

## **Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas**

Keynote Address at the 2008 Annual Meeting

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I had a dream a while back that I was standing at the doorway to the kingdom of God shaking with excitement. I had finally found the gates after walking the perimeter for years. The gatekeeper welcomed me into the kingdom with open arms. He explained to me that I was to be the steward of a little plot of land and that God had some gifts for me that would help me start off my new life. I was given a full suit of armor: a belt of truth, a breast plate of righteousness, winged shoes of readiness, a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation and a sword of the Spirit. Stumbling under the surprisingly light but awkward load, I followed the gatekeeper to a beautiful plot of land. Before he kissed me goodbye he said “Remember, you are to love your neighbors as yourself, for all who live in the kingdom are children of God.”

I settled down alone on my plot for a while and soaked in the beauty of my surroundings. After a while I grew restless and began thinking about the parting words of the gatekeeper. Did I even have any neighbors? Walking around the edge of my plot of land, I started singing a little song... “Hello out there, anyone out there? Are you my neighbor?” As I walked by a particular tree, sang my song, and stopped to listen, I heard the faintest reply “Hello friend.” I looked up into the branches and heard the voice again, “up here, I’m your neighbor.” I tried to get up the tree but my armor made me clumsy. So I took off the armor. I took off: the belt of truth, the breast plate of righteousness, and the shoes of readiness. I put down the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit and I climbed the branches. Up high in the branches, a small brilliant green snake curled slowly around the leaves. “Hello friend,” it said, “I am your neighbor.”

This dream has stayed with me as I moved from the safety of the Earlham College community to a new house with new housemates and new neighbors. I began calling my message in my dream “Befriending the Serpent” which ended up being one of most

confusing and difficult calls to ministry I have ever experienced. I have found serpents within myself with which God has taught me grace. I have found serpents among various communities with which God has taught me integrity and I have found serpents among the world with which God has taught me a sense of mission, hope, and justice. For befriending the serpent means not to slaughter it, silence it, or ignore it. “Befriending the Serpent” leads to a sometimes dangerous but always in the end miraculous mutual transformation.

One of my most hidden secrets is the belief that I’m actually not a good person. A little voice inside me tells me that I don’t actually live what I preach and I’ve only managed to trick everyone for a little while. One day I fear that you all will find this out.

This fear is magnified with the inadequacy I feel standing before so many people who have devoted their lives to peace making. I was given the verse Romans 14:19 “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbrining,” as the guide for this talk. I look around and I see so many of you with stories and lives that reflect these words, so many of you whose lives reflect the words of Jesus. I look at my own life and hope that as I get older and go through life, I can live closer and closer to these words too.

So on those days when I come home from teaching, after getting yelled at by parents, listening to conflict among coworkers and yes sometimes even yelling at students, exhausted and bruised to the core... and I see an empty refrigerator, a near empty bank account and the dog’s poop on the floor... I wonder what being faithful is all about. All I seem to be able to do is put one foot in front of the other and I’m stumbling quite a bit.

After scrambling up some random dinner of canned goods, tightening my budget and cleaning up the poop, I look at myself in the mirror and the tears begin to flow. “Who am I to follow Jesus? Me who just can’t seem to get things right? Me who just can’t seem to get ahead? Me who has been given all the privileges of the world and still can’t seem to do anything with them. Who am I to follow Jesus?” A voice answers back from that deep dark place inside; that I can only see in the reflection of my eyes in the mirror and says “You are a child of God, and you’re doing alright.”

See, this year I’ve really learned that God loves me just the way I am. Whether I’m succeeding or failing... but as Shane Claiborne wrote in his book Irresistible Revolution God might love you just the way you are... but God certainly loves you too much to let you stay there. That love has been grace; not an absolution from my mistakes or shortcomings

and certainly I've experience responsibility, but a feeling in my most devastating moments that there are arms around me and energy through me pumping hope and life into my body.

During my last semester of college I took a class on Contemporary Religious Movements where I researched the relationship between Quakerism and the Emergent Church. The Emergent Church has become a strong network of socially conscious Christians from a variety of denominations that are through their friendships, faith, and witness creating a progressive community. Through my research and consequential participation and friendships I have become inspired by a younger generation (ages 20-40) claiming the messages of Jesus as their life-purpose and challenging the violent influences of the world with a message of hope.

