

Tumult, Turmoil and Truth, Vital Quaker Witness Today

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Thank you, Jen, and Pendle Hill for welcoming me and for asking me to offer this Stephen Cary Lecture, to be a part of the rich tradition of education, worship and spiritual deepening that is this place. Pendle Hill is an important institution in the life of Friends today as it has been for almost 90 years.

I speak to you this evening as the head of another important Quaker institution—the Friends Committee on National Legislation.

We advance effective public policies through federal legislation: that’s the heart of FCNL’s mission—to build political will for legislation and public policy change that reflect Quaker priorities. FCNL fields a lobbying team in Washington DC that brings subject matter expertise to congressional offices. Coupled with constituent voices, FCNL offers a compelling message for peace, social justice and environmental sustainability by empowering civil dialogue for policy change.

It is my experience in the nearly 35 years that I have worshipped with Friends and in the eight years that I have served as executive secretary of FCNL, that Quakers offer the world a vital faith and practice that is relevant and alive. And Quaker institutions offer depth and breadth to those who hunger for a life in the Spirit.

Quakers and Quaker institutions bring value to the world, a world that is troubled and in turmoil, a world seeking truth. How do we encourage, cultivate and enable the flourishing of this rich faith and practice to create the world we seek?

Test this in your own life, in the life of your Quaker meetings or in the life of Quaker institutions that you may be attached to. The call of the mission-driven life, the essence of our deep listening for divine revelation, our pursuit of Truth, our practice to let love be the first motion is essential for who we are as the Religious Society of Friends and for how we show up every day in the world.

In my spiritual formation as a Friend, I learned this practice of inward listening—both individually and corporately. I learned to love my meeting for the space and structure it

provided to my religious and spiritual life. As a convinced Friend, it took some time to figure out how silent worship and vocal ministry worked and how my local meeting related to other Quakers in New England, across the US and even throughout the world. But I began to see the value that Quaker institutions bring to the Religious Society of Friends. I read Pendle Hill pamphlets; I attended an FGC consultation; I served on the Advisory Board of Earlham School of Religion; I drove my kids and others from our meeting to NEYM retreats and attended annual sessions. I saw the value these organizations and institutions had and have in my life. I relished the community of Friends and I learned ways of simplifying by watching and listening to Friends. I saw how Friends let their lives speak, and I knew that I wanted my life to speak to others as well.

Recently, I have been thinking about the communion of saints. It has come to me more than once and in different places and times as I worship that those Friends who have died are still present with those of us in waiting worship, there is a mystical sense of presence as if they inhabit the space. Maybe they only inhabit my heart and soul, their vocal ministry and wisdom still speaking to me.

In the Apostles Creed, which is a statement of belief that binds many Christian denominations in liturgy, the last part of the creed, one that I recited every week growing up in the Lutheran church, says: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

Quakers don't have a creed; we don't all believe the same thing and I'm guessing not many Quakers would agree with that sentence, and I don't either. But I do believe some of it; I believe in the holy spirit, the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins. For a long time after I became a Quaker I didn't think of sin. Now I do.

In naming the value that I see in Quaker faith and practice for confronting the tumult and turmoil of the world, I don't mean to imply that Quakers are the only people who feel a call to a mission driven life; there are plenty of other people of faith and people who don't profess a particular faith but who are deeply drawn to leading a life from a morally grounded heart and soul. In fact, one of the joys of my work in Washington DC is advocating with colleagues on an interfaith basis and recognizing the communion of saints with Muslim, Jewish, Sikh, Buddhists and Christian brothers and sisters. Together we see the possibility of a world where every person is seen as a beloved child of God. And, together, we work on federal policies that lead us to that world.

As Quakers, we certainly aren't pure: we don't always experience Divine revelation; and we are sometimes known to be stand-offish, self-righteous and even testy in our peculiarity. So, when I say that Quakers and Quaker institutions bring value to the world, to confront the turmoil of

the world, I say it as an encouragement and challenge to you. To step fully into who we are and how we are called, to invite others to join us in our Quaker institutions, and to acknowledge that what attracts people to Quakers often is our witness in the world, in living lives that speak.

Stephen Cary was that kind of Quaker. I didn't know Steve, but I have been delighted to read the rich stories of his life in [The Intrepid Quaker](#). From his role providing humanitarian relief in Europe following World War II to his acts of civil disobedience in witness to securing food assistance for millions of poor Americans to his leadership at the AFSC and Haverford, Steve followed a calling for humanitarian service in the world.

