

# “WHAT CANST THOU SAY?”

Gwen Weaver

The 2019 Jonathan Plummer Lecture

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

June 23, 2019

## 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.”



Gwen Weaver has been my friend for over 25 years. Her friendship has been a privilege and a blessing.

Gwen was born and raised in Washington, D.C. She was the only child of Bruce and Margaret Weaver. Her father had a law degree. Her mother, with an MSW from Howard University, was a social worker in the Washington, D.C. Child Welfare Department. Gwen's family all had a high regard for education.

From a very young age, Gwen was a quiet introvert. This was a challenge for her parents. They never made her into an extrovert. But they certainly instilled their strong belief in and commitment to education, high standards, hard work, integrity, and a deep concern for social justice.

Today Gwen is a member of Lake Forest Meeting. She is the Associate Director of Academic Advising Services in the School for New Learning at DePaul University in Chicago. In the next weeks, she will be retired from this position, a major change in her life.

Those who know Gwen well, know that she loves (somewhat fiercely) ice cream, cats, books, and jokes. She was not able to get one into her talk, but she made me promise to share one:

What is the Friendliest appliance in your kitchen?  
The refrigerator. It has an Inner Light.

—Introduction by Judy Jager



## “WHAT CANST THOU SAY?”

Good morning, Friends. I am honored that you asked me to speak this morning.

I do it only *because* you asked, as an act of faith.

I chose my title, “What Canst Thou Say?” from George Fox’s journal, to emphasize that I speak only for myself and only out of my experience. I will tell you about my path to becoming a Quaker, what I find wondrous about Quakerism, and finally, my enduring enchantment with *The Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, and the questions I think it raises for us.

Religion was part of my life for as long as I can remember, and I now think there are hints in my earlier experience of why I was drawn to the Religious Society of Friends.

My mother was born in Kentucky and raised in the Baptist church. I remember hearing her talk about spending all day at church on Sundays, first at morning worship service, then staying for afternoon and evening activities.

Among my early childhood memories are annual visits to my mother’s family, by then in Cincinnati, Ohio. We stayed with my grandmother, whom I always knew as a member of Zion Baptist Church. On Sunday, my mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and I would leave together for church. My mother, grandmother, and I would go to my grandmother’s Baptist church, and my great-grandmother would go to her Methodist church. This seemed to happen as a matter of course, and I don’t remember any discussion about it. One of my uncles was a member of the same church as my grandmother, and one of the officers of the church. One of the family stories I think I remember is about the sermon which seemed to refer to my uncle when he and the pastor were in disagreement about a church matter.

Growing up in Washington, D.C., I attended a Baptist church with my mother until I was about eight years old. My father

attended church for weddings and funerals, though when not in church, seemed to me to behave better than many people who spent much more time in church.

After we moved when I was eight, my mother and I attended a church closer to home, now Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, a middle-class African-American church. The church's current website says it was founded in 1881, under the name Plymouth Congregational Church of Washington, D.C. It describes the church's theological roots as resting with the New England Congregationalists, who were historically abolitionists, and involved in founding many of today's Historically Black Colleges and Universities. When the Congregational, Christian, Reformed and Evangelical churches united in 1957 as the United Church of Christ, the church I attended became Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ.

Though I had not joined the Baptist church, I did join Plymouth. I found there a deep spirituality, and a strong commitment to social justice. Then, as now, individual UCC churches have a relatively generous amount of autonomy from the national body of the church. In these ways, the United Church of Christ seems to me not altogether dissimilar from the Religious Society of Friends. There are two memories, though not on the same scale, that stand out from those years in my life.

During the 1960s, Plymouth supported the Freedom Marchers in the South in a variety of ways. I remember one Sunday morning when, near the end of the service, the minister sent the collection plates out among the congregation. When the collection returned to the front of the church where he was standing, he peered into the collection plates, shook his head, and went back up to the pulpit. He then said to his congregation: Many of you can't march due to health problems and age, but you can do a better job of supporting the marchers financially. Then he sent the collection plates back out to the congregation. When they returned this time, he peered into them, nodded his head—this time, in a very satisfied way—and continued with the conclusion of the service.

