

An Ocean of Darkness, an Ocean of Light, y un Barquito Grande:

*Friends Ministry of Hope
in a Troubled World*

BRIDGET MOIX



The Wider Quaker Fellowship

La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos

AN OCEAN OF DARKNESS, AN OCEAN OF LIGHT,
Y UN BARQUITO GRANDE: FRIENDS MINISTRY OF
HOPE IN A TROUBLED WORLD

Bridget Moix, Friend-In-Residence, NPYM Annual Sessions, July 15, 2010

INTRODUCTION

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bridget Moix leads the Peaceful Prevention of Deadly Conflict program at Friends Committee on National Legislation in Washington, DC, and has worked on peace and conflict issues for 15 years. She has worked with other Quaker organizations, including Casa de los Amigos in Mexico, the Quaker United Nations Office in New York, American Friends Service Committee, and the Quaker Peace Centre in Cape Town, South Africa. Bridget holds a Masters of International Affairs from Columbia University and an undergraduate degree from Ohio Wesleyan. She has travelled widely, including visits to South Africa, Kenya, Burundi, Sudan, Uganda, the Philippines, Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and various countries in Europe.

She is a member of Friends Meeting of Washington, Baltimore Yearly Meeting, and has served on committees for her local meeting, the American Friends Service Committee, the Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva, Friends Peace Teams Latin America, and the Clarence and Lily Pickett Endowment for Quaker Leadership.

Good evening, Friends, and thank you so much for inviting me to be with you during NPYM's Annual Sessions as your Friend-in-Residence. It's already been a wonderful experience for me and my family. I want to particularly thank Janet and the organizing committee for her support and our work together selecting the theme, Practicing Hope: Living and Witnessing Our Testimonies. Thanks also to Dorsey and Ann who have been fantastic hosts. And thanks to all of you for so warmly welcoming me, my husband Alberto, and our son Pablo. It's a real gift to us that we could come together to be with you.

I'm very glad to have a chance to talk with you tonight about what I believe is a critical part of Friends work of "practicing hope" in the world. As you'll see from the program, I've titled my talk tonight "An Ocean of Darkness, an Ocean of Light, y un Barquito Grande." I might add the subtitle: "Friends Ministry of Hope in a Troubled World."

I hope the title has you wondering just what in the world it is I'm going to be talking about. That I think should be the purpose of a good title.

I'm sure many of you recognize the first part of the title—words taken from George Fox's journal and the vision he had of a world of both great evil and great love:

I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death; but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. In that also I saw the infinite love of God, and I had great openings....

I'll say more about that vision in a moment, but I

should address the third phrase in the title—“y un Barquito Grande”—first.

This part of my title was given to me by my bilingual son Pablo, who has been learning to speak more fluently in both Spanish and English over the past few months. On a recent trip to Vermont we spent time at a lakeside resort watching boats of all shapes and sizes, and Pablo even got to ride out on the lake in a big boat with his dad. Driving back to the airport in a van, he was pointing out things he saw along the way and naming them when we passed a boat parked in a gas station. It was kind of a small boat but sitting next to the gas station it looked bigger than how it might appear on the lake. He looked at it and said declaratively, “un barquito grande”. I smiled, nodded, and agreed with him, enjoying his description.

Now the literal translation of “un barquito grande” would be “a big little boat”, and may seem like simply a cute two-year-old grammatical mistake. In Spanish, the diminutive ending “ito” makes everything little, so combining it with the adjective grande, or big, would not normally be done. I was amused by the idea of “un barquito grande” but then started wondering if I should have corrected his grammar and explained that it doesn’t really make sense to have a big little boat. Like many mothers, though, I often find great instruction in my two-year-old’s observations of the world. And so it was in this case.

Because the more I thought about the idea of “un barquito grande”, the more I felt it offered a wonderful metaphor for Friends work in the world. We are, after all, a small people. Mostly simple folk. Not very powerful. No grand sails to flourish or large engines to boast. Yet, we have—I believe—been given a great task in this world. Led to launch our small vessel into often uncharted waters on these great oceans of dark and light. To sail boldly and trust that the right wind will guide us.

That work of Friends witness in the world—that “barquito

grande” that we are called to sail—is what I like to call our “ministry of hope” in the world. And I think that the world we live in today desperately needs it. And that is also what I’d like to talk with you about tonight.

But first things first. Because before George Fox saw the ocean of light, and before he and other early Friends launched the barquito grande that we continue sailing today, he looked into an ocean of darkness. He looked into it and he did not turn away.

The dark waters that George Fox faced in his time looked quite different than the ones we find lapping at our shores today, but many of the themes were the same: the death and destruction wrought by war; the blight of poverty and disease; the unconscionable concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, while millions suffer from unmet basic needs.