Abraham Heschel, the Jewish theologian who wrote about the role of the biblical prophets in the call to social justice, asks this: **How shall I live the life that I am?**

Over the past couple of years, I have been dipping into Abraham Heschel's book **The Prophets**, and it has helped me understand something about prophetic witness. He states that "the main task of prophetic thinking is to bring the world into divine focus." Seeking a world free of war, and the threat of war; a society with equity and justice; a community where every person's potential may be fulfilled; and an earth restored is prophetic thinking.

Last Tuesday on the final day of FCNL's Spring Lobby Weekend, we gathered at a Lutheran church on Capitol Hill for a rousing send-off as the young adults, who had been thoroughly trained and prepped to meet their members of Congress scattered across the Hill to congressional offices to ask them for a just immigration policy. 500 young adults from 37 states attended this Spring Lobby Weekend and over the course of 4 days heard from FCNL's colleague organizations who work to end detention, deportation and border militarization. They heard from staff in congressional offices about what makes a successful lobby visit, how telling their own stories can be the most powerful way to make the case to elected officials. And they heard from FCNL staff—Hannah Graf Evans and Gaby Viera—our lobbyist and program assistant who are our experts who lead this issue for FCNL on Capital Hill.

On Tuesday morning, when Rep. Linda Sanchez of California stood up to address them, she told her own story, how she was the sixth of seven children born to Mexican immigrants, how her parents had limited educations, but worked hard to make it possible for their children to go to college and be successful, how her mother, after raising 7 children went back to obtain her GED and attend college to become a teacher.

But the power of what she said about every day acts of courage is what resonated for me. Ms. Sanchez spoke about the heroism of Rosa Parks not giving up her seat on the bus, and noted how that was a spark. But the hundreds of black Montgomery citizens who refused to ride the buses and instead walked long miles to work or church or to shop, over the course of many months are the everyday heroes of the civil rights movement.

I love that she told that story to the 18-25 year olds in that room. That they begin to comprehend—from a member of the U.S. Congress—that it isn't a single action by a celebrity or elected official that makes change. It is the everyday courage of individuals. It is people listening to their Inner Light that guides right action.

In my remarks to these young activists, I encouraged them to use the opportunity of the FCNL training at Spring Lobby Weekend to become effective advocates for lives dedicated to social justice. While a single act can spark change, it is through “the countless actions of individuals who see themselves tied in a single garment of destiny, an inescapable network of mutuality” as Martin Luther King declares, that we will make a difference.

Margery Post Abbott's most recent book: Walk Humbly, Serve Boldly Modern Quakers as Everyday Prophets has given me the encouragement and acceptance to regard my own work at FCNL as prophetic witness. It is not a role that sits easily with me, but Marge's casting everyday prophets as ‘a people who seek to pay attention to the nudges and visions of the Spirit on a daily (or even minute by minute basis) to live in accord with the guidance they receive to help others know this Inward Teacher and Holy Guide’—well, that feels truthful for my own condition.

Are you an everyday prophet? Here's further definition:

“Everyday prophets are people who are faithful to the path of truth and love and whose lives project hope and a passion for justice. This path is at the core of Quaker worship and spiritual discipline.”

Do our institutions, including our meetings and churches project hope and passion for justice?
Are we faithful to the path of truth and love?

Do we, in the words of the prophet Micah, love mercy, do justice and walk humbly with our God?

Do we, as Abraham Heschel describes prophets: “bring the world into divine focus?”

People often ask me ‘how do you stay hopeful’? Someone asked me last weekend in an even more plaintive way: Do you see any hope?

I understand why people say this: there are decisions made by the governmental power structure in this country and in countries around the world that are a threat to humanity.

People across the globe are being killed in deadly conflict by weapons made in the United States. The U.S. military is fueling Saudi Arabian airplanes that are wreaking a terrible humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Civilians are being killed and starved.

What we have known as the existential threat of nuclear war is still with us and now the threat is renewed with the design of so-called “low yield” nuclear weapons and the \$1 trillion price tag for the modernization of a nuclear arsenal in the next decade.

The vision of Shared Security that FCNL and AFSC jointly developed a few years ago is difficult to see in the actions of our country. The president has slammed the door shut on diplomacy—from decertifying the Iran deal to pulling out of the Paris climate accord, to ignoring the diligent labor required to advance diplomatic agreements. Witness North Korea. While the opening created by Trump’s embrace of Kim Jung Un offered an unprecedented opportunity for North and South Korea, the president walked away from the summit, with no apparent “deal.”

The United States is one of the biggest contributors of carbon output in the world, yet we are pulling back on the commitments we made to the other 190 nations that signed the Paris Climate Accord in 2015 and to families and neighborhoods that have counted on the protections of the Environmental Protection Agency. Last year, 3 separate reports issued dire warnings of the growing threat of global warming and eroding biodiversity and the short time span we have to respond. Yet our Congress resists meaningful action.

