

Today
Was The Future
Yesterday

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In keeping with the general forward-looking theme of this yearly meeting, I was invited to review briefly the historical development of yearly meetings and their relationships to monthly meetings, to comment on some currently vital yearly meetings, and, if possible, to say something encouraging about future possibilities for yearly meetings. On its best day, my crystal ball tends to be murky, so, in accepting your invitation, I made no promises about offering wisdom about the future. As a result, I had not been really daunted by the task assigned me until I went looking for a title and came up with the one at the top of the sheet in front of me. It is, *Today was the future yesterday*. Today was the future yesterday? Now there's a repellent thought if I ever heard one!

The title of the Yearly Meeting sessions—*Envisioning Our Future*—is much more appealing. Words like *envisioning* say that we will see something noble and splendid—a vision—and we will build it, and the future will be noble and splendid because of our efforts, and we will rise above our messy present and be noble and splendid, too. Now that's exciting! We come to yearly meeting to get that kind of hope and vision and inspiration. We sing and worship together, and we share what is deepest in us, and for four or five days we really trust love to guide our lives and to protect our vulnerabilities, and we go home exhausted and grateful and, maybe, wiser and better people than when we came. At home, when the euphoria has begun to wear off a little, we really do not want to recall

that some cross-grained character has reminded us that “today was the future yesterday.”

Well, I am sorry, Friends, but that seems to be what I have been given to say. Let me reassure you a little, however. The more I worked on that idea, the more it seemed not only true to the nature of things, discouraging as that may initially sound, but the more it seemed true to the mystery of things, to the wonder of things. And I saw that it had been given to me to say because of our need to trust the mystery, the wonder of things—your need and my need to back off a little from our own visions, at least enough to acknowledge the possibility that there is at work in Creation a nobler, more splendid vision than we have ever dreamed.

One of my favorite characters in the New Testament is Peter, a sort of great Labrador puppy kind of man, full of joy and affection and energy and loyalty. You can picture him putting his muddy paws up on Jesus's clean shirt and licking his face. Peter never quite caught on to what was happening around him. Jesus came striding across the water, and Peter said, “Wow, that looks like fun! Here I come, Lord! Oops, I'm sinking! Help!” Jesus, in despair, told the disciples that they would all desert him at the end, but good, loyal Peter said, “Not me, Lord! You can count on me! I'll never desert you!” And the crowing of the cock left him in tears of shame and remorse. And when they came to get Jesus, it was Peter who whipped out a sword and whacked someone's ear off till Jesus, shaking his head, said, in effect, “Will you put that thing away? I don't think you've been listening at all.” Poor Peter!

Only his name wasn't Peter; it was Simon, and Jesus made a pun on the word *petra*, meaning *rock*, and named him Peter and said, “On this rock I will build my church.” On Peter? Peter was a good Jew and knew that the Christ was promised to the Jews. It took a message direct from the Holy Spirit to persuade him that this Christ was for all people. He finally accepted that and taught it, even when it cost him a lot of friends down at the synagogue. But he got his reward. He was crucified upside down for the entertainment of the Romans.

I mentioned Peter not only because I like him but also because his story reminds me of so much Quaker history. The facts are that we have stumbled into some of our most noble and splendid stances and that what we have ended up with, what we treasure and want to have visions about improving, was never the intention of our founding parents, be they George Fox, Margaret Fell, or any of the other early Quaker saints. Peter did not lead; he followed—not a vision but a living, breathing man whom

he loved and did not fully understand but who gave him a sense of God and of persons and of how they are connected that he had never known before. As things kept happening to him, he tried to be true to what Jesus had shown him. The Christian Church was the result.

So, too, with George and Margaret and John Camm and Mary Fisher and all the others. They followed a living spirit, whom they knew by direct, intimate, personal experience, and they did not set out to found a sect but to help all the world to know and to be true to what they had discovered about that spirit. The Religious Society of Friends was the result.

In the earliest days of Quakerism, before we were even called Quakers, there were not meetings—monthly, quarterly, or yearly.¹ There were only worshipping groups of men and women, knit together by their hunger for authentic experience of the Divine, those groups, in turn, linked by the faithful travels and ministry of a handful of inspired preachers. Though their experience of worship and their wish to be obedient to the will of God provided some common premises, there was no authority structure or person among them who could say, “This is what Friends of Truth² believe.” or “This is how Friends of Truth behave.” Rather, George Fox and the other eminent ministers, in preaching and in writing, exhorted, counselled, and encouraged the faithful, offering their own discernments of God’s Truth.

