

Where Have I Come From? Where Am I Going?

Richard Boyajian

The 1988 Jonathan Plummer Lecture

Presented at

Illinois Yearly Meeting
of the

Religious Society of Friends

McNabb, Illinois

August 7, 1988

One day in India in 1968, several U.S. science teachers, who were in India on a summer teaching project, were invited to a meeting of a Lions Club chapter in a small suburban university town outside a medium-sized city named Vizakhapatnam. I was one of those teachers. One of the others in the group had been asked to address the Lions Club.

While listening to the address, I had a premonition that I, too, would be called on to say something of note to the assembled Lions Club members. And so, while I listened to the advertised speaker, I thought and thought. And presto! I came up with a topic: Cooperatives in America. And sure enough, at the termination of the first presentation, I was asked to do likewise give an address. Little did the assembled group know that I was preparing my as-yet unrequested

presentation, while I listened to the first speaker. I invoked the Boy Scout advice I learned thirty-four years previously: Be Prepared. And do you know what? I WAS prepared. I expounded for 45 minutes, ad lib, on my experiences in the cooperative movement in America, from a babysitter's swap to the housing co-op in which I still live.

I thank the planners of this IYM gathering for not waiting until three minutes ago to ask me to present this year's Plummer Lecture. The invitation came last fall. Just as the topic in that talk twenty years ago in India was of my choosing and was drawn from one aspect of my life experience, so is the topic of this presentation of my choosing, but it is more encompassing in nature. After all, I've had eleven months to think about it, just enough time for me to complete the first full draft early this week under the care of a Plummer Lecture Writing Clearness Committee of the Fifty-Seventh Street Meeting of Friends. The title: "Where Have I Come From? Where Am I Going?"

It's to be a sort of mini-autobiography, and will be an exploration into what factors in my life molded me into what I have become.

I stand before this gathering as a human, a man, a husband and father, a merchant, an Armenian, and a nature lover. As I continue this accounting to you of what I am, I invite you to contemplate what a diverse creature you too are, even at the expense of your not being fully attentive to what I tell you I am. You may tune out and do as I've suggested, but for no other reason. After all, my purpose is to stimulate you to think through your life as I've thought through mine. When I have finished my enumeration, I'm going to ask you how many of these things I am, you, too, are. I am also a cook, a scientist, a recycler, a singer, a Chicagoan, a pacifist, a car driver, a camper, a world traveler, a night-owl, a hiker, a folk dancer, a grower of house plants, a penny-pincher, a holder of an M.S. in biochemistry, and finally, underlying it all, binding together all these things, I am a Quaker, a convinced one.

I was a high school and middle school biology teacher, a student, a male child keenly aware that my parents were immigrants from oppression, a Boy Scout, a door-to-door magazine salesboy, a soldier, a choir member, a high school journalist, a Chicago Cub fan, a camp counselor, a teacher-trainer, a nature photographer, a college camping trip organizer, and a bicyclist.

Now show me by a raising of your hand if you can claim to be at least four of those things that I am or have been.

I really expected all hands to go up, for I have included the fact that I am a human and a Quaker. All you need are two more!

We are all diverse individuals. We all have a multiplicity of interests and dislikes. The big question is, "What made each of us what we are today?" What elements in my past made me what I am today? What do my beliefs and likes stem from? What elements in your past molded you?

It's rather hard to know with certainty what events and experiences in my past propelled me to what I now do and what I believe. I can tell you my interests, my beliefs, my positions. I can tell

you what some of my experiences were. But I can't pinpoint too well what caused what. I do recall a sophomore English teacher enrolled me in a junior journalism class, instead of the standard third-year English class, without my prior approval. That led to my working as one of the editors of the school newspaper, which meant I was part of a creativity team producing a weekly newspaper. I liked doing that. Did that contribute to my decision to become a teacher, a position that gave me a free hand to create new kinds of laboratory and field trip experiences for biology students?

So what else molded me? Knowledge of my heritage? Knowledge that my loving parents and their parents left eastern Turkey to start a new life in the United States? Or was it my own innate, original thinking? My public education? My urban environment? My informal education, as provided by my family and by the Methodist Church I grew up in? My post-high school biological and chemical training? My thirty years as a biology teacher? My thirty-nine years' association with Quakers? My regular reading of newspapers and magazines and an occasional book? Probably all of these, and more.