To return to family, one of my cousins, Dr. Charles Cobb, was a UCC minister. He helped found the UCC's Commission for Racial Justice, and then served as Executive Director of the Commission from 1966 to 1985. The activities of this Commission

have been described by his successors as strengthening the UCC's commitment to racial justice and to the African Americans whose congregations entered the UCC with its formation in 1957. The best-known example started with the arrest of the group that came to be known as the Wilmington 10. In 1972, several religious and community leaders were arrested and imprisoned in North Carolina as a result of their efforts to assist students in a recently integrated North Carolina school. Those arrested included Rev. Ben Chavis, then a UCC community organizer from the field office of the Commission for Racial Justice. Before the group's convictions were overturned 10 years later, Dr. Cobb had, among other things, persuaded the church to pay \$500,000 in bail, and \$250,000 in other legal costs. In 2012, the group was pardoned by the governor of North Carolina.

I remember hearing at various family and holiday gatherings conversation by and about my cousin and his efforts to free the Wilmington 10. I'm now not at all certain I understood all I heard, but I know I heard, and heard about, his unwavering commitment to righting an injustice, and mobilizing the full weight of his denomination behind his efforts. This memory and these events helped form my understanding of what's right, what's important and what's worth doing.

And then I went to Earlham College, where I learned about, and lived among, Quakers. It sounds strange now, even to me, but all I was really looking for was a small liberal arts college in the Midwest with a foreign study program. I wanted a liberal arts college because I enjoyed and did well in humanities and social science courses, and no one, including me, ever imagined I would be a scientist or mathematician. I wanted to go away to school, and had grown up visiting family in the Midwest, and had good memories of those visits. I wanted a school with a foreign study program because I'd studied French in high school and wanted to go to France.

From the first, Earlham was a place where I felt seen and heard. The summer before my senior year, my mother and I went to Earlham during a visit to family in Cincinnati. John Owen, who was then director of admissions, greeted us. He suggested my mother make herself comfortable in the reception area, while he took me into his office for what I later understood served as an admission interview. I was the introvert in my family, so often

when I was out in the world with either or both of my parents, I felt as though I sometimes disappeared into the woodwork. I was astonished that John Owen wanted to talk with me by myself, and at the same time, was most gracious to my mother. After our visit to campus, I made an early decision application to Earlham, applied nowhere else, and was accepted. (Now, it's hard to imagine doing such a thing.) In later years, and until John Owen's death, when I called my mother to say I was back home from a trip to Earlham, she would say, "Did you see John Owen?" In other words, he "saw" both of us.

Now, I'm going to digress slightly, which will surprise no one who has known me for more than two minutes. Though there were not a lot of African-Americans at Earlham when I arrived, I knew there'd been African-Americans there for a long time, having met a friend and contemporary of my father's who was an Earlham alum. Indiana was familiar to me from family visits and family attachments. My father grew up in Marion. Not far from there is the historical site of Weaver, Indiana, a community founded in the 1840s. Family accounts and other historical accounts indicate the community was settled by several African-American families who came to Indiana from the Carolinas with Quakers. I hope to do more research, but in the meantime, I'm pleased that the name "Weaver" has re-appeared on Indiana road maps. You'll find it in Grant County, slightly southeast of Marion, and not far from Fairmount, the home of movie star James Dean. It was named "Weaver" by the postal service, which delivered mail to the general store run by a Weaver. I've not been to Marion recently, but I hope to go in August for the 100th annual family reunion.

To return to Earlham: Though perhaps my decision to attend Earlham was not well-reasoned, I've never regretted it. I knew at the time I got a good education. Having now spent my career in higher ed, I've come to appreciate even more how good it really was. I did go on foreign study, though to Germany, not France. My schedule permitted taking a German language course to satisfy my curiosity about why there were capital letters in the middle of German sentences. The faculty leader for the trip was Martin Dietrich, who grew up visiting his grandparents in Germany, then worked in Germany for the Lutheran church after the war. Most Germans took him to be a native German speaker, and as far as we could tell, there was unlikely to be anywhere in Germany where he



didn't know someone. This included the man in charge of Wartburg Castle where Martin Luther translated the New Testament into German, as well as Gustav Heinemann, president of Germany 1969-1974, with whom we had coffee one afternoon. In Vienna, we learned about the post-war restoration of the Cathedral from one of the men who worked on the restoration.

