

REFLECTIONS FROM A SOLITARY MEETING FOR WORSHIP (not included in the Pendle Hill Pamphlet)

HOLDING IN THE LIGHT

March 29, 2020

When I sit down for meeting for worship on first day morning, alone in my apartment, the first thing I do after settling into a period of silence is to visualize the meeting room in which I would be seated in normal times. I visualize the room filled with the people who usually attend each week and slowly look around the room, bringing to mind each individual I imagine I see. This is relatively easy as most people sit in the same place each week. As my inner eye moves around the room, passing from one set of benches to the next, I silently say the name of each person as I see them come into view. On the way, I'll come to a spot where an occasional visitor sits who often delivers a message I find annoying, and I include him in the group as well because today I want to pray for him, too. I might even throw in a few unknown persons representing the visitors that frequently come to worship with us, some for the first time.

It is easier for me to imagine all these people in their regular places in the meeting room than to try to imagine them one by one scattered throughout Philadelphia in their own houses or apartments. Once I have them all assembled as it were, my natural desire is to pray for their well-being in this complicated time. But then I ask myself, what does "to pray" mean for a Quaker? Traditionally we say, "I'll hold you in the Light" rather than "I'll pray for you." I'm comfortable with that phrase, and it is full of meaning for me.

Recently I read an interview given many years ago by Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of the well-known book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He expressed his ideas about prayer in a very Quakerly way. He said, when someone is ill or having difficulty, we do not pray for a miracle to cure them or for God to solve their problem. We are not asking God to intervene, "We are praying for the presence of God." Of himself, he said, "Presence is the essence of prayer... I don't pray for specifics. I simply and openly pray for the presence of God because I am a different person when I feel that I am in the presence of God." God's job, he says, is not to solve problems: "God's job is to make us brave" in the face of those problems.

That is what I mean—and what I think Quakers in general mean—when I say to you that, “I’m holding you in the Light.” I am asking God to be present with you and for you to feel that presence in whatever situation you find yourself in, and that feeling the presence of God will give you the courage and strength you need. When I do this, I actually try to envision a bright light encompassing you, almost like an aura emanating from your body as if that Inner Light we believe is present in all of us has burst forth and now envelops you externally as well as still shining brightly within.

At the same time, I am acknowledging that I don't know what the best outcome for you is, and you may not know that either; we both may have to surrender our desire to control the situation and accept whatever outcome God has in mind. But that doesn't mean sitting passively by and expecting God to do all the work. It means having the courage to face our situation and take the best actions we can to address it, knowing that the outcome may not be in our hands.

When asked by a follower whether he should tie up his camel when he got to the oasis or trust God to look after it, Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) said, "Trust in God, but tie up your camel." We must each do our part as best we can and trust that God will take care of the rest.

* * * * *

FINDING THE WAY TO WALK*

May 3, 2020

** Published in Friends Journal, April 2021*

Often, I find it helpful to print out a spiritual sentence or phrase and post it somewhere on the wall where I can easily and causally see it. That helps to remind me of the message it conveys, but I also find that letting my eyes roll over the words, allowing them to float around in my mind in a non-intellectual manner, enables me to see something new in them that I don't see when reading the words in their full text. That has been true for a verse of the 143rd Psalm that I posted on the wall last week.

While the ideas in the verse immediately appealed to me, the more I've looked at it, the more I've wanted to reverse the order of the second and fourth phrases. Somehow, when I do that, it has much more significance for me. But I

worry that I may be missing something important in the way the author worded it by imposing my own conception. My version is this:

*Cause me to hear thy loving-kindness in the morning;
For I lift up my soul unto thee:
Cause me to know the way wherein I should walk;
For in thee do I trust. — KJV Psalm 143.8*

I'll have to confess I don't think much about my soul; the concept of a soul doesn't seem to be part of my spiritual beliefs. So, when I come to that line, the phrase that comes to me that seems to convey the same idea is "open my heart to thee." During this time of self-isolation, the spiritual practice I've been trying to improve is meditation. I've tried it before, but I've never been able to sustain it—either for a long enough time in an individual sitting or over time. However, rather than trying to empty my mind of all thoughts as I've done before, I have taken a different approach. Using the words of the Psalm, I have been trying to hear God's loving-kindness by opening my heart to God and trying to feel God's presence—feel it within me and also feel that I am being held in its loving embrace.

God's loving-kindness is always present, of course. The difficulty is getting rid of all the distractions in my mind that prevent me from actually feeling it, from allowing it to permeate my being and transform my life. But consciously trying to open my heart to that presence each morning has enabled me to meditate longer and with a more positive attitude about what I'm doing.

The fact that I trust that God leads me on the right path is why I feel more comfortable with that phrase being last. But the word that grabs my attention most is "way." "Way" can have several different meanings. It can mean path or route—which is how I take it in this context—or it can mean *how* to do something, a form of behavior. I've spent a good deal of my life looking for a spiritual path to follow that will lead me into the greater harmony of God. I've at least discovered that I don't want something as definitively defined as a paved sidewalk with clear directional signs. What I want is something more like a dirt path meandering through the woods with occasional side trails to lead me down paths I haven't explored before that open up new experiences and unexpected

discoveries. Quakerism is as close as I've come to that, but even its loose structure is often a bit more than I want.

