

## Opening Oneself to God

Greetings to you all in the love of God. It is a great joy to be with you this morning here in McNabb.<sup>1</sup> You are very special to me. The Yearly Meeting as a whole and many of you individually have nurtured my growth in the Spirit. Many of you are dear friends. For these blessings I am deeply grateful. Certainly one of the ways in which the Yearly Meeting has nurtured my growth is by giving me challenging assignments. The invitation to speak this morning is a case in point.

### Overview

As Friends we are gathered by the Spirit, joining together that we might draw closer to God, indeed so that we might together find unity in God. We are called to braid our individual spiritual journeys with those of other Friends for the mutual strengthening of all our journeys. We are called to share with one another that measure of Light each of us has received as we feel our way deeper and are guided toward God, our true home. This morning I shall be talking about some aspects of this journey that have been important to me thus far along the path.

I shall begin with a little bit about my childhood, to provide some context. Then I shall make some comments about my spiritual journey, some impediments encountered, and some strategies employed to open myself to divine guidance. Finally, I shall make a case for both ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

### Background

I was born into a loving Quaker family, the third of four children. In 1940 the family joined an intentional, semi-cooperative community in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, spending only summers there until after the war when materials became available to complete our house. The community was from the beginning intended to be interracial and interreligious. Friends and social workers were prominent among its founders. I remember Bryn Gweled Homesteads, as it was named, as a wonderful place in which to grow up. In summers a smorgasbord of activities was offered to us

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1. The location of Illinois Yearly Meeting's meetinghouse and the site of its annual sessions.

children by caring adults. Also during summers there were monthly Saturday morning work parties for all ages to maintain and improve the common grounds and facilities. Next month I'll be returning to Bryn Gweled to join in the celebration of its 70th anniversary.

Southampton Friends Meeting was started in 1941, principally by Bryn Gweled Friends. The meeting had an active First Day School and I had some wonderful classes. I remember with particular gratitude a class on the parables of Jesus, another on the prophets, and a third on world religions—all subjects that have held my interest. The peace and equality testimonies were given considerable attention.

Among the many blessings I received as a child was an understanding of God as an intangible, invisible, omnipresent Spirit. I did not have to unlearn a conception of God as an old man with long white beard sitting on a golden throne on or above the clouds. Instead, I felt the divine presence while sinking into the stillness of meetings for worship, while wandering through light-dappled woods, while listening to bird songs floating across sunny meadows, while beholding the starry heavens on a hushed, dark night. I often felt the divine presence as love.

Growing up in the overlapping communities of Bryn Gweled and the Friends Meeting grounded me with a set of values, practices and expectations often at odds with those I met in the area's dominant culture. One of my persistent challenges has been to negotiate the differences. Three examples from my youth will suffice.

I was not yet nine when I was part of a contingent of Bryn Gweleders that joined in a protest against the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere. We marched along US Route 1 in Philadelphia, Roosevelt Boulevard. I and all the rest were picked up by the Fairmount Park Guards for “parading without a permit” and taken to a Park Guard station for processing. A couple of hours later we were released after the intervention of the ACLU. At school I refused to take part in the duck-and-cover drills that, absurdly, were supposed to protect us in the event of a nuclear attack. Then there was the occasion when a friend revealed to me the racist element of a joke I had heard from a Yellowstone National Park ranger while on a family trip and had repeated upon returning home. I was chagrined that I had been so naive.

In 2006, members of the Board and Cabinet of the Interfaith Partnership of greater St. Louis met with the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East of the Maronite Catholic Church. His message to us was that religion does not divide. It was a *köan* of sorts, a riddle, especially given the Maronites' role in numerous bloody conflicts in Lebanon over many decades. He explained that religion should not be a source of conflict, but that politics makes things difficult owing to material interests that are the source of division. The Patriarch urged that religious people preach, proclaim, and testify that God is Unifier of people.<sup>16</sup>

The next morning in meeting for worship I was moved to report this message, and to note that the Patriarch's appeal resonates deeply with Friends' efforts to find unity in God. I wondered whether we were challenged to search for this unity beyond our small group of Friends, to test whether God is Unifier of us all. At length another Friend spoke out of the silence, saying that if we look to God to connect us with others in conflict, we need first to look to God to connect us and heal our own internal conflicts. Indeed we must, regarding both the conflicts among Friends and also the conflicts within each of us as individuals. Coming into unity in God is as much an internal quest as a communal one; we are called to both. Furthermore, being called to live into God's commonwealth *now*, unity in God is a spiritual quest for us not merely within the Religious Society of Friends but also within the household of God in its widest sense: the whole inhabited world.