The underlying belief, from which flows much of what I hold to, is my concept of God. This takes me back to my and my wife's marriage vows of 32 1/2 years ago, which began with the traditional, or should I say trite, phrase: "In the presence of God, I take thee to be my wife/husband." In an attempt to depersonify God, to describe a God different from the Yahweh of the Old Testament, we chose a modification that went like this: "In the presence of God, the all-pervading spirit of the universe, I take thee to be my wife/husband." More recently, I progressed in my religious search to the point where "God, the all-pervading spirit of the universe" must give way to "God, the creative force of the universe." To me, this describes the relationships between the ultimate particles of all matter and the various manifestations of what we call energy, which makes all things what they are. Thus when I say there is that of God in all people, I must continue to say, "There is that of God in all things, both animate and inanimate." There is a light within all things, whether they be stellar, solar, planetary, organic, inorganic, systemic, molecular, atomic, nuclear or subnuclear. That light or creative force which comprises all things permits them to fill their niche in the overall scheme of existence. So I challenge us Quakers to extend our concept of the God within all people to the God without, that is, the creative force within all things.

But where did my concept of God come from? It certainly wasn't my parents' belief. I doubt they knew much about atoms and molecules. My mother prayed to Astvatz, the Armenian word for the supernatural God. It wasn't what I learned in Methodist Sunday School. I can't even say it was an outgrowth of specific messages heard in Quaker meeting for worship. And the concept of the nature of matter and energy I learned in college and graduate school classes was not classified as a divine concept. God was never mentioned. I remember the horror and disgust of an avowed atheistic college classmate when he heard that the chemistry professor, for whom he had great respect, was an orthodox Mormon.

It took me to put the two ideas together for myself. I can say I was conditioned to do that by my parents who allowed me to develop my own interests. I was also conditioned by my science training which encouraged free inquiry. My mother was openly upset on learning of my rejection

of the existence of a supernatural God. Her comment was: "One of us is wrong." Her death shortly after cut off our reaching a resolution of our differences.

I wish to conclude this portion of my comments with a statement to those people who feel that required doctrinal prayers belong in public schools. There are better, non-coercive ways to help people to arrive at their fundamental beliefs.

Primarily within the human species, and perhaps to a small degree within the sub-human or pre-human species, and just possibly slightly within some non-primate species, the God within has developed in such a way that we possess a second-stage creativity. We have those attributes we associate with humanity: reflective thinking, compassion, invention, discovery, complex language, love, hate, discrimination between right and wrong, and contemplation about our own existence, to name a few.

These attributes hold the potential to evolve and change over time, both within individuals and within human societies. Our capacity for learning far exceeds that of other species. Can I speak of a secondary God within us that permits us to create, and knowingly so? The primary creative force that led to the development of the inanimate, and ultimately the animate world, is not a knowing creativity. The secondary one is. The secondary creativity depends on the existence of the primary creativity. We humans are working at creating machines that can, in turn, create. Should that come to pass, we would have created a third-stage or tertiary creativity, and probably, a non-knowing one.

I can't help but ponder where the human capacity to create has taken us, given the legions of examples of human inhumanity to other humans and inhumanity (if I may call it that) to the environment on which we rely for our existence. The culmination is reached in the numerous wars and massacres we all know about, catastrophic to humans and other species alike, and potentially to much of our physical environment.

The Earth has a special existence; it's a treasure within the universe with its development of living things. All stars and planets and their moons consist of inanimate matter. Even though there may be other planets with life forms, such planets, to our knowledge, exist only as statistical possibilities. And if they do exist, they are unknown light years away. So the earth is a rarity, and as such, life is a rarity, and therefore, precious. Thus, the earth and whatever sustains life, is precious and deserves reverent treatment. This is my premise. What people have done to the earth has been a desecration, a desanctification, to their own peril.

While thoughtfully assembling my ideas for today, I became more aware than previously of my feeling of preciousness toward the earth. I feel a kinship with various societies of people who, as a matter of group philosophy, treasure the earth and all therein, who on taking the life of an animal for food, apologize to it, or hold a spiritual ceremony as part of the event. I am also aware of the sacred places of different native American tribes and of litigation involving their attempt to recover these sacred places from the United States Government for perpetual stewardship by the tribes. In a sense, our national parks come close to being sacred places to us. One major difference is that we manage to crisscross them with highways, and fill up significant portions of them with lodges, cabins, parking lots and a host of other amenities. The Native Americans knew

how to use a place and not make major alterations to it, much as we are supposed to treat our wilderness areas. But we have a habit of reclassifying some of our natural areas such that a wilderness area may lose its pristine status and be subject to logging, dam-building, mining, hunting and road-building. Can you conceive of a Native American tribe reclassifying *its* sacred place?