Not unlike us, Fox asked why he had to face such horrors: “I cried unto the Lord, saying, ‘Why should I be thus, seeing I was never addicted to commit these evils?’ and the Lord answered, ‘That it was needful I should have a sense of all conditions, how else should I speak to all conditions?’”

We too would often rather look away. I know I would. I work on issues of war and peace in Washington, DC, and I can assure you that some days I open my email and cry at my desk. There is evil at work in the world, and we are swimming in it. If we are to live our testimonies in the world today, it’s important, Friends, that we understand the depths of the ocean of darkness, and that we face it head on, as Fox did.

So at the risk of depressing us all, let me paint a clearer picture of the challenges we face as we seek to practice hope in the world today.

I am a new mother and so I am deeply saddened by the statistics facing the next generation. Today’s young people—my own son included—are the first generation in the United States in many decades that cannot expect to do better economically

than their parents did. A well-known commentator reported in “Politico” just two weeks ago that the global economy appears to be headed for the third great depression in history, and that while it may not be as deep as the Great Depression of the thirties and forties, we should expect it to be longer, with real recovery still years away. In the meantime, unemployment is at record highs in cities across the U.S., state budgets are in crisis, and the most vulnerable—the poor, the sick, the elderly, communities of color, immigrants, and the First Peoples of this land—will suffer the worst. In the midst of this economic crisis, you might expect our policymakers to be focused on meeting people’s most basic needs first. Unfortunately, you would be wrong. Even an imperfect health care bill—but one that extends coverage to millions who were previously without any access to care—became a political fight of the utmost proportions on Capitol Hill, where partisanship has replaced problem-solving as the highest order of the day.

Today’s young people are also growing up in a country where war is increasingly becoming the normal state of affairs. Where nine years and 100,000 U.S. troops killing and dying in Afghanistan is accepted as a given, and the merits of such actions are barely even discussed at the dinner table, much less in the halls of Congress. Where ongoing violence in Iraq no longer even makes the news. Why, Friends, are we and our neighbors not standing up in outrage against such waste and abuse of human life and national treasure? Over 5,000 US troops have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, and tens of thousands wounded. Veterans who have returned home from the wars are also committing suicide at a shocking rate.

Of course those are just the US statistics. Numbers of Iraqi and Afghan soldiers and civilians killed and wounded are hard to confirm but no doubt are in the hundreds of thousands. The result will of course be increased resentment and hatred toward

the U.S. and continued attacks against us for years to come. In Afghanistan, the under-30 generation—which constitutes more than 70 percent of the population—cannot remember a time of peace.

I was struck recently by a commentator who pointed out that many of the young men and women now fighting for the U.S. in Afghanistan and Iraq—some only 18 and 19 years old—were only 11 or 12 when the attacks of September 11, 2001, took place and the U.S. dove full force into this spiral of escalating global war. Yet these young people are now bogged down in a doomed war, fighting and paying for a failed policy made by gray haired adults in Washington who should have known better.

Some of those same policymakers voted just last week to send more of our kids to war by approving \$33 billion more dollars to support 30,000 more troops in Afghanistan. General David Petraeus, in his Senate confirmation hearing as the new head of U.S. and NATO forces, suggested more troops might be requested in the future. The grand total of war spending over the past 9 years now stands over \$1 trillion.

If our government chose to invest in building healthy communities and preventing wars instead of fighting them, those dollars could fund thousands of new schools, provide quality healthcare for millions, create new green jobs across the country, and hire and train thousands more diplomats and development professionals to engage the world without violence. Unfortunately, Congress is continuing a cycle of perpetual war at the expense of our communities and our planet.

In addition to the crippling debt that runaway wars and military spending will leave to our children, the next generation will also inherit a planet in peril. Global temperatures are expected to rise between 2.0 and 4.5 degrees Celsius by the end of the century. That is enough to severely influence weather

patterns, food production, and the Arctic. The expected results of this global warming are well known and well publicized: increasing extreme weather events, desertification and arctic ice melt, extinction of some species, loss of entire island nation homelands, new patterns of human migration, a food crisis that could reach every corner of the globe, and rising potential for violent conflict over resources.

As can be expected, the poor and marginalized—at home and abroad—will be hit worst. Crop ecologists estimate that every 1 degree Celsius rise in temperature corresponds to a 10% drop in grain production. Most of the world's food shortages already occur on the Indian subcontinent and sub-Saharan Africa, areas struggling with poverty and conflict, and expected to get hotter and drier in the coming decades.

Again, in Washington and other capitals around the world, the problems of global warming and climate change are understood. Yet, those in positions of power carry on with business as usual—worrying more about their next election than the fact that glaciers that provide water to 40% of the world's population are shrinking at an alarming rate, or that the millions of barrels of oil pouring into the Gulf of Mexico as we speak will have more devastating economic, environmental, and health impacts on this country than we are willing to acknowledge. The ocean of darkness is literally rising every day, Friends.

