknown could see the development of meaningful patterns growing systems each

with their own imperative reaching out tentacles or lines of influence two allied themselves for greater power greater control.

John Dewey spoke with great power, I would say prophetic power, about the tyranny of the quest for certainty. Over and over he spoke to the human need and desire to make desirable things more likely, and more permanent in our lives ends to make undesirable or frightening or harmful things less likely in our lives in a world which is full of chance and uncertainty and in which we cannot rely of life or approval or health or safety from one moment to the next. The quest for certainty which each of us enacts in our own lives is also enacted by social entities – any human collective activity that is self-aware of its existence and its surroundings, and aware, too, of what it needs to persist in some kind of equilibrium with its surroundings.

We long for the good things to stay with us, and fear their loss; we know, sometimes not consciously, sometimes very consciously, how thin the ice is upon which we skate.

But I am not attempting to claim that there is nothing unprecedented in our condition today. There are things which are unprecedented, and which are of such die mention and complexity that we cannot really grasp their limits, where the levers of control may be, where the brakes are, and who should push them. It cannot be forgotten that at no time in human history have more than 7 billion people coexisted. At the time of the Civil War there were perhaps 1 billion or little more people on earth and already the quest for certainty, as well as the desire to build a society that had some of the prophetic virtues embedded in it, had set in motion developments which have brought us to our present time.

More people means more minds and therefore more discoveries; more discoveries, and more people, can mean more commodities to be sold to more people. After all, more people require the generation of more resources, or wealth, and they also make it possible. For those whose primary goal is to create an edifice of outward achievements, the accumulation of wealth, the protection of one's own interests, the opportunities have expanded exponentially with the expansion of the population. Science and technology, as well as other fields in which knowledge accumulates, thrive upon collaboration, and competition, and on dialogue and debate.

More minds and hands speaking over more and more efficient channels, being able to speak both in words and in numbers and in images and other kinds of data, the drives the

extraordinary growth of insight into the structure of matter and of the body and as a successful enterprise, it has become the most reliable approach, and the most lauded approach, to the development both of insight and of methods of control. So then politics, governance, education, child rearing, social improvement, are recast as technical problems with technical solutions amenable to the utilitarian goal of the greatest good for the largest number of people. Starting with Charles Darwin's relative Galton in the 1870s and 80s and walking hand-in-hand with the development of computational machinery, it was possible to develop a psychology and sociology cast in numerical terms, in which simple counts of people in different categories for different conditions could be analyzed in their choices and needs and life histories modeled as statistical equations which provide some real insight. This approach is amenable, it is a natural fit, with the needs of heavy industry, the manufacture of consent, the educational industry, and it seems like the best possible response to coping with the needs and aspirations of exploding population where wholesale seems the only real response as opposed to retail.

This is of course particularly true if you are a person wants to make sure that you and people like you keep their hand on the tiller. Other visions, perhaps less efficient, certainly less organized in a conventional sense, must therefore be marginalized, ridiculed, or possibly incorporated into the system for the purposes of prototyping, or the relief of tension and acrimony.

The result of all this is that at a time but the largest possible number of people have the most at stake, as our consumption of the worlds resources of water fixed carbon the former plant matter of nutrients of space of topsoil reaches unsustainable levels, we find ourselves committed to methods of social organization, and systems of values, which tend to prevent responses to our challenges on the necessary scale. We are indeed hastening towards a cliff of some kind and we have not yet learned one will take the event is going over the edge, and we don't even know how close we are to the edge.

Well, given all this, we still need to add, that despite the richness and extent of our challenges, and the richness and extent of our ignorance about them, we are, in fact, the same old *Homo sapiens*, with the same old strengths and limitations, that we have been for the past 50,000 years or so. We tend to think in the short term, we tend to maximize pleasure, we tend to avoid conflict, or to use conflict four control, we are passionate, forgetful, fearful,

distractible, and to grow in our lives in such a way this to share whatever wounds we have received with other people, usually in very unhelpful, or on helpful ways. Shakespeare could exclaim "oh brave new world that has such people in it!", but however new the world is, it's the same people.

