

Transforming Hearts, Souls, and Minds:

Two Quaker Perspectives

JOHN EDMINSTER

"Bringing the Triennial Back Home"

TERRI JOHNS

"Finding God in the Midst of our Brokenness"



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BRINGING THE TRIENNIAL BACK HOME

John Edminster

“We need a transformation of hearts, souls, and minds across the half a million people we represent,” declared General Secretary Sylvia Graves in her keynote address to the Friends United Meeting Triennial. Holding up the image of Friends United Meeting as Friends’ corporate response to Jesus’ Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-16), she concluded, “Be willing to change — your mindset, your attitude, your trust level. There is a fresh wind blowing.... May we be changed, as God sees fit.”

Call me credulous, but I think such transformation is possible — even in my theologically mixed, liberal meeting, where Christ-centered Friends often shake hands at the end of the hour with Friends who may never have heard of the Great Commission and might cringe at the thought of the meeting’s being the Church of Christ. But of course! If such a transformation of heart is possible in a sixty-eight year-old creature of habit like me, then it’s also possible in the meeting I belong to. And if it’s possible in that meeting, which is like so many other meetings, then it’s possible throughout the whole world’s household of faith, where, as Paul told the Athenians (Acts 17:30b), God now commands everyone, everywhere, to repent. God never asks us to do what we can’t do. In fact, I believe, repentance or metanoia, rightly understood, is not something “we” do, but is granted us as a gift (Acts 11:18). One need only welcome it.

Ever the optimist, I returned to my meeting from the Triennial full of hopes for a grand metamorphosis in my own character — “beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, being changed into the same image,” 2 Corinthians 3:18, ushering in a whole new way of looking at people, things, the world we

live in, our calling as Friends — and a readiness to obey Christ in all new ways. Perhaps I might see my meeting through fresh, more charitable eyes! But my unhappiness with the quality of our vocal ministry during our hour of unprogrammed worship showed that I was still the same old judgmental me, ready enough to complain but without a loving, creative solution to suggest.

Books sometimes have a way of almost jumping off the shelf when I'm carrying a concern in prayer, and then opening to just the right page. That week, I picked up a copy of Mary Glenn Hadley's *Come Pray* (Friends United Press, 2001), where I read these words (pp. 76-77):

Our society strongly encourages individual rights. This thought pattern has subtly found its way into the church making it very difficult to experience fully the power of corporate leading for the body of Christ.

As I visit churches, I find that prayer is considered something very private. Many people say they pray alone. Yet when opportunity is given to pray together, people fall silent, seemingly unable to talk with God when in the presence of others. The forces of evil are very afraid of prayer. Are our churches weak because we are not claiming the power of prayer?

The following Sunday I surprised myself. After about half an hour of silence, I rose to my feet trembling and called out: *The one God we all worship now calls Fifteenth Street Meeting to learn to pray for itself, so that it might learn to speak with one voice and one heart.*

This was new. Friends had called on us before to pray for ailing loved ones or suffering populations far away, but never, in my memory, for ourselves — considered as one unity! And then came a sequel, a seed-idea of how to get that learning process

started. For this I'm deeply indebted to Friends Bill Samuel and Steven Davison for their helpful comments on a blog posting I'd put up about "praying churches."

During the following week, I drafted a letter to the meeting's Ministry and Worship Committee — a rather formal approach, since one of its co-clerks is my wife Elizabeth, but I knew I needed the slow flow of words onto paper to guide the thought's development. Mindful that blackberry vines need sour earth, I wrote of our often chaffy vocal ministry as "thorns" that "only flourish where the soil favors thorns." *Good*, I thought. *I need to be emphatic that it's not about individuals.* I went on: *The meeting is defended against becoming too deeply gathered, too intimate with God, too closely bonded one Friend with another; the talkative thorns are expressions of our collective defenses against the threat of deep love and transformative faith.... A core group needs to pray together for the meeting for worship.*

Strange! Had you asked me a month earlier what most needed improvement about the meeting, I might have answered, "poor attendance, poor turnout for business meetings, and too few generous donors of money and other resources." I might have also grumbled a bit about the vocal ministry, and more generally about spiritual complacency, love of this world, and secular-minded individualism. But now, when I asked for Christ's help, my attention was directed rather to our defendedness against "deep love and transformative faith" — in other words, our fear. How right-seeming!

I need look no further than the lock on my front door to see how pervasively dominated by fear I and my mother culture are. As I write, I fear offending readers. I fear spending too much time on this article and not getting my chores done. I fear losing my home if I lose my job. Having witnessed painful and meaningless-seeming deaths, I fear dying the same way (Luke 13:5). Knowing myself temptable, I fear estranging myself from

God. Police cars in the street below, newspaper headlines, and my tax records all bear witness to the great edifice of fear that expresses itself as state, economy, society, property institutions and armed forces.

