

MY FAMILY, MY PEOPLE, MY LIFE

Fernando Freire

The 2015 Jonathan Plummer Lecture

Presented at
Illinois Yearly Meeting
of the
Religious Society of Friends
McNabb, Illinois

June 28, 2015



INTRODUCTION

by Cristi Belmonte

Good Morning. I am Cristi Belmonte. I have known Fernando since 1997 when we worked as therapists at the same social service agency. It was my first job out of graduate school and Fernando was a more experienced therapist. Our offices were next door to each other in a basement corner. He quickly became a mentor to me professionally as he was always willing to consult and offer support when needed. It did not take long for us to also form a friendship. We were sort of an unlikely pair but it still worked. He was more mature, more reserved, reflective and thoughtful. I was full of impatience and brilliant ideas that I was going to share with anyone who would listen and even some who did not want to. I believed every battle was worth fighting. His quiet reserve had a calming, centering, maturing effect on me. As a matter of fact, when I would be in knots over work stress and my husband did not know what to say or do, he quickly figured out that a safe response was “Have you talked to Fernando about

that?” That usually had the effect of making me slow down and think things through as Fernando would or to actually call him and talk it over.

I have had the honor of calling Fernando my friend through many transitions in his life: divorce, single parenthood, dating then marrying his amazing wife Priscila, becoming a father again, and dealing with family health crises. Through it all, his faith and practicality has kept him on an even keel and allowed him to move through those transitions with true grace.

When I was asked to introduce Fernando for this Plummer lecture, I was flattered but also uncertain. I have never considered myself to be a religious person and quite frankly have shied away from those who proclaim themselves to be religious. However, through Fernando’s friendship, my view of religion and spirituality has grown. Through his faith, he has demonstrated and at times forced me to recognize spirituality as not just about organized religion but as manifesting itself in those things for which one has a passion. Fernando’s spiritual path has taken the scenic route. He started on that journey early in life and has made a few pit stops along the way but he has remained committed to spiritual growth.

He embodies the values of fairness, family, friendship, loyalty, and humility. Those are the qualities I most admire about him. His subtle sense of humor shared with only those in his inner circle is something I am privileged to witness. He also taught me through word and deed that there is the family that you are born into by blood and the family you create by choice. I am so proud to be part of the family Fernando has created by choice and to have him as part of my family.

MY FAMILY, MY PEOPLE, MY FAITH

Good morning Friends. For my family and me it has always been a special occasion to come to Annual Sessions of Illinois Yearly Meeting. Once we arrive here it feels like time slows down and we are at our spiritual home to once again be able to walk in a land that has a special connection with the sacred and be among people that share a very special bond to this place and to each other. It is true that Spirit is everywhere and every moment of life is an opportunity to feel God's presence and love, but that does not preclude that certain places and memories can occupy a special place in our hearts.

Annual Sessions of Illinois Yearly Meeting is one of those special places. I come to you with a humble spirit and a heart full of gratitude and joy. Thank you for inviting me to share my spiritual journey. I am well aware that we may not necessarily share the same understandings of the faith or how we would explain our spirituality or even agree on what spirituality means. I do not pretend that my journey should be exemplary or advisable to anyone but me. It is also not my intention to produce a negative reaction in anyone as I have learned that sometimes you have to be very careful with how you share anything that could be described as religious or spiritual. There is good reason why the saying goes that you are not supposed to talk about politics or religion in polite company.

What I will share comes from the best of me and it is intended to connect with that part of you where God is found. I do not plan to talk about religion, at least not in the sense that it is used to divide, dominate, or try to convert someone to a particular belief or worldview. I will be sharing about my life and how my spirituality and religious identity and practices are an important part of who I am without implying that anyone has to be like me.

Listen to my story as one coming from someone who talks about his life using language that may be dressed up in spiritual metaphors and religious imagery, but it is still his life that is being shared.

For the sake of clarity it may be good to note that although there are many possible definitions of spirituality, when I use this term I am not referring to the 900 numbers you call to be connected to a psychic who is ready to tell your fortune or give you advice about your problems. I am not talking of channeling, crystals or esoteric practices. I am using the term spirituality to mean the search for the ultimate meaning in life, a meaning that can connect all what we see, feel, and experience with the understanding of who we are and our purpose in this vast universe of us. My definition also assumes the existence of a transcendental reality beyond our individual experience and the physical world. This reality has been given many names like God, the divine, universal consciousness, or the other many forms that we have used to talk about God.

When I speak about religion I would like to propose that we consider its possible Latin etymology where religare means to tie or bind. Religion is a way for people to connect and reconnect around a system of beliefs regarding what it is considered to be sacred or related to God. Religion is culturally influenced and it is accompanied by rituals and behaviors connected to a particular understanding of the divine or sacred. Also, religion and religiosity have clear social connections and requirements. It was the famous sociologist Emile Durkheim that proposed that religion refers to an activity that is intrinsically social.

You can find many more definitions and discussions about what religion and spirituality are about, but for us today religion will refer to the outward manifestation of the deeply held ideas or experiences of what we perceive to be the ultimate meaning of life. This will be an artificial separation for the sake of our conversation, since as for me religion and spirituality are two dimensions of the same reality that encompasses the search for meaning and purpose in life, in relation to our encounter with God, the divine realm, and each other.