These early Friends did not live in isolation, however. They lived in a world torn by religious and social conflict. There were powers and principalities prepared to say clearly what good people believed and how good people behaved and what should be done with bad people who didn’t believe or behave those ways. The non-conformist ways of Friends soon led them to be seen by the powers and principalities as among the bad people. Persecution followed.

We modern Friends tend to take pride in the staunch way those early Quakers accepted suffering rather than be untrue to their understanding of Truth. We like to read their stories and to tell them to each other. In the process, we tend to forget that they didn’t enjoy what was happening at all. People were being carted off to prison, leaving families and farms and businesses unattended and uncared for. Property was being seized at a rate that left some Friends destitute. I doubt if they felt particularly noble or splendid. I suspect they felt hurt and bruised and frightened. And, of course, defiant. Because it was Truth they were defending, and they had no other choice. So they prayed for each other and visited each other and wrote to each other—how many hundreds of letters did Mar-

garet Fell and her daughters write to suffering Friends and on their behalf to the authorities?—and they shared their goods and took in each others' children and pleaded with the authorities to leave them alone because they were a harmless people of God. With George Fox's encouragement, they established meetings for business, initially not on a regular basis, to address the problems of those who were suffering. With his continued encouragement, those meetings were regularized to monthly meetings. Later there were general and quarterly meetings, too. Initially, those meetings had just two tasks: to assist those in the meeting who were suffering and to deal with "disorderly walkers".

Incidentally, if you think *disorderly walkers* is one of those charmingly quaint Quaker phrases, let me assure you it is soundly biblical. See II Thessalonians, 3, in the King James or RSV versions. Anyway, disorderly walkers were persons whose behavior or speech was seen as inconsistent with the principles that Friends had come to share. Of particular concern was the fear that disorderly walkers would mislead the world about Friends and bring more persecution down on them. To prevent that, some Friends, labored with as disorderly walkers and repentant, provided written statements, confessing that their behavior or speech had been inconsistent with Quaker principles.

No one intended to create an institution called monthly meeting. There was only the confidence that Friends coming together under the power of God would be shown what they needed to do for one another and what they needed to do to persuade the authorities to leave them alone. If there is anything distinctive about Quakers in the world today it is their method of doing business³—an unplanned discovery that no one envisioned!

The tragic experience of James Nayler⁴ strengthened a practice already established: regular meetings of the traveling ministers to test their ideas and understandings with one another. They submitted their individual leadings to the group's understanding of Truth. No one wanted to incur more persecution for the whole Society by ill-considered words or untested theories. The testing of individual leadings against the corporate experience of Truth remains one of the most creative tensions ever discovered by a people unwilling to state a creed or to establish firm dogma. In trust and humility, those early Quaker leaders submitted to one another their thoughts for ministry before they offered them to the world. In 1676, even George Fox found himself prevented from circulating one of his writings because the other ministers could not unite with its thought. Once again, then, treasured Quaker practices were discov-

ered to deal with messy todays. The future would take care of itself. And did.

Michael Sheeran, author of *Beyond Majority Rule*, says of these developments, "... in this earliest period, Fox did almost nothing to organize his brethren [sic] above the local level. The meetings kept in touch with each other through the loose and informal contact of the Valiant Sixty⁵ or other traveling Friends. There is simply no evidence that Fox or his followers had any more rigorous plan of governance in mind. ... any development of polity above the local level seems always a step forced by the need to defend Friends from government actions or [from] those inner excesses which invite government action; and always it is tailored to achieve maximum effect with a minimum of added structure."

Just one more crucial example. No Friend or group of Friends had authority to speak for all Friends, any more than anyone has such authority today. However, when Charles II suppressed dissenting groups like the Fifth Monarchists, with whom many Royalists identified the Quakers, and the persecution of Friends was renewed with special ferocity, George Fox and Richard Hubberthorne drew up a declaration against "plots and fightings" to be presented to the king. This statement was seized at the printer's and destroyed. A second statement was then prepared and presented to the king over the signatures of twelve Friends, including George Fox and Richard Hubberthorne. This was the famous statement that said, "All bloody principles and practices, we as to our own particulars, do utterly deny, with all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world."