John Owen was only the first of many extraordinary people I met at Earlham. Only later—much later—did it occur to me that they might have been extraordinary even if they weren't Quakers, though I don't think so. The faculty included outstanding scholars and teachers, many of whom had been conscientious objectors during the war. They were Quakers by birth, or by conviction, and in either case, could tell you what it meant to them to be Quaker, and what difference it made to how they lived their lives. I learned from observation, and by living among them, that being Quaker is not something done only on Sunday, but every day of the week, and that it makes a difference to what one does with respect to things both large and small. I attended meeting, and I learned about Quaker processes for decision-making.

I also learned about community. During my time on campus, there was much anti-war activity, and the war was, of course, a concern on a Quaker campus. Among other things, I remember a day President Landrum Bolling called an unscheduled all-college convocation. An incident related to one of the then-numerous protests against the Vietnam War had occurred. I'm now not certain about the date, but it may have been 1970, when the Ohio National Guard was called to the Kent State University campus in response to students' protest of the US bombing of Cambodia. Before the protest ended, the National Guard fired on the students, who were not armed. Four students were killed, and nine injured. The incident was national and international news and increased campus unrest and war protests. At Earlham, classes were meeting, but not much classwork was getting done. Mid-morning, Landrum made an announcement. He said he'd been visiting classes all over campus, where he found discussions taking place about current events. We are a community, he said, and we will discuss this together. So he called an all-college convocation for the campus community to be together, and have an all-college discussion for as long as we needed—and we did. "Community" had a different meaning for me when I left Earlham

than when I arrived. Earlham taught me that “community” is not only a secular term, it’s also a spiritual term.

I remember sitting at my Earlham graduation thinking that I wasn’t ready to leave. For once, I did good problem solving—in 1984, I became president of the Earlham Alumni Council and thereby, a member of the Board of Trustees. After my term as Alumni Council president ended, I continued on the Board, including chairing the Board for seven years, and am now an Honorary Lifetime Trustee.

As you hear, I’ve never quite gotten over my Earlham upbringing. It pleases me that I wrote part of what you’re hearing while I was on campus week before last for a Board meeting. (It did not please me that I was still writing week before last, but it felt wonderfully right to be writing this at Earlham.)

It was when I joined the Earlham Board that I saw Quaker process at its very best. I don’t know how many of you know that the Earlham Board does business by Quaker process. There’s a provision in the by-laws that, if a decision cannot be delayed, and the Board is unable to reach unity, a vote may be taken. To my knowledge, the Board has never voted. When I went onto the Board, many of the Board members were long-time, life-long, and/or birthright Friends, some from families that had been Friends for many generations. They were practiced at Quaker process and knew how to use it, as intended, as a spiritual practice for discernment. More than once, I’ve participated in Board meetings and in decision-making, when we started in one place, with clarity about our options, and finished in a better place with an option unknown to us when we began.

Among other things, my experience with the Earlham Board convinced me that good process will result in good decisions. For me, Quaker process, done well, is a wonder to behold. By the time I became Board chair, I understood my job to be attending to process, with full confidence that, if the process was well done, the outcome would be the best decision. This understanding also detached me from unalterable personal viewpoints; my remaining unalterable personal viewpoint is my faith in Quaker process. More times than I can count, people have told me they thought chairing the Earlham Board must have been a hard job. To be honest, it feels like one of the easiest things I’ve ever done because I never felt I had to make decisions by myself. I had to be sure the Board had the

information it needed, was clear about the question before us, and that each individual's wisdom was heard and honored, but beyond that, I needed only to try to ensure that we decided *together*. This seems to me another thing Friends got right—collectively, we have more wisdom than any one of us has individually.

Serving as an Earlham trustee continues to be a joy and has continued my Earlham education. I've now served with a variety of individuals, and always, their commitment to Earlham is extraordinary. I've been traveling to Earlham for many years, and I would always be sure to call my mother when I left for campus and when I returned home. A few times, when she knew I was very tired, or very busy, or the weather was precarious, she would start to ask why I was going, or whether I really had to go, but I don't remember her every finishing that sentence. Instead, she would remember what she knew, sigh, and say, "I know, it's Earlham," which was exactly right.

After I graduated from Earlham, I went to grad school, got married, got divorced, got a job and moved to Lincoln Park in Chicago. I did not attend church during some of this time, and then began to attend Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ, which was nearby and which a good friend attended. Wellington was wonderful, and a nurturing, socially active, and spiritual community, as I expected a UCC church to be. I attended for several months, and gradually began feeling dissatisfied. It took me a while to realize that the Sunday services felt too busy, and I wanted to go to meeting. I called Cathy Garra, whom I met when we were both Earlham students, and asked her, "Where's the nearest Quaker Meeting?" Her answer took me to Northside Friends Meeting, where I joined the meeting and became a member of the Religious Society of Friends.