However, as I've been contemplating this verse, it is the second meaning of "way" that has intrigued me. Maybe it's not as important which path you walk as the *way* (the manner) in which you walk it. After all, there is no real destination, just a journey to be lived, and, who knows—perhaps to walk that journey with love, trust, and an open heart is itself the path, the way, to God.

* * * * *

CHERRY BLOSSOMS

May 10, 2020

Each day around noon, I venture outside and take a two to three mile walk. It provides a break in the routine of my day and a break from the monotony of being inside for extended periods of time. I live adjacent to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, so my walk takes me along Pennsylvania Avenue for several blocks until I come to the place where the freight train line that runs along the edge of the Schuylkill River in Center City emerges from its tunnel. Remarkably enough, there are freight trains still running. For a short distance along the railroad line, there is an area so wild and overgrown that it seems like part of a forest. Small bushes surround tall trees; fallen trees lie where they fell, all sorts of white and yellow and blue flowers cover the ground in the shade and in the patches of the sunlight that falls through the trees.

There are two paths through this mini-forest, and to take either would be to feel totally out of the city were it not for the drone of cars and motorcycles on Kelly Drive and the occasional hum of a freight train. The upper path is longer and more frequently used, so I usually take the lower, which is shorter but so enclosed by bushes on both sides that it truly feels like another world. I also like this path because it comes out onto a wide lawn of grass at the edge of which is a bench where I usually stop and rest briefly on my walk.

On this day, about a week ago, it was very windy. I like the wind. I like feeling the air that is always present but invisible to sight or touch. And so I was quite content. As I approached the bench, I noticed that the wind was blowing the petals of the last of the blossoms off the cherry trees that mark the edge

between the forest and the lawn. When I got closer, I saw that the ground around the bench was covered with a remarkably even distribution of the white petals, almost like newly fallen snow. As I wandered back under the large cherry tree, I saw that the entire area beneath it and an adjacent tree was totally covered with petals that seemed much more pink in the shade but again looked like freshly fallen snow. It was extraordinarily beautiful, and I think it would be accurate to say that "my heart did leap for joy."

When I sat on the bench, the wind continued to blow petals in my direction. They floated gently in the air then settled on the ground before me. It felt like I was sitting in a snow flurry without the cold. The windy day had kept other people away, and so I sat there alone, looking out at the beauty of the scene before me—the wide green lawn, the trees, the blue sky with white clouds floating by—feeling quite peaceful and serene. The wind blew some petals onto my pants and shirt, and I imagined that if I sat there long enough I might become as covered as the ground and merge so totally into this natural environment that I would be virtually invisible to passersby. It was a very pleasant thought.

Recently I'd been listening to Louis Armstrong sing the song, *What a Wonderful World* as an antidote for the world we're living in right now. As I sat there, I could not help but think of the song and some of its lyrics. "I see skies of blue, and clouds of white, the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night." But as I thought of this song, a wave of sadness suddenly washed over me. The world is such a wonderful place, and we are so blessed to be able to be alive on earth; why is there so much hate? Why can't we get along? Why does it take a crisis like the present one to bring out the goodness in people? Why can't we be this way all the time?

Like many others, I am wondering what we will learn from all this. We will go forward to something new and better, or back to the old normal? I know I can't do much about what nations might learn or even what our country as a whole might learn. But Lao-tzu reminds me that it's more important for me to take care of my own little corner of the world:

*If you want to awaken all of humanity,
Then awaken all of yourself;
If you want to eliminate the suffering in the world,
Then eliminate all that is dark and negative in yourself.*

*Truly the greatest gift you have to give
Is that of your own self-transformation.*

So, the real question is, what will I learn from this, and how will it change my life? How am I going to go forward to something better rather than back to my old normal? One thing I know for sure, I miss the people I love. I will take them less for granted in the future and express my love for them more frequently—and with abundant physical affection! As for the rest, I'm only beginning to get a sense of some answers, but at least I'm asking a good question.

* * * * *

TRUST AND SERVE

May 24, 2020

Opposite the chair where I sit for my Sunday morning solitary meeting for worship are two bookcases filled with spiritual books. The one on the left consists almost entirely of books about Jesus, indicating the dominance of his teachings in my spiritual life. The one on the right contains a highly diverse collection of books showing my general interest in comparative religion and things spiritual. Each speaks to me in a different way. Today it is the books about Jesus that attract my attention. When I look at them, I feel more confused than knowledgeable and wonder how I would summarize his message based on all that I have read.

Jesus himself gives a simple answer to that question. When asked by a lawyer (as the gospel of Luke calls the man) what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus mentions only two things: love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. For me, the word "love" is used in relation to so many different things it has lost its meaning. In the context of these statements, it doesn't really tell me much of practical usefulness, and so I search for other words that convey the same spirit but provide what I think is a clearer sense of what Jesus means or at least what his statement means to me.

It's difficult for me to figure out how to apply the human concepts of love to my idea of God. For me, God is something like an energy field that permeates all creation and encompasses all creation as well. It is an energy field with a

special kind of intelligence that gives order to the universe and also influences our individual lives. While it may sound strange to say this, I've always found the concept of The Force in the *Star Wars* movies to be a good approximation.