As I have thought about joy, I find myself needing also to think about other things like faith, hope, patients, and delete all the other fruits of the spirit, and maybe courage to. I expect I am not the only person in this room who finds that the longer we meditate upon one of these great themes, the more they start to look like each other, to be different facets of the same jewel, just as truth than mercy and justice and love and compassion and vengeance and judgment are not separate attributes of the one God but only words we must use to express one element of that divine experience.

So now it is time at last to think a little bit about joy, given the people that we are, and given the times in which we live.

## 2. An anatomy of joy

Thomas Kelly did us a disservice when he wrote, "I'd rather be jolly St. Francis hymning his canticle to the sun than a dour old sobersides Quaker whose diet would appear to have been spiritual persimmons." The equation of joy with mirth has, I think, caused a good deal of discouragement down through the ages, when committed souls find themselves struggling and experiencing pain and doubt, and unable to maintain a steady state of cheeriness. Does that represent a failure to live in joy?

My quest to understand the nature of joy, for one seeking to live a life rooted in the gospel, that is, the power of God to salvation, was set off by my trying to understand the passages about joy in the gospel of John. Most especially, in the farewell discourses, delivered on the very night before the crucifixion, Jesus speaks of joy.

Now I do not know what your understanding is of how Jesus understood his nature and his mission. But I do not think that one needs to attribute any divine foreknowledge to Jesus, to believe that he knew he was on the edge of catastrophe. If nothing else, Jesus was an acute observer, and shrewd enough in his understanding of human motivations and the signs of the times, as any prophet is. Reading those signs, and knowing what is in the human heart, he must have had a sense that the radical and paradoxical nature of his vision as a messenger of God's revelation was about to be made manifest by a climactic counter with those who embody the conventional wisdom and the structures of power. The Cross is the final revelation of just how unexpected his Messiah-ship was.

At this pivotal moment, in the 15th chapter, Jesus says, "These things I have spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full." He emphasizes that his experience of joy, and that of his disciples, is of an unconventional kind when, in chapter 16, he says, "ye shall weep and lament but the world shall rejoice; and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy."

Already the questions and temptations and grief and fear of Gethsemane must have been gathering upon him. Already he knew very well how incomplete, how unfinished the work of transformation was in the hearts and wills of his apostles, his closest friends and successors. Given how people reacted to his preaching about the relationship between God and humanity,



(It is a dynamic word, and we don't have time to explore it further here, but I will just leave you with a factoid. When the great Dutch scholar Erasmus translated the New Testament into Latin again freshly from the Greek which he was the first to make widely available again to Western culture in the early 1500s, he did not translate ΛΟΓΟΣ with the Latin word *uerbum*, which may be taken as 'word,' that is a single utterance. Instead, he contradicted the translation received from Jerome, by using the word *sermo*, an active word which connotes an utterance embedded in an exchange, a dialogue, a discourse. A sermon is an utterance, often a complex utterance, whose aim and longing it is to reach the hearts and minds of its hearers and stimulate response, participation, to engender, create. The Word became flesh, and pitched its tent among us.)

Well, the Stoics also used a word to describe the condition of one who perceives the ΛΟΓΟΣ and is in harmony with it. That word was ΧΑΡΑ, the same word that John uses for the joy that Jesus wishes for his disciples, and indeed promises them in defiance of the world's judgment. It's the sense of being at home in the universe, sort of like their version of enlightenment. John certainly knew about the Stoics; he could have used other words for joy, but that's the one he used, alongside ΛΟΓΟΣ. It's also related to the word for "grace." That's the word that Jesus uses, and promises to his disciples, in defiance of all the powers arrayed against them.

James Nayler echoed the words of Jesus when he said

"In God alone it can rejoice, though none else regard it, or can own its life. It's conceived in sorrow, and brought forth without any to pity it; nor doth it murmur at grief and oppression. It never rejoiceth, but through sufferings, for with the world's joy it is murdered.