Our quest to open ourselves to God leads inevitably both to openness to the Spirit's speaking through one another, and to the search with one another, in love, for unity in God. Insofar as we attain together such unity in God, we attain together God's peace. The "one another" in whom we are called to listen to the Spirit, and with whom are called to search for peace, includes everyone in this war-torn world, replete with prejudice, violence, and hatred—much of it tied ostensibly to religion. Insofar as we *obey* that call, our practice will testify to the centrality of peace in our faith; our peace testimony will be manifest in the faithfulness of our lives.

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16. My notes from that occasion do not include either an "a" or a "the" preceding "unifier" - hence the awkward English.

## Some Elements of My Spiritual Journey

When very young I learned to appreciate periods of stillness and silence, however noisy and rambunctious I was at other times, and I learned some measure of discipline in this regard. Over the years, despite doubts or emotional turmoil, I have been led ever deeper in my appreciation of silence and stillness, of waiting upon the Spirit. When I was in high school I found my mother's little library of mysticism and spirituality, and I devoured it hungrily. The Catholic Quietist, Fénelon (who was represented in the collection), commented that "Prayer is so necessary and the source of so much good that the soul which has found this treasure cannot resist returning to it when left to itself," where by "prayer" he meant not verbal formulae but "the aspiration and elevation of mind and heart to God."<sup>2</sup> This expresses well what I have found in my own life—repeatedly, I confess.

Searching for God came naturally to me, arising from curiosity, from hunger for the love of God, and later from the quest for a love that cannot suffer the separation of death. This searching was no intellectual quest; it had much deeper roots. Insofar as I experienced an answering movement of the Spirit, being searched by God flowed naturally from love of God: my love of God (with its desire to live as God would have me live) and God's love of me (experienced in felt motions of the Spirit, however chiding).

For my tenth Christmas (I was nine and a half) my parents gave me a copy of *The Authorized King James Version of the Bible* published by Oxford University Press. It was the *pilgrim edition*, complete with notes "especially adapted for young Christians," as the title page reported. Though young, I read selections from it as my interest and persistence allowed.

The notes, however helpful in some respects, were jarring in another. They presented an approach to the Bible quite different from the one employed in First Day School, where the Bible was treated as a library of ancient testimony of people's encounters with God. The *pilgrim edition* notes presented the Old and New Testaments as parts of a single picture, a picture, as the editors put it, "of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, saving sinful men." (Yes,

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2. François de Salignac de La Mothe Fénelon, *Christian Perfection*, Mildred W. Stillman, trans. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), pp. 6 & 5.

the editors wrote “men.”) I remember reading some texts in the Old Testament and then the notes which said that the texts in question were about Jesus Christ. I was not at all convinced by the notes that these texts were about Jesus. It didn’t seem so to me. I found, instead, fascinating stories of many kinds, stories of murder, mayhem, cruelty and deceit, and stories of kindness, forgiveness, and great faithfulness under duress. I enjoyed many psalms, but in my teens I especially enjoyed the prophets. What teenager can resist the appeal of someone calling authorities to account?

Within a year of my receiving that Bible my mother died of cancer, at home, under an oxygen tent. She was 42 years old. We had seen it coming and had prayed ardently, desperately, that she not die, but death stole her from us anyway. This was the era about which Elizabeth Kübler-Ross wrote.<sup>3</sup> In those days death was not considered a topic of polite conversation—especially conversation with bereaved children. We four siblings took it hard, however differently we mourned, and we struggled to cope with our vastly changed circumstances. I think that in our different ways we came to repress our grief, as the times demanded, though it bubbled up in emotional volatility and in other ways.

