

On the Way to Harmony:
The Spiritual Disciplines
of a
Christian Reconciling Ministry

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(New England Yearly Meeting)

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Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in harmony! [Psalms 133:1]

In December 1998, I stood in an enormous tent in Harare, Zimbabwe, with over 5,000 other people, praising God together. We came from almost every country and almost every denomination in the world. As we stood, singing and swaying, I felt fully released into the joy and presence of that moment. My American and my Quaker inhibitions melted away as tears streamed down my face. I could see people all around me moving with that same Spirit: young African men — Indigenous women from the mountains of Peru — European bishops — Indians from the untouchable caste — Methodists from tiny south Pacific islands — Sudanese refugees — a 30-year old Quaker mother from Boston. We all were seized by the one Holy Spirit, and, as our bodies moved together, we became the one body of Christ. Our churches have denounced each other as heretics, yet the living Christ who knows each heart gave complete assurance to our unity. Even the tent itself began to move, as a fierce thunderstorm raged around us. This baptism by fire was the opening worship of the World Council of Churches Assembly, and it was a point of no return for me on my personal quest for a vision of the reconciled Christian Church.

Spiritual experiences such as these are what breathe life into the structures of the formal ecumenical movement, such as the World Council of Churches. They are what inspire individuals to make a personal commitment to the demands of facing Christian division, as indeed I have done. But beyond that, a spiritual understanding and experience of oneness in Jesus Christ is at the heart of all reconciling ministries — not only reconciliation between divided Christians, but also reconciliation between races, cultures, religions, family members, victims/offenders or any other situation of brokenness.

This evening, I want to explore some of the personal spiritual disciplines that give expression to the heart's desire to dwell together in harmony. I'm describing the elements of a particular spiritual gift,

as I have experienced it. I'm laying out a roadmap for the journey toward reconciliation.

You may not have had ecumenical experiences like mine, but I'm hoping that you will be able to find yourself somewhere in this picture. Imagine yourself at a gathering of 5,000 Christians, from over 330 denominations and every continent of the world. Or imagine yourself at a small theological consultation, discussing the deep divisions within Quakerism. Or imagine yourself being called upon to explain Quakerism to those who know nothing about it. Or imagine yourself struggling to understand someone else's tradition, which frankly strikes you as bizarre. How do you behave? What do you say? When do you keep quiet? How do you listen? For how long? What do you assume? What assumptions do you question? What do you pray for?

You, as individuals with a calling to work for Quaker unity through FWCC, should recognize your own experience and leading in my description of the ecumenical movement. Indeed, the mission of the ecumenical movement is the same as that of FWCC, seeking to bring divided brothers and sisters together in unity, and FWCC can be seen as intra-Quaker ecumenism.

I am going to offer my reflections in the form of advices and queries. I have six spiritual disciplines to propose to you: on speaking; on listening; on working together; on building trust over time; on unity, diversity and division; and on being careful. For each of these disciplines, I will first offer an advice, then elaborate with reflections from my own experience, and conclude with a query. You have the advices and queries printed on your handout.

1. Speaking

Speak from what you know by your own experience. Be humble because your experience is limited. Be bold because God has empowered you. Know what your gifts are. Know the power of words and use them with integrity and careful respect.

One of the first things I had to learn when I started doing ecumenical work was to speak from what I know, which also means don't try to speak from what I don't know. Finding that place of self-confidence for myself has been something of a challenge. Being young, being a woman, and not being ordained opened a lot of doors for me in the ecumenical movement. I get invited to a lot of things in the World Council of Churches because of a quota system for how many young people, how many lay people, and how many women have to be on each committee. I fit three categories, which means I'm nominated for everything. It's been a challenge for me to realize that they invited me for their reasons, but God puts me here for God's own reasons, and all I can do, or say, or claim with authority, comes from standing where I am and not trying to be more than that.

“Be bold because the Lord has empowered you” and “Be humble because your experience is limited.” That's tricky. It is a difficult thing to hold in balance. We need to check ourselves for tendencies both toward arrogance (“I know the whole truth”) and toward relativism (“my truth is just truth for me”). We get to claim Truth with a capital T, and then also admit that it's God who holds that Truth, and I may not know it all. Be willing to change or at least reconsider and rearticulate your position. Cling to your beliefs with a certain elasticity.

Know the power of words and use them with careful respect. Don't be careless with words that can hurt, dismiss or disrespect the experience of another. There is a poster in my son's classroom at Cambridge Friends School that says: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can really hurt me.” That's true. We can hurt each other and we need to be careful.