There had been earlier peace statements from individual Friends, of course, most notable George Fox's "I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars . . ." But other Friends had served in Cromwell's army and navy without hesitation. Of the statement offered by the twelve, Michael Sheeran observes: "This is a curious document. A dozen prominent Friends took it upon themselves to declare that pacifism was a central Quaker tenet. Yet we know that at least two of the signers, Howgill and Hubberthorne, had advocated the use of force as late as 1659. And Fox, himself, though he had refused an army commission in 1651, still felt free in 1657 to urge 'the inferior officers and soldiers' of the army to conquer Rome. Further, it would appear that the plight of imprisoned Friends was so pressing that the twelve were led to define Quaker belief with an absoluteness uncharacteristic of the movement. Because their action—combined with the timely denial of Quaker

complicity by Fifth Monarchy leaders just before their own execution—brought relief from the large-scale imprisonment of Friends, it seems to have drawn no objections from within the Quaker communities scattered over England.” Today was indeed the future yesterday. Today we have meetings who would refuse membership to applicants who cannot say absolutely that they are pacifists.

I trust that it is apparent that what I have been doing is not disparaging vision and the hope for a nobler and more splendid future. What I have been trying to say is that our responses to the situations in which we live shape our future, willy-nilly, and that, if those responses are made out of our fullest possible openness and obedience to God’s will, mysterious and wonderful things occur. Most of the dissenting groups of the seventeenth century have long since disappeared and been forgotten. Friends survive and are at least moderately healthy because the centralization of action and authority which they both resisted and felt required to accept led to the creation of institutions that served them without oppressing them.

The local meeting has remained central. It is there that membership is established and marriages approved. It provides the worshipping community out of which Quaker action and beliefs grow. And in most cases, the relationship of the higher bodies, quarterly and yearly meetings, for example, is advisory, within the context of an agreed *Faith and Practice*, which the local meeting has had a role in shaping and approving.

There are important differences among yearly meetings in regard to their authority over monthly or quarterly meetings. London Yearly Meeting has, perhaps, experienced greater centralization of authority than most yearly meetings on this continent. The essential business of the yearly meeting is done by a representative body, Meeting for Sufferings, and Friends House in London houses the central staff and offices through which most of the work of London Yearly Meeting is done. It has been observed that the name of the representative body is not accidental. The persecution in England lasted longer and was more widespread than it was anywhere else. Meeting for Sufferings became the body which addressed the government on behalf of suffering Friends, which collected funds to broaden support for those in prison and to sustain the traveling ministers. Responding to the needs of each day, it became a centralized authority which no one envisioned. And most British Friends, though they may quarrel with details, find their institutional structure good today.

On this continent, Friends United Meeting (FUM)⁷, originally formed as Five Years Meeting, had expected to provide a uniform book of discipline for its constituent yearly meetings. This was to build unity and to deal with the disorderly walkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, not all of its yearly meetings have adopted that uniform discipline. Evangelical Friends Church—Eastern Region⁸ and Friends Church—Southwest Yearly Meeting⁹ are probably the yearly meetings on this continent which are most centralized in authority. Many of the younger yearly meetings have been suspicious of creating any yearly meeting structures or authority at all. Several suffer for that reluctance, being unable to lend support or encouragement to constituent monthly meetings with problems.

There is one other element in the formation of yearly meetings which needs to be commented on briefly.

The oldest yearly meeting in the world is not London but New England. Its first sessions did, of course, address the persecutions in Boston and counsel some disorderly walkers, whose disruptive behavior eventually brought George Fox himself to New England Yearly Meeting to protect Friends in the New World against ranterism¹⁰. But those first sessions had another purpose, a purpose that has been part of every Friends gathering since. That was to permit Friends to be with others of similar experience and views, to pray together, to worship together, to enjoy each other's company. The first gathering in New England in 1661 brought together Quakers from all up and down the Atlantic seaboard, Friends in lonely isolation or small communities, who hungered for sight and touch and sound of other Friends. And a decade later, when George Fox was present at New England Yearly Meeting, he recorded in his Journal, "When it was ended, it was hard for Friends to part, for the glorious power of the Lord which was over all his blessed Truth and Life flowing amongst them had so knit and united them together that they spent two days of taking leave of one another and Friends went away being mightily filled with the presence and power of the Lord." If, come Sunday, you find you love one another so much that it takes you two days to say goodbye, you will be in a fine tradition. This fellowship, this sense of community, is an important, unifying experience at all levels, monthly meeting, quarterly meeting, yearly meeting, Friends General Conference (FGC), or Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC)¹¹. In such communities of love and of trust in God, today has a way of surprisingly turning into the future God may have in mind for us.