I was born and raised in a small town in the mountains of Puerto Rico surrounded by nature and what I will describe as a wonderful and magical otherworld. The spirits of the departed were never completely gone. Magic practitioners and faith healers

were accepted and consulted, although almost never publicly. Each moment of life was an opportunity for the miraculous to happen. There was not a real division between the sacred and the profane, between the realm of God and our lives. You may call it superstition or ignorance but we all knew what things not to do or say to bring on bad luck or offend the spiritual indwellers that lived around us. Many times as a child I listened to the stories of mysterious occurrences and inexplicable events from the elders, and I was encouraged and expected to always show deep respect for the spiritual world and religious practices. Perhaps because of these seminal experiences I have never doubted the absolute reality of that dimension of life that is the field and context of the manifestation of the spiritual and religious.

As far as I can remember, I also experienced God as a real and constant presence in my life. Growing up, God assumed a distinctly Judeo-Christian form with a Spanish Caribbean Roman Catholic accent that included a profound reverence toward Mary the mother of Jesus. Because of Mary, and a myriad of female saints, the divine realm was never exclusively masculine. Perhaps this was a reflection of the matriarchal aspects of the Puerto Rican culture. In my childhood memories the veneration of Mary was center to the worship of God, especially when you take into consideration the belief in the divinity of Jesus. However, I do not think that many people could explain in any theologically sound manner the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, or the role of Mary in the economy of salvation.

We all knew about God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost and that they shared the heavens with the Virgin Mary, the saints, the hierarchy of angels, and the souls of the departed. But Mary occupied a very special place in the hearts and minds of people that resulted in a deeply felt devotion. As an example, the required exclamation to the mentioning of any future event, “Si Dios quiere” (if God wills it) had to be accompanied by “y si la Virgen lo permite” (and if the Virgin allows it). We also had the saints, male and female, for any kind of trouble, protection, need, or petition, and on top of that you had the angels and the spirits that we all knew shared this world with us.

I could talk for a long time about the richness of the popular religiosity that was part of my upbringing, but it suffices to say that my culture, music, language, and social experience

were interwoven with religion in its popular manifestations in ways that may be difficult to understand by those that have not had a similar experience. Let me give you some examples. As a sign of respect when you encountered any older relative like an uncle or grandmother you were expected to ask for their blessing saying “Bendición” (Bless me) and they would reply to you “Que Dios te bendiga” (May God bless you). In the mornings you would hear the bells from the church announcing the early morning mass. Throughout the day you would hear the same bells reminding people of the passing of time, but more importantly the need to remember God. On other occasions, you would hear the sad cadence of the church’s bells announcing a funeral and you would say a prayer for the soul of the departed. I remember the communal observance of Lent when public dancing and other trivial activities stopped from Ash Wednesday until Easter. During Holy Week only religiously suited music and programs were broadcasted on radio or TV. Also on Good Friday, you had the reenactment of the passion, death, and burial of Jesus to be followed on Sunday by the celebration of Easter and the reenactment of the encounter of Jesus with his mother.

The Gospels do not mention an encounter of Jesus with his mother just after the resurrection, but that was not needed. Can anyone believe that a loving son was not going to visit his mother after returning from the dead? On Easter morning in many towns you had a cofradia (religious brotherhood) carrying the statue of Jesus encountering another cofradia carrying the statue of Mary and converging at a previously set place by the town square and the Catholic temple. My childhood was deeply influenced by a rather positive, natural, and comforting view of God, the divine realm, the Church, and the meaning and order of life events. Births, weddings, funerals, and almost any other important life occurrences were full of tradition and meaning that you did not have to learn in Sunday school or be taught in any formal way.

By experiencing the culture, the family, and the social fabric of life in a small town in Puerto Rico I received a worldview and understanding of what faith was all about. And at the heart of this faith was the experience of religious life as an expression of the notion that we are all part of the family of God. Let us remember that in most Latin American cultures the family, both nuclear and extended, is at the center of your understanding of

who you are and your place in society and life. In my case, I belonged to a very large familia (family) composed by multiple generations of relatives, most of them living within walking distance from each other. I had the paternal branch of my family, who were mostly town dwellers and the maternal side with strong connections to the country side.

Perhaps due to my family experience, I intuitively accepted the idea of the Church as a large family under the guidance and protection of a benevolent and always caring God. The faith that I received through my family was full of hope, joy, generosity, forgiveness, and solidarity. We were not a rich town and poverty was a fact of life especially in the country side but I do not remember despair or meanness. Poor families and not-so-poor families lived side by side and they were all part of the same social fabric that included the Church. My family was very fortunate, and although not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination we were not poor.

My family experience, although not devoid of the normal pain and struggles found in all families, was essentially a positive one and clearly influenced my faith and religious identity. My experience growing up in a small close-knit town was also good. It is then not an accident that for me to be part of the family and people of God is a powerful metaphor of what it means to be related to God and each other. Did not Jesus refer to God as Abba (Daddy)? Did not I hear frequently that Mary the mother of Jesus was also our mother? Is not the Church the people of God?