At the same time as we are choosing words that respect other people, we need to choose words that respect our own integrity and don't violate our own experience. That's been a question for me in an ecumenical setting around the use of titles. Quakers have had a longstanding testimony against titles. Yet here I am in ecumenical settings with Eminences and Right Reverends. I don't know the system of titles and I resist learning the system of titles. How can I

be faithful to my own tradition, to my own integrity about what I believe to be true, and at the same time be respectful of people who come from a very different tradition than mine? What I've discovered is that the testimony against titles can become an outward form — a refusal to say certain words. What I think is the truth of the testimony against titles is a testimony on equality that I can claim in the substance of relationships regardless of the titles. I can sit down with a Metropolitan from Egypt at a lunch table and have a conversation with him as my brother. Whether I call him by the title he prefers or not, what I want to attend to is the substance of that brotherhood, and to claim for myself that I am his sister and therefore his equal. I need to practice a careful balance between using words that respect others and using words that respect my own integrity.

The last thing I want to say about speaking is about holding words lightly and listening for the meaning behind the words. At the World Council of Churches, all business is simultaneously translated into five languages — English, Spanish, French, German and Russian. The reality of colonialism is that almost everyone in the world speaks one of those languages, although this puts native speakers at a significant advantage over those for whom a European language is their third or fourth tongue. It also puts a particular responsibility for discipline on the native speakers — to speak slowly and to listen sympathetically. Don't worry about nuances of grammar and vocabulary, and don't rely on those kinds of nuances to make your point.

However, in the WCC's tradition, worship is not translated. Each person prays and reads scripture in their native language, not their European language, and this is not translated. It is an indescribable experience to hear the Holy Spirit speaking through words that carry no meaning to me. Most profound of all is the Lord's Prayer. The entire worshipping congregation — in Harare that was 5,000 people — spoke the Lord's Prayer together, each in his or her own native language. It sounded like mush, and it was utterly staggering. It was immediately clear that God speaks all languages and none — that language is a human construct that God both

completes and transcends. Truly, our mush was acceptable corporate prayer, for it is the heart that prays, and thus we were praying in unison.

Query on Speaking

Are you careful to speak from your own experience, not overstating or outrunning your guide? Are you prepared to give an account of the faith that you have? Are you confident in your witness, knowing that God empowers you through your faithfulness? Do you know what gifts God has entrusted to you, and are you trustworthy in offering them? Are you careful with words, looking always for how the Holy Spirit might be speaking through human language?

2. Listening

Listen with a charitable presumption of goodwill, expecting the best from others. Seek out the gifts of others and know where you (and your tradition) can benefit from hearing their experience. Hold your assumptions lightly, and listen for deeper meanings. Expect to find a profound resonance of spiritual experience, although you might be hearing that experience described in alien language.

The first condition of a listening spirituality is a presumption of goodwill. Listen with a charitable heart, expecting the best from others. Assume the best about those who are different from you. Impute good motives. I experienced the way that can transform a meeting at a particularly contentious session in the WCC. Directly across from me at the table was a Russian named Father Hilarion. I knew the Russians were particularly sensitive about the discussion in this committee. Father Hilarion was silent through the whole first day and I found myself spending a lot of energy looking directly across the table at him trying to figure out what he was thinking. I was sure that he was angry, dismissive, and critical — even though he wasn't saying anything. And then on the second day, he and I started to make some eye contact and smile at each other a little bit. I said something and he smiled at me when I spoke. My whole sense

of the meeting started shifting as I began to impute a different motive to him. He hadn't given me any evidence of his negative attitude — I had projected that onto him and that was coloring the whole experience for me. I made the choice to say: "Father Hilarion is here with goodwill. He's willing to listen to me. He's interested in being part of this process. He wants a good outcome from this meeting." The whole meeting shifted in tone for me, from an adversarial one to a cooperative one. Just because I shifted my attitude toward another person.

Don't presume you understand the language, context and experience of someone else, especially in a cross-cultural situation. Most of the work I've been doing has been in international meetings. I have learned to be much more aware of the way that my culture, my context, my Americanism colors the way that I speak and listen, and to hear other contexts not through my own lens, but to try to hear their context in their own words.