I need to say just one or two more things on this subject.

Though a few yearly meetings leave the major parts of their work to the direction of a representative body, the practice of delegation of responsibility is not strongly established among Friends. A member of a meeting unable to attend a business meeting cannot vote by proxy. The meeting will give no more than passing attention to a letter setting forth the member's views. A conscientious committee may find its well researched and reasoned report dismissed almost casually by the meeting to which it is offered. Such experience is frustrating and disappointing sometimes, but it is also characteristic of Friends. For the *unchanged* and *unchanging* truth is that the meeting gathered to do business, whether it is at the local or yearly meeting level, expects to be guided, expects *that* particular group of men and women and children, of experienced Friends and novices, to be gathered together under the power of God and to be brought into an understanding of Truth under the power of God and to be brought into an understanding of Truth that transcends any individual insight. No proxy, no caucus, no report can compete with Friends' expectation and experience of corporate guidance.

Furthermore, few things have a tougher time in the Society of Friends than top down decisions. At yearly meeting sessions, Friends may minute that all constituent monthly meetings are asked to study a subject in the coming year and to report their findings to the yearly meeting, but that does not mean that they will do it. Often the deafening silence from the local meetings is a clearer rejection of an uncongenial idea than could have been mustered among polite Friends on the floor of the yearly meeting itself. In 1976, the FWCC Triennial¹² in Hamilton, Ontario, received from a constituent yearly meeting a concern that Friends address the subject of torture. In a deeply worshipful session, the Triennial united with the concern and passed it on to all constituent yearly meetings. In Europe, where the concern originated, significant programs of action developed within a number of yearly meetings and across yearly meeting lines. In North America, almost nothing happened. For some reason, American Friends did not feel the concern as strongly as did their European brothers and sisters. That does not mean the Triennial was not rightly led. It merely emphasizes the fact that concerns cannot be imposed from above in Quaker structures.

Finally, most yearly meetings preserve in their books of *Faith and Practice* some means for the yearly meeting to deal with disorderly walkers, either individuals or meetings. The authority to exercise such discipline is usually provided with careful restrictions that put the responsibility on the yearly meeting only after a subordinate meeting, a

quarterly meeting or monthly meeting, has failed to deal successfully with the problem. In some instances, appeal from the decision of a local meeting to the yearly meeting is provided for. Happily, these provisions and this authority are rarely and carefully exercised. But they are used and, in my judgment, are still needed, perhaps not to protect Friends from persecution but certainly to protect Friends and their meetings from various forms of exploitation.

Where are the lively, vital monthly and yearly meetings? Each of the three major Quaker journals in the United States—*Friends Journal*, *Quaker Life*, and *The Evangelical Friend*—has recently carried a series of articles about such monthly meetings. I encourage you to look those articles up. Despite the difference in tradition represented in the three journals, there are some traits common to most of those meetings. First, they are inward looking. They look hard at the quality of their worship first, at the commitment their religious life invites them to make. They look at their members and attenders and at the way they care for one another. They set out to meet the needs within their own meeting membership, certain that the work they may be led to in the larger world must be based in a strong and loving meeting community. Almost always that meeting community will include the children and youth. Many vital meetings also have some project in their local communities which involves them in pursuit of common goals with non-Friends around them. This work may be ecumenical or purely secular, but through it the meeting is identified with a place and the needs of the people in that place. Finally, they look outward to the larger world; and whether the work the meeting undertakes is in support of Christian missions or of peace and justice or of the environment, it represents a meeting commitment, not just permission to a few active, concerned members to make their witness with the meeting's blessing. To illustrate, a meeting was falling short in a major financial commitment to a service project. Quietly three meeting families agreed among themselves that each family would take a mortgage on its house to cover the shortfall, and they did. The essential element of every vital meeting is a powerful, loving, supportive community.