But faith tells me that there was no fear anywhere before our disobedience and fall, and that Jesus Christ calls us back to a life of perfect love, which casts out fear (1 John 4:18). His New Commandment to us to love one another states that *by that love* will people know that we're His followers (John 13:34-35). Fifteenth Street could become such a community of love, and *if it can, then so can your meeting or church*. God says, now and always (Jeremiah 32:27): *Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there anything too hard for me?*

QUERIES FOR "BRINGING THE TRIENNIAL BACK HOME"

- 1) Are you satisfied with the quality of the vocal ministry in your faith community? If not, is it because those ministering are "talkative thorns," or is it because you are overly judgmental?
 - 2) Do you sense a need for renewal and transformation in your Friends meeting or church?
 - 3) What fears move you and/or your Friends meeting or church to being "defended" against "deep love and transformative faith"?
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FINDING GOD IN THE MIDST OF OUR BROKENNESS

Terri Johns

Growing up in a good Quaker pastoral home, I had a fairly solid understanding of what it meant to be Christian in the Midwest, at least within the communities in which I grew up. Scripture is the authority for the word of God. Sound biblical teaching that has stood the test of time is that which gives our faith a firm ground to stand upon. Willingly walking outside of these principles is stepping outside the will of God for our lives. This was preached from the pulpit and taught in Sunday school. I was firmly rooted in these principles and they guided my life. Even though I attended other denominations after I left home, I followed these principles without question.

When I married in 1985, there was no doubt in my mind it would last forever. That was a given in a good Christian marriage. I understood there would be problems, but I couldn't imagine a relationship which could not be repaired.

I didn't count on a marriage filled with discord and secrets, shattered promises and broken trust. Irreparable damage left both of us feeling defeated and rejected.

For the last couple years of our marriage, I struggled with the concept of divorce. It was stepping outside the will of God for my life, wasn't it? It was willingly walking away from the principles I held so dearly. I was convinced that making this decision for my life meant giving up God's love for me. It meant taking the chance that I would no longer be accepted in the arms of God as his child.

There was a dark and empty space within my soul between the decision to separate and the actual divorce—a space in which I felt alone and forgotten. Similar to the darkness that spread across the land at Jesus' death, I felt as if I had been

abandoned by God and left to die. This space could not be filled by my friends in church or at work, though they tried. In my mind I had walked out of the good graces of God. I was the prodigal. I deserved no longer to be called a child of God.

And then there was light.

Not a strong, bright light, but a gentle, warm light. A small glow at first but a source of comfort. A sense of security, of love, of compassion, of belonging—a sense of God. As if my spirits had been resurrected from death itself and given a new place to stand, this light began to lift me from the dark and empty space of my soul and filled me with God's abiding love and never-ending grace. I was being transformed into a new creation.

As I reflected on that dark and empty space in my life, time and again the realization that God was working on my behalf, taking care of my needs before I ever asked or even recognized that I had a need, filled me with awe. As if I had traveled a path in utter darkness cleared of all danger or obstructions, God was there orchestrating every move with the utmost attention to detail while I bumbled along, blindly oblivious of God's presence.

I came to understand that indeed God had not abandoned me. God still loved me very much. I still had value and worth, and I still had a place in God's plan for my life. In keeping with biblical teachings, this new awareness of God's compassion had not come from the Bible itself, but from my experience of God's tender and diligent care of me in my darkest days.

Intrigued by this new concept, I spent a couple years in a non-denominational Bible study program searching for confirmation of my discovery. I learned a lot of history, facts and truths that had once been the foundation of my faith, but nothing that could give credence to what I had experienced. Rejected as a leader in the Bible study program because of the irrevocable choice I had made in getting divorced and unable to witness to the love of God within me, I left. I walked away from

the life I grew up with, the steady foundation, the solid faith. I had been rejected. I was unworthy. My experience of the light and compassion of God was not recognized as being legitimate.

Disillusioned and confused by the lack of acceptance I found among Christians in this group, I stopped attending church for the better part of a year. How was it possible that God could lavish so much love and attention on me during my darkest times regardless of my decision to divorce, yet God's own children would find no room for me within their carefully defined world?

God had given me a good job at Friends United Meeting with caring people and responsibility over a great many things. God had watched over my children, providing for them and nurturing them through the generosity and goodness of others when I was unable to see the road ahead of me. God had walked beside me every step of the way, clearing my path, guiding and leading in the direction I was to go, picking me up when I stumbled and always, always treating me with tenderness and deep love.

The encouragement I received at work and from those around me was confirmation that God had not abandoned me. This deep sense of God's presence within my soul was true and good. Regardless of my choice to divorce, God still loved me. There was no doubt in my mind.