All of this does not mean that I am not aware that for many the memories of their families are not good ones and sometimes they are even profoundly painful and traumatic. I have met and work with many victims of abuse and trauma: men, women, children, and elderly. They have been poor and not that poor. What they have in common is the experience of emotional or physical abuse at home at the hands of members of their own families. Others have been so profoundly emotionally neglected to the point that love is not something that they would associate with their family life. It is a great human tragedy that in the bosom of the family, where people should feel safe and affirmed, sometimes the opposite is true.

For others, culture and social conventions have represented rejection and a profound sense of alienation because of the insistence on there being one “right” way of being and behaving

and that other ways are wrong and/or incomplete. Furthermore, some cultural manifestations perpetuate oppressive, traumatic, and deeply harmful behaviors and ideas. Social mores and conventions can be deeply oppressive and unfair.

A close-knit community can be the closest thing to hell on earth for those who are different from the majority or present characteristics and so go against what is socially accepted. Despite my relatively happy and protected childhood and how fortunate I consider myself to be, I have witnessed the sorrowful state of the human condition. I am cognizant of the pain, suffering, injustice, and oppression that seem to be all around us. Sickness, violence, hate, material and human misery, loneliness, and alienation from each other are realities that I cannot ignore. For some, these realities are a valid reason for their inability to believe in a merciful and loving God. Those that have witnessed the pain of a child dying of cancer or killed in an act of war can rightly wonder if God really exists.

My faith has provided me with some answers to this and other questions regarding the wantonness of suffering and pain. It has also given me a degree of hope and emotional reassurance. As I mentioned earlier, I have never doubted the existence of God or God's love but I understand why so many do. To share with others your faith in the existence and attributes of a loving God can cause a very strong negative reaction in some people. If you share your faith, even with the best of intentions, you are opening the door to hear how wrong or almost delusional is the assertion that you believe in God. I have learned to be patient as it has become clear to me that the animosity and negative reaction that I encounter are often related to very negative experiences with allegedly religious people or institutions or at times just the unhealed wounds of life's traumas. And who can deny the atrocities perpetrated in God's name?

To keep a balanced view, there are also people that have come to the conclusion that God does not exist out of their own observations and logic and not because of any personal trauma. This latter group usually does not become angry when talking about faith matters and they will not try to dissuade you from your own conclusions when talking about religious or spiritual topics. However, I am not usually interested in engaging in adversarial or idle philosophical discussion nor is it my interest to

persuade anyone of my religious views. I have never been a good candidate to become a zealot or polemicist. I would rather listen and help others find their own answers. I am not attracted to intellectually-driven philosophical or theological pursuits if they are not accompanied by the sharing of life stories and insights. If you want to converse with me about your spiritual thoughts and experiences and what you can say about your search for meaning in life, I will with delight listen to you and share my own experiences and ideas.

I will share with you that from an early age I have been aware of my ability to feel the emotional pain of others and also feel profound empathy for people, animals, and even inanimate objects. I was a very sensitive child and to a great degree solitary by my own choosing. It would not be a surprise that I consider myself to be an introvert and as such I have always enjoyed solitude. I find contemplative disciplines appealing with the caveat that not as a way to run or escape from reality, but as a way to gain strength and direction to remain active in the work of God among us. I would not choose to live a cloistered life but I would rather live close to nature and not that far from the city where I could serve the poor and be available to those in search of spiritual companionship or guidance. That may explain why I live in the suburbs close to a forest preserve but I work in Chicago. As an introvert, I need very little stimulus from the outside to connect to a very rich internal life. I need silence and a quiet environment to feel at my best.

I learned many years ago that some people seemed to come to this world with an innate capacity to be in tune with the feelings of others and with the ability to put into words what may be out of their conscious awareness. You can say that I have the natural temperament and predisposition to be a good listener and I profoundly enjoy helping others to heal from emotional or spiritual wounds. One of my dreams is someday to be able to dedicate my life to what in the Catholic tradition is referred as spiritual companionship or direction. More than any formal training or schooling what has helped me to help others as a clinician—I will talk about how I became a clinical social worker later—is this gift of spiritual sensitivity that was freely given to me and that I am still developing with a conscious commitment to offer to others what God has undeservingly given me. I mentioned how I have always

been in tune with the pain and suffering of sentient beings. This can sometimes feel overwhelming but a particular devotion from my Catholic past has helped me to remain grounded and hopeful.

When I see a cross or a crucifix what I see is the proof that God is not immune or indifferent to our pain. It may be part of the mystery of life why there has to be so much suffering in life, but in faith I know through the example and teachings of Jesus that God is present, not metaphorically or symbolically, but really present with those that are suffering or in need. I could draw from several passages in the Bible that talk about this but one comes to mind now. In the Gospel of Matthew there is a passage that talks about the end of times and the Final Judgment Day when we all will have to answer to God about our lives. The passage talks about those deserving to enter into heaven and how they earned that privilege. It does not mention the asking of any creeds, not the date and time when we accepted Jesus as Savior, not how much money we gave to the Church, not in how many religious rituals we engaged, nor how many people we were able to save in the name of Jesus. We will be tested by the love and solidarity we showed for those less fortunate knowing that God is present in them.