Vital yearly meetings? There are many, some old and very alive, like my own New England Yearly Meeting, which suffered one of the Gurneyite-Wilburite¹³ separations for 100 years. Reunited in 1945, it has found its way to include fully in its life both FUM-oriented and FGC-oriented Friends and meetings. There are young, deliberately structure and tradition-resistant yearly meetings like Intermountain Yearly Meet-

ing, which has somehow found a way to create genuine Quaker community across four huge states—Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. Intermountain has invented its own structures to keep its members, many of whom are in tiny, isolated meetings, aware of the larger bodies of Friends of which they are a part. Attendance at yearly meeting includes the highest percentage of total members of any yearly meeting I know. Its children and young people, often the only Quakers in their schools, confidently identify themselves as Friends and regularly take part in Quaker Youth Pilgrimages, Young Friends of North America, and other opportunities to reinforce that identification. The Yearly Meeting supports the attendance of its representatives on the corporation of AFSC, the Executive Committee of FWCC, the FCNL, and at FWCC Triennials. Like New England, Intermountain is growing in membership.

Or there are young yearly meetings which are the product of Friends' missions, like Iglesia Nacional Evangelica de Los Amigos in Bolivia—INELA, Bolivia—financially the poorest yearly meeting in the world, its members all Aymara and Qechua Indians, many of whom were serfs on the land barely 30 years ago. The Yearly Meeting is growing so fast that it may divide in two along geographic lines. Totally without resources by our standards, the Yearly Meeting supports nineteen Quaker elementary schools and one high school. It has established a medical and dental clinic in La Paz for poor people, Friends and non-Friends alike. It maintains a hostel in the basement of the meeting house in La Paz where poor country people can stay when they have to come to the city. It has asked for literature and persons to help it understand and strengthen commitment to Friends Peace Testimony. This yearly meeting's interest in finding more effective ways to share its faith led to the Friends International Conference on Evangelism in Guatemala in 1987. Since their first attendance at a meeting of the FWCC Latin American program, these Friends have sought to involve themselves fully with all Friends of all traditions, to learn and to share, to deepen their Quaker life, and to help others know of their liberating faith. They are remarkable.

But to return, in a way, to my beginning, I would say a word about modern Friends who have experienced persecution. I am convinced that, if they weren't exhausted by their struggles simply to survive and to make a witness for justice, South African Quakers, who are part of Southern Africa Yearly Meeting, would be offering spiritual leadership to us all. Some of you have heard Jennifer Kinghorn, white South African Quaker lawyer, when she has been here in the United States. Some of you have met Rommel Roberts, South African Quaker peace worker—colored—

during his visits. Some of you got to hear Joyce Mtshazo, black clerk of South Africa General Meeting, when she was here in 1987. To meet these Friends is to face the power of lives based not on possessions nor personal power nor personal security but lives based on faith that God's way of love, justice, and compassion will ultimately weary out and overcome the evil of the system that surrounds them. Their response to the conditions in their country has been to let go of what they have and of what they are, to pray more, to worship together more often, and to try to let themselves be nothing but tools in the hands of God. Like early Friends, they find that Christ has come among them to teach them Himself, and they are prepared to learn what is required of them and, to the best of their ability, to do it. They know persecution. Some South African Friends have been imprisoned for advocating the right of conscientious objection to conscription. Before its new Center was built, Soweto Meeting saw its meeting room vandalized and rendered unusable. At least two young black men from Quaker families have died violent deaths, one after being cruelly tortured. South African Friends need our love and our prayers. We need their example.

Perhaps the most astonishingly vital yearly meeting I have visited is Cuba Yearly Meeting, and its recent history, too, is filled with pain. At the time of the Cuban revolution, the Yearly Meeting had roughly 1,000 members, more than half of whom came to the United States when Fidel Castro took power. The entire Christian Church in Cuba had opposed the revolution, and, not surprisingly, the government has regarded the church with suspicion ever since. Certain professions, certain educational programs, certain levels of professional advancement have been automatically closed to anyone identified as a Christian. Though the new constitution of Cuba guarantees freedom of religion and forbids discrimination on religious grounds, I met Friends who felt that they had been passed over for deserved promotions because of their faith. A Young Friend with a 98% average through all his schooling was told he was not qualified to enroll in the university. Such discriminatory practices may be the work of local bureaucrats rather than official policy, but they are equally painful.

