



Variations on a Theme by Fox

*Selections from an address to the 334th sessions
of New England Yearly Meeting*

Brunswick, Maine, August 6, 1994

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...When I was invited to speak this afternoon, I was told from the first that I could reflect on whatever subject I felt led, and need not dwell on the theme of the sessions....Your theme, *Sing and rejoice, ye children of the Day and of the Light, for the lord God is at work in this thick night of Darkness that may be felt*, would demand of me or any of us a particular treatment if I were to understand from the standpoint of historical theology and Biblical reflection just what Fox meant by the period or night of darkness—of shadows—and, moreover, to consider the call he is making to the children of the Day and of the Light in order that, as seems clear to me, they can keep up an attitude of hope.

I prefer, however, to invite you to reflect with me on what I've called "Variations on a Theme by Fox," keeping only a metaphorical relationship to your text. I will offer you something of what I have lived in the past few years as a Mexican woman, as a Latin American woman, and as a "stranger in the midst" of your country, within the context of the Religious Society of Friends.

I come from the "Other Side" of the Religious Society of Friends, the side for whom singing and music have been an integral part of their life as a spiritual community, as well as of civil society in general. Music, whether sung or played, whether indigenous, popular or high-brow, is without question part of our creative vocabulary for our feelings and experiences. It was there well before the Europeans arrived five hundred years ago, and since then it's been part of the ethos, the essence, of our peoples. As for the religious expression of those times, there are a myriad of testimonies to ritual songs which included instruments such as conches, all kinds of seashells, rattles, and many others used since the beginning of time to raise harmonious sounds as pleas, as thanksgiving, as sacrificial hymns to ensure good relations with the gods. Many of these songs, picked up by the conquistadores, produced hybrid pieces, incredibly exquisite, to which the Catholic priests of the time give tribute in many texts.

And as for popular songs! These and all popular music express not only feelings of joy, but of disappointment, sorrow,

triumph, frustrated passions, and so on. Sometimes, even, our nations are known only for their songs. Thus music brings people together; it gives them an identity which, as time passes, becomes universal. For example, when Latin Americans speak of the tragedies of love, we will sometimes say, "It's all a tango." This means that most Argentinean tangos are just that—tragedies. But these songs do more than express private experiences or interpersonal relationships. There are countless songs which give voice to the whole feeling of a nation, of society. And countless songs of this kind have been silenced because in many cases they reflect the desire for liberty and justice of the oppressed peoples of Latin America. Many throats were cut because they were a way of keeping hope alive, a challenge to those who, supposedly representing their people and even in many cases claiming divine sanction, exercise power illegitimately. This has been the case in Chile and Argentina and many other countries.

As for religious songs, the European Catholic Church, and its North American Protestant offshoot particularly, took it upon themselves to class as "pagan" the thousand-year-old cultural tradition of our peoples. Thus it became the norm to hear only organ and piano accompaniments to singing, so much so that we have grown blind to other possible ways of being, and have silenced them. Even in our manner of praising God through song, we have left behind elements which would otherwise have brought extraordinary riches to the life of a faith community where song is vital. We have even learned to join those who conquered us in condemning them.

At first, we Protestants contented ourselves with translating North American hymns, just as we learned to "translate" many other things. And we called earlier musical expressions pagan in spite of the deep spiritual content they had.

I remember the heavy burden carried by one Protestant indigenous community where I worked for several years. They were struggling to raise three thousand dollars to buy a piano so that they could make music which was pleasing to God. Nobody there could play the piano, and there were many young people with an amazing

gift for music, but they could not exercise it there—it was considered pagan.

Not until a few decades ago has the Protestant part of the Christian church begun to accept the music which is now called “autochthonous” or “indigenous.” There is still a great deal of reluctance and sometimes tension between members of the religious community, although it is seen more as a question of generational conflict and the ideological aspect is not accepted or not perceived. Friends in Latin America are not immune from this, and there are many examples of these tensions in our day. Fortunately, it isn’t all like this.