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”
(Matthew 25:34-40, ESV)

My early family experience was the framework for my understanding of Matthew’s metaphor. Let me tell you about my maternal grandparents and hopefully you will see what I mean. My grandparents were very simple people. My grandfather only finished 6th grade, and my grandmother I think the 3rd. My grandfather grew up very poor. He was an illegitimate child and

the first child born to my great-grandmother. I did not meet her as she died many years before I was born. But from early on I learned that my grandfather loved her deeply. Her picture was in a prominent place in his house and he always talked about her with great tenderness and love.

My grandmother came from a large family of small farmers, many of them living in the countryside. However, my maternal great-grandparents moved to the town early in their marriage and all my great-aunts were essentially raised there, although while growing up they spent great amounts of time in the countryside helping with farm chores. I vividly remember our visits to our rural relatives that were always full of food, music, and celebrations. I also remember a few not that joyful occasions when we visited someone sick or near their death. At my grandparents' home, everybody was welcomed and there were many people that frequently stopped by for lunch or dinner, or just to share an afternoon cup of coffee. No one was ever turned away and a constant stream of interesting characters frequently visited my grandparents' home.

I am the first grandchild from my mother's side and I was essentially raised by my grandparents. In our town, my grandfather used to serve as a kind of scribe for illiterate people that trusted him to read to them and help complete all sorts of documents. He never learned how to type but by using two fingers he was quite fast and accurate with a typewriter. I remember him at city hall typing and helping people to fill out official documents or write letters without expecting any compensation. He made a living selling lottery tickets. I should explain that back then the lottery in Puerto Rico was very different to the one we have today in the States. Selling lottery tickets was reserved for the poor, the widows, and the disabled. By selling tickets they were guaranteed a modest income that allowed them some financial independence.

My grandfather was also the local coordinator of the Lottery Agents Cooperative. This was a cooperative association created to help the lottery ticket sellers to finance the buying of the tickets, offer small loans, and buy funeral insurance. My grandfather never learned to drive and his main source of pride and joy was his family. It was also a particular source of pride for him that he served for a long time as an elected member of the town council.

As I mentioned before, he was a simple man but his funeral was attended by the local mayor and the mayors of two neighboring towns. The church bells were played longer than usual when he was being transported to the cemetery, and the municipal band played when we arrived there. If I am not mistaken, it was the first time that they had done that at a funeral. A poor illegitimate child had grown to become a man loved and respected by those that came to know him.

What I remember the most about my grandfather was his generosity, his joy for life, his good humor, his acceptance of all, and his profound non-judgmental view of people, not to mention that he was a very affectionate and doting grandparent. He was very proud of all his grandchildren and his three children: my mother, my aunt, and my uncle.

My grandmother had a wicked sense of humor. She had an infectious laughter and she enjoyed telling jokes of all ratings, G, PG, R and the occasional NC-17. She was a homemaker all her life and she was the perfect complement to my grandfather. I do not want to imply that my father's family or my parents were not also influential in me, but when I think about the unconditional love of God and God's constant generosity, nurturing, and acceptance, it is my maternal grandparents that come front and center in my mind and soul.

My grandfather was also a deeply religious man. I remember that he used to seclude himself in his room every morning to say his prayers before going on with his daily toils. I do not recall that kind of external devotions coming from my grandmother and for some reason she was not adept to priests and church functions. But she was happy to serve a plate of food to anyone hungry and lend a hand to anyone in need. She was not as affectionate as my grandfather, but you could always feel her love through her care. She also enjoyed smoking an occasional cigar or cigarette but always when my grandfather was not around.

Perhaps because of their example, my early experience of faith never had rules and obligations at its core. There were clear rituals and beliefs that we followed but they never felt onerous or oppressive. Even more important, for my grandparents their faith, family, and people always came first. People were always more important than rules, and your faith was supposed to help you to be a better person and in times of need or sorrow to offer

consolation. You did not need to be perfect to be loved by them as it was clearly understood that we all had imperfections and shortcomings, but were still part of the same family. The family on earth and the family of God that at the end was one and the same.

My father was a state employee that coincidentally worked for the Lottery of Puerto Rico as an accounting clerk until his retirement. He was an army veteran, a sports enthusiast, and someone that seemed to be fearless. He was not into material things or possessions and never showed any interest in living anywhere besides my hometown. He was different from my grandfather in one important aspect. I remember him as a distant figure not in a physical sense but in an emotional one. Although I know that he loved my brothers and me and that we were important to him I do not think that any of us felt emotionally close to him.

In my case, I believe that I was a real mystery to him. I do remember something that he told me when I was young. He said to never pay too much attention to what other people say and to live life according to what I thought was important to me. I also knew that my father would have supported and protected me the best he could with whatever decision I made. Nevertheless, although a strong sense of belonging framed the relationship with my father and my paternal family, a degree of emotional aloofness could also define the type of relationship we had. They were quite different to my intensely gregarious maternal family.

My mother had me when she was 19 years old. She went on to finish a bachelor's degree in elementary education and eventually a master's degree in social work. All of this while raising four boys with the help of my grandparents. She traveled from our town to San Juan, the capital city, to complete her education and retired after 30 years of service, mostly as a school social worker.