Here is a good place to come back to St. Francis. If you actually read the writings of St. Francis, such as they are, and the reminiscences about him by his contemporaries, and the legends about him, you can recognize in him the kind of joy that we begin to explore if we start from these passages in the gospel of John. I think that Chesterton's portrayal of St. Francis is just, when he sees the final acts of Francis's life, including the receiving of the stigmata, and Francis's complete identification with Christ in suffering as well as in rejoicing, as being a fulfillment and a continuation of his entire spiritual journey, which included both the deep participation in the

beauty and wonder and order of creation and at the same time a deep asceticism. Joy is really complicated, but it's the kind of joy that we can work towards in our times — not rejoicing at suffering but rejoicing in the midst of it.

We are challenged, when we speak of Christian joy, joy amidst the wilderness of this world, to use Bunyan's phrase, to take note of people who participate fully in the complexities of the world and do not deny the ocean of darkness and death, the pain and tribulation that is attendant upon mortal life, and yet testify to joy, and often rejoicing. They remain undismayed, because of some fundamental assurance that they have come to. Yet it's promised to all of us, and therefore within the reach of all of us, if we can find our way there.

Ever since I began to try to penetrate the heart of this mystery, which in some sense is deeply part of the mystery of incarnation, the mystery of the divine achievable through and in human life, it has seemed important to seek out the places where a joy is found which is not celebration, but in some sense feels like participation in God's love, and a fundamental affirmation of the person, the individual, the traveler, and Pilgrim and explore and witness.

How have I been doing it? There is not much technology or technique here: I have slowly developed a habit of stopping whenever I can — it's happening more and more often — to see whether I can feel something which flows below — like an underground stream of cool water — or around — like the air we draw in and release constantly, in rhythm with our heartbeat — whatever else is going on. I go through fads, trying things that help me remember to check in, "to mount the watchtower."

I will not claim to be anything more than a beginner, but for the encouragement of any who find it useful, some reflections about some of the roots of this mysterious joy as I have come to understand. As I've tried from time to time to seek for a place of joy [XAPA] in many different conditions, I have come to feel that if I accept joy as a query, if you will, one also comes closer to understanding the paradoxes embedded in the Christian message — how it is that the meek shall inherit the earth, how it is the merciful obtain mercy, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness can be satisfied, how one can find in the folly of Christ's revelation a glimpse of the wisdom of God and thereby see the folly at the heart of the wisdom of the world, that is the world from which God has been excluded, or in which God is perhaps is no longer sought.

**Delight.** One element of joy is certainly delight (of all kinds), an intense, very often sensual feeling of well-being. Mirth can come from it, of course, but it's more than that. We are drawn, for example, to feel kinship with nature, and poets have spoken it with power: "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower/Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees/Is my destroyer./ And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose/My youth is bent by the same wintry fever."

In the Lord of the Rings, when the Fellowship comes to Lothlorien, and to the place called Cerin Amroth, Frodo is taken by his elvish guide to a high platform in a great tree, to look across the whole forest. As he is climbing up, Frodo in touching the tree feels it as an individual not as wood, or as some inanimate object, but he feels "the delight of the living tree itself."

This is a condition in which we hear the echoes of the days of creation, when as evenings and mornings began their cycles, God saw that it was good, very good. We see that

The special clumsy beauty of this particular colt on this day in this field under these clouds is a holiness consecrated to God by His own creative wisdom and it declares the glory of God.

The pale flowers of the dogwood outside this window are saints.

The little yellow flowers that nobody notices on the edge of that road are saints looking up into the face of God.

The lakes hidden among the hills are saints, and the sea too is a saint who praises God without interruption in her majestic dance.

The great, gashed, half-naked mountain is another of God's saints. There is no other like him. He is alone in his own character; nothing else in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way. That is his sanctity.

But what about you? What about me? *Merton, Thomas (2007-03-01). A Book of Hours (p. 72). Ave Maria Press - A. Kindle Edition.*

It is a place of innocence and freedom. When we are in this place, the creatures, among whom we take our place and feel it blessed, teach us compassion, endurance, resilience which for me are the tracks of the joy I am looking for.