My experience with the Emergent community has in fact shown me the uniqueness of Quakerism. Quakerism as a theology and as a physical group of people was the family that brought me up, instilled in me values that are seeped deep into my skin and my heart, and showed me that God was more than a white man in the clouds; God was in my blood, was my blood, living and flowing inside me. Quakerism had made me hunger with a deep sense of integrity and taught me to listen to the flow of God.

However, I've found that these little groups of spiritual progressives who call themselves Emergent cohorts seem to be stealing early Quaker theology and doing something with it! I've seen Baptists sit in silent worship, Catholic priests uplift universal ministry, and Consensus work with the true presence of God. I talk about theology with my Emergent cohort in pubs, serve food at homeless shelters and watch them play football with strangers at the local park. A group of us who are Quaker have even formed a brand new Sunday evening worship group that is all inclusive and based in the radical and progressive teachings of Jesus. As friends we are all dedicated to trying to live out our faith everyday and mostly without committees. Our church is our life.

Still, as diverse as these little emergent conversations may be, it is still Quakerism that represents in my heart a sense of family; represents deep intentional community. As a small child I learned how to work with others; how to listen both to conflict and beyond conflict. Unconditional love really means unconditional, and that kind of love is something that in most groups of people takes years and years to develop. In my experience with Quakerism unconditional love is not just developed it is expected. It is expected that when two people meet for the first time, wisps of the divine living spirit join in the center of the

two people. The living Christ in me meets the living Christ in you. I am asked by strangers at Quaker events not for my resume in verbal form, but for the messages that are inscribed on my heart, pushing me onwards.

Although the Quaker community is far from united and far from perfect, we do have a witness to the world. Our witness of love and community makes us not only preach peace and integrity but breath and embody these things as we walk or dance through life. I work in a public school where students and co-workers both gossip and slander each other and to not participate in these destructive activities is to lead a very isolated and uninspired career. I have to admit I've tried both. My school is not unusual to public schools and it seems like sometimes no one, not even me, ever learned how to be nice. And although there are moments, brief but everyday, where kindness and inspiration break out of the routine and surprise me, I often feel like everyone inside the school walls walks around like robots. I really don't believe God has all that of an affinity for robots...

I was talking to a good friend of mine yesterday, who was relaying a story about his Spanish class the morning after a young girl took her life at Earlham. He said that his teacher refused to teach that day because she said "We aren't robots, and sometimes there are more important things than getting through material." Those students who wanted to leave were free to leave, but those who wanted to stay and talk were welcomed. To this professor, teaching students to be human was the most important thing to teach. Humanity, that is respecting the feelings and creativity within you and within others, is a subject that is often lost among standardized tests, fearful observations, student fights and faculty room gossip. Yet humanity is something that I was taught without knowing it, because Humanity, regardless of your Quaker affiliation, is our unspoken universal curriculum for peace.

So that's we have for the world, that's what we carry with us in offering to the world; it's a curriculum for peace. Among this curriculum is not series after series of handouts, objectives, quizzes, standardized tests or high school assessments and defiantly not violence. Rather we offer an instructional model based on stories, songs, dancing, dreams, listening, making mistakes, making friends and of course, unconditional love. Shauna Niequist wrote in her book Cold Tangerines: Celebrating the Extraordinary Nature of Everyday Life "You have stories worth telling, memories worth remembering, dreams worth tending and beyond that, the God of the universe dwells within you, the true culmination of super and natural. You are more than dust and bones. You are spirit and power and the image of God. And

you have been given today.” Let us teach this curriculum of peace to the world in a manner that is life giving.

As members of the Religious Society of Friends we have the advantage of a long passionate history of creating peace by creating community. Our service and mission projects create circles of people uplifting each other. During and after the violence in East Africa, Friends sold and distributed T-shirts among their relief work that read “Peace, Love your Neighbor.” Part of what makes the Quaker witness to peace so amazing, is that peace is not an end result, but an active process. War is not the answer, but the answer is a life long process... often too long and too complicated to fit on a lawn sign. However if we tried, perhaps our motto for our curriculum would read “Peace is when you love yourself and your neighbor.”