I attended both public and Catholic schools. At the age of 12, I felt an intense feeling that God was calling me to be a priest. I vividly remember lying in my bed at night and hearing a voice (a figure of speech, no early signs of psychosis here) that was asking me to become a priest. Ever since that experience I have been able to relate to the story of the calling of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 3) in a special way.

I joined a religious order seminary at age 12 when I was entering 8th grade, convinced that God was calling me to become a priest. I stayed in the seminary until my sophomore year when I

returned home not being sure if my calling was to join this particular order of priests or even to become one. I was supposed to enter the novitiate in the Dominican Republic once I graduated from high school and after the novitiate go on to study philosophy and later theology as it is the usual path for Catholic priests.

However, during my high school sophomore year I was not feeling ready and somehow the life in seminary was not completely fulfilling. I decided to return home and during that time I met my first girlfriend and learned about the Episcopal Church and married priests. I became active in the Episcopal Church for a few years but after my second year of college I felt again the call to become a Catholic priest. I considered several Catholic religious orders and after making my decision I started my college junior year in seminary catching up with the philosophy requirements. But it was not meant to be.

I finally left the seminary for good shortly after starting my senior year in college. If from my family life I got the notion of the Church as the family of God, in the seminary I learned the philosophical and theological language to explain the faith. Seminary was also a time in which I was able to live close to poor communities, visit the sick and the infirm, teach the catechism to children, participate in the liturgy, and have the opportunity to live close to really good and committed priests, nuns, and religious brothers.

Nevertheless, something did not feel right. Too much energy was required to keep the institutional church going at the expense of being truly faithful to Jesus's example. For many former Catholics their memories of the church are mired with recollections of abuse, hypocrisy, exploitation, and even sexual abuse. By contrast my memories of the nuns, priests, religious brothers, and church institutions are mostly good ones and Roman Catholicism is part of my spiritual identity. My movement away from the Catholic Church of my youth was not necessarily connected to any particular negative experience, but it was an opening to contemplating and experiencing the faith from a different perspective.

I found myself attracted to the Protestant vision of the Church and after expending sometime in the Episcopal Church I settled in with the Lutherans. I should mention that while I was still in the Catholic seminary in college I thought that the skills of a formal training in social work were going to be useful to a future

priest. By the time I left seminary in addition to philosophy I was already studying social work, and when I finished my bachelor's degree I went on to complete a master's degree in social work with a concentration in clinical work. By then I was married to my first wife and went to work as a school social worker.

I eventually ended up working for the Medicaid program at the state level. During this time I applied and was accepted to law school in a part-time program. It looked like I was finally going to settle as a high level government administrator. I was also active in my Lutheran congregation and at one point I was asked if I would contemplate becoming a pastor. I started to feel that something in me was telling me to try again to find out if I was being called to the ordained ministry.

Eventually I decided that the calling that I first received when I was 12 was still very much alive and perhaps the "Big Plan" was for me to be a Lutheran pastor. I started attending seminary on a part-time basis although this time it was the Evangelical Seminary in San Juan. Eventually the church asked me if I was willing to come to the U.S. to complete my education at a Lutheran seminary. I said yes, and everything began to fall into place.

I resigned my job and with my first wife I arrived in Chicago on January 1, 1988, to study at the Lutheran seminary in Hyde Park. My two-year-old daughter joined us a couple of months later. My oldest son was born in May of 1990 when I was still in seminary, and I completed my M.Div. in June of 1991 after doing my internship in an inner-city congregation in Chicago. Also in June of 1990 I switched to a part-time student status and started working for the social services agency where I am still currently employed.

I began as a clinician, eventually becoming a supervisor, then a manager, and I am currently a program director. I have spent most of my professional life at the same agency, which has allowed me to serve a very diverse population composed of individuals, families, communities, and from children to seniors. However, at the end of my studies at the Lutheran seminary it was clear that the ordained ministry was not in the cards for me. I had grown disenchanted with the Lutheran Church. Not that much with the doctrinal aspects of the faith and the many wonderful and sincere parishioners and pastors that I met, but by the actual functioning of the institutional church.

I can say that although my Lutheran and Catholic experiences with the institutional church have some differences, at the end what was similar was this profound feeling of the inconsistency between the stated faith and the behavior of the Church and those in leadership positions. I have to admit that this inconsistency was always part of my church experience, but somehow at a younger and more naïve state in my life I was able to rationalize it or just ignore it. Eventually I came to realize that my secular agency was as close, and perhaps even closer, to serving the poor and needy as any religious agency would.

In my secular agency I have been honored to serve with people of profound spiritual convictions and commitment even if no religious language was ever used at work. Nowadays, it pains me that with all the challenges facing the human services field in general and the mental health field in particular, I wonder how much longer I will be able to keep the connection between my faith and my work. We have been infected by the values and ways of corporate America and I have the firm conviction that capitalism and the corporate ideology do not belong in human services. Corporate mentality and values do not easily match the best of the human service spirit and I could argue that they are fundamentally incompatible. Self-promotion, an emphasis in considering the margins (the equivalent of profits for charities) over mission is part of the current state of affairs in many not-for-profits in addition to chronic underfunding.