In retrospect, I would say I became a Quaker for several reasons. Sometimes I think I'm Quaker by temperament; I'm an introvert who's usually not comfortable in a noisy world surrounded by extroverts. I learned in my family of origin the importance of social justice, and I found Quakers to be on what I thought was the "right" side of many issues. There seems to me so much that Quakers got right, and got right earlier than most. I grew up thinking it was normal to go to church, and missed it when I did not, though as with most things with me, not just any church would do. Though I don't want to think I took God for granted, I

somehow always understand God as part of life, and the most important and interesting part of life, and of understanding the world. Though I did not mention it earlier, my major at Earlham was Religion. The Religion Department was where I found the things I most wanted to learn, the most interesting courses, and faculty who stood out among so many excellent faculty. Perhaps most importantly, Quakerism seemed to offer the most direct path to God for me, offering fewer distractions, nurturing spiritual growth, and removing intermediaries between me and God. And, it made sense of the world for me. Last, and by no means least, Quaker history is full of good stories, and I love good stories. As Quakers, one way we learn from each other what it means to be a Quaker, and how to be a Quaker, is by sharing our stories, which is another reason I agreed to tell you my story this morning.

During my time at Northside, I was asked to clerk the Meeting, and I agreed. Shortly thereafter, Pat Lucas and Sandy Huntley requested marriage under the care of Northside Friends Meeting. Theirs was one of the first (if not the first) requests for same-sex marriage under the care of an Illinois Yearly Meeting monthly meeting. I spent at least the following two weeks saying to them, separately and together, “You want to do this NOW?” And for a while, that was about *all* I could manage to say to them. As an individual, I favored approving the marriage, but for a variety of reasons, that wasn’t true for all meeting members.

In a memorable moment of spiritual clarity about how to clerk, I realized I didn’t care what the Meeting decided, but I was determined that we would decide it like Quakers. After that, everything seemed easier. I still thought it important to proceed with care, and as faithfully as possible. The meeting was comprised of individuals of different ages and generations, straight and gay, married and not, with varying degrees of experience as Quakers, and with Quaker process. We took a year. We talked with one another individually and collectively. I watched people who were opposed in principle to same sex marriage find it difficult to oppose the marriage of Pat and Sandy, whom they knew and liked. A long-time and experienced Quaker spent much of the year struggling to reconcile his understanding of same-sex marriage with his conception of his own heterosexual marriage of many years, and with his friendship with Pat and Sandy. He modeled for all of us how to do it like a Quaker. I

believe we all benefited, and grew as Quakers, from witnessing him fulfill what he felt to be his spiritual obligation, by keeping himself in an uncomfortable place in order to reach spiritual clarity—which he did! At the meeting where the decision was made, I asked each person to speak her/his approval for all of us to know and hear. I remember hearing things that surprised me, that made me laugh, and that nearly moved me to tears. It was truly a meeting for worship with a concern for business, and I heard much ministry that morning.

After changing jobs, and moving to Evanston, I transferred my membership to Lake Forest Friends Meeting, where I remain today.

Now I want to turn to consideration of Levi Coffin. I hope my Quaker autobiography, as I've shared it here, will help you understand my enduring fascination with *The Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*.<sup>\*</sup> While not forgetting that Coffin's reminiscences include dramatic stories about serious matters of life and death, I've always thought he wrote a great adventure story that would make a wonderful movie. Readers also find that Levin Coffin had a well-developed sense of humor. He admits to a moment when he was feeling mischievous and acted accordingly (Coffin, 233). He also admits that his wife (at least once) reproved him for being mischievous (Coffin, 352). In one account of diverting a man in pursuit of a fugitive, Coffin says, "...I had certainly deceived him but told no untruth" (Coffin, 28).

While I enjoy reading and rereading Coffin's reminiscences, his writing raises for me questions I cannot answer that I want to share with you this morning. I experienced these questions in another context last fall when I re-visited the Coffin house in Indiana. Standing in the house, I wondered what it would be like to have the spiritual certainty with which Levi and Catherine Coffin pursued their work as abolitionists in 19th century Indiana. (I regret that I've not found a first-person account of Catherine's experience, but we know that the two of them worked together in their opposition to slavery.)