When I think of an alternative word for love in this context, the one that comes immediately to mind is "trust." To trust first of all that God exists, and then to trust that God is a constant presence in my life that brings only good. To me, that is the "leap of faith," and once I accept that, all else follows as a natural consequence.

To trust in God's presence and goodness is to trust that all the events and experiences of my life are purposeful and meaningful and intended to help me along my spiritual journey. As I said in another reflection, it means to trust that I am being led, to be willing to float in the stream of my life, and confidently accept where the current takes me. It also means to trust that the people who come into my life are messengers sent from God to help me along my spiritual way. No matter what they bring or ask, whether easy or hard, or whether they seem friendly or not, all are God's messengers and to be treated with equal respect and loving-kindness.

It is also somewhat difficult for me to understand Jesus' use of the word love with respect to my neighbor. The word that seems to fit his teachings best is "serve." This is well illustrated in the gospel of John when he says, "love one another as I have loved you," and then later adds, "I have given you an example." The example is the washing of feet; that is, serving the needs of others. I can modify the word serve in many ways that incorporate the qualities of love—serve with compassion, serve with humility, serve without expecting anything in return, serve anyone in need, serve without worrying about the results or the consequences for yourself. In fact, all these qualities are aspects of love mentioned somewhere in his teachings.

In Wagner's opera, *Parsifal*, the character Kundry has a prominent role in the second act. She is under the spell of an evil master who has charged her to seduce Parsifal so that he will lose the purity he must have to complete his task. She tries very hard and sings a lot! By rejecting her advances, Parsifal essentially frees her from the spell. In the final act, she speaks only one word: Serve. It is the essence of the opera and, I believe, an essential characteristic of Jesus' life, condensed into a single word.

Of all the thousands of words I've read on the thousands of pages in those couple of hundred books, these two—trust and serve—stand out for me as the ones that best exemplify what it means to lead a spiritual life. They are easy to say but very hard to put into practice. However, many people have been able to do so, which challenges me to continue to strive to do the same.

* * * * *

ALONE WITH GOD

June 1, 2020

(When I sat down for my solitary meeting for worship on Sunday, my mind and heart were on the marches and protests that had occurred in Philadelphia on Saturday. It seemed inappropriate to think of anything else, but that's not where I was led.)

Last week during my solitary meeting for worship, my eyes were drawn to the bookcase on the left opposite where I sit, so it is not surprising that this week my attention was drawn to the one on the right. In contrast to the first, which contains books about only one spiritual tradition, the bookcase on the right contains books about so many different spiritual paths it is almost impossible for me to describe what's there. Everything from Buddhism, Islam, and Quakers, to *A Course in Miracles*, Gurdjieff, Edgar Cayce, Native American wisdom, Swedenborg—well, you name it, and I probably have at least one book about it.

There is no doubt I've gained a lot from reading all of them; they have enriched my spiritual knowledge and reinforced many of the ideas I've obtained from the books in the other bookcase. At the same time, they've created a lot of confusion in my mind and for my spiritual journey. When I became a Quaker, I spent about the first ten years trying to learn about the history, spiritual beliefs, and practices of Quakers. That was an inspiring experience and made me feel I'd made the right decision in becoming a member. However, in recent years I have been drawn to the wide variety of other ideas represented by my second bookcase. I liken my approach to trying to get to the top of a high hill or small mountain. I started out on one path and got reasonably far along. But then I decided to explore another path. I went a short way along it, enough to get a feel for it, then tried another and another and another. Now I'm still only partway up

the mountain and unsure which path to take and feeling confused and somewhat lost. It feels as if I'm afraid to commit myself to one because I wonder if there might not be a better one around the corner or that by picking one I'll pick the *wrong* one: too many paths, too many choices.

As I was staring at these books today, I realized that the founders of most of these spiritual traditions followed a similar path. Buddha sat under a tree in the forest for forty-nine years, or so the story goes. Jesus went into the desert for forty days; even Muhammad spent many nights week after week in his cave in the hills before anything happened. Native Americans talk about going into the woods on a vision quest. George Fox describes himself wandering alone in the fields at night for what seems like years before he had a transforming opening. Each of them went off alone into a natural environment away from the world of other people. Why did they do this, and what did they do while they were there?

Neal Donald Walsch tells a lovely story that helps explain the "why." A father noticed his young son went off by himself into the woods every day. When he asked his son why he did that, the reply was "to be with God." But, the father said, God is everywhere; God is no different in the woods than here. "Yes, I know that," said the son, "But in the woods *I* am different."

One of the copies I have of the Tao Te Ching translates a line as, "Let nature renew what men undo." Clearly, for the young son and for these others, getting away from the man-made world was an important way to get in touch with the essence and wonder of creation and its creator. Anyone who has spent time in a natural setting is aware of the different quality of peace and calm that comes from that experience. That most certainly has been true for me. In such environments, I feel more open and more connected to the divine reality behind creation, and I believe that's how Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Fox, and others felt as well. Did they expect to find God there more than anyplace else? No. As T.E. Lawrence put it, in that "solitude they heard more clearly the living word they brought with them."

As to what they did while there, I cannot say for sure. However, their teachings suggest that they turned inward to connect with that living word they brought with them. While they may not have used these words, they were, it seems to me, all doing what Fox advised early Friends to do: "Turn to the Inner Light, and it will tell you all you need to know."