**Freedom from fear.** We are fearful of a lot of specific things, but at bottom, our perception of the joy we are promised by existential fear, and by social fear — what I think of as "fear of not being," and "fear of not counting." Many of the things that trigger fear involve both — if I lose my job, I worry about how my family and I will be sheltered, be fed, and stay healthy, but I also may feel personally rejected, or feel a failure, and suffer from a loss of structure and purpose through which I find much of my identity. Often the things that are disturbing to us seem far removed from existential challenges, but nevertheless trigger the deep alarms. Maybe this is the source of some of the anger that we find rising up, unexpectedly, from no recognizable source. Deep down inside, your reptilian brain says "Death!"

In moments of joy, or in the place where joy stays, I am not afraid. There are fewer and fewer things that I am afraid of. It seems a bit arrogant to say so, but what I want to emphasize is that it works, one can grow into this joy, and indeed there are many stories about such growth (such as many of the Plummer lectures), so it's not new, it's not arrogant — it's what we're invited to, and led to, if we will.

At the same time, you feel free **to acknowledgement your limits, and even more of my limited nature.** You can even look at the fact that my life in this body will end — as Dewey wrote, everything we see now is actually an event, which occurs under some conditions, and then comes to an end-- the beginning and the end, as well as everything in between, part of a process of transformation. Moreover, there are things I will never know or understand, and tasks I will not complete, things I don't have the strength or wit to do.

**Freedom to Compassion.** Sometimes the first opening we have to freedom is in fact a motion of love, a sense of identification with another. It's related to the delight, the innocence of nature, the freedom from fear. *Love was the first motion and then a concern arose to spend some time with the Indians that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in.* In the feeling of this opening beyond our own isolated selves, accompanied by a perception of the respect due the other or even kinship with the other — joy comes in there, and in time the respect and kinship can be transformed or enriched by a reverence which can live side by side with clarity of judgment, with truthfulness.

**Willingness to be used.** The actions of the inward teacher, or what Friends used sometimes also to call the Inward Monitor — instructing, prompting, restraining, guiding - these are perhaps the most tangible signs of the Living God present and at work — Christ come again, in the bodies of his saints, and preparing the way to the kingdom life, to paraphrase Nayler. The old Sober-sided Quaker that Thomas Kelly jokes about, in the frequent encounter with this inward activity that came from beyond the self, and yet in measure cleansed, prepared and consecrated the individual, was experiencing, in the words of Father Mapple, "topgallant joy".

**Finally, reverence is also a component of that joy.**

All these are characteristics of the joy that seems to be XAPA, "chronic joy", but also paths towards it. Another path towards it, which can help us recognize it, in a "nonmystical" setting, is work:

**Right Work.** Our culture has glorified "creativity," but many of us can testify that there are many kinds of work which, when we are absorbed in it, are paths to joy.

Ps. 90 begins with a burst of praise at a cosmic level: "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. 2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." But it ends with the prayer, "Establish thou the work of our hands; yea, the work of our hands, establish thou it". There is great joy about exercising your skill. The work of the craftsman, the teacher, merchants, and even rulers and bureaucrats (remember Joseph?), receive Biblical notice: the challenge is to do them honorably and whole-heartedly, and enjoy the appropriate satisfactions that come from meeting a need, exercising a skill or gift, balancing what was incomplete, capturing some aspect of experience in a form (of words, material, motion, music) which invites and enables someone else to participate in it for themselves, and be nourished by what you have done.

In all these places or experiences related to joy we are vulnerable, available to the work of the Living God. Take any path that works, in our quest for this kind of joy, that leads towards compassion, reverence, freedom — each of us can just start at the nearest opening, the most accessible pathway.

**But why aren't we doing it? Why can the fear and distraction come back, the lack of attentiveness can come back. Why don't we stay there reliably? It may be we don't take the promise for ourselves, that we don't take seriously what our calling is.**

### 3. Art thou in thy soul's rest?

Now to the soul that hath felt breathings towards the Lord formerly, and in whom there are yet any true breathings left after his living presence, and after the feeling of his eternal virtue [strength] in the heart, I have this to say: Where art thou? Art thou in thy soul's rest? Dost thou feel the virtue and power of the gospel? Is thy laboring for life in a good degree at an end? And dost thou feel the life and power flowing in upon thee from the free fountain? ...do not imagine and talk away the rest and salvation of thy soul. The gospel state is a state of substance, a state of enjoying the life. It begins in a sweet, powerful touch of life, and there is a growth in the life to be administered and waited for daily.