To listen with a reconciling spirit means to listen carefully, deeply and sympathetically to the experience behind the words. I participated in a small consultation last July at Pendle Hill, which brought together Quaker theologians from around the world to talk about the essential Quaker identity. Who are we as a church, bottom line? And it was a very difficult meeting. We had people coming from each of the branches of Quakers, each of whom felt that they held the essential message of Friends and the others had gone astray. We were each proposing formulations of Quaker identity to which the others would say "Friends in my country could never find themselves in such a statement." The turning point in that consultation was a profound moment when we realized that every one of us, from each branch of Friends, felt beleaguered, fearful, sure that we were the persecuted few and that some other branch of Friends held all the advantage. To hear your own feelings of beleagueredness echoed in the one who is perceived to be your adversary — to feel your enemy's pain as your own — is the first step toward reconciliation. That realization that we all feel beleaguered transformed the whole meeting at Pendle Hill. We

shifted from proposing theological positions to feeling each other's experience, and from there we reached a sense of deep unity, that we are indeed a single church, despite our divisions, that we share a single heritage and a single spirituality. So listening sympathetically to those from whom we are divided can transform the relationship. Listen to unfamiliar perspectives and learn from them. Listen with ears to hear — expect to hear an experience you recognize expressed in words you wouldn't have used to describe it.

Query on Listening

Do you listen with a charitable attitude and a presumption of goodwill? Do you expect the best from others, listening to the experience behind the words? Do you seek resonance rather than conflict when encountering difference? Do you allow disorienting unfamiliarity to become an invitation to new understanding?

3. Working together

Act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel you to act independently. Seek ways for ever-increasing and deepening your shared worship, witness and service. Pay attention to how you come together; attend to how spiritual fellowship is nurtured in your shared experience. Take risks that stretch the limits of what is possible to do together. Know that the substance of reconciliation is in the relationships, which is reflected in, rather than created by, the formal agreements.

There's an ecumenical doctrine called the Lund Principle, which came from the World Council of Churches in 1952, which says "act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel us to act separately." We should assume that we act together with other Christians, except where we are compelled to act separately. And especially we should apply this principle to other Quakers.

Shared life is the norm. Division demands explanation. Let me say that again. Shared life is the norm. Division demands

explanation. The divisions within the Religious Society of Friends are not and should never be considered normative. FWCC as an organization, and you as its representatives, are called to a faithful witness to the scandal of our schism. Through FWCC and other means, you must be intentional about living into a new depth of fellowship through shared life in worship and work.

Do practical things together. Assume we will be together. Grow together. Seek ways for ever-increasing our common worship, witness and service, with a special priority given to worship. Worship is the most basic Christian activity. All cooperative action needs to be grounded in shared worship.

The *way* we do things matters just as much as *what* we do. The way we do things is how we build spiritual fellowship or *koinonia*, the Biblical word for community or fellowship. Over the last year I've been involved in looking at the way that decisions are made in the governing bodies of the World Council of Churches. Now, that may not be a question that inspires you, but it does me. Because I see the implication of how we reach agreement and what we believe agreement is — is it 51% of the group, or is it discovering the will of God? One of those things destroys unity and the other builds it. And I believe that when we pay attention to how we make decisions together, how we engage together, and root that in our unity in the Holy Spirit in the will of God — then we are intentional about building fellowship. So whether we vote or whether we reach consensus becomes, for me, a deeply theological issue that has a profound spiritual impact.

Take risks to stretch the limits of what it is possible to do together. I've been inspired by the example of the Massachusetts Council of Churches in taking risks which build trust. The Council is, in terms of membership, a Protestant body, yet it yearns to grow, to include Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches in membership. In order to live into this possibility, the Board has taken the risk to include Roman Catholic and Orthodox representatives on the Board, to give them voting power in this Protestant organization. We have done this in faith that working together builds relationships, creates

a shared history, and opens the way. We're starting to see the results of the trust we've built as we have now received an application for membership from the Greek Orthodox diocese of Massachusetts. Sustained commitment, the generosity to share the table with others, and attention to the quality of the fellowship do indeed bear fruit that is worth the effort.

Query on Working Together

Do you cooperate with your brothers and sisters in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel you to act separately? Do you engage constructively with such points of difference? Do you seek to share in worship, witness and service with all Christians, stretching the limits of what it is possible to do together? Are you attentive to the unfolding process of reconciliation, and not simply focused on a final outcome?

4. Building trust over time

Grow together in trust over time. Come prepared to trust, with patience for the time required to build trusting relationships. Take time to share your personal stories with each other, to know one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Reap the fruits of shared trust by taking risks with each other. Within relationships of trust, be prepared to question and be questioned. Be impatient for truth and justice, and patient for the pace of change. Remember that we are in the middle of God's unfolding plan for creation, and be prepared to live with some measure of unsettling ambiguity.

It takes time to build trust, to build community. We can come with a presumption of trust, but that presumption needs to be filled out by real experience of each other. We need to invest the time to build that community. And the fruits of what you can experience as a result of sustained cooperation are worth it.