For early Quakers, the idea of turning to the Inner Light seems to have been both a primary belief and a primary practice. Indeed, it almost seems that it was the only thing early Friends believed in. They were certainly not concerned with codifying a set of rules, ideas, or “testimonies” to follow. Direct experience of the Inner Light seems to have taken precedence even over the Bible. Yet turning to the Inner Light has not been a feature of my own spiritual practice, nor was it for two groups of Quakers in two different meetings I asked about this. Rather than turning to the Inner Light as a central practice, there seems to be a reliance on other people’s experiences that have been organized into a list of testimonies and a book of guidelines without having had the actual experiences ourselves. We know what these others said, but as Fox challenged us, “what canst thou say” of your own direct experience.

Much to my surprise, I have found that sitting silently alone these past few weeks has provided more spiritual inspiration (the source of these reflections) than I’ve found in several months of sitting in a meeting room filled with people. Has this been turning to the Inner Light? I’m not sure, but it seems like a practice worth continuing.

* * * * *

TREE ENERGY

June 21, 2020

For the past two Sundays, my solitary meetings for worship have been anything but peaceful. My mind has been like a corral full of wild horses unwilling to be tamed. It is a reflection, at least in part, I think, of the chaos and confusion that exists in the world around me. I try to calm my mind each morning with a routine of walking, meditation, prayer, and a simple form of Tai Chi, all performed on the roof deck of my apartment building. There are usually no other people there, so I can carry out my activities in the quiet early morning sunlight undisturbed.

The Tai Chi exercise I do is called Tree Energy Tai Chi and is intended to be undertaken with a tree as a partner as a way of reminding myself of the spiritual lessons a tree has to teach me. These days, rather than take the time to search out a tree in the park, I focus on a stand of pine trees on the opposite side of the Parkway and on one particular tree on the edge that is slightly taller than the

others. Each movement of the exercise has a spiritual meaning. The first reminds me that the tree is firmly rooted in the ground; its roots are deep, and its trunk is solid and strong, capable of withstanding all kinds of conditions. This reminds me that my spiritual life must be rooted too, well-grounded in my convictions and practices with confidence in God's presence. The second movement reminds me that the branches of the tree are flexible and can adjust to changing circumstances—wind and rain and snow, different seasons and temperatures. If the tree was only as stiff as the trunk, it might easily break in a strong wind; if it were only as flexible as the branches that same wind would blow it over. This combination of strength and flexibility, this ability of the tree to accept and adjust to circumstances without losing its integrity, serves as a model and a goal for my spiritual life.

The other movements represent exchanges of energy and love between the tree and me. We each give, and we each receive just as in reality we mutually exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide. The last two movements are the most important. The first requires me to bend my right leg and balance on my left foot while holding my arms folded horizontally in front of my face so that my hands block my view of the tree and everything else. It reminds me that for both me and the tree, the future is uncertain and unknown. The last movement maintains the same position but lifts my arms upward until they and my body form the letter "Y." This symbolizes that no matter what the future brings, I, like the tree, stand ready to receive it with the strength of my faith in God's goodness, and my willingness to accept all that comes to me as a gift. It is a very powerful posture—and challenging belief—that I hold for sixty seconds before I bow to the tree and finish.

It has somewhat surprised me that, confined as I mostly am to the inside of my apartment, these reflections have been so inspired by thoughts about nature: streams to float in, rivers to float on, hills to climb, birds that sing, and now trees that serve as spiritual teachers. Perhaps the general absence of those things has made them more precious, more a source of spiritual inspiration than usual. And there is even one more: wind.

When I sit, usually shirtless, on the roof deck in meditation after completing my Tai Chi, I feel the wind that comes to me there fourteen floors above the street. It comes as a soft and gentle breeze as if the hands of God were caressing my body with the same soft and gentle touch a mother would use

washing her child's body with warm water. It is a final reminder of God's constant presence and loving-kindness that I try to carry with me throughout the day.

* * * * *

CHRIST IN THE MIDST

June 28, 2020

A wonderful feature of Zoom technology is that you can attend a meeting for worship almost anywhere. Today I spent part of my time in a Conservative Friends meeting for worship from Cleveland, Ohio, at the invitation of a Conservative Friend I met several years ago. The rest of my time I spent in my usual solitary meeting. The host of the Conservative Friends meeting posted an image on the screen of the painting, "The Presence in the Midst" by James Doyle Penrose. I found this a welcome change from the usual focus on the faces of participants.

The painting is based on the gospel of Matthew (18:20): "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." Penrose's interpretation of the phrase is clearly influenced by George Fox's statement, "Christ has come to teach his people." This is indicated by the hovering transparent figure of Jesus superimposed over a 17th or early 18th-century meeting for worship in what is thought to be Jordans Meeting House in England. Women in bonnets and plain dress and men in dark suits and hats sit with heads bowed in silent, expectant worship. The image, and my interpretation of the phrase, reminded me of the difference between meeting for worship alone and with others.

All my life, I have been aware that I feel very different when I am in the presence of another person. I feel more alert, more alive, more energized whether I'm with just one person or many. And it doesn't seem to matter whether we are in the same room or separate ones or whether we are doing something together or not. The mere presence of another person nearby is enough to change my attitude and the way I feel. I have a theory of why this is so.