Among Friends in Bolivia there is an amazing musical gift which they express whenever they get the chance. You will find Quaker men and women there whose daily experience of their relationship with God comes out in a marvelous song imbued with heritage and sung by voices whose timbre and tone hardly any of us could match. Accompanying it will be Andean flutes, panpipes and drums. And all the brothers and sisters of the community rejoice, as children of the Day and of the Light, convinced that the Lord God is working amidst the dark night which they feel. The dark night of poverty, the dark night of the injustices they suffer in many ways, the dark night of obligatory military service for the young men, the dark night of malnutrition, the dark night of an ethnocentrism which forces them to speak another tongue than that of their people if they are to be heard and respected by dominant society. In their situation, we might not be able to stand the level of humiliation and poverty they bear, to put our faith in that same God and sing, “One more day in the hands of God, one more day in the hands of God, I want to wake up singing, I want to wake up praying, I want to wake up singing and praising my Lord; I want to wake up singing and praising my Lord. Sadness may come as evening falls, but happiness comes, it comes in the morning; but happiness comes, it comes in the morning.” And they repeat: “I want to wake up singing and praising my Lord.” They rejoice in the firm certainty that they are children of the Day and of the Light, and the ecstasy of the experi-

ence has an extraordinary depth and conviction. That song gives meaning to life, because it expresses faith when everything, almost everything, has been denied them. Could one of us question that faith, silence that song, call it pagan? I think not. Rather, we have much to learn from our brothers and sisters.

This isn't the situation of Bolivian Friends alone—it is the common denominator of many of our brothers and sisters in Latin America who form part of this Quaker community of ours which claims a shared origin.

I invite you to consider for a few moments the sentence which is the central theme of these sessions, but to start with the last part. I think we all agree that just as in Fox's age, we are living in an age of shadows, an age which darkens our existence in many, so many ways.

...I'd like to talk about a kind of darkness which occurs among us as Friends, when we try to respond to the other night of darkness which can be felt at the world level.

The first time it had an impact on me was in 1976, when, with my curiosity about history, I had the opportunity to take a look into the FUM archives in Richmond, Indiana.... Among the documents I found there, I remember...a series of letters from María Luz Castillo, a teacher, missionary and Mexican Friend committed to her work in all those areas. After years of labor, the denominational schools were to be closed by the government. Steadfast and faithful, María Castillo argued for the need to keep them open, even if the gospel message could not be preached openly except by example. Although we only have María's letters, one can listen between the lines to the questioning she was getting, and feel that the North American Friends in the ministry were arguing that there was no way of carrying forward the work of the schools because of the government's regulations. Eventually they all did close, except for one which stayed open due to the determination of a single woman: María Castillo.

She needed to find ways of obeying God first and foremost, before men (her correspondents may have been telling her that she

had to obey the laws and policy of Mexico). She firmly believed the schools were the soul of the work of evangelism (in the fullest sense of the word) in Latin America, and during that dark time in Mexico she felt that the Quaker ideals which had come to her people needed to be maintained. With many ups and downs, relying on voluntary donations, not charging her pupils (the children of campesinos) except in kind, she continued her work for years, up to the 1970s.

Of course these events deserve a more serious, contextual analysis. But I must say that this discovery filled me with even more love for that woman we all called Mami Castillo, who had given me so much good counsel in my childhood. It also made me think, several years later, about a situation which is very much present among us today as we try to express our faith in answer to the divine call within very concrete situations involving groups of Friends with different perspectives. There is no doubt in the case I've mentioned that both parties felt they were responding to God's call, that both parties were trying to be faithful to it, and that these were two very different approaches, based in faith, to the same reality.

I bring this up as a historical example of what sometimes happens today, with different elements, maybe, but sometimes similar attitudes which harm our spiritual growth and our relations as part of the family of Friends.

Through the last two decades, Friends from the North and South of our continent have come together in a special way. But this has also increased tensions rooted in the preexisting historical tensions within the Religious Society of Friends in our hemisphere. It has challenged Friends, shocked Friends out of the complacency created by maintaining an adequate distance between evangelicals and liberals, between programmed and unprogrammed Friends.... We have discovered the enormous external differences among us. We have vacillated between recognizing the differences between us, a thing which can be painful to do, and ignoring each other to various degrees. We have tried at times, as we say in Latin America,

to cover the sun with one finger. Sometimes we have taken our own paths. Of course we have every right to do this. We've gone so far as to rationalize these paths, using them to give validity to our differences and our refusing to relate to one another.