Now art thou here, in the living power, in the divine life, joined to the spring of life, drawing water of life out of the well of life with joy? Or art thou dry, dead, barren, sapless, or at best but unsatisfiedly mourning after what thou wantest?

We are called to be holy, to allow the life of God so to grow and transform us, that we are freed from the versions of self that are given to us by our culture, and our history, and our activities, and our fears and compulsions, so we can be wholly ourselves, and wholly available to the divine. Can you accept that? There is not one of us that is not invited to this path, and offered power to walk it.

Friends have a method. I would like to remind Friends of what Howard Brinton called "the Quaker doctrine of inner peace."

Brinton was talking about "peace," but he could also have said "stillness," in the Quaker understanding of an inward condition. Indeed, the more you explore, the more you find that stillness, peace, joy, compassion, fearlessness — all are different facets of the same thing. Just in the way that the God in whose image and likeness we are created does not have different faces, of truth or love or mercy or wisdom — God is one, and these attributes are words we have to use to express some aspect of how we are experiencing or thinking about God. That's why living in the Gospel life brings you into unity, because it is a unified life.

You sink down to stillness, putting aside the day's preoccupations, the needs and issues and unfinished business. On many occasions, you may rest there in the stream of divine life. It is its own reward. But it may happen, when you have become stilled and established in the Presence, that you find your peace is troubled - you see something about yourself, or you find a sense of burden or responsibility towards a person, or group, or concern. This is a first stage in the Lamb's War, as Nayler describes it: The Lamb shatters your peace. As you sit with it, it may be taken from you, or in time it may be made clear why it has been brought before you. Remember the story of the Woodhouse, and Robert Fowler, while building a ship, getting the message "Thou hast her not for nothing!" and little more, until he started on his way, and then more was made clear.

So the realization, the disturbance of the peace, this is not yet a call to action, but rather a call to pay attention, until a way is shown to you, and power and permission to set out, bread for the journey. Or maybe one has to wait for the power to relinquish a crutch, confront a habit, ask for forgiveness, or give it something that's inhibiting your availability to the spirit. Maybe it's just a matter of unclenching our fists and accepting the calling and work of the Lord.

Remember, the spirit by which we seek to be guided takes its kingdom with entreaty, and not with contention, and keeps it by lowliness of mind. That's how we have to treat ourselves, too. Even on ourselves, however brutally honest we may be, and famished for renovation, we are not to work violence, but with the persistent, directed power of growing roots and continental drift. At some point, the peace returns, and it's time to lay down that work for that time.

having kindled the fire and awakened the creature, and broken their peace and rest in sin, he [The Lamb] waits in patience to prevail to recover the creature and stay the enmity by suffering all the rage and envy, and evil entreatings that the evil spirit that rules in the creature can cast upon him, and he receives it with meekness and pity to the creature, returning love for hatred, wrestling with God against the enmity with prayers and tears night and day, with fasting, mourning, and lamentation, in patience, in faithfulness, in truth, in love unfeigned, in long suffering, and in all the fruits of the spirit, that if by any means he may overcome evil with good, and by this his light in the eye of the creature that the eye may come to be opened.

#### **4. Seeing the life of God in all.**

This is the title of a late work by James Nayler, in which he reflects upon what led him into the sorry incident in Bristol, for which he is still most remembered among Friends, as an object lesson about the dangers of individual leadings and the need for group discernment.

It haunts me, because it makes it very concrete what Friends were looking for. They weren't looking for some disembodied, abstract "That of God," they were looking for the Life of Christ in someone else. So when in the law courts they spoke of the infallible guidance of the Light, they weren't claiming infallibility for themselves. They were saying that their measure of the Life of Christ was speaking a particular message in judgment, and Christ is infallible. It was very concrete and powerful in their understanding. At one point, Dewsbury writes with to someone, and says "that which is pure in me speaks to that which is pure in thee." We are called to grow to be fully a brother or sister of Christ.