It is sad and for me even painful to say that if you look around even churches are being absorbed by the corporate ethos including its emphasis in marketing and considering people as a commodity instead of affirming the dignity of the human person. I think that these last comments will give you an idea of some of the struggles that I am currently facing in trying to keep my professional life in line with what I believe are the best values and aspirations of those working in human services.

But coming back to my story, when I finished my seminary degree I contemplated, albeit just briefly, to return to my Catholic roots. Nonetheless, when I thought about it I could not see my understanding of the faith within the Catholic framework of my youth and I was already feeling as an outsider among Lutherans. The reasons for my distancing from mainline Protestantism may be multiple, but the most powerful one resembles what George

Fox describes in his journal about his utmost despair when faced with the lack of integrity with the Church of his time. I cannot say that the depth of my feelings even came close to his; but when I found the following quote that you will recognize his words resonated in me.

And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, oh, then, I heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition," and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give Him all the glory; for all are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the pre-eminence who enlightens, and gives grace, and faith, and power. Thus when God doth work, who shall let it? And this I knew experimentally.

The traditional Christian language used by Fox may put off some modern readers. What I see in this quote is Fox sharing his conviction that we cannot completely depend on external teachers or sources to find Truth. What is true and eternal resides in all of us. It has been given many names like that of God in everyone or the measure of Light that we share. At the time that Fox had this revelation, he was experiencing a profound disappointment with the Church and alleged Christians. He experienced one of those transformative moments with classical mystical overtones that are capable of changing the course of someone's life. After his encounter with that which he thought was the Christ, Fox went on to share his new-found revelation with anyone who would listen.

But what happened here? First, we have someone who from an early age showed deep sensitivity toward religious and spiritual matters. Fox was also someone who had tried to live his life according to Christian morals and teachings. However, the Church and churchgoers of his time left him wanting and profoundly disappointed, especially with what he saw as the inconsistency between what they preached versus their actions. A casual reader of Fox's writings may see his emphasis in living life according to the highest Christian principles, which was not that different from the Puritans of his day. It is a historically and generally accepted fact that the Puritans influenced not only the Quakers but also other religious movement in 17th century England.

However, while Puritans tended to see the human nature in a very negative way, accepting the doctrine of original sin and the existence of ever-present demonic forces in a constant battle to win human souls, Fox presented a rather positive alternative view of the human nature and potential with an almost absence of references to demons or the devil. Furthermore, Quakers did not subscribe to the doctrine of original sin and proclaimed that a spark of the divine Spirit resides in each one of us and affirmed the fundamental goodness of humankind.

While a majority of Puritans accepted the Calvinist notion of predestination according to which a sovereign and omnipotent God had established from the beginning of time those elected to be saved and those to be eternally condemned, nothing could have been further from the Quaker's understanding. They asserted that all humanity has a measure of the Light, direct access to God, and the opportunity to live a good and holy life in true communion with God. Fox and the early Quakers taught that it was within the potential of all people to live a virtuous life by, among other things, submitting to the guidance and grace of God.

To live in complete harmony with God also required living in peace with one another. Early Friends were convinced that we cannot be truly happy, nor have inner peace, unless we are true to ourselves. In order to reach true peace and closeness to God our lives cannot be a pretension of what we are not or that we know inwardly to be untrue. This is how integrity became the essential soil for God's seed to be able to grow and eventually bear fruits.

For Fox the search for Truth was not an intellectual exercise but as an encounter with God in the person and ministry of Jesus. In the Gospels' narrative Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life as found in John 14:6. Honesty with ourselves and others was an essential prerequisite to find Truth. But as I mentioned this Truth was not an intellectual assertion but the encounter with God. When early Friends called themselves Publishers of the Truth or Seekers they were not talking of an academic, philosophical, or theological pursuit. They were talking of the encounter with the Jesus of the New Testament as they were intent on bringing back the Church to its pristine origins as recorded in the writings of the New Testament.

Anyone familiar with the writings of early Friends can quickly see their familiarity with the Bible and the tenets and

themes of Christian faith. The Bible and the Christian faith were used to explain and understand what early Friends were experiencing. However, nowadays a significant number of Friends do not relate any more to the Christian faith in favor of universalist or even non-theistic alternatives. Even among Christian Friends there is not unanimity of what it means to be a Christian. But our emphasis on integrity as central to Friends' testimonies has not been diminished.

Coming back to my story, in my own search for what I later recognized as a yearning for integrity and spiritual wholeness I came to a similar state of disappointment. Like Fox, I was feeling profoundly let down by the Church and some of her leaders. In search for spiritual wholeness it is then that I came across the Quakers and decided to visit 57th Street Meeting which was located in the same neighborhood as the Lutheran Seminary. I was already familiar with the history and beliefs of Quakers but needed to see how an actual meeting conducted their corporate life. As you know, there is often a gap between how a religious group sees itself and their actual behavior. I was happy to see that the inconsistencies that I encountered at 57th Street Meeting were within what could be expected in any human group that is trying to live according to some common principles. That happened in 1993 and today I am here talking to you.

When I first visited 57th Street Meeting I met David Finke and David Rutschman, two Friends that have been part of my life ever since. David Rutschman and his wife Marj became our *compadres* when we chose them to be our son Daniel's *padrino* and *madrina* (godparents). In our culture, *padrinos* and *madrinas* become part of the family and are called to take care of their godchildren in case of the absence of the parents. I eventually joined 57th Street Meeting and later transferred my membership to Duneland Meeting, where my wife Priscila and I are currently members.