I believe that all living things are sending out vibrations of energy. When I am with someone else, the vibrations of energy that we are each sending out

interact with one another to enhance and magnify our own individual energies and create a new and third field of energy that both combines our individual energies and encompasses them as well. It is like saying there is me, and there is you, but then there is also "us," which is a third entity in its own right that results from the merger of the two of us and in some strange way is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

There is some basis in scientific fact for this theory. Scientists tell us that at the atomic level, everything is in motion; everything is vibrating and sending off waves of energy whether we detect it or not. This is true of even what we might call "dead" matter – rocks and other inanimate objects. The only difference is that living creatures, and human beings especially, send off waves of energy at higher frequency levels. Some scientists suggest that there must be an intelligent force that sets these atomic movements in motion. For me, that force is what I mean when I use the word God.

When I apply these ideas to meeting for worship, it is the words “come together *in my name*” that have special significance. I don't take those words as literally referring to Jesus as Penrose did. To me, they mean coming together with the specific *intent* to try to connect with “that of God” within, with the Inner Light or what some call the “Christ consciousness” that Jesus personified so fully and that is potential in all of us. And in the best of moments, that effort brings forth an encompassing field of energy—a presence—that unites each of us with one another and with the Divine energy of creation itself.

When I am in meeting for worship with others—even just two or three—the potential for this sense of a larger field of energy is greater than when I am alone. I believe that this sense of connection to something larger enables me or another to tap into the presence within and bring forth a message that may provide one or more of us present with inspiration for our spiritual journey. This potential, and the feeling that I am vibrating in unity with the oneness of all creation that seems only possible in the actual physical presence of others, is what I miss in the current situation and long to recapture.

* * * * *

BLACK JESUS

July 19, 2020

There are four objects that are evidence of my interest in comparative religion on the bookcase next to the desk where I write these reflections. One is a statue of Buddha. Another a square orange ceramic tile with the word for Allah in Arabic in red letters, and the third, a colorful statue of the Hindu god Hauman—the monkey god—about whom I know very little. The fourth statue is of Jesus and is somewhat unusual, at least for me.

The approximately twelve-inch tall statue portrays Jesus as a Black man with short black hair and a black mustache and goatee. He is standing on what looks like a cloud, with arms extended outward at his sides. His only garment is a blue robe wrapped around his body and head, leaving one arm and most of his dark-skinned chest exposed. He could easily be a homeless Black man you might see walking the streets of Philadelphia with a blue blanket as his only article of clothing.

When I found this statue in a vendor's cart at 30th Street Station, it had an immediate and powerful impact on me. Today the statue has even more meaning because of the events of the past weeks and the homeless encampment that now exists on the baseball fields along the Benjamin Franklin Parkway opposite my building. There are around 100 or so tents in the encampment, and I can readily imagine my Black Jesus wrapped in his blue blanket emerging from one of them ready to preach his message of love to his assembled homeless followers much like he preached his message to what might have been similar followers in his day.

My fascination with this statue is not because I care about the color of Jesus' skin. I am sure he was not the handsome Northern European white man with long, nicely combed hair and spotlessly clean clothes as he is typically depicted. But I think it is also unlikely that he was Black, and if he was of darker skin, undoubtedly so were the other people in his community, and therefore he would not have stood out as anything unusual. But by depicting him as a Black man, the statue is a clear reminder that he was an outsider who was criticized, oppressed, and not valued by much of his society. It is also a reminder that he identified more with poor and marginalized people to whom he brought his message than with the well-to-do and well-established. Above all, it expresses to

me in a profound way that there is "that of God in everyone" and that anyone can be God's messenger—beliefs that are particularly important to me right now as I stare out at the homeless encampment in front of me.

The statue makes me wonder if I would have been attracted to Jesus' message when I was younger if he had been depicted as a Black man in the Catholic Church I attended. Or even whether his teachings would have the same relevance today to the Italian Catholics of South Philadelphia. Or conversely, would his message to love one another, even those who oppress you, have been more powerful coming from someone whose condition provided no good reason to think in those terms and every reason to think otherwise. Would that message, coming from a Black man, have created a different attitude about Black people in general that would have led to a different society than the one that has prevailed so long in this country?

In addition to these thoughts about Jesus, the statue and recent events pose a question about God that I have not considered before. Is my entire conception of God distorted by my perspective as a privileged white man? I grew up with the image of God as an elderly bearded white man on a cloud in the sky, and so it is not surprising that this has influenced my perspective. I began to address the "male" aspect of that many years ago by consciously refusing to refer to God as "he," even if it required me to repeat the word God many times in the same sentence. However, I haven't been willing to alternate "he" with "she" as some often do. My reluctance is because I no longer think of God in anthropomorphic terms. I think of God as a Divine Spirit or as a Divine Energy. For those definitions of God, the correct pronoun is "it," something I've been comfortable with ever since reading a character use that term in the novel *The Color Purple*.