Also, while preparing these comments today, I developed a greater awareness of my wonderment for commonplace natural events, things, and relationships. Here's one small example. I marvel at the variation of the shapes of leaves, not only on different species of familiar plants, but specifically on red mulberry and sassafras trees. I don't know where to find a sassafras tree around Illinois Yearly Meeting grounds, but I do know where the mulberry trees are. I have some samples here. Some look like traditional right-hand mittens, but others look like traditional left hand mittens, and still others look like a mitten with a place for the thumb, another place for the pinkie finger and a third place for the remaining three fingers. What complex, delicate process within the mulberry tree dictates to each leaf what it shall become? What conceivable function could be served by such shape variation? This leaf shape variation is present in the sassafras tree as well.

I also marvel at how we can distinguish the sassafras aroma from a large constellation of aromas. A specific biochemical emanates from the tree, and is detected by our olfactory organ in a highly-specific manner. And in some fashion, a neural impulse is transmitted to our brain where the nerve impulse triggers an obscure chain of events that allows us to identify the specific biochemical aroma and to exclaim: "SASSAFRAS", or we can do the same with another biochemical aroma and elatedly cry out "STRAWBERRY", or "ONION". Not only does the sassafras tree emit a specific biochemical, but also the tree produces it by way of a complex series of reactions within its cells. Each reaction in the complex series of reactions is presumably controlled by a set of specific genes in a highly-structured portion of a still-more-highly-structured cell. And the marvel of it all is that this complex process evolved over an unknown number of years from antecedent cells that didn't possess such capability. That, of course, is a Darwinian type of explanation, but I would marvel at all of this just as much if I believed instant creation of each species were the way species came about.

I'm tempted to use the word "miraculous" when I contemplate the manner in which the kidney cells cleanse our blood. Still more "miraculous" are the complex relationships between our various endocrine glands which control one another in a feedback mechanism that in normal health keeps the body in hormonal balance. This hormonal balance undergoes alterations at certain stages of life, such as puberty, and at conception. I marvel still more at what is involved at the cellular level when it comes to learning and memory. But I can't use the word "miraculous," for that implies a supernatural event and my belief is that supernatural events are impossible. If it can happen, it's natural.

I'll explain it this way. I go to a lot of house sales where, as at flea markets, one person's trash is another person's treasure. To my good fortune, at a recent house sale I came across a 12½-cent paperback entitled "A God Within" by Rene Dubos, a renowned research scientist and prolific popular science writer. Here it is. My delight was immeasurable -- a Quaker title very much related to the main thought of my Plummer lecture. So I quickly plunked down a quarter for this

and another paperback. I have to acknowledge that Dubos arrived at the wonderment I have expressed about life before I did, and expressed such views in this small volume copyrighted in 1972. I would like to read the following quotation from Dubos' book:

I should not speak of miracles, since I know that there is order in creation and that the world of matter and the world of life are governed by the same universal laws. All material objects, different as they may appear to be, are built out of the same fundamental particles and forces. All living creatures derive a fundamental unity from their common origin in some primordial protoplasm that presumably emerged from [inanimate] matter more than 3 billion years ago and has continued to evolve and differentiate ever since.

Let me now turn my attention to this precious, yes, sacred environment of ours.

Natural cataclysms of the past in the form of tremendous volcanic eruptions and continental ice sheets have wreaked havoc on existing ecological systems. Human-induced cataclysms have occurred in the form of nuclear test explosions, herbicide use in war to denude large areas, and heavy pollution of rivers and lakes, to name a select few. So there is a philosophical question. If natural cataclysms can wreak havoc and cause a totally new ecological balance to form, what's so terrible about humans doing likewise? Even simple agriculture creates new ecosystems. Modern mechanical agriculture with its use of machines, inorganic fertilizers, plant hormones and organic pesticides, and total clearing away of the original vegetative cover from millions of square miles totally disrupts the land and its living organisms. Eventually, a new ecological balance is reached.

We can't even say that natural catastrophes are slow in their development and effects and that human induced catastrophes are rapid and immediately devastating. The volcanic eruption on Krakatoa Island, in what is now Indonesia, in 1883 produced worldwide effects when two-thirds of the island was spewed into the atmosphere. Also, earthquakes can be destructive immediately, usually locally. And the human spreading of nondegradable organic pesticides has a less immediate effect. But there is still a slowly accumulating level of such chemicals in our total environment.