Through the unconditional acceptance I received from a good Catholic friend and the support of my father, who was struggling with similar issues of his own, I came to realize there are people in this world who have the gift of seeing past my shortcomings and into my soul. These people are a rare and beautiful gift to those of us who need loved through the hard times in our lives. I soon found others who had this gift as well and many of them belonged to the unprogrammed tradition in Quaker circles. These folks brought healing to my soul and

confidence in God's love for me. With this confidence, I was able to walk into church again.

Jesus said the two greatest commandments were to love God with all my heart, soul, strength and mind and to love my neighbor as myself. To follow the second command means I have to love myself. It means I have to accept the decisions I have made, forgive myself and move on. It means I have to love myself in spite of my flaws and failures. To love myself as God loves me means an unconditional, unwavering, fully confident kind of love. How difficult it was to love myself past my divorce, to accept the decision I had made, to love myself past my perceived failures. But God loved me throughout the whole time. God's love for me was a perfect example of the kind of love I needed to have for myself.

The choice to divorce is a part of my life, a part of who I am, and it will never change. I am a stronger person because of the struggles to overcome my sense of failure and unworthiness and I love the person I am becoming. The commandment doesn't just stop at me loving myself; I have a responsibility to love my brothers and sisters in the same way I love myself. If I love myself regardless of the choice I made, should I not also love my brothers and sisters regardless of their choices? God does.

My beliefs are sacred to me and I must be obedient to God in my life. I believe God is calling me to love and accept those who have made choices outside of my own comfort zone as well as those for whom life choices were never given. I have not been asked to *agree* with them but to *accept* their brokenness and recognize that of God within them, for truly they are children of God as well and deserve to be loved and welcomed within my community.

I have been broken in the trials of life.

I have found God in the midst of my brokenness.

I have been blessed by God because of my brokenness and have much to offer you.

If you have found yourself broken and blessed, then together we are united through our brokenness.

When FUM was formed in 1902, its purpose was to create a better spirit of unity and action on the part of widely separated groups of Friends, Friends who felt broken by their differences. Now, over 100 years later, we still struggle with the spirit of unity within our diverse group of Friends. What separates us? What divides us? The first thoughts in your mind are surely the sexual ethics policy. But I want to suggest that what truly divides us is not this policy but something much deeper. What divides us and separates us from one another and therefore takes our focus off of our purpose and off of God is a misunderstanding of unity.

God invites us all to his table to dine. Do we sit bickering about who has the right to be there and who does not? I believe we are guests of God and God has the right to decide who is to be blessed at the table. Do we bicker, judge and condemn in front of our host? I can only imagine how God must feel when we come together in God's presence in this fashion.

Do we listen to the still small voice? Do we try to discover why God loves each of us? Do we look for that of God within each one, the light within, the presence of God within the other guests? Can we see past ourselves to see the beauty and purpose and design of others?

God does not ask us to be "cookie cutter" images of one another. God has designed us to be unique to fill his special purpose in our lives. My theology and the way I express it may never look just like yours, but I am a child of God just as you are. I dine at the table and I belong there just as each of you belongs at God's table. We may not look the same, talk the same, believe the same, but we are united as dinner guests, as one body,

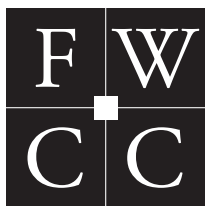
as part of the vine, as friends of God. Can we not, for the sake of our host and the other guests, recognize the value of those differences without allowing that diversity to separate us from the unity we have in God?

I need the emphasis of a strong biblical foundation that I get from my Midwest Friends; it anchors my life. But I also need the emphasis of a strong spiritual experience with God — a blessing from my East Coast Friends. Friends United Meeting offers the opportunity to embrace both for people like me who find themselves caught in the middle of two worlds. It is one of the beautiful things about FUM and one of the most precious. To love one another out of a deep desire to learn from, share with and work alongside one another is what FUM is all about. To worship with Friends who are so very different from one another, yet share the same deep desire to serve God from the depth of their being, is a fantastic experience.

Let us work together to preserve this special spirit of unity and action that Friends 100 years ago recognized as being a crucial step towards healing and wholeness among Friends.

QUERIES FOR “FINDING GOD IN THE MIDST OF OUR BROKENNESS”

- 1) Have you had a similar journey to that depicted in this article, from moral certainty into darkness and confusion, then back into the light and love of God?
 - 2) How is loving oneself a prerequisite for loving others?
 - 3) How might a better understanding of the true nature of unity help create a stronger, more loving faith community?
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Friends World Committee
for Consultation

SECTION OF THE AMERICAS

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ABOUT THE WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP

The Wider Quaker Fellowship is a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas. Through our mailings we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages, cultures and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows live in over 90 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. Wider Quaker Fellowship depends on the financial support of its readers to provide this service.

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