One place where I've experienced the fruits of building trust over time is on the Board of Friends United Meeting. FUM experienced some truly difficult years during the Realignment

proposal. We managed not to succumb to the divisive spirit in that proposal, but rather reaffirmed FUM's identity as an inclusive Christian body. The depth of trust and love that has grown on the Board in the nine years since then is truly remarkable. We've journeyed together as a group. We know each other as people. We know the traditions we each represent and we don't always agree with each other, but we trust each other, and that's allowed us to continue to govern this organization full of constituencies that don't always trust each other. The fruits of growing together in trust over time can be quite profound. I know you have experienced the same thing here in FWCC, and its fruits are evident in the spiritual condition of Quakerism world-wide.

It is important to know each other's personal stories, to know each other as people as well as representing a particular constituency. For me that's meant staying at the hotel when I attend WCC events, even if I could stay with Friends in the area. I can eat breakfast with the Archbishop from Albania and show him pictures of my family and ask him questions like "how did you come into ministry?" You hear amazing things, and it fills out people into real flesh and blood so that when you are in those dicey theological conversations, it's easier to come with that presumption of goodwill and trust. It's worth investing the time to share at that informal, personal level.

One of the hardest things to do, and one of the places where we run against a lot of conflict ecumenically, is the tension between being impatient for truth and justice and patient for the pace of change. For me, one place where I feel the pull on both sides is the question of women's ordination, because it is perfectly clear to me that God calls women to public ministry and there is nothing that disqualifies women from being recognized as leaders in churches. Yet I am meeting together, with a presumption of goodwill and respect, with people for whom that's a decided question on the other side. It is not helpful for me to be triumphalistic and accusatory and dismissive. Yes, I'm impatient for those women who I know aren't able to exercise their gifts. Where I draw strength to be patient is from finding places where there are kernels of change and

recognizing that change is slow. People's hearts are changed sometimes in a flash, but whole communities change slowly.

Query on Building Trust over Time

Are you patient with the slow pace of change, knowing that God's purposes are not always served by our hurried expectations? Are you impatient for the truth, never complacent with injustice or unfaithfulness? Are you consistent in building relationships of trust over time, undergirding the work you do together with a sense of love for each other? Do you listen for the movement of God in the lives of the individuals you encounter? Within relationships of trust, can you question and be questioned? Are you prepared to live with a measure of ambiguity, trusting that as you live up to the truth you have received, more will be granted you?

5. Unity, diversity and division

Cling to the sure knowledge that what unites us is stronger than what divides us. Seek to know each other in that which is eternal, in that which unites. Affirm the diversity of creation while challenging divisions that break the bonds of love. Know that the forces that divide us are powerful, real and should not be underestimated. Know also that the walls that divide us do not reach all the way to heaven.

For me, the source of ecumenical assurance is that Christ is not divided. I know that what unites us is stronger than what divides us, since I know that Jesus Christ is Lord of us all. I look for what unites us. I expect to find it. I know that our unity is a gift of the Spirit, a consequence of our common faith, not something we manufacture. It's not a product of our creativity or our hard work or our intellect or our clever theology or our searching the Scriptures. Our unity derives from the unity of Jesus. There's an old Quaker saying which bears well the test of time: "Seek to know each other in that which is eternal." Know each other in that Spirit.

Diversity and division are not the same thing. Diversity is intrinsic to the triune nature of God, since relationship is not possible

without differentiation. We must be different from each other in order to love each other, and in this sense we can celebrate diversity. But division breaks the bonds of love, severs the relationship, and must be challenged. One possible measure of the difference between diversity and division is whether we can share in worship together. Question division. Don't accept as inevitable that there are four Yearly Meetings in one state.

But know also that what divides us is powerful, real and should not be underestimated. It is not easily overcome, and those who try will meet fierce resistance. We are bound to bump against our hurt places, as people and communities. In fact, if we're not bumping against our hurt places, we're not doing the work of reconciliation. This is especially true within FWCC. Reconciliation is not about smoothing over or pretending a pious spiritual unity of the invisible church that masks real and deep division. An overly spiritualized unity is a persistent danger for Friends. It is not enough to say that God has granted invisible spiritual unity to the universal church. We are called to incarnate our unity by growing in visible love and fellowship with each other for the sake of the world.

What divides us is not always theological. Some classic theological divisions between churches are around baptism, eucharist and orders of ministry. But in the United States, one of the most church-dividing issues has been race. Among Quakers, we are divided in the relative weight of authority given to Scripture — that's partly a theological point, but it's also cultural and historical, and has as much to do with which non-Quaker movements influenced us, as with what the original Quaker teachings were. Quakers, like all churches in the US, are divided on moral and social issues, which often get discussed theologically, but which are rooted more in sociological and demographic factors. If we're not engaging these complex questions, and feeling the hurt and the brokenness which they evoke, we're not doing the work.