So our argument to respect environment must depend on a different ethic than just to conserve the status quo. The earth has recovered from the volcanic eruption on Krakatoa as well as from the 1950's nuclear test explosions on Eniwetok and Bikini Islands. It has even recovered from the devastation of the spread of several continental ice sheets. The recovery in each case was to a new ecological balance different from that disrupted. Our aim should be to avoid disrupting and harming humans by destroying forests of value to us for fuel, construction, and recreation. Our aim should be to avoid poisoning our bodies of water and underground water, and to minimize soil erosion. We also need to maintain the genetic diversity of a host of species, both domestic and wild, to allow for global adjustment to changed climatic and other factors, and one way to maintain this genetic diversity is to maintain sizable natural areas worldwide wherein the various

species can survive. In addition, it is spiritually uplifting for many people to spend time in such natural areas.

I wish to say more on the use of agricultural insecticides, since this is a topic on which we have great division of opinion within Illinois Yearly Meeting, within this meetinghouse. Our aim should be to phase out the use of broad-spectrum, nondegradable, synthetic organic insecticides in favor of biodegradable chemicals targeted to particular species we wish to control. We should avoid placing full responsibility for the problem I claim exists on farmers who use the chemicals. Likewise, we should avoid dismissing the concerns of those who complain about their use. Rather, the onus can be placed in large measure on the chemical companies which produce and market the insecticides for a profit. They have the research facilities and the personnel who have the capacity to develop alternative pest control methods more acceptable to everyone.

Having said all that, I now wish to offer you *Boyajian's Environmental Manifesto*:

I hold this truth to be self-evident: that the survival of all humanity is enhanced when each human takes personal responsibility to personally avoid environmentally destructive actions and when each human seeks to convince other humans, governments, and other organizations to do likewise.

I also have *Boyajian's Environmental Impact Statement* to share with you:

I promise to take personal responsibility to minimize my effect on the environment.

I will minimize my fuel use and my use of water.

I will bury my degradable garbage.

I will recycle all paper goods, metals, and glass and will press for the development of the recycling of all plastic materials.

I will minimize my purchase of packaged products.

I will give monetary donations to groups which work for environmental preservation and improvement.

Further, I will seek to convince others to follow in my footsteps, no matter how intransigent they may appear to be.

Let us now give recognition to the need to nurture humans.

Our belief in the divine spark, which I call the creative force, in each human dictates that we pay serious attention to individuals and groups who feel they are treated with discrimination or paternalism or who believe they are neglected. The '60's have been described as the decade of blacks, the '70's as the decade of women, and the '80's as the decade of the disabled. Who will tomorrow's newly-discovered oppressed be?

As time progresses, I have become aware of one group after another which feels discriminated against. One discrimination of which I was unaware until very recently involves blind people seeking to be treated non-paternalistically. There are also those disabled in their physical mobility who keep pressing for full accessibility to public accommodations. And homosexuals are battling a series of actions that they regard as abuses, taunts, mistreatments and misunderstandings. Quakers, including all of us here, are already facing the question of giving our blessing to homosexual marriages. The question has the potential of generating hurtful feelings within Meetings. Will we face the issue with the conviction that there is that sacred creative force within each of us? Will we reach consensus without schism?

Why do we need to be alerted to the existence of a discrimination by the person or group feeling discriminated against? Why do we sometimes need convincing that a discrimination exists? Not too many years ago I thought the only types of discrimination were racial and religious. I've learned otherwise.

What does it take for a social movement to spring forth? You can always start with yourself by re-examining your personal beliefs and positions. It took a Martin Luther with his ninety-five theses nailed to a door to bring on the Reformation. It took a Rosa Parks to dare to sit in a whites-only section on a bus to spark the largely peaceful elimination of a number of publicly-sanctioned anti-black practices. Gandhi's struggle for Indian independence is partly traceable to Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience, and in turn was influential in Martin Luther King's support for Rosa Parks.

In the United States, Quaker Mary Dyer gave her life for her insistence on religious freedom, and religious freedom was broadened as a result of her martyrdom. Galileo was forced to retract his statement that the earth revolved around the sun. Five-hundred years later, in our time, the Roman Catholic church formally acknowledged its error and now officially accepts the concept that the earth is in fact a planet of the solar system. Just this week the United States government did a little better by letting only forty-six years elapse before admitting its mistake in interning our West Coast Japanese population.