The phrase encapsulates Friends' experience of the growth of the Christ-life within, and helps me see in more concrete terms what "love of neighbor" calls for: a watchfulness for where that life is present in its measure, where it is at work, or oppressed — the "suffering Seed." What can be more precious? Like a babe in arms, like a new sprout from the earth, like a secret, as yet-unexpressed affection, in its presence we are tendered, drawn to nurture, engaged to honesty and gratitude.

But the watchful, awakened condition in which we can grow in our ability to see this, and live from it, is a condition that needs continued renewal. Eternity is now, and therefore we need to be always in process of reconciliation. I have sought for practices which can help both sharpen the vision, and lead to greater understanding — to growth, in fact. Here are three words, metaphors, roads, tools, queries — faces of God's life at work.

#### **To be Interrogated by Love**

Many of us have had the experience of a moment in which we feel touched by love — someone acts in a way that surprises us into gratitude and warmth, and we are captivated by the realization of the preciousness of a person (maybe also our own preciousness), or place, or community, or object.

Such moments of openness and sweetness, however, are very often evanescent and easily dispelled or displaced in our attention. How can such a fragile thing be an encompassing force, that can "outlive all wrath and contention, and weary out all exaltation and cruelty, or whatever is of a nature contrary to itself"?

Jesus certainly had moments of recognizable tenderness: he wept for Lazarus, he mourned for Jerusalem, and on the cross he committed his mother to the care of the disciple whom he loved.

But was melting affection what sustained him when he agonized in Gethsemane, or stilled the storm on Gennesaret, or spoke of bringing a sword to the earth? Friends, especially Fox, have spoken movingly about the process of tendering, of being struck or drawn into an open, teachable, loving state. But what then?

Woolman speaks of how an inward purification and steadfast abiding under it, leads to a "a lively operative desire for the good of others." "Operative" is the key here — the availability and simplicity of tenderness can, if established, be the ground from which springs the impulse to enact the prophetic virtues - visiting the prisoner, comforting the bereaved, stir up the spiritually dead into newness of life.

Now, I have always been bugged by Jesus' teaching that he had come to fulfill the law — as I had been taught to interpret it, and I have come late to the realization that to understand a love that supposedly is the pivot of the law, I need to become more aware of how love constrains us, what its imperatives and demands are. The prophets — whose job, as Bill Taber said, was to know the law, to point out what was required for faithfulness to it, and to make spirit available — are a tough, knotty, uncompromising, and hard-headed bunch. Their advocacy was very specific and concrete.

So, indeed, was Jesus, and I don't think his "love" is any more vague than the stipulations of the law upon which the prophets insisted. If we are to live under the guidance of his spirit, returned and at work among us, reigning in our lives if we accept it, we are called to seek relentlessly, not for what pleases or instructs us, but to know more and more clearly the voice of that teacher and companion. All his teachings and actions were demonstrating what "love" means.

How does my understanding of love, as I live it, reflect challenges, repeated to the point where they are background noise, such as these:

*Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you, bless those that curse you, pray for those that despitefully use you. (Who are my enemies? What does it mean to bless? What does it mean to pray for anyone?)*

*Don't be anxious about security, in food or clothing, shelter or relationships. Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these will be added thereto.*

*Seek first the kingdom of God...*

*If you're on your way to meeting, and you remember that a brother or sister has a problem with you, go make peace with them [don't go to meeting!], and then you are free to worship the God whose children you both are.*

*Inasmuch as you do this unto these, the least of my brethren, ye do it unto me.*

Living into these, we see that Love is not formless. We come to see that Gospel love indeed constrains us, that as our love grows to reflect the universal love of God, we are called away from, or into, ways of living, speaking and thinking which love defines — and enables us to feel it as law-- the lawfulness at the heart of Gospel freedom.

Perhaps the most important remnant of primitive Christianity which Quakerism has preserved is the practice which echoes the words from John's gospel: *The wind blows where it will; you hear the noise of its passage, but you don't know where it arose, and where it's going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.* There is nothing more precious than the practice of listening for the promptings of the Spirit, large or small. When accompanied by the taste of love, of sweetness, and truth, such promptings are the way forward, the royal road to the "rest" that Penington spoke of.