But while I've considered that issue, I have not considered whether white privilege has influenced my perspective. That is a new challenge. I think of God as a positive presence in my life and that all the gifts I have received from God are good and designed to help me on my spiritual journey. It is quite easy for me to think in those terms because I've basically had a very blessed life. I've had my share of struggles and difficulties, but my life has been relatively easy by comparison with many others. I have no doubt that this is partly because I am white, male, well-educated, and have benefited from all the unearned privileges that come with those characteristics. But has that unconsciously influenced my

concept of God? Has my thinking of God as a white man implicitly made me value white people more than people of color? Would my conception of God be the same if I was a homeless Black man living across the street in a tent? Or if I was an employed low-wage earning man living in a run-down and crime-ridden neighborhood of North Philadelphia. Or a Black woman trying to raise two children while living in public housing? What would my conception of God be in those circumstances? Could I believe that everything that had come to me was a gift and a good gift at that? Or would my conception of God remain the same, but my faith be stronger, like those communities in South American who find strength in the fact that Jesus also suffered and yet could still love and forgive those who oppressed him.

I think it is because of the difficulty of holding a positive image of God in such circumstances that I so greatly admire the faith of Black people, whether Christian or Muslim or of any other faith tradition. For many years I worked with the head of the community association in an impoverished and segregated neighborhood in North Philadelphia. I was twenty-six years old when I first went there and found myself in a world unlike anything I had previously experienced or could possibly have imagined. Within the five or ten minutes it took me to walk from the trolley stop to this man's house, my entire life changed. When I stood on his doorstep, ready to ring the doorbell, I noticed a bumper sticker pasted on the window beside the door. During the many decades I worked with him, he lived in several different houses in the neighborhood, but in each one, he had this bumper sticker pasted to his front window. It said, *"God is Good All the Time."* Each time I went to his house, I stood in awe that someone living in the conditions in which he did could believe that. But he did; he most emphatically did. His strong faith was a source of inspiration for me; it made me more appreciative of the gifts I had received and made me more conscious of the need to share my unearned and perhaps undeserved good fortune with others. Today the statue of Black Jesus beside me is a constant reminder of all that and a continuing source of inspiration and challenge.

* * * * *

HEALING BEGINS

August 9, 2020

Healing begins when we each take responsibility for our part in the pain.

I spoke those words in a meeting for worship at Friends General Conference almost twenty-five years ago. The words, and the ones that followed, came from that place where spirit-led messages originate, not from any clear thinking of my own. The meeting for worship was focused on racial healing. There were about fifty or sixty white Quakers present, along with six Black Quakers, five women, and one man. What prompted my message was a question I asked myself: What did the six Black people need to hear from me? I concluded that an apology was in order, and that idea opened the door for the spirit to put the words in my mouth. They still seem relevant today—more relevant in fact—and suggest a possible way to begin to move forward. These are the words the spirit led me to speak back then:

“Healing begins when we each take responsibility for our part in the pain. I know that the pain of racial discrimination is not part of the past, not just a part of the period of slavery. I know that it has extended into my own lifetime and up to the present moment. I know that my parents, friends, and I have implicitly condoned it. I would like to apologize for myself and my society, white society, and all that we have done to you and your ancestors. I hope you will forgive us. For myself, I pledge that I will do whatever I can to make sure it does not continue.”

My message was not directed toward the white people present. I was not saying, here is something I think we need to do. It was explicitly directed to the six Black people who sat in front of me and was intended to come from me personally to them personally and individually. Moreover, I was not then, and I am not now asking for forgiveness: that seems inappropriate and is simply a way to relieve myself of the burden of guilt. I can only apologize, and if forgiveness is offered or not, that was and still is a decision for them to make. And if it is withheld—withheld until I truly earn it by my present and future actions—then that would seem appropriate and just.

I felt strongly then and continue to feel today that the white society I, and most of you who are reading this are part of, owes a genuine, sincere, and

explicit apology to the Black citizens of our community and country. We may think that by passing civil rights legislation, by passing laws to overcome discrimination, by supporting anti-poverty programs, that by doing all those things we have taken responsibility for the past and apologized, but in truth, we have not. We need to say it explicitly and directly to individual Black people, as I tried to do at FGC.

When I look at the Black Lives Matter movement and ask myself, what can I do, what should we—white society—do, I come back to that phrase: Healing begins when... We are the ones that need to initiate that healing; the Black Lives Matter movement has offered us an open invitation to do so and expressed the hope that we will take up that challenge. We need to apologize to each Black person we know and meet, even those friends we've had for years to whom we believe we have already shown our respect and support. We need to connect with one another, one on one, and get to know one another as real people, not as members of groups of "them" and "us;" we need to know one another's hopes and dreams, the things we share in common so that we can truly see that we are all part of one human family with the same hopes and dreams for our lives and the lives of our children. An apology may not be enough; there may be a need for reparations or other solutions. But it is an essential place to begin, a place of intimate human connection, and out of that whatever is needed to heal will arise and be valued more because it will be something we determine together. It will be an expression of our love and respect for one another.

While I believe this is something we need to do as individuals, it will not have the impact that is necessary unless we do it together, as communities seeking reconciliation with others. Simply walking up to a Black stranger and offering an apology may not be comfortable for either party nor will it lead to greater understanding. What is needed is an extended dialogue and an organized way to conduct it.