The separations at the time of the revolution were searing. Families were divided. Old friends were lost. Those who had given up country, home, family, profession, and property to come to the United States had to believe in the rightness of their decisions or else their pain was unendurable. They tended, therefore, to be more anti-Castro and anti-communist than most Americans. Inevitably, they became suspicious of the motives and wisdom of those who stayed behind, and physical separa-

tions were exacerbated by separations in trust. As political forces reduced normal contacts between the two nations, Cuban Friends in the United States felt still more isolated from home and family, while Friends in Cuba felt entirely cut off not only from their relatives here but from their co-religionists all over the world. In such isolation and distress, forbidden by law to hold services in homes or to reach out to others with their message except in regularly scheduled religious services, Cuba Yearly Meeting should have shriveled up and disappeared. It has not.

I see three important elements in its survival and present vitality. First, the entire Christian Church in Cuba has known discrimination and suspicion. It has suffered. The present Methodist bishop of Havana, for example, spent two years in prison for his opposition to the revolution. Christians in Cuba have needed each other, and the result is the strongest ecumenical movement I have met anywhere I have been. Denominational distinctives are preserved and respected, but they are not cause for enmity nor harsh judgments nor lack of association with one another. The Church has had to accept the revolution and to work with it, despite the officially atheist stance of the government, and to look for its own contribution to the welfare and health of the Cuban people.

The second dynamic force in Cuba Yearly Meeting is its youth. A whole generation has grown up since the revolution without historical memory of the painful separations of those early days. They are loyal to the revolution and loyal to their Quakerism, and they see no inconsistency between them. I met one young man who was planning to go to Moscow to university and then to return to the ecumenical seminary in Cuba to study to become a Quaker pastor, not the usual route for most Quaker pastors. These young Friends know their Quakerism. They have been diligently and carefully taught. More than that, they have been given responsibility for it. At the annual Cuban Family Camp, Young Friends lead daily worship services, do the housekeeping and dishwashing, and sing and sing and sing. They also go swimming every afternoon. They have wonderful times together. Evangelizing in any form is against Cuban law, but Young Friends invite their non-Quaker friends to come to Family Camp with them. They tell them that they will pray and worship and sing together, that they will work together, that they will meet young people from other communities, and that they will have fun. Perhaps out of curiosity, a surprising number come. And a surprising number become Friends. Cuba Yearly Meeting is growing, believe it or not! Young Friends told me that they all try to do better in school than their non-Christian friends, just to demonstrate that they are in touch with a

power that helps them and that the non-Christian young people ought to know. Isn't that a lovely way of evangelizing?

The third element in the strength of Cuba Yearly Meeting is leadership. Throughout their period of trial, Cuban Friends have been blessed with deeply committed, sensitive leadership, not only from their five pastors, a remarkable and self-sacrificing group, but also from the Yearly Meeting officers, the monthly meeting clerks and religious education leaders, and, as I said, the Young Friends. What produces such leadership?

The Methodist bishop of Havana told me that he believed that between 50% and 60% of the Cuban population were, in his words, believers. But only 5% to 10% were members of any church. To identify yourself publicly as a Christian was to invite some of the difficulties mentioned earlier. I said to one of the Cuban Friends,

"It must be hard to be a Christian in Cuba."

He smiled. "Not as hard as it is in the United States," he said. Of course, I asked why he said that, and he went on, "You are tempted by three idols that do not tempt us. One is affluence, which we do not have. Another is power, which we also do not have. The third is technology, which again we do not have. Furthermore, when you join a church or a meeting, you gain in social acceptance and respectability. When we join, we lose those things, so we must be very clear about what we believe and what the commitment is that we are prepared to make."

Cuban Friends *are* clear, about who they are, about what they believe, about what characterizes them as a religious community. Conscientiously they pass on to their children their own experiences of Truth and encourage those children on their own spiritual paths. From such clarity and such education and such discipline comes leadership. And that leadership, which probably would never refer to itself by that name, knows the source of its strength.

"God loves us all," says Heredio Santos, one of the pastors, "Quaker, Catholic, communist, atheist—God loves us all. Therefore, so must I." And he does. And Cuba Yearly Meeting thrives.