And the paradox is that these nudges are the stuff of the Lamb's War, the hard work of reconciling the world and its workings with the love of God, which must go forward simultaneously inwardly — as we grow to holiness — and outwardly, as concerns right use of power, right relationship to the earth, and the prophetic virtues of truthfulness, mercy, justice, compassion.

How to engage with the Lamb's War? It is simple, Friends, but I haven't found it so easy, at least thus far on my journey —

First, wait, wait, learn to keep up the daily watch, return to the place of light often and expectantly, whether your hands and heart are full or empty;

Second, what is given there, however small, practice it promptly and whole-heartedly when the freedom or command is given, and comes with power, whether the command is to rest, or to speak, or act, or cease from some action — but wait till the power is accompanied by reverence for the life of God in all. Prompt action under the guidance of the Spirit, is a sign of faith, it is faithfulness, and many of our most revered Friends (and others) are characterized by their willingness to move as the wind of the Spirit blows. Available.

Third, know that it's going to have a cost, expect suffering, but remember that "suffering" may take a lot of forms that on the surface seem trivial: being disconcerted, the tension or disharmony that comes from change of habit, or looking the fool, growing pains, discomfort even for our friends and loved ones — or indeed retribution inflicted by people or institutions threatened by our faithfulness. But in the joy, the love that constrains us, is the place of freedom from fear.

Finally, proclamation: Gandhi spoke of experiments with truth, but we are called to experiment with love (are they different? Not in God, I think), and our community will grow in depth and power as we tell each other what we've been trying and finding. Whether we feel successful, or find the way closed up, if we are rooted in love, awakened, watchful love, we gain victory, freedom from the chains of fear, sin, compulsion, anger. We need to find ways to talk about it — simple, humble, concrete, realistic, truthful. It's not bragging to admit we've been visited by the Lord, and trying to take some steps along the way God's spirit leads. It's especially important when we find ourselves led into new testimonies, first as individuals, and then as we are figuring it out in community. We wait, we try to be faithful, we tell each other what's happening, we listen in love and patience.

In a love which reveals the bindings throughout creation, and the structure of activity by which the broken world is to be healed, we can see the lawfulness at the heart of Gospel freedom, which constrains us as we come to understand it, as in understanding our compassion is increased, and as under its preparation and power we find our fear removed — and joy is made thereby more and more accessible.

## To be interrogated by Light

The great Quaker metaphor — but early Friends, and many down the centuries, have found that Light is more than a metaphor, an image, but a power and an experience. The intensity and comprehensiveness of this encounter is summed up the phrase, "the terror and power of the Light."

I do not need to recount, but only remind you of some of the ways the Light has been found to operate:

- It illuminates. It is a basic human experience, to walk in the night, unable to see things rightly, or know how to proceed. Night is a time of disorientation and sometimes fear, when our most important sense, sight, is limited so that the visible world contracts around us, loses color and many dimensions of meaning. If we have watched long through the night, how grateful we are to see the first light of dawn, or the glimmer of a friend's lantern! "The people that walked in darkness, have seen a great light, and they that walked in the shadow of death, upon them hath a light shined!" We see things in relationship to each other, all three dimensions are accessible.
- it shows us the truth of our condition. One of my favorite illustrations of this is in Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well; but another is with the Syro-phoenician woman: There was "satyagraha," truth force, in the woman's reply. She saw that his calling was to people like her, when he could not, and the Light showed him the truth of his condition, thanks to the words of a faithful person who needed him. In both these, there is revelation, there is learning, there is a change of heart in response, and an opening to newness of life. (Somebody who left that story in the Gospel was an evolved person!)
- It can transform by insight, as we see incongruities between our current condition and what we can be; or we find that our actions make us less able to be aware of the light, and we learn thereby to
- it can be a way-marker, and it not only an impersonal environmental factor, but an active encourager and giver of power: "There is a creating, a quickening power in the light, which begets a little life, and that can answer the voice of the living power."

We have more power than we did before, in the Light. Once we have found ourselves available to the work of the light, we have embarked on a journey across the inward landscape, which is marked repeatedly by encounters with situations, people, questions, decisions in which our spirit is tried and our clarity is lost for the time being. Our experience with the light is one of unfolding the growing inward dimension, as one might say, as the Christ life grows in us and we are transformed into persons with new capacities. (James Naylor writes "The Light says, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.' This the first birth cannot do.")