The next summer, if memory serves, I found a secluded place in a small meadow between what we called our “pine woods” and the community’s wooded “gully” below. There I erected a covering akin to a tent fly. I had found a decrepit old wooden chest somewhere and placed within it the Bible my parents had given me and a few other things I valued, now long forgotten. I would slip out to this tent or “tabernacle,” as I thought of it, for mourning, for solace, and for communion with God. One night it rained and the next day, to my horror, I found that the Bible was thoroughly soaked. It had been of good quality, so the long-term effect was to leave the spine weakened and the pages rumped but still perfectly legible. Embarrassed that my carelessness resulted in damage to the Bible, I hid it away. I have it still. When I graduated from high school my mother’s mother gave me a fine new Bible, the *King James Version* again but without the notes for young Christians. This one I read from cover to cover—the following summer, as I recall.

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3. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

outside the church. “Finally,” Ferner Nunn reports, “Bishop Charles Gore, of the Church of England, settled the question by stating with great authority that ‘God is not limited by His own sacraments’.”<sup>14</sup> I’d like to turn that around as a reminder to those who are convinced that Friends alone are right: “God is not limited by [God’s] own sacraments” as *we* understand them. God can speak to us through other Christians, however different our understandings of God and church.

Open and sympathetic *interfaith* dialogue also helps increase one’s openness to the Spirit and helps build mutual understanding and cooperation. It also helps build peace. These days, it seems, Friends are more familiar with the benefits of interfaith dialogue than with those of ecumenical dialogue. Some of you know Sallie King, who used to live in Carbondale, and her study of Buddhism, particularly *Engaged Buddhism*. Betty Clegg’s 1982 Plummer Lecture, *The Eloquence of Silence*, now on our web site, describes how her spiritual journey was enriched by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. While I haven’t immersed myself in other world religions to the same extent as Sallie King and Betty Clegg, I have benefited from dialogue with adherents of Baha’i, Buddhism, Hinduism, and especially Judaism and Islam. I encourage you to seek opportunities for interfaith dialogue. If you do so, you will be richly rewarded and deepened in your faith. That has been my experience, the experience of my interfaith dialogue partners, and the experience of Friends engaged in such dialogue with whom I have spoken about this. Yes, God speaks to us directly, but, yes, God speaks to us through others—including others on very different spiritual paths. Reach out to engage in interfaith dialogue, to build interfaith community, and to support faith communities that are the targets of prejudice and hate.

John Woolman wrote about his own interfaith visit to Native Americans at Wyalusing, explaining, “love was the first motion...”<sup>15</sup> So let it be for us in our own ecumenical and interfaith efforts, that the first motion is love—love for those with whom we dialogue, and love for God whom we trust to speak through our dialogue partners.

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14. Ferner Nunn, “Friends and the Ecumenical Movement” (Philadelphia, PA: Friends General Conference, 1970), p. 21.

15. The Journal and Major essays of John Woolman, Phillips Moulton, ed. (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), p. 127.

*Ecumenical and Interfaith Dialogue: An Appeal to Friends*

When engaging in ecumenical dialogue one should be aware that there is a related use of the term “ecumenical” that has been very important in the last one hundred years or so in the expression, “ecumenical movement.” This is the movement that seeks to heal the divisions in the Church universal, “the body of Christ,”<sup>13</sup> and to work toward the “visible unity” of the Church. Some seek formal unity with common sacraments and/or recognition by each church of the baptisms and communions of the other churches, but other ecumenists have the more modest goal of seeking mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation.

I urge Friends to adopt an ecumenical spirit of the latter sort, to reach out to those whose theology, faith, and practice differ from their own in order to forge mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation—to build these ecumenical relations and in the process to grow in the Spirit as well. Every active member of an unprogrammed Friends meeting necessarily employs an ecumenical spirit to some degree in listening to that of God in the spoken messages in meetings for worship. Seek and cherish opportunities to listen in the Spirit to Friends with theological orientations different from your own—to those in your own meeting, in the Yearly Meeting, and in different branches of the Religious Society of Friends. Listen, reflect, and allow the Spirit to lead you into new understandings, to lead you deeper. But do not stop there; reach out to those in other churches as well.

There are those in the ecumenical movement who find Friends problematic—we don’t practice outward rituals of communion or baptism. We *do* believe in both baptism and communion—baptism of the Spirit, on the Spirit’s own terms and timetable, and the communion so manifest, for example, in a gathered meeting for worship. Other churches find it helpful to be reminded of this. Nonetheless, Friends are challenged on occasion as to whether we are actually part of the “household of God,” that is, the Church. At the 1927 Conference on Faith and Order in Lausanne, Switzerland, Friends’ position on the sacraments became a focus of much controversy; for some, our position was seen as putting Friends

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13. Cf. Ro 12:5, I Cor 12:22-23, 12:27, Eph 4:12, Col 1:24.