Although this is something I'd like to see all Philadelphia undertake, it is a process that Quakers could begin and hope that others might follow. Let us declare 2021 a **Year of Reconciliation**. Let each of our meetings reach out to a religious congregation in the Black community—preferably one that is also geographically and economically different—and offer an explicit apology for our own and our society's actions. Then let us begin a sustained yearlong process of getting to know one another as people and seeing what solutions for future

change God may inspire us to find together. At the end of a year, we can collectively come together to share results.

I feel it is essential to do this in person, so it may not be possible to begin until the Covid-19 crisis has ended or eased. But we can start now to identify partners and plan how to go about this, even testing out some ideas via Zoom. Alone and separate we will continue to stumble; together we may be able not only to find a way to heal the pain but also a path toward a world in which all God's children will know only love and respect.

* * * * *

LOOK FOR THE GOOD

August 23, 2020

One of the readers of these Reflections sent me a music video of a song entitled *Love is Still the Answer*. I found this so inspiring I looked for other videos by the same artist, Jason Mraz. That led me to *Look for the Good*, which I found equally inspiring. Now I play each one several times a week as a source of inspiration. In addition, I printed out the words to the chorus of *Look for the Good* and taped them on a wall where I've started to put up quotes that inspire me. In the time I spent in solitary meeting for worship this morning it was those words I thought about almost as if they were a message someone else in meeting with me had just delivered.

Looking for the good in everyone has an obvious connection to the Quaker belief that there is "that of God" in everyone. Much as I believe that and find it helpful, it is sometimes too general and too conceptual to have an impact on how I behave. On the other hand, look for the good is simple, direct, tangible, clear, and easy to remember, and gives me a proactive orientation to the way I view other people and events.

When I thought about this phrase this morning, I was reminded that most of the time, I consider myself a "glass half empty" type of person. I tend to see the difficulties and problems first. Quite often, that helps me identify things I can do something about, but most of the time it means that I feel weighed down by the burden of these problems. In an earlier Reflection, I noted how I thought I often walked around with "my blues on parade." My usual reaction to this feeling

has just been to hope the problems and difficulties will go away, hope that things will improve in the future. But valuable as a feeling of hope can be, it can also be an obstacle, as Thich Nhat Hanh points out. When "we cling to our hope in the future, we do not focus our energies and capabilities on the present moment. If you can refrain from hoping you can bring yourself entirely into the present moment and discover the joy that is already here." That certainly is true for me, and so I have decided to abandon all hope and simply look for the good that's in the present around me right now.

That seems like a crazy thing to do when the world seems to be in such a mess. But I'm starting to feel that makes it even more important to look for the good—to recognize and appreciate the good that is there, and to believe that some good will come of all that seems to be a mess right now and to set about trying to find it. So, I invite you to join me and follow Jason's advice:

Look for the good in everything.

Look for the people who will set your soul free.

It always seems impossible until it's done.

Look for the good in everyone.

Look for the good in everyone.

* * * * *

HOPE

August 30, 2020

Last week I reflected on how hope could be an obstacle to appreciating and experiencing the joy and wonder of the present moment. This week, while meditating in the morning, I recalled those thoughts and found myself reflecting on the opposite—how hope can be a positive influence and give strength during difficult times. That reflection was influenced by a recent video chat with the young man I visit in prison. He is serving a term of life without parole, but despite that, he has a remarkably positive and optimistic attitude about his life. I sometimes feel he is more positive and optimistic than I am despite the difference in our circumstances.

His attitude is, in part at least, influenced by his religious beliefs. He is a Muslim and takes his religious practices seriously; he fasts during Ramadan and does his best to pray five times a day within the context of his prison schedule. He believes that where he is right now—where each of us is right now—is precisely where Allah intends him (and us) to be, and therefore all is to the good. He acknowledges that being sent to prison has had a positive impact on his life, transforming him from a drug dealer and petty criminal into a more thoughtful and responsible man.

While I think I would find a life sentence demoralizing, he is sustained by the hope that appeals may reduce his sentence, and he may eventually be able to go home. Over the 13 years he has been in prison, he has done a good job of educating himself about the law and has filed many appeals himself, pointing out irregularities in his trial. Even though so far all of those have been turned down, he has not lost hope.

The appeals process is like climbing a ladder. Each time you go up one rung and get rejected, that allows you to move up to the next higher rung until finally you get near the top where, in some instances, a favorable outcome might be more likely. He's almost at the top right now and waiting for the result. But recently, he said that if his latest appeal is rejected, he will apply to have his sentence commuted based on his positive accomplishments in prison. So, there is still room to hope, and I believe that contributes to his ability to maintain such a positive outlook.

At first, his example served to remind me that there are two aspects of hope. Yes, it can be an obstacle to living in the present moment, but it can also be the factor that makes it possible to live positively in the difficult circumstances of the present moment. So, my previous conclusion to abandon all hope seems a little too extreme. But the more I thought about his situation, the more I realized that he embodies a good balance between these two aspects of hope. In the present, he is taking advantage of whatever the prison has to offer in educational courses, focusing on subjects that may be of use to him if he gets out, but often taking things simply for the experience of learning something new. He has written one short book about his relationship with his daughter and is now completing a book of poems. He is very focused on making the most out of the present moment to the fullest extent his circumstances allow. He is not pinning all his "hopes" on a future that may or may not occur. On the other hand, neither

is he just sitting back and idly hoping that something good will happen in the future. He's taking whatever action he can to help the future he hopes for appear.