Since I first read the *Reminiscences*, I have never ceased to wonder: **How and why was Levi Coffin able to do what he did? Where did he find the courage and steadfastness that sustained him?**

---

<sup>\*</sup> Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, edited by Ben Richmond (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1991).

To put it another way: **What do Levi Coffin's Reminiscences tell us about ourselves as Friends? What are Friends called to do today and how can we know?**

Coffin begins his *Reminiscences* by describing his last few years living in North Carolina. There, he'd already begun aiding fugitives in their escapes, taught reading classes for people who were still enslaved and founded what may have been the first Sabbath schools for Friends. He tells us of his marriage to Catherine White in 1824, on his 26th birthday, in the meetinghouse of Hopewell Meeting, where Catherine's family were members. He says that he and Catherine had known each other since childhood, growing up in the same neighborhood (Coffin, 57).

The marriage endured; *The New York Times* published an article in 1874 describing their 50th anniversary celebration in a meetinghouse in Cincinnati, where both colleagues and beneficiaries of their work as abolitionists were present. The article also notes that they repeated "the peculiar ceremony of the Quaker society which united them as man and wife fifty years ago" (*The New York Times*, November 2, 1874.5).

As the laws regulating slavery became more oppressive, the Coffins, like many Friends in their area, concluded that "Slavery and Quakerism could not prosper together" (Coffin, 47), and moved West. In 1826, Catherine and Levi Coffin moved to Newport (now Fountain City), Indiana.

In Newport, Levi found himself living on one of the stations of the Underground Railroad, and became so active a conductor that he became known for more than 30 years as the "President of the Underground Railroad." It seems generally accepted that one of the episodes and locations described by Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is borrowed from the life of Levi Coffin. I've read that the Coffins helped over 300 people escape slavery, and the *Reminiscences* describe many escapes on the Underground Railroad with the Coffins' help.

After 20 years, the Coffins left Newport for Cincinnati. By then, Levi was involved with a group of abolitionists who organized a store selling only goods produced by free labor and was persuaded to become proprietor of the store. We also read about the Coffins' work providing food, shelter and clothing to fugitives from slavery and to free people of color. Coffin describes a trip to Canada where he encounters some of those he helped to

freedom, a trip to England, where he visited London Yearly Meeting, and his work with freedmen's associations during the American Civil War. Along the way, he tells us that Frederick Douglass visited his house, and that during his work with the Western Freedmen's Aid Commission, General Grant approved free transport of all supplies for the freedmen and for the Commission's agents and teachers (Coffin, 359). *The New York Times* reported Levi Coffin's death in September of 1877 at about age 75 (*The New York Times*, September 17, 1877).

I do not yet feel that I understand Levi Coffin's spiritual certainty about his work as an abolitionist. At the same time, his *Reminiscences* offer some clues that seem necessary, if not sufficient, to understanding why he was able to do what he did.

**More than once Levi Coffin says he must obey the Bible and the laws of humanity**, even though, as we see, they will bring him into conflict with federal and state law and with Indiana Yearly Meeting. He recalls an occasion while he was still living with his parents in North Carolina when his family sheltered an enslaved woman with a sick child who was fleeing her owner. He says, "The dictates of humanity came into opposition to the law of the land, and we ignored the law" (Coffin, 9). In Newport, he asked the Friends among whom he settled why they did not help fugitives fleeing enslavement, then says,

I found they were afraid of the penalty of the law. I told them that I read in the Bible when I was a boy that it was right to take in the stranger and administer to those in distress, and that I thought it was always safe to do right. The Bible, in bidding us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, said nothing about color, and I should try to follow out the teachings of that good book (Coffin, 69-70).

In a different context, he says he "...did not feel bound to respect human laws that came in direct contact with the law of God" (Coffin, 203).

Once, when a friend warned Levi Coffin of verbal threats, Coffin says he, ...thanked him for his kindness, but told him that I felt no fear of danger. I had obeyed the commands of the Bible, and the dictates of humanity, in feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and aiding the oppressed, and I felt no condemnation for it (Coffin, 124).