If today was the future yesterday, then tomorrow will reflect what we are grounded in today. I dare not speculate what Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting will be tomorrow, but you who know it better than I do can find clues. Ask yourselves questions such as these: How much do we love one another? How much do we trust one another? How strong is our community? Do we feel accountable to each other? Is anything more important to us than our religious commitment? What do our children know of who

we are and what we stand for? Are they an essential part of our community life? What responsibilities in our community do they bear? What do we as a meeting contribute to the life of all residents in the Ohio Valley? What do we as a meeting offer to the world?

My own experience tells me that today is messy, that today is always messy. The kind of hopeful vision of the future that you seek this week, however, often can carry us through our messiest todays. I applaud your effort, even though I suspect that when that future becomes today, we will find it, too, is messy. Too many other things demand our attention, impinge on us from outside ourselves, to permit a clear, undistorted view of the ideal we envisioned yesterday. People and problems are more complex than we imagined. In nearly every situation, Truth and justice are harder to discover or to define than we anticipated. If we are to offer help in one situation, we may have to defer our efforts in another, and how do we know which is more urgent?

How quickly we reach the limits of our understanding and power! But, dear Friends, we have our Guide, the same Guide to whom early Friends turned for vision as they addressed the messiness of their days. And as they followed that Guide, Truth was served, new structures and institutions were discovered, and we have benefited. What new discoveries may we make? I wouldn't dare to guess. But I pray they may be as fruitful as those of earlier Friends. And I pray that they may be offered in the same spirit as the very first advices on Quaker governance, those from the gathering of elders at Balby in 1656, which concluded with the famous postscript, now quoted in nearly every book of *Faith and Practice*:

Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all with the measure of light which is pure and holy may be guided, and so in the light walking and abiding these may be fulfilled in the Spirit—not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.

FOOTNOTES

1. In the Religious Society of Friends, local congregations ordinarily gather once a month to attend to their business. Hence, they are called monthly meetings. Several monthly meetings in a geographic area are joined into a quarterly meeting, which gathers four times a year. Several quarterly meetings in a still larger geographic area join together to form a yearly meeting, whose annual sessions may last as much as a week and may help local groups maintain their awareness of themselves as parts of a diverse and scattered people known to the world as Quakers.
2. One of the names which early Friends called themselves.
3. Quaker meetings for business take place in a spirit of worship. As in other worship, Friends speak to the matter before them as they feel required to by God. It is a corporate effort to find God's will for that group on that matter at that moment. No votes are taken. When agreement seems to have been reached, the "sense of the meeting" is recorded in a minute by the presiding clerk and submitted for the meeting's approval. Revision of that minute may be called for by anyone present until there is unity in the meeting.
4. James Nayler was an early Quaker leader and powerful preacher who, caught up in the enthusiasm of some of his followers, allowed himself to be led into the city of Bristol, England in imitation of Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem. Arrested and charged with blasphemy, he was whipped, branded, tortured by having a hot iron bored through his tongue, and imprisoned.
5. "The Valiant Sixty" is the name given to the enthusiastic group of men and women, traveling ministers, who first carried Quaker religious insights across England to Europe, North America, the Caribbean, North Africa, and elsewhere.
6. *The Book of Faith and Practice*, also known as *The Book of Discipline*, distills the experience of Friends and applies it to meetings and to personal conduct. These books vary somewhat from yearly meeting to yearly meeting, just as Quaker practice does, but they define what is normative behavior for Friends.
7. An organization of a number of yearly meetings around the world, formed to preserve and to strengthen orthodox Quakerism.
8. Based in Canton, Ohio.
9. Based in Whittier, California.

10. "Ranters" gave primary authority to individual "leadings", which produced highly individualistic, occasionally shocking behavior. Friends insisted that individual insights must be tested against the corporate leadings of the meeting.
11. Friends General Conference is an organization of yearly meetings in North America, generally more theologically liberal than the orthodox meetings of FUM. Friends World Committee for Consultation is the international body of Friends, which embraces all Quakers everywhere.
12. Friends from all over the world gather every three years to do the business of FWCC.
13. The Gurneyite-Wilburite separations arose in the 19th century over theological disputes about such matters, for example, as the authority of the Bible, the importance of the Inward Light, and the place of evangelism in Quaker life. The orthodox Friends of FUM are closer to the Gurneyite position. So called Conservative Friends are closer to the Wilburite position.

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