Some time during my junior high or early high school years I seriously considered that God might not exist and that, even should God exist, there could be no rational proof of this. I adopted this agnosticism without giving up the practice of silent stillness in and outside meetings for worship. The doubts and questions had been prompted by concerns regarding the soundness of the five Thomistic “proofs” for the existence of God, by my inability to provide a satisfactory answer to the problem of evil, and by my elementary introduction to other world religions.

One day during my high school years I decided to rely on both my own spiritual experiences and my felt need for God, rather than on rational arguments: I couldn’t manage without God. I heeded my experience of an emptiness in myself that only God could fill. I heeded my felt need for love that would not betray. I heeded my need for that toward which my existential gratitude could be directed. I heeded my need for spiritual sustenance and direction. It was as if my love of God had penetrated “the cloud of unknowing,” to borrow the image of the anonymous author of the great 14th-century spiritual classic of that name. Where reason could not go, my heart could. So I resolved to live “as if”—the conditional being a sop to my reason.

My agnosticism was terminated by resolution, the resolution to live as if God exists and to abandon rational speculation about God. I subsequently resolved, as far as possible:

First, to consider whether my life became better, so living; whether I became more loving, more peaceful, more patient, more forgiving; whether I began to manifest fruits of the Spirit.

Second, to open myself up more intentionally to God’s searching Light, to uncover habits of heart, mind, and behavior that needed to be changed to accord more closely with the divine will.

Third, to lay matters before God that angered, frightened, or otherwise bothered me; to seek guidance regarding them and to act on my concerns if so led by the Spirit, or to let them go, if not led to act. I would not stew; I would not nurse resentment.

I often seemed to hear a loving and patient response to anxious inquiries or complaints offered in prayer, a response such as, “Of course, what did thee expect?” What *did* I expect? Perhaps it was

the infinite being, infinite understanding, and infinite bliss, the *sat, chit, ananda*, that Hindu sages have said we all want, or perhaps it was simply to be complete, finished, no longer threatened by the possibility of becoming something utterly other than what I wanted to be. When I was young, I didn't get it that to be "finished" in growing is to be dead.

So when I speak of resolution in this context, it is not in the sense of an answer to a challenge, the challenge to prove the existence of God; it is rather in the sense of a course of action chosen: to set aside rational speculation and to heed the yearnings of my heart and the leadings of the Spirit. I resolved on a path that was both my experiment in Truth (I believe I had read Gandhi's autobiography by this time) and practicing the presence of God (a reference to the 17th-century spiritual classic by Brother Lawrence, another book in my mother's collection).

The agnostic questions have become moot. The experience of a lifetime in relationship with the Divine robs those questions of interest.

I have delighted in times, however short and intermittent, in which I have been in the Life, the Peace of Christ, living into God's commonwealth. Thirsting for more, I have recognized that I am myself a major source of impediments to living more fully in the Life.

A comment is in order about the language I am using in this talk. I use the following words almost as if they were interchangeable: "God," "Spirit," "Light," "Christ," and "the Divine." They are not interchangeable. You might well complain, "Doesn't your usage create a terrible theological muddle?" My answer, however unsatisfactory, is that I am not concerned here to do theology. I use this variety of terms, first, because I experience the Divine in many ways and in many guises; secondly, because I am trying to point toward a reality that defies our classifications in any case; thirdly, because I want to recognize and respect the theological diversity among Illinois Yearly Meeting Friends. I dare to hope that you listen not for what I might think, which is unimportant, but for whatever the Spirit may say to you as you hear these comments.

### *Why We Need Encounters with People on Different Journeys*

However satisfied we are with our current faith and practice and with our present spiritual development, we know that we have farther to go to live into God's commonwealth, to live in the Spirit. We also know that it is always the Spirit that moves us forward, often through messages carried to us by others. If we have been active in the spiritual life of our meetings we know that our own spiritual journeys are braided with the spiritual journeys of others. God surprises us through messages given by others that speak to our condition.