I want to pause here as we consider the dark waters threatening to engulf our world, to appreciate the willingness of Friends, like Fox himself, to face honestly the enormous problems that God calls us to labor with in our time. As difficult and depressing as it can be to look squarely at what it is we are up against, I believe it is something we must do if we hope to live out our testimonies in the world. It is part of how the Spirit teaches us to practice hope. Without darkness, we cannot see light. Fox's insight was that to speak to all conditions, he had to

see clearly the troubles of the world. *“And in that,” he writes, “I saw the infinite love of God.”*

Which brings us to the ocean of light and love. I am a firm believer in this ocean as well, and in its power to flow over the ocean of darkness. Friends, including many of you, have instilled and repeatedly confirmed this belief in me. I feel surrounded here with you in those waters. And I see the ocean of light and love flowing over the waters of darkness each day in my work with FCNL.

It is visible in the willingness of individuals and small groups, and sometimes even big crowds, to carry signs that read “War Is Not the Answer”, and to believe it is true. It is visible in the countless letters and visits to Congress that speak truth to power and urge practical steps to fix the policy problems that entangle our country and our world today. Letters and visits that do make a difference I want to assure you, if not today, then tomorrow or the next day or months or years from now. These waters of light flow abundantly in the transforming way that Friends seek to meet violence with nonviolence; abuse of our nation and world's resources with care for all people and stewardship of the earth; hate and fear of those different from us, with love and welcoming of the stranger.

When the first Congress of the United States met, Quakers were there presenting a petition against slavery. When World War I was raging, Friends volunteered to drive ambulances and provide humanitarian aid across the lines of conflict. In the midst of World War II, Quakers were bold enough to create a religious lobby organization to be a voice for peace on Capitol Hill.

And today, many Friends—and young Friends in particular—are dedicating their lives to sustainable living, working to change both their own impact on the earth and the policies of this nation and the world to save our planet.

Look around you, Friends. Take a moment and look around

at the people and lives just here in this room tonight. What an inspiration you are to me. What a powerhouse! What an ocean of light and love.

Working in the service of Friends I am regularly humbled and awed by you. You organize events in your communities, write letters to Congress, visit Capitol Hill to lobby, publish articles, teach classes, talk with your neighbors, and work in countless other ways of your own to build a better world—all on your own time, just because you care, just because you feel called. You practice hope in this troubled world every day in the way you wade into those dark waters with a smile on your face and your hands clasped together in friendship. You know change does not come quickly, that the journey is long, and that each step counts. So you do what you can, you trust you will be given what you need, and you look for the Light in even the darkest spots.

And Light comes. It shines through the dark waters in Washington when nearly a quarter of the Senate and over a third of the House votes for an exit strategy to the war in Afghanistan. When the President of the United States envisions a world without nuclear weapons. When the chair of the House Financial Services committee calls for cutting military spending by \$100 million per year for the next 10 years—and then lays out a plan to do it. The ocean of Light swells a bit larger when the senior senator of Louisiana, a good friend to the oil industry, states frankly that it is time to end the U.S. addiction to fossil fuels and move to clean energy technology. When the White House files a lawsuit against an ill-conceived state law that would open the door to racial profiling and destroy trust between police and the communities they seek to protect. And when the U.S. government finally takes steps toward repaying long-standing royalty debt it has owed to tribal communities for over a century.

I see the waters of Light rising in my own work to prevent

war as well. When FCNL dared to declare that War Is Not the Answer in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, and then began a program to promote peaceful alternatives, we felt like a lone, and often unwelcome, voice on Capitol Hill. But less than a decade later—just a small drop of time in the arc of history—the U.S. government has built a Civilian Response Corps of over 1,000 trained experts to help prevent and rebuild after wars, and created a new fund to allow civilian agencies—not the military—to respond quickly to help de-escalate conflicts and avert mass violence. These new tools for preventing war are actively being employed today in places that have directly suffered violence—Sudan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kenya. They are, I hope, shining a bit more light in some very dark waters of the world.

The Ocean of Light is growing, Friends, because of you. You put your faith into action in the world, and in doing so, you give others hope that a different world is possible. Hope breeds positive action. Positive action yields more hope. The cycle continues, the Waters of Light rise.

Practicing hope this way is part of Friends ministry to the world. It's our "barquito grande"—our big little boat—that carries us through the waters—dark and light—and sustains us in the journey. It is a big mission—given to a small people. It is the call to put our faith into practice in the world. To manifest our testimonies of peace, simplicity, equality, integrity, and community in each and every action we take in the world—or at least try our best to do so. To live as if the Light is at work in us and the world...because it is.