Some years ago Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois, a former member of the 57th Street Meeting, mailed a newsletter to his constituents. An article entitled "Winning Lost Causes" appeared in that newsletter. About that time he was embroiled in the effort to set aside, as a national lakeshore, the remaining part of the Indiana Dunes bypassed by industry. That effort was largely successful though success at various points seemed unattainable.

Underlying all these moves for social change is the recognition of the sacred light within that needs nurturing. It may be clothed in other expressions. It may be stated in ways you would not at first recognize, like extending the rights of the individuals or sharing the wealth. Any practice

or social condition offending human dignity can be confronted in a dignified way, in a way to recognize the creative spark in the offender. That is, love thine enemy. Paul Douglas basically said, "If you believe in the rightness of your position on a social issue, remaining indefatigable in pressing for the removal of the social ill is the way to go." Certainly, change or removal of an injustice is not likely to occur unless you remain steadfast in your efforts to bring about change.

It is easy to conclude that your tiny effort counts for little. I once calculated, after giving annual donations to the Save-the-Redwoods League for a number of years, that after taking into account matching funds of the state of California, our family had purchased two-plus acres of prime redwood forest.

At this point it seems appropriate to sing a little song, with modified words so that the language is inclusive.

One person's hands can't put an end to war;
Two person's hands can't turn the world to peace;
But if two and two and two can make a million,
We'll see that day come 'round.
We'll see that day come 'round.

I continue with a brief anecdote of members of my family. I have a daughter who worked for five years in a day care center in Olympia, Washington. She kept pressing for health care coverage for the employees without being obnoxious about it. Then one fine day, to her delighted surprise, the powers that be agreed. The same thing happened at my wife's place of work where she kept nudging those in authority to offer HMO coverage. It is now a reality. If people are sacred, then their level of health should be of sacred concern to us.

It is not possible for this presentation to deal with all issues involving the nurturing of humans. I have chosen to deal with two more. The first deals with tobacco-smoking.

In recent years, non-smokers have become vocal regarding the effect of tobacco smoke on everyone's health. We are at the point now of accelerating public action to limit smoking in public places nationwide on the basis of convincing statistical evidence of the harmful effects of smoke on non-smokers. The current Surgeon General strongly supports such action. Economic dislocation will come if smoking declines drastically, as it may. We should show as much concern for the tobacco farmer needing to learn how to raise a different crop as we show for the non-smoker whose health is harmed by smoke. We can put it on the basis of nurturing the creative force in everyone. I'm not so sure how I should apply this to the cigarette companies and their lawyers who labor fervently to keep things as they are. Nor do I know how to nurture the magazine owners whose income from cigarette advertising may diminish.

The last of my topics is concerned with the major mind-altering drug and disease-producing beverage in the country, if not the world: ethyl alcohol. The use of alcohol as a beverage is looked upon as socially acceptable by the overwhelming majority of the U.S. population,

including a number of us in this meetinghouse. At the risk of sounding pontifical and offending some here, I'll have to say that I believe far more harm has come from the legal use of alcohol since Prohibition was repealed than was caused by the illegal use of alcohol during Prohibition. This is one main reason I question the legalization of other mind-altering drugs. I feel much more endangered by people who use alcohol than I do by people who smoke tobacco. All too many individuals I know seem not to mind drinking some and then driving. Their blood alcohol level may be within the legal limit, but I wouldn't want to be a rider in a car driven by such a person. My contention is that their driving judgment is submaximal. Condoning social drinking, to me, is condoning all the heartache that comes from broken homes, beaten wives, abused children, auto fatalities, and all the health afflictions that accompany the mild to gross overuse of alcohol. My drastic statement is that the imbibing of one drop is overuse. The best way to nurture the divine creative force within you is to avoid alcohol altogether. Any encouragement given anyone to use alcohol increases the probability of misuse to the point of harmful health effects.

There is no doubt in my mind that certain portions of what I have said today have unsettled some of you. It was my intention to do so while sharing some personal beliefs and concerns. Where there is disagreement as to content, we can think lovingly of one another, continue to re-examine one another's positions and be influenced by them.

In closing, I offer a prayer to my non-personal God:

All praise to the creative forces of the universe. May the creative force in each of us assist us in being helpful, understanding, loving, and forgiving towards one another in all ways. May we conduct ourselves so that the creative force in others can treat us in like manner, so that all people may have their physical and spiritual needs met.