We also know that we sometimes lose our way; we drift out of the current to spin idly in spiritual eddies. These are intervals in which God seems to "hide his face," as Job and the author of the thirteenth Psalm complain (Job 13:24, Ps 13:1). I think of these occasions as times in which I persist in looking in the wrong direction, listening for a familiar melody rather than the one I am to learn, searching for a familiar face rather than for the One I need.

Our ordinary cognitive and emotional processes create stereotypes and broad generalizations in our effort to distinguish quickly the beneficial from the harmful, the familiar from the unfamiliar, the useful from the not useful. These simplifications limit our ability to apprehend both the particular and the whole. We tend to force anything new or unfamiliar into old, familiar categories of ordinary experience, however ill the fit. I have learned by experience the value of freeing myself from the tyranny of these old categories: new wine needs new wine skins, or the skins will split and spill the wine.<sup>11</sup> Encounters with those on other spiritual paths help me when they shake me out of my complacency, dislodge me from the rut in which I have been traveling, or waken me from the spiritual sleep of distracted attention. I find that I must be unsettled from time to time, confronted by alternatives posed unexpectedly by others lest, like Peter, James, and John in Gethsemane, I fall asleep when I should be on watch.<sup>12</sup> Ecumenical and interfaith dialogue provide wonderful opportunities for such fruitful encounters.

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11. Matthew 9:17, Mark 2:22, Luke 5:37-38.

12. Mark 14:33-41.

Carolina. It was there that I experienced for the first time a Friends church service. It was in Kernersville, NC, and was complete with choir in choir robes, invocation, sermon, offering, and benediction. I was astonished despite the briefing that had been given beforehand to prepare us. The experience certainly stretched me, and stretched my understanding of the Religious Society of Friends. It turned out to be good preparation for the 1963 Young Friends of North America conference I attended some years later. The theme of the conference was “‘But Who Do You Say that I Am?’: The Nature and Meaning of Christ.” Our main evening speakers were Everett Cattell, then president of the World Association of Evangelicals and president of Malone College, and Paul Lacey, then Professor of English at Earlham College. It was a rich experience, one I still treasure. During the conference Paul Lacey spoke of theological options I had not yet encountered and I came away resolved not to let others define for me who I was, nor what Christianity is. This resolution was reinforced by the religion courses I took at the Brethren college I attended. Those courses introduced me to church history, higher form criticism, existential theology, neo-orthodoxy, and other late 19th- and early 20th-century theological currents. It was all exciting stuff. But during those undergraduate years I discovered my true academic love: philosophy.

I remember attending only two non-Christian religious events during my youth: a Bar Mitzvah for one of the Bryn Gweled boys, held at a large temple somewhere in Philadelphia, and the inaugural Friday evening service at a Reform congregation’s new synagogue. (The congregation had been using our meetinghouse while their synagogue was being built.) On the latter occasion I was blown away by the beauty of the Cantor’s singing; I believe the prayers were in Hebrew, but I was deeply moved in any case. These experiences, together with my First Day School class on religions of the world, ignited in me a great and sympathetic interest in other religions. My appreciation of other world religions was deepened by an undergraduate course, by extensive readings, and much later by direct interfaith dialogue and personal experience of worship in other faith communities.

I believe that everyone engaged in spiritual journey, but certainly every Friend, should welcome—indeed, would benefit from—participating in both ecumenical and interfaith dialogue.

## Knowledge by Acquaintance

Bring to mind someone whom you have known a long time and known well, someone who was or has been very important in your life. If I asked you to take ten minutes to write a description of this person, no doubt you could jot down many things. But no matter how perceptive your account and how ably expressed, this account could not transmit your knowledge of this person to me, should I read what you had written. Let us call the knowledge I would gain of this person “knowledge by description” —*your* description; your knowledge of the person, in contrast, is not “knowledge by description.” Your knowledge is based on long and deep acquaintance. Knowing a person in this way requires having a deep and complex relationship with that person. Knowledge by description requires no such relationship.<sup>4</sup>

There is a witticism in Historic Peace Church circles that runs like this: Mennonites tend to appeal to theology to ground their beliefs, practices, and arguments; Brethren, to history; and Friends, to experience. Like all witticisms, it is a gross oversimplification but there is something to it nonetheless. Regarding Friends, the tendency goes back to Fox’s challenge, “You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say?”<sup>5</sup> and the insistence that the Scriptures be read in the Spirit that gave them forth.<sup>6</sup> This suggests that Friends’ faith and practice are not based on knowledge about God acquired from descriptions provided by others, but on knowing God by direct acquaintance. Descriptions may be true or false, but regarding knowing someone or knowing God the concern is not primarily about descriptions, but about how well one knows, about the quality and depth of the relationship, a relationship that will not be merely cognitive but will have many different dimensions.