**I also find suggestions in Coffin's Reminiscences of our aspirations as Friends to "let our lives speak."** Of the prospect of standing trial in Indiana for violating the Fugitive Slave Law, Coffin says he felt no alarm, but rather that his conviction in court "might be the means of advancing the anti-slavery cause..." (Coffin, 127). In preparation for opening the store in Cincinnati, Coffin and others traveled to the South to purchase free-labor goods. He says of those travels, "I believe that our traveling through the cotton growing States and buying free-labor cotton, encouraging paid labor and discouraging unpaid labor, were the means of preaching abolitionism in the slave States, and was really pleading the cause of the poor slave" (Coffin, 200).

While not forgetting the differences between himself and those he helps, **Coffin also maintains an awareness of the humanity he shares with his "passengers."** He writes of several occasions on which he was able to imagine the feelings of the fugitives he was assisting, mentioning fear, anxiety, distress and hunger (Coffin, 11, 34). At a later time, after listening to the experiences of a group recently escaped from slavery, he says he was "renewedly convinced that many of the Lord's children were to be found among the poor untutored slaves" (Coffin, 364-5).

When in need of comfort and guidance for his work, Coffin turns to God, and to the community around him. He speaks of "praying earnestly" (Coffin, 173), and of feeling that "Providence seemed to favor our efforts..." (Coffin, 79). While traveling to Mississippi by ship, he says he spent much time on deck reading what he calls "my pocket Bible, my daily companion" (Coffin, 306). At another time, after successfully eluding men seeking a fugitive from slavery, he says, "In looking back over the work of the past few days, I felt that the hand of God was in it. He had blessed my efforts; he had guided my steps; he had strengthened my judgment" (Coffin, 28).

Coffin speaks of his trepidation in deciding to visit England in 1884 to seek support for his work on behalf of formerly enslaved people who had recently been emancipated. Then, he says, "After much thought and earnest prayer, the path in that direction seemed clear" (Coffin, 375). Coffin goes to England and meets with great success, though he also describes a time there when he felt "lonely and depressed in spirit" (Coffin, 379), and not equal to the tasks of public speaking which lay before him. Unable



to sleep well, he tells us he “...prayed earnestly for divine guidance and direction in all my movements, and toward morning the cloud seemed to pass from my mind” (Coffin, 379).

In addition to these individual practices, Coffin mentions practices involving others. Over the years, he worked with a variety of organizations, some of which I noted earlier. He mentions an occasion when he “called a council of my particular friends, those who stood by me and sustained me in all my anti-slavery efforts” (Coffin, 102). Later, he addresses the 13-year separation of Indiana Yearly Meeting, and his conversations about it with British Friends who visited Indiana. He speaks of the reorganization of Indiana Yearly Meeting and the establishment of the Yearly Meeting of Anti-Slavery Friends as the result of time spent in “prayerful deliberation” (Coffin, 168). Speaking to British Friends distressed by the separation, Coffin assures them that anti-slavery Friends felt the cost and suffering of separation, and their meetings leading to the decision to separate “had been much blessed,” with “abundant evidence that our assemblies had been owned by the great Head of the Church” (Coffin, 170). In fact, he suggests that separation is, in part, for the sake of being able to continue to enjoy religious society (Coffin, 170). It is then no surprise when he says, “...a reunion was finally effected, to the rejoicing of many hearts on both sides” (Coffin, 167).

I’ve shared these passages from the *Reminiscences* at length, partly because I love the writing, but also as evidence that Coffin sought guidance for his work not only in individual religious practices, but also in corporate practices, as Friends do today.

Our Meetings for Worship, as well as our Meetings for Worship with particular concerns, are *corporate* spiritual practices, as are the Clearness Committees we think appropriate in a variety of circumstances. This suggests to me an indivisibility between our individual and corporate practices as Friends. It also suggests that it is what we do as individuals that sustains our corporate practice, which in turn, helps us sustain our individual practices. **We cannot be Friends without one another; the strength of our Religious Society depends on each of us.**

In many ways, Levi Coffin is still a mystery to me. Like the Quakers I met at Earlham, and like many of you, Levi Coffin was extraordinary, and I think it’s clear that being a Friend made him more so. I believe he has much to teach us, and I hope my

relatively superficial account of his *Reminiscences* will entice you to read or re-read them.

Then, I look forward to hearing your answers to the questions **What do Levi Coffin's *Reminiscences* tell us about ourselves as Friends? What are Friends called to do today and how can we know?**

In the meantime, one of Levi Coffin's lessons for me is that we are called to be faithful, and it is from faithfulness that all else will follow. To give my Plummer Lecture a corporate conclusion, I ask that we sing—together—"Be Thou my Vision."