Between joining 57th Street Meeting and the transfer of my membership to Duneland Meeting, my first marriage ended and this precipitated one of the darkest times for my soul when my ex-wife and my children returned to Puerto Rico. Although I completely supported their return to the island I suddenly found myself essentially alone in Chicago and far from my homeland and my family. Cristi and Yesenia, my two friends, one who gave

the introduction this morning, were there for me and supported me in ways that allowed me to start a healing process that also solidified our friendship. I think that if you ask them they will agree that throughout the years we have become family, the family that is given to you by life and not by blood.

Sometimes God's intervention assumes unexpected forms and if you are open to them, God's grace will make what was broken whole again. I never stopped feeling God's presence, but I think that I also experienced a *noche oscura del alma* (dark night of the soul) episode. This term was coined by two 16th century Spanish mystics named Saint John of the Cross and Saint Theresa of Avila who were later proclaimed Doctors of the Church for their extraordinary contribution to the understanding of the faith. Simply put, a dark night of the soul is when your world is shaken at its foundation, your attachments prove to be a mirage, and you are forced to depend and trust only in God and yourself to bring you back to Light. It is not major depression or dysthymia although it could mimic some of their symptoms.

At its core is God reaching out to dispel falsehood and idolatry and invite the soul to be united with Spirit. I wish that I could do more justice to this important insight developed by St. John and St. Theresa, but we do not have the time. My assumption is that Fox experienced one of these dark nights and came out of it with a new beautiful and liberating understanding that propelled him to his future ministry.

I also believe that something else that has sustained me during my dark nights is a profound sense of gratitude. I cannot explain why I have always had so much when so many of our fellow brothers and sisters have so little. In my case, all these blessings lead me to be grateful and then offer back to live whatever grace I have received in the form of solidarity and care for others.

Eventually, as sad as the end of my first marriage could have been, it is nothing compared to what I felt when two very close family members were diagnosed with serious health conditions that will accompany them for the rest of their lives and may prevent them from accomplishing many things that we all take for granted. This is a constant source of concern and sadness for me. However, I often find myself saying like Job, "Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" (Job 2:10)

I also lost my grandparents and my father which left a profound void in my life. As you should know by now, my grandparents played an essential part in my sense of security and belonging as I knew that no matter where I was, I had a home in Puerto Rico. After their death that home was not there anymore. Once again, Job's words came to me, "I came naked from my mother's womb, and I will be naked when I leave. The Lord gave me what I had, and the Lord has taken it away. Praise the name of the Lord!" (Job 1:21)

But as it often happens, sorrow and happiness share the same timeline in our life's stories and they are truly interwoven. A couple of years after my divorce I started to date my wife Priscila and we eventually married. From our union our son Daniel was born. They are two of my greatest joys in life and together I feel that I have my family back. But if, God forbid, something may happen to them, I know that I can never be far from the love and grace of God. I have experienced the ocean of darkness that Fox mentioned and I can truly testify that it is surrounded by an ocean of light. This I may not be able to prove to you through reason but I know experientially.

A couple of years ago I came across the teachings of an 18th Century Hasidic Rabbi named Nachman of Breslov. By coming close to the Jewish faith and in particular to its Hasidic manifestation I was able to relate to Jesus and my Christian faith in a new and different way. God stopped being the God of Greek philosophy and Latin Church theology and became a more accessible and profoundly personal reality to me. Now when I read the Gospels I am able to see Jesus' message from what I think is a closer perspective to his Jewish identity. I could talk quite extensively about this experience, but I just want to share one small portion of the teachings of Rebbe Nachman. He taught:

It is a great mitzvah to be happy always. Make every effort to maintain a happy, positive outlook at all times. It is a natural human tendency to become discouraged and depressed because of the hardships of life: everyone has their full share of suffering. That is why you must force yourself to be happy at all times. Use every possible way to bring yourself to joy, even by joking or acting a little crazy.

He also taught that

No sophistication is needed in serving God. Only simplicity, sincerity and faith. Simplicity is higher than all else. For God is certainly higher than everything else, and God is ultimately simple.

If joy is something inherently connected to a relationship with God and simplicity is at the center of the worship and service to God, once more the memory of my grandparents feels very close to me. If I am going to follow Rabbi Nachman's advice, in them and their example I had a wonderful model to follow. I have made a resolution to try living my life affirming joy and not feeling fearful. As I am experiencing my transition from middle age to the senior years I am aware of the changes in my body, and the finitude of life is not a theory but a felt reality. My father and my grandparents have already passed away and their generation will soon follow. I am now older than my grandfather was when I was born.

Almost every decision that I make is impacted by the thought that the retirement years are not that far, and then I will be welcoming Sister Death. Death has never really scared me. I was scared and anxious by the idea of people that I love and were close to me dying. Now I know that if I was able to face the death of my grandparents with peace and hope, death truly has lost its sting. Talking from my Christian faith I am ready to join them when my time comes to enjoy in heaven that wonderful family reunion.