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4. Philosophers have distinguished “knowledge by acquaintance” from “knowledge by description” for a long time. My use of these expressions is informal and not intended to refer to specific technical accounts as, for example, the one given by Bertrand Russell in *The Problems of Philosophy*, Chapter V (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1912).

5. “The Testimony of Margaret Fox Concerning Her Late Husband, George Fox,” reprinted in *Hidden in Plain Sight*, Mary Garman *et al.*, eds. (Walingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1996), p. 235.

6. Cf. Robert Barclay, *An Apology...*, Proposition III §I, last sentence of first paragraph. *Barclay’s Apology in Modern English*, Dean Freiday, ed. (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1967), p. 57. Also, *The Journal of George Fox*, John Nickalls, ed. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 32.

Early Friends discovered the hard way that gaining knowledge by direct acquaintance with the Spirit required careful discernment. Various methods were adopted to check whether that which was felt to be given in experience was truly from the Spirit. For example, did the message cohere with Scripture generally? Did one's Meeting recognize its authenticity? There is a substantial history and body of literature among Friends regarding such discernment. So I want to spend a little time sharing with you what I have learned in dealing with a *different* problem that arises in seeking to learn by direct experience. I say, "learn by direct experience," here because it takes significant learning before one attains the knowledge we desire.

I have encountered obstacles of my own creation. Like a horse harnessed to a milk wagon, I have blinders that limit my peripheral vision, and thus too often fail to see what comes to me from unexpected directions. Unlike the horse, I make my own blinders. Everyone does.

### **The Self and Spiritual Pilgrimage**

Part of being honest with oneself and with God, and being honest in all one's dealings, is an accurate sense of who one is and what one's place is in the larger scheme of things. Inscribed at Delphi was the ancient admonition, Know Thyself. The admonition was understood to require genuine, thorough self knowledge deeply saturating one's feelings, thought, and behavior, and resulting in appropriate attitudes and conduct towards oneself, others, and the gods.

If you have a false conception of yourself, you have blinders that prevent you from acting and living as you otherwise might. To take a trivial example, if one were persuaded erroneously that one could not sing, would one develop one's capacity for singing? If one thinks that one is, or ought to be, self sufficient, independent, and virtually invulnerable, one sets oneself up as if practically divine, not needing God. With this self understanding, one will not expect, let alone invite, Divine instruction; one will not open the darkest recesses of oneself to be searched by the Light. Throughout the centuries spiritual guides have warned against excessive pride, unwarranted self satisfaction, and the like. There are many fine advices in this regard, including Brian Drayton's urging that we "take seriously the admonition 'to give thanks continually,' because the grateful heart is

oneself to be open to new winds of the Spirit. It requires yielding the ambiguities that fracture our perceptions of reality.

You may protest that I have said both that I have found it important and useful to pay attention to the ambiguities of existence but also to set them aside. Indeed, I have. It is valuable to identify the ambiguities of existence because they reveal aspects of the whole that need to be appreciated as both real and partial. As partial they are symptoms of one's orientation, but Spiritual pilgrimage requires that we let go of the partial to open ourselves to wholeness, to unity in the Spirit.

So far we have looked at two impediments to Spiritual progress resulting from self-constructed blinders: self-regard and ambiguities of existence. I now turn to make a case for valuing diversity within spiritual community.

### **Ecumenical and Interfaith Dialogue**

I was recruited to ecumenical dialogue by Dean Freiday in 1988, and mentored by him ever since. Though, sadly, he died Third Month 4, 2008, his example, his advice, and some materials from his extensive theological library continue to nurture me. I have also been blessed by the support and instruction of many others as well, including friends in the ecumenical and interfaith communities in which I have been involved during the past twenty years.