But — this is an old Orthodox quote — the walls that divide us do not reach all the way to heaven. Christ is not divided.

Query on Unity, Diversity and Division

Do you look for the unity that comes from abiding together in Christ, and know that because our Lord Jesus Christ is One, what unites us is stronger than what divides us? Do you seek to know each other in that which is eternal? Do you uphold the diversity of spiritual expression as a creative manifestation of the triune God? Do you give proper weight to those things that divide us, neither underestimating the depth of their hold on us, nor elevating them to absolutes?

6. Being careful

In embracing the spirituality of reconciliation, you are called to the difficult work of balancing speaking and listening, humility and boldness, challenge and acceptance, patience and impatience, firm conviction and the willingness to change. Do not underestimate the depth of this challenge, and be always ready for self-examination. Hold before yourself a primary commitment not to place a stumbling block in the path of your sister or brother.

Dr. Seuss says, “life’s a great balancing act,” and what I’m describing for you today is a lot of balancing. Balancing being firm in your convictions and being flexible in relating to those who hold other convictions. The Apostle Paul tells us “each of us will be accountable to God. Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.” [Rom. 14:12,13]

We need to take care that our witness, that our expression of our experience, is not damaging to another. Don’t build yourself up by tearing down someone else, or compare your best to their worst. This is the more common thing to do. It’s easier. It’s hard to compare your best to their best. It’s hard to understand their best. But if you’re satisfied with building yourself up by tearing someone else down, then you’re not doing that hard work of reconciliation. Don’t compare the spiritual depth of the gathered unprogrammed meeting

with a caricature of programmed worship. And don't compare the spiritual power of a programmed meeting with a stereotype of unprogrammed worship.

One place where this comes up in a very concrete way is in the problem of what's called proselytism — of trying to win converts to your church by preying on the weakness of another church. Certainly there are things to criticize in all the churches. None of us is at our best all the time. But a destructive witness is something that we must challenge. It simply fails that test of not placing a stumbling block in the path of your sister or brother. Quaker Meetings tend to attract "refugees" from other churches, but we must be extremely careful that we do not engage in outreach which makes Quakerism sound attractive by exaggerating a stereotyped image of another church.

All this is hard work, and I don't think individuals with this leading can do it alone. It's important to know who our spiritual advisors are, and to use them to engage in frequent, searching self-examination. I have an oversight committee of five people appointed by my Meeting. They are appointed as my elders, to sit with me and help me stay faithful. To discern. To check and challenge me when I go astray. And I couldn't do this work without somebody drawing out my faithfulness. We can't do it alone.

Query on being careful

Do you remember not to underestimate the difficulty of this balancing act? Do you set aside time for self-examination? Are you careful that your witness does not come at another's expense? Do you take care that your boldness of faith does not place a stumbling block in the way of another?

Prayer

I have often prayed, with Psalm 51, for a broken and contrite heart. Ezekiel 11 promises to remove our heart of stone and give us a heart of flesh. The very essence of Quaker spirituality is the desire to take up our daily cross. We must yearn to bear the suffering of

brokenness, feel its pain as our own and pray through it, in order to become ministers of reconciliation. When the work I've described is grounded in prayer, then we will behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in harmony.

Pray for your own discernment (since what I have described is not easy, and you won't always get it right.)

Pray for God's forgiveness, and ask the forgiveness of others when you mess up.

Pray for those you are divided from, both close by and distant (geographically, theologically).

Pray for your "enemies."

Pray together with those you are divided from.

Pray for Christian unity, that the scandal of the broken body of Christ may be healed through our faithfulness.

Pray for the Religious Society of Friends, that in seeking persistently to heal our divisions, we might unleash the power of reconciliation embodied in George Fox's vision of a gathered people.

Pray for the world, that all creation may know the healing, reconciling, transforming, saving love of God in Jesus Christ.

About the Author

Eden is a member of Beacon Hill Meeting, New England YM and lives in Medford, Massachusetts, with her husband and their two sons. She has just graduated from the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge with a Masters of Divinity degree. Her interest in ecumenical work has taken her to international conferences and has brought her membership in the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches as its only Quaker as well as membership in several other bodies. She is the author of *Studying the Bible Together*, a resource packet for ecumenical study.



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About the Wider Quaker Fellowship

Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, works to facilitate loving understanding of diversities among Friends while we discover together, with God's help, our common spiritual ground, and to facilitate full expression of our Friends' testimonies in the world. Friends World Committee's Wider Quaker Fellowship program is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

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