I will undertake to say that this, in a community of *faith*, a community which claims to meet under the Spirit in order to respond to divine guidance, is just not allowed!

What is also true, as you probably know, is that sometimes this refusal to dialogue has occurred between groups coming from the same tradition as well. Silences have lasted for years, and the results have not been healthy. It seems to me that this is the easy path. Far from reflecting within the Society of Friends what we preach so often about the need for reconciliation and peace, it denies it. ...It seems to me of fundamental importance not only to recognise what I have suggested is a part of the darkness that exists amongst us, but also to identify the ways through which *the lord God is at work*, so that we may *rejoice and sing as children of the Day and of the Light*.

I am very pleased to be here amongst you, in part because I know of the two-way ministry you have carried along with Cuban Friends. You are, in that sense, an example of how God works amongst us. I suppose that, along with the joy this relationship has meant, there have come some painful encounters with theological and ideological differences, but I am pretty sure neither you nor Cuban Friends would like to turn back or wish these efforts had never begun. Rather, we have perceived from listening to and reading some of these testimonies that there is a mutual desire to deepen and expand the relationship, for which we all thank God.

Let me tell you about how I feel the same thing is happening in other places:

In Bolivia, there are 12 groups that claim their Quaker roots. We have contacted seven of them. It would take too long to mention all the reasons why during many years all of these groups have simply ignored each other. It has been very moving to see how after

long hours of dialogue and prayer that implied recognising differences and conflicts past and present, these seven groups have reached a place where they are able to meet to share in the life of the Spirit and support each other in any way they can, as they try to minister to their fellow citizens within what they believe to be their leading. From these long hours together, the desire has emerged to join in a declaration of faith and to ask the government to study alternatives to obligatory military service.

In Honduras during the 1980s, Friends, along with Mennonites, Brethren and other church groups, made a similar request, but with little success at the time as there was never a response from the government. Today for the first time a civilian government is talking about passing a law to declare Honduran military service non-compulsory. Here again, Friends, Mennonites, and other groups have united to support the government's initiative, and at the same time are urging other groups to do so. Friends, Mennonites and the others are dialoguing in the hopes of offering some alternatives to military service. Honduras, a country paralleling Mexico in numbers of maquiladoras, is a very strategic country for the United States. People have begun to speak about the USA moving the military force there that is to be removed from Panama by the year 2000.

The tiny group in San José, Costa Rica, through an eager search to understand what it means to be a Friend, has decided after long study that its priority is to offer alternatives to the existing jail system, out of the conviction that a retributive justice approach will never be the answer to social problems: we cannot send poverty to jail. They are engaged in a series of internal dialogues with some sectors of civil society and of the Costa Rican judiciary system to promote this concern, fully knowing that it is a long road. Nevertheless they do feel this is their call, and more people join them as days go by.

Even more hopeful is the Mennonite, Quaker and Presbyterian effort called PAX 2100 that started in the West Coast of the United States and aims to expand throughout the world. It has taken

the Friends community of Monteverde in Costa Rica as a model community: one that at the beginning was almost closed, and is nowadays quite integrated into Costa Rican society.

In Costa Rica there is also a Peace Foundation with over 3,000 members all over Latin America, promoting and training people with the Alternatives to Violence Programmes as ways to conflict resolution. This was introduced in Costa Rica by a Friend, too. Unfortunately in this case our participation as Friends is very little. Sometimes we have blinded ourselves and thought that these programmes ought to respond to Latin American realities in the same way they do to prisons and other situations in the USA. This has led to misunderstandings and frustration for those involved, because we Friends do not listen carefully or simply get fed up with this business of dialogue we always talk about.

Allow me to go back to the personal level and share with you the following testimony:

Many of you may be aware of what we Mexican Friends have called the General Reunion of Mexican Friends, which is an effort begun in the early 1950s to keep programmed (my meeting) and unprogrammed Friends open to each other. Through the years, this gathering has become a centre for transformation and growth for all of us, and we feel we are accountable to each other. It was in that context that I and many others grew up during the 1960s.