"Ecumenical dialogue" and "interfaith dialogue" refer to different endeavors. The expression, "ecumenical dialogue," has come to mean dialogue among Christians from different churches. "Interfaith dialogue," in contrast, refers to dialogue among persons representing different religions. I have been involved, for example, with interfaith dialogue among representatives of Judaism, Islam, Baha'i, Hinduism, and occasionally with others. Both activities are vitally important.

Ecumenical concerns came to me relatively early. In elementary school I had a Baptist friend who invited me to go with his family to a Billy Graham revival. I didn't go. My friend had very set ideas about who counted as a Christian, ideas that had not been part of my First Day School experience which emphasized the teachings and practice of Jesus rather than Christ's dying for our sins. I wasn't prepared for dialogue.

When I was in high school I was part of a group of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting young Friends who visited Friends in North



an abstract design. Each of the three perceptual experiences differs from the other two and it can take effort to yield one perspective for another. Such figures are ambiguous because they are incomplete. Our minds fill in what is not given.

We experience our own existence as ambiguous, not because what confronts us is incomplete but rather because it is so complex—the cognitive and perceptual faculties that serve us in day-to-day existence cannot take in the whole reality, so we attend only to limited aspects; our perception is partial by design. Here we are, as it were, entranced by an orientation, for example, that we are victims of fate, or that we are frighteningly free—inescapably responsible for what we do. I term it an orientation because what I am talking about involves not just habits of mind, but habits of heart and habits of behavior as well. Ambiguities of existence are not creations of intellect so much as creations of perceptual orientation.

### *Ambiguities of Existence and Spiritual Pilgrimage*

Spiritual pilgrimage, in my experience, involves mind, heart, and behavior; it involves the whole of life. The very faculties that serve so well in navigating the world when it comes to physical and social survival create ambiguities that bedevil our spiritual journey to wholeness. When seeking the closer walk with Christ, God, the Spirit, or however we experience the Divine, it is useful to remember the tendency of our perceptual orientation to create ambiguities that can interfere with our living into the wholeness of the divine Presence.

When troubled by distracting thoughts or feelings that prevent me from centering, or if already centered, that surface unbidden and claim my attention, I have found it helpful to set them aside by turning once again to God and so to sink back down to the beginning: stillness and silent attendance upon the Spirit. In so doing I sink beneath the distracting thoughts and feelings that disturbed my consciousness. So it is with ambiguities of existence. When I center, the incompatible perceptions drop away and I become open, alert for movements of the Spirit. I do not know beforehand in what direction I shall be led. In retrospect I find that sometimes I am led toward a deeper grasp of the wholeness of existence and other times I am led toward action, living into the Life. “Waiting upon the Lord” does not require assuming one perspective or another; it requires emptying

teachable and not self-sufficient.”<sup>7</sup> I cherish and try to heed such advice, but I have also employed another strategy.

I have found it useful to see myself in a variety of ways, as no one perspective is free of distortion. It was perhaps 15 years ago when I was delighted to learn of a Confucian understanding of the self as “a center of relationships.”<sup>8</sup> We are, after all, social animals. We are mutually dependent in many ways. We find meaning in relationship—relationship with people, with institutions, with our environment, and with divinity in whatever guises we encounter it. I find it helpful, therefore, to think of myself as a node in a multidimensional network of relations. The “dimensions” include, among others, the physical, social, moral, political, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of our lives. On this model of self, as node in a multidimensional network of relations, there is no independent self. I am a dependent, transitory, relational convergence—and source—of energy.

Among the obstacles that I have confronted in my spiritual pilgrimage are tendencies to value myself too highly, and to rely too much on my own resources, both mental and emotional. Pride, self confidence, and stubbornness have impeded my journey. Embracing the model of self to which I have just referred has helped undermine the assumptions, if not all the habits, of these tendencies. It is an experiment that has begun to bear fruit. What is important is not some abstract or autonomous “self” but the relationships of which I am a part—in all directions, in all dimensions. Embracing the model helps me to focus on these relationships, a focus which I find both helpful and liberating.

Whether a particular model of the self is useful at some point in one’s spiritual journey depends on one’s condition at the time; this model works for me now. You might **not** find it helpful, particularly if you were brought up, as have been many women, to deny yourself and to put relationships with family and other people first.<sup>9</sup> Another model of the self might serve you better. Whatever model you select

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7. *On Living with a Concern for Gospel Ministry* (Philadelphia: Quaker Press of FGC, 2006), p. 13.