So now I see that both aspects of hope have their worthwhile qualities. The key is to find the balance between pinning your hopes on the future to such a degree that you miss out on the joy and wonder of the present and focusing so much on the present that you neglect to do your part in helping a positive future emerge.

* * * * *

HOLDING IN THE LIGHT #2

September 27, 2020

Last week I was informed that an acquaintance from Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting was in intensive care, sedated, and on a ventilator. Whether this was from Covid-19 or another reason, I do not know. I refer to him as an acquaintance rather than a friend not to diminish my feeling for him, but because I only knew him in that limited way you know people in your Quaker meeting with whom you have no other social or personal connection. My closest contact with him came once a year when I organized the meeting's annual art show in the gathering room of the "old" Chestnut Hill meetinghouse. He was always eager to display and discuss his artwork and occasionally helped organize and hang the show. I also know he liked dancing, although I never saw him dance. My impression was that he had a difficult life and struggled with both financial and health issues. I may be wrong, but that's the impression I had, and it's that impression, combined with his present circumstances, that weighs heavily on my heart this morning as I sit here in my usual solitary meeting for worship.

Some Friends have organized sessions to hold him in the Light, so that is what I am trying to do this morning. But I find that this has produced thoughts about the meaning of "holding in the Light" somewhat different from those I expressed when I wrote the first of these Reflections back in March. At that time, I wrote that holding in Light meant to ask God to be present with another, to give strength and comfort in a difficult situation, and for the other person to be aware of God's presence. While I still hold that view, I see it somewhat differently today.

I found myself asking if I can hold myself in the Light, and if so, what does that mean? The answer that comes to me is yes. When I have been in difficult circumstances I have asked God to be with me and to give me the strength I need to deal with the situation. In that sense, I am holding myself in the Light. But at the same time, I know I am trying to ask God to give me the strength to accept the situation, to find meaning and purpose in it, and to be able to overcome my fear and say, "thy will be done" and mean it. That's not easy, and I can't claim I've always been able to do that.

In holding myself in the Light, I try to remind myself that if I believe in God's presence and goodness (as I do), then there must be purpose and meaning and some sliver of good in all the experiences that come to me; all are gifts intended to help me along my spiritual journey. None are inherently good or bad; it's only our thinking, as Shakespeare reminds us, that makes them one or the other. So, if we have a choice, why not assume there is some good even if it's very hard to find? I know: easy to say, but extremely hard to do. However, we have no other choice. Holding ourselves in the light is both to ask for God's presence and to be willing to accept the outcome no matter what that may be.

On the other hand, when it comes to holding another in the Light, I think that trying to find meaning and purpose and good in a difficult situation is not our purpose. Our task in those situations is the opposite: it is to see the difficulty for what it is and not pretend otherwise. It is to feel, to the extent we can, the pain and suffering another is experiencing and acknowledge that. It is not to be the optimistic one, saying, all will be well, but to moan and cry out, "Why him, God, why him?" In doing so, we shoulder some of the burden of the pain and try to unite with it, leaving the other person the task of finding whatever meaning, purpose, or good they can find in the situation.

While we can never experience the real pain and suffering of another or the mental anguish or fear, we can perhaps imagine it from some similar experience of our own or by imagining how we would feel in the same situation. And if we can do that, if we can enter into and experience the condition of another as if it were truly our own and still say "thy will be done," then the Light we hold another in will be imbued with real power—the power that comes from our confidence that God is with us at all times, the power that comes from the belief in God's goodness, the power of our love for another, and the power to

accept all that life has to offer no matter how difficult it seems to our limited vision.

Dear friend, that is the Light I'm holding you in this morning.

* * * * *

LEAPING INTO THE VOID

October 25, 2020

Throughout the course of my life, I have found it easier to determine when there is a "leading" I am intended to follow than to determine when such a leading has ended, and it's time or appropriate to lay it down. Such is the case with the writing of these Reflections.

When I began in writing March, it was clear that it was something I wanted to do, something that was important for me to do for my own benefit and to share with others with whom I would not be having direct contact for some unforeseeable time. However, I assumed that the Covid-19 pandemic would end, in person meetings for worship would resume, and I would return. That has not been the case. Consequently, I'm thrown back on my own devices, attempting to find a sign that says "continue" or "enough."

Many of the short essays I've written reflect a movement in my own spiritual journey that was going on even before the pandemic began. The pandemic and the necessity of meeting for worship alone provided a space that enabled those concerns to rise to the surface and were often reflected—although indirectly and perhaps apparent only to me—in many of the short essays I wrote. It seems quite clear now that a particular phase of my spiritual journey was coming to a close and that to be open to what might happen next, I need to be willing to give up some of the past to be empty enough to receive new leadings. *The Book of Runes* says it is time for me "to leap empty-handed into the void." and while that sounds overly dramatic, it also sounds right.

I want to thank all of you who have taken the time to read what I've written, to thank those of you who sent me comments or were holding me in the Light. I will be holding you in the Light as you proceed on your spiritual journey and as I proceed on mine, and I hope that we will continue to nurture one another directly or indirectly as the case may be. Peace be with you.