I reached my college years in an epoch of turmoil: the time of all the student movements, and a chaotic time of darkness, when the armed response was chosen as the right one. We suffered in our own family the disappearing of some very close relatives. In Central America, on the other hand, the guerrilla movement was being reorganised, and the stories that came to us shook our lives so profoundly that we couldn't possibly ignore such realities.

Having been born in a Quaker family, I considered myself to be a Friend, but there were two events that transformed my life so that I could later say: *I am a convinced Friend.*

One of them, during the students' revolts, was my continuing dialogue with Heberto Sein, whom many of you may remember. A member of the silent meeting in Mexico City, he went off with conviction and passion to the universities to speak about the *power of transforming love that leads us to look for alternatives to violence as a way to solve conflicts*. I remember him sitting with a handful of people in a silent vigil right there in the Zócalo, the main plaza in front of the national government palace, asking for dialogue.

Shortly afterwards, I travelled to Central America, where a handful of students from all over the continent gathered to reflect and discuss what the participation and responsibilities of university students should be in the running of our own countries, and what our role should be as Christian students. Many concluded that our realities were so chaotic with violence of all kinds that we should join the opposition. Many even found the necessary biblical foundations for taking up arms.

Very distressed by such approaches, I came back to Mexico to continue my conversation with Heberto, who always answered with a smile on his face and faith in human nature. A few months later, that same year, I found myself representing the youth of my church at a Young Friends of North America gathering in a remote place in Kansas; these were also the days of the Vietnam War, so the draft, the military service, and conscientious objection were constantly under discussion. There were many young Friends from all over this country. In very rudimentary Spanglish, I was able to transmit my concern to this wonderful youth group in a quite different situation from mine, but with whom I felt deeply united by a divine miracle in the Spirit. I remember with deep reverence another vigil during this gathering. A young Friend was being tried at the time because he had refused to bear arms. We were holding him in the Light. This vigil was of such spiritual depth that no one could deny our large group was united and gathered in the Spirit and by the Spirit.

These two vigils, one in Mexico and the other in Kansas, transformed my life in a way that no sermon had done before! It was there I discovered that Quakerism was my spiritual path; it was there I discovered that Quakerism is not only a shelter for those running away from other spiritual communities, but something deeper that could embrace all, all of the corners of my life. It was there I discovered Quakerism as a way of life.

Sometimes I am amazed when, meeting and talking with Friends from the unprogrammed tradition, I find out that one of the things they can hardly stand about programmed Friends is the fact that a sermon is prepared as a central part of a meeting for worship. I have had to say quite frankly, "Look: I have been in Meetings where instead of listening to God's voice through whoever speaks, I have heard many sermons in one hour of silence! and even some quite academic philosophical arguments. On the other hand, I have also been in programmed Meetings where I have heard a sermon that does not say anything to me." We get so easily lost in our external differences that we shut the door to dialogue. Both of us feel we are in the correct place, and even that we are the only true heirs of the Spirit that permeated the first Friends.

Just a few days ago, I had a telephone conversation with Heredio Santos, whom many of you know. We hadn't seen each other for quite a few years; we were talking about our own personal situations, about what we believe is our calling, and he asked me, *How do you feel where you are now?* I responded that I felt quite uncomfortable particularly when, in the work/ministry FWCC carries out, I had found myself in situations of racial insensitivity and resistance to diversity. We concluded that *as long as one feels uncomfortable where one is, one is doing well. The problem would be if we felt comfortable, because that could mean two things: one, that we are in the Kingdom of Heaven, which couldn't possibly be true, or that we have conformed, adapted to this secular world, which Paul and Fox called us not to do.*

All my experiences have taught me a lot and shake my inner being and they do not allow me to feel comfortable. Yet I know by

personal experience, and I'm sure many of you can testify to this, too, that in the midst of the inner and outer darkness, over and over, when we open ourselves to the Spirit in worship, we are transformed and redeemed by the miraculous grace of God, whether through silence or by spoken ministry.

We are living in a very special period in history in which we must rediscover day by day the basis of our faith and not only attempt to be politically or theologically correct.