I do fear getting disabled or having one of those prolonged illnesses that sometimes afflicts the elderly. I have enjoyed and accepted many blessings in my life, so how can I not also accept whatever suffering may come my way? If anything, I will have a wonderful chance to meet Jesus in the cross in a special intimate way. I also have a Catholic devotion for when it is my time to welcome Sister Death. Saint Joseph is the patron saint of a good death and I learned the following prayer that I hope to be able to say when the time comes for my soul to return to God. It is a prayer to the Holy Family. Something that I treasured about my Catholic past is all the wonderful rituals and faith connections to life's major and not-that-major events with all the smells, sounds, sights, and rituals connected to the normal rhythms of life. Here is the prayer: "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Assist me in my last agony. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, May I die in peace with Thee."

As I advance further in years I am appreciating in new and deeper ways that incredibly rich and powerful otherworld that overlaps with ours and that as a child I experienced so vividly. The division between our reality and the world to come looks evermore thinner, and with a renewed resolution I pray the Lord's Prayer asking for the final realization of God's Kingdom.

I have one last insight that I would like to share with you. I have found that sadness and fear are not the greatest obstacle to joy in my life, but anger is. As a Friend I have made a conscious decision to live by and promote peace, but the level of anger that we experience all around us is just overwhelming. There is so much anger in this world that I can see how many have concluded that sooner or later we will commit the ultimate collective suicide by the use of nuclear or biological weapons, or we will just continue to abuse our planet to the point when human life will be extinguished. It amuses me that at this precise moment there are a multitude of people preparing for the end of civilization and perhaps life in this planet by stockpiling weapons, food, and building shelters in the wilderness.

Sometimes I think that we have not learned anything from our sad and unconcluded history full of violence and wars. If we are going to survive we need to collectively understand that either we are saved together through love and justice, or we are going to die alone and isolated fighting each other to the end. We are one people and the solution to any apocalyptic fear is not to make plans to survive alone, because we will not, but to embrace each other and collectively accept our call to become the family of God. Closer to me, what has been shocking is to realize and consciously acknowledge how much anger resides in me. I am working to understand the origin and locale of this anger and what can be done to expand the presence of peace in my soul.

I am fascinated by the advances in neuropsychology that have shown me ways to understand our violent tendencies and the role of anger in evolutionary theory. And as I have come to see the anger in me, I have also experienced deep seated anger that seems to be increasing in our corporate life as Quakers. Certainly we are not immune to this corrosive and pervasive reality that afflicts human-kind and that many times results in open conflict and even violence.

I want you to look deep into your souls this morning and with me renew your commitment to work for peace and a just

world remembering that peace has to come from within first and that the true test of our commitment and faith is not what we preached, but how we treat ourselves and others. I have one more biblical quote from the Gospel that sometimes has been referred among Friends as the Quaker Gospel.

I give you a new commandment, to love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.
Everyone will know by this that you are my disciples, if
you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35 NET)

Peace starts with us here and now. May we return to our daily lives and our meetings renewed in this understanding and with God's grace in our hearts continue to work for the well-being of all God's creatures big and small that share with us this beautiful planet. May we continue "to work toward justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God." (Micah 6:8)

THE JONATHAN W. PLUMMER LECTURE

Beginning with the 1961 sessions, Illinois Yearly Meeting of Friends proposed to annually honor its first clerk by designating the principal or keynote address, the Jonathan W. Plummer Lecture.

Jonathan Wright Plummer, acknowledged by Quaker Torch Bearers, as the father of Friends General Conference, was born in 1835 at Richmond, Indiana. He died in 1918 at 83 years of age and lies interred at Graceland Cemetery in Chicago.

When he was 39, he moved to Chicago, where he was first with E. R. Burnham & Son, wholesale druggists. Later, this was the Morrison-Plummer Company, wholesale druggists, and is now known as McKesson & Robbins.

He introduced profit-sharing in his business and he practiced tithing, giving one-tenth of his private income and one-tenth of the income from his drug business. He also loaned money freely to people in need. He advocated prison reform.

“He did go to Meeting, headed committees of action, and notably in 1878 wrote letters which were albatrosses about the neck of pious epistolary correspondence. Illinois Yearly Meeting, which he helped to create in 1875, was housed in the country near McNabb, Illinois. Here he came once a year by train to meet with Friends from 10 neighborhoods of Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana, as well as with spiritual leaders from other Yearly Meetings.

“In 1878 he came with a project as clear as a blueprint. Its framework was a conference and its aim to co-ordinate widely scattered activities.... Jonathan Plummer desired a conference that would consider all the social testimonies of Friends. As a result, minute 52 of Illinois Yearly Meeting’s proceedings in 1878 set him at liberty to prepare an address of invitation to the several Yearly Meetings for holding a general conference once in five years or oftener.”

He gave the opening address at the World’s Parliament of Religions (held during the ‘93 Fair), expressing hope for greater helpfulness and for co-operation among all faiths.

“He was not a pronounced religious mystic, as were many earlier Quakers. He listened to the ‘still, small voice,’ and this prompted both charity and vocal ministry.

“He measured up to the test of greatness set by Goethe in that he expressed clearly what others felt but were unable to express. He lived in the midst of what shall not pass away. Whoever is the messenger of its truth brings surprises to mankind. Such was Jonathan W. Plummer.”