Friends have been called "relentlessly hopeful", and I admire that character trait in us. We work for peace in the midst of war, and we often smile while doing it. But our hope is not one of blind optimism that ignores the great troubles and despairs of the world and waits naively for a happy end to the story. Our practice of hope looks squarely at the pain in our world and

weeps. War in Afghanistan, hunger and poverty, walls on our border, an earth in peril. Our hope suffers with the world we have been given. And then, steadily, lovingly, picks us up and puts us to work changing it, because that's what the Spirit calls us to do.

This practice of hope is, I believe, a remarkable gift Friends have been entrusted with. This small, peculiar group of people is bold enough—or blessed enough—to believe that we can change this world: us, you and me, in our big little boat. We actually believe that we can help build the community of God, that in fact we are made for this work. We hear a call from the Spirit to live out our beliefs in the world, despite how troubled it is, to live with light and love, “walking joyfully over the earth and answering that of God in everyone.” And we do our best to answer.

Now, I don't pretend that sailing this *barquito grande* through the waters before us will be easy. Friends, it is a small boat, with a big load to carry. But we are not alone in this journey. We have all those around us here, and many, many more whom we do not see tonight. We ride the waves of those who came before us and chart a path for those who will follow. We each need only do our small part to keep the boat on course and above water. If we listen well, and set our sails in the right direction, the Wind will carry us.

So I'd like to ask each of us tonight to consider what our part might be. What gifts do you bring to the troubled world we live in? What steps might you take—in your life, your community, your country, the world—to move us toward the world we seek? Where is the Spirit calling you to practice hope? Remember that we are only called to be faithful, not successful. Do not shun a small task, or fear a great one, that is set before you. Just do your part.

Last year I spoke to Friends at Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting and Association and I challenged them to each commit

to meeting with at least one of their Members of Congress at least one time over the following year to discuss an issue they cared about. I know I'm dealing with a lot of people who are already expert lobbyists here, though, so let me just say this: There are elections coming up in November, there are many issues in need of work in Washington and in your communities, there are calls you hear in the still moments of your life. Listen. Imagine wading into waters you've never touched before. Then sail boldly, with a smile, into the unknown.

I want to close by shifting metaphors from the sea to the air. Some years ago I was on a retreat at a wonderful Quaker retreat center called Powell House in upstate New York; perhaps some of you know it. I was at a point in my life when I was looking for answers as to what lay ahead for me. During a break I hiked up a trail to a lookout point on a quiet ridge. The air was quiet and still, the sky was a beautiful blue, and I was looking out over the tops of fall-colored trees. I immediately felt that there was a message for me here, so I sat down and waited, with great expectation.

Then slowly a black bird sailed in from the right and circled over the trees. And a lighter-colored bird sailed in from the left and flew crossways with the black bird. Aha!, I thought. This is it—this is God speaking to me—all the answers I need will soon be revealed! The future will unfold with clarity. ...But what do these two birds mean, flying with each other above the treetops? What is their message? What's the answer, God?! I waited.

And then I heard a small, still voice say quietly to me, “Bridget, those...are birds. They live here. They're flying, that's just what they do.”

I felt a warm chuckling and then I burst out laughing at myself. I didn't need great answers to be revealed—our problems and the world's problems do not get solved that way. The future is uncertain, but hope is real. I just needed to listen to the Spirit

and go where it guided.

I've thought about that moment a lot over the years, and about those birds, and the message the Spirit was giving me. Because it's true, they were just a couple of ordinary birds who lived in those woods, out for an afternoon flight. And that is just what they do. They're birds. They fly. But think about that—they FLY! That's just what they do, nothing special, just the gift God gave them. But, wow, what a gift!

I think that we as Friends are also like those birds. Living our testimonies, practicing hope in the face of despair, working for a more peaceful, just, and healthy world—it's not anything spectacular—it's just what we do. It's the gift God gave us—our *barquito grande*. But, wow, what a gift—what a reason for hope!

Q U E R I E S

Following are some queries about the text, which you may wish to use for reflection or study, individually or with others.

1. Can you think of moments in which you became aware of the infinite love of God as you experienced that ocean of light and love over the ocean of darkness and death?
 2. Bridget Moix says, "Without darkness we cannot see light." How do you interpret this statement?
 3. Why is it "needful" for us to have a sense of a condition in order to speak to that condition?
 4. Have you known of or participated in the cycle of hope when a positive action yielded more hope which fostered further positive action?
 5. Can you think of a time when the expectation of a heroic solution to a problem got in the way of seeing the need for a seemingly simple act, like Bridget Moix expecting a great revelation on a mountaintop?
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The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows live in over 90 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. Wider Quaker Fellowship depends on the financial support of its readers to provide this service.

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Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas
Friends Center, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA
tel: 215.241.7250, email: wqf@fwccamericas.org