Today, more than ever, entire peoples, communities, immerse themselves in the search for a spiritual message that speaks to their condition, to their lives overwhelmed by violence in its diverse manifestations.... In Nicaragua, amongst the young people of the convulsive 1960s who were hit by the violence of the decade, there were many who were also struck by the prophetic voice of Martin Luther King. Today these people are deeply concerned to find, together, alternatives to violence. This seeking, while not spiritualising, is spiritual, and they feel that the Quaker understanding of the gospel may be one way to their goal; they feel it breaks down the alienating dichotomies of good and bad, sacred and secular, by its understanding of the world and creation as a sacred whole. They speak about these things in the context of building up the foundations for a culture of peace that may be the basis of true reconciliation and global reconstruction, in a country that has suffered so much.

In June, the World Council of Churches held a consultation in Corrymeela, Ireland, to consider nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution. In his opening lecture, *Peace on Earth, New Visions, New Praxis*, Konrad Raiser, general secretary of the WCC, spoke about the culture of violence in which we have grown up and of which we are prisoners, and confessed the failures and weaknesses of the efforts of some sectors of the Christian Church to act as builders of peace.... In his analysis of the different convocations and conferences held by the Council to reflect on the ways Christians have acted under such circumstances, the sentence that attracted my attention the most was one which recognised that the

long-term testimony of the historic peace churches for nonviolence “receives new relevance in the present situation. It formulates the most basic challenge to the prevailing culture of violence and is, therefore, no longer a respectable but idealistic and apolitical position, but points towards the need to develop a new form of political reason which we have to learn if humanity is to survive.”

As Friends, we are part of the historic peace churches, and as such, I consider this affirmation a challenge to our conscience and to the way we act internally as a Society of Friends, as well as in the wider world.

But to me, responding to this challenge would not be of value if we do not continue to make efforts inside our own family of Friends to dialogue amongst ourselves, to reconcile, acknowledging our own failures and knowing that we still have a lot to learn from each other.

To link all these thoughts to the theme, I would suggest that I’d like to think that we Friends are not so much a family as a musical band or a philharmonic orchestra, however we prefer to think of ourselves, where all instruments and voices of the choir are vital in producing the harmony that allows the central melody to be heard. Sometimes, wherever we are in it, whatever the instrument or voice, our performance has to be soft, quiet, *pianissimo*. At other times, there may be opportunities for solo performances. At times, we have to discover the precise moment to come in without disrupting what is already being played. There are opportunities for all to perform in *crescendo*, and even others where we will all be playing and singing together in a climax, making everyone else feel the music.

But two things are essential in all of this. First, we must have studied the music in order to understand what the composer wrote, because after all we are only the interpreters and not the authors. Secondly, we must always pay attention to the conductor. The first Friends never claimed to be the composers, nor the conductors, and I believe that George Fox’s phrase shows this implicitly when he calls Friends to know that “the Lord God is at work in this thick

night of darkness that may be felt.” Perhaps it is this very conviction (which I would say has an eschatological realism) that we, as a community of faith and hope, need to maintain in order to rejoice and sing as children of the light.

As I finish this testimony, I encourage you to continue to explore more deeply what you and Cuban Friends have already begun: Let us continue creating bridges, let us not stop, let’s be open to God’s guidance, and let’s listen to it. Let us not feel we are the composers or the conductors. Let us learn more and more to listen to the others, so that through our harmony we may be able to produce a better interpretation of the song, the music, that has been given to us.

Let us not be content. After all we have not reached the Kingdom of Heaven yet. We are all seekers, we are all beginners in many ways.

I am reminded of two poems as I finish writing these experiences:

The first one, just a verse, from one of T.S. Eliot’s “Four Quartets”:

*And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*¹

The other, by Mexican poet and writer Octavio Paz:

*Life is never ours, it belongs to others...
I am other when I am, my acts
are more mine if they are also everyone's,
in order to be I must be other,
leave myself, seek myself among others...*²

May God be with us all.

¹“Four Quartets” in *T. S. Eliot’s Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

² From *Piedra de Sol* (Sunstone), 1957 (©1979 Editorial Seix Barral, S.A.; ©1957, 1987 Octavio Paz).

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This address was delivered to New England Yearly Meeting on August 6, 1994, in Brunswick, Maine.

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THE WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP
a program of the Friends World Committee for Consultation,
Section of the Americas
1506 Race Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA*



Printed on recycled paper

4-95/3200/GS