When we are for a time steadily established in the Light, we find ourselves going through the transformation that seems most urgent at the time, and in this we can reach a place of some piece, some assurance, some rest. But that new rest is also a vantage point from which we can see farther or better than we could before we get a better look at our own condition and that the society around us. But how is it for you? How do you experience the Light, if you do?

Now, one more quote from Penington:

*Why dost thou call him the light? Are there not other names every whit as proper, whereby he may as well be known?*

A. Do not thus set up the wise and stumbling part in thee; but mind the thing which first puts forth its virtue as light, and so is thus first to be known, owned, and received.

But note how he goes on:

we call him light, because the Father of lights hath peculiarly chosen this name for him, to make him known to his people in this age by, and hath thus made him manifest to us. And by thus receiving him under this name, we come to know his other names. He is the life, the righteousness, the power, the wisdom, the peace, &c., but he is all these in the light, and in the light we learn and receive them all; and they are none of them to be known in spirit, but in and by the light.

Reflecting on this passage, I have been led to raise this question to myself and others — you!:

Granted that Light is central, it has been essential to spiritual growth for centuries, and we know that the life that is in Christ is the light of the world.

Yet is there another manifestation of that life for our time, which is being offered to us, in the needs and troubles of our times, for insight, for comfort, for challenge, for nourishment? Not to replace "light" but something that might be particularly important and tuned to our condition now?

### **Exploring Sophia.**

[read from Proverbs]

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.

23 Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

24 When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs  
abounding with water.

25 Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth;

26 before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world.

27 When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of  
the deep,

28 when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep,

29 when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his  
command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth,

30 then I was beside him, like a master workman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing  
before him always,

31 rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men.

32 And now, my sons, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways.

33 Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it.

34 Happy is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my  
doors.

35 For he who finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD;

36 but he who misses me injures himself; all who hate me love death.

This Sophia ΣΟΦΙΑ, permeating the whole of creation, the delight of God, the comforter and companion of humanity, sounds a lot like ΛΟΓΟΣ, Logos, the sense at the heart of the

world. Indeed, it feels even more closely aligned with Christ as I have come to understand him, from the gospels, from Paul, that indispensable, irritating, mystical brother, from my own measure of experience, from you — from everything! This sense of God's creation still abounding, still at work in and through everything, delighting in us.

I should note that Sophia has been used as a way to speak about the feminine "principle" in God, and that is an important viewpoint, but I am now thinking of Sophia as God active, energetic, creative, loving, yearning presence in His creation (including us) — God's Eros.

What are some of the lessons of Sophia that seem important for our present time?

- God loves diversity, which is the astonishing, delightful, overwhelming message of life and the universe, and that God's unity, ΣΟΦΙΑ, Sophia, pervades and is expressed in this diversity. We love diversity, texture, novelty-- this is the ground inside our love of the new and different.
- God loves growth and transformation;
- God sets us among the creatures, the earth, the seas, and the heavens, and it is in that system that our growth and transformation happens, including our spiritual growth. If we were not in this body, in this system, we could not grow towards the Light;
- God loves the little things: Among all the great and astounding and heart-piercing things in this world, there are also as many or more small, simple, transitory creatures, objects, and events, and just as God is present in fulness no matter how small may seem his manifestation to us, so also the loving, appreciative wisdom of God is found in the mean and low as well as the high and impressive — and most of the essential processes of life are rooted in the little, the humdrum, the quickly ending things.
- God's delight is in service and creation, and so Sophia□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□; this is the power of the Gardener of Eden, not the Commander of Hosts, and Sophia and Jesus both teach us that this is where God's heart resides□□
- Transformation may require a loss, a dissolution of beloved forms, and the experience of crucifixion is part of the experience of transfiguration.
- Sophia teaches us about the **play** of creation.



delighting, creative, Wisdom of God, which trusts, tries, follows, sings, exhorts, waits, mourns,  
forgives, accepts, is forgiven, rejoices.