8. Tu Wei-Ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1985), p. 53.

9. See Valerie S. Goldstein, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” reprinted in Simon Doniger, *The Nature of Man in Theological and Psychological Perspective* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), p. 165. Cf. Susan Dunfee, “The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr’s Account of the Sin of Pride,” *Soundings*, Vol. 65 (1982).

is only that, a model for highlighting certain aspects of one's self, more or less usefully. All such models are misleading insofar as they are taken to present the full richness of the self. They need to be deployed lightly, lest they become more a hindrance than an aid. Their proper use is as a corrective—to bring out aspects that one has hitherto ignored or not sufficiently appreciated.

### **Ambiguities of Existence**

Settled habits of mind, heart, and behavior of all sorts are major, self-imposed causes of tunnel vision. These settled habits tend to be invisible to the one who has them unless they are called into consciousness by something unexpected. For this reason they are very effective blinders. To counter this I look for problems and puzzles that can throw my expectations into question. I also look for uncomfortable ambiguities.

Simone de Beauvoir begins her book, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, by identifying some signal ambiguities of human existence.<sup>10</sup> An ambiguity of existence occurs when we perceive the human condition in two apparently incompatible ways. For example, we see life as the opposite of death, though we know that death is part of the very fabric of life, that living and dying are part of the same journey. In this second perspective, the opposite of life is not death but the inanimate existence of a stone, for example. How we apprehend death involves our attitudes and behavior, as much as our thoughts. Earlier I spoke of how death “stole” my mother, because that captured my feeling that she was abducted forcibly and unjustly. In contrast, I might have said that my mother departed this earthly stage. This way of putting it suggests the conclusion of her part in the drama of life, a conclusion that might be understood as part of the script, a timely finale, however wrenching for those who loved her. So, is death the very denial of life (the first view), or is it an intrinsic part of life, a part of its meaning (the second view)? We cling uneasily to both, emphasizing one or the other depending upon the circumstances and our attitudes.

To take a second ambiguity of existence, we each have a past and a future, with but a moment between them. A moment ago you heard

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10. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Bernard Frechtman, trans. (New York: Citadel Press, 1948).

me say “circumstances.” We cannot take back that moment. It is past. My life so far is past, what remains is an uncertain future. Yet I also apprehend time in a different way: I exist, we exist, entirely in the present. We act, we meet one another, we encounter God, only in the present; we *live* only in the present. In the present we are vulnerable, surprised, and enchanted by beauty, but we also suffer, worry, and struggle in making decisions. An important aspect of Friends’ waiting worship is attention to the present, with its openness to encountering the Divine—*now*. Yet our attention keeps slipping to the past and to the future. It should be easy to attend wholly to the present, but so often it is not. We seem caught in two incompatible times, the brief boundary between past and future, and the living present with its window into eternity.

As a third example we perceive ourselves as free, free even to end our own existence. There is nothing that we can be forced to do if we choose not to do it and are willing to pay the price. Yet an avalanche of forces outside our control carries us along, heedless of our wishes. We seem caught in two incompatible conditions: absolute freedom, and helpless subjection to the mighty forces of nature, history, economics, big government, big business, and so forth. This ambiguity Beauvoir viewed as having particular significance in Nazi-occupied France, for she associated it with the choice each person faced whether to risk his or her life in the resistance or to acquiesce in the occupation.

Beauvoir recognized that the ambiguities of existence make us uncomfortable; we have a tendency to choose one perspective and ignore another, depending on our circumstances at the time. This strategy is inauthentic, she held; it is a strategy of self deceit. In my view it is a refusal to embrace the complexity and wholeness of existence. To be whole ourselves, we need to embrace the wholeness of existence without avoiding the ambiguities created by our partial, distorting, and willful perceptions.

It is not that there is something peculiar about reality, that it is divided against itself. Ambiguity is a characteristic of our perception.

### *Ambiguities Produced by Mechanisms of Perception*

Consider the well-known duck-rabbit figure. One can see this ambiguous figure in at least three perceptually incompatible ways: as the drawing of a duck’s head, as the drawing of a rabbit’s head, or as