At the same time, the administration is radically retrenching through reductions in the federal budget and federal agencies to meet human needs. Our government—for the people, by the people and of the people—is being twisted to serve a narrow segment of our society, further fueling vast income inequality.

The structural racism built into our public policies over generations that subjugate people with brown or black skin to different standards—from criminal justice to public education to healthcare to housing opportunity—is now more overt with brazen demands and displays from white nationalists. The grievous acts of white supremacy exhibited in Charlottesville and perpetuated in our border policies today manifest the practices that people of color have experienced throughout their lives—behavior that demeans, degrades and rejects other than “white.” The fault lines of whiteness that make true equality a lie are deep and touch every one of us.

And now I come back to the problem of sin—because these sins—defiling the air, water and earth; putting human beings in cages; leaving people on the streets to sleep and sometimes to die; spending our governmental resources on nuclear weapons; exporting armaments and violence to countries across the globe; resisting actions to end the scourge of gun violence; hatred, harm and indifference experienced as a reality for too many human beings—these are structural sins.

And all of us are complicit. Even when we do not want to be. These structural or social sins are different than personal wrongdoing, which is how I have traditionally thought of sin. I don’t so

much think these structural sins are to be forgiven as to be recognized as that which distances us from God and is the opposite of holy. There is a truth telling in naming this structural sinfulness and injustice that causes turmoil and division in order to move toward the conditions that foster equality, peace, community, and integrity.

In spite of all this—this sin, this turmoil, this trouble,

Do I see any hope? Yes, I do. In the words of Elizabeth Fry: a Quaker prison reformer and philanthropist, who lived from 1780 to 1845: “I look not to myself, but to that within me, that has to my admiration proved to be my present help, and enabled me to do what I believe of myself I could not have done.”

What keeps me hopeful?

- **New Law to Prevent Violent Conflict**

In January, 2019 the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act became law with President Trump’s signature. This legislation equips the U.S. government with constructive and cost-effective tools to address the root causes of violent conflict. FCNL led the strategy and lobbying that resulted in the bill’s passage in the House and Senate. This success comes after more than a decade of FCNL’s leadership to build a strong, bipartisan consensus in Congress for proactive peacebuilding investment.

- **Yemen: Congress Votes to End Illegal U.S. War**

This week the House will once again vote to reassert congressional authority over when the U.S. goes to war by invoking the War Powers Act to end U.S. involvement in the Saudi-led war in Yemen. FCNL’s advocacy paved the way for the historic bipartisan votes in the Senate and House: educating members of Congress about U.S. complicity in this massive humanitarian crisis, mobilizing grassroots advocates across the country, and leading the faith community’s lobbying to end this illegal war.

- **Criminal Justice: First Step Act Becomes Law**

President Trump signed this legislation, the most significant criminal justice reform in years, in December 2018. The new law reduces long prison sentences for non-violent crimes and improves rehabilitation for those currently in prison. FCNL is a leader in the faith community advocating for criminal justice reform and has worked with our strong grassroots network to persistently push Congress to act to end mass incarceration.

- **Reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act includes provisions to address Native American Women’s Safety**

On March 7, Reps. Karen Bass (CA-37) and Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01) introduced H.R. 1585, a bill to reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act which included provisions that would strengthen the protections for Native women, children, and tribal officers. It expands tribal jurisdiction over non-Indians to include crimes of

sexual assault, stalking, sex trafficking, assault of a tribal officer, and child abuse. These provisions will address the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women by improving responses to missing cases through better communication between tribal, state, local, and federal law enforcement. It will also improve data collection and tribal access to federal crime databases. When it goes to the floor for a vote this week, we'll be lobbying to keep Mr. Fitzpatrick's and Ms. Bass's protections for Native Americans in the bill.

- **Gun Violence: House Breaks Barrier on Action**

The House's passage of the Bipartisan Background Checks Act in February 2019 is the first crack in the barrier that for decades has prevented any sensible gun legislation from passing Congress. The bill requires universal background checks for all gun sales, closing a significant loophole. FCNL coordinated lobbying of more than 50 faith groups to help ensure this bill's passage.

Here's what else gives me hope:

- Those 500 young adults who are fearless advocates for social justice and peace, who bring passion, intelligence, commitment and love to advocacy; the 200 young adults who apply to work at FCNL as Young Fellows, Summer Interns or Advocacy Corps Members although we have positions for only 20% of those who apply.
- The power of constituent advocacy to influence Congress—FCNL Advocacy Teams; Visiting Friends; Meet-up Motivators; people across the country who are everyday prophets; who are called to act and find a community with FCNL.

And, above all, I am buoyed by the essential hopefulness of waiting worship—of gathering together in expectant listening to the Holy Spirit—and staying open to how this inward experience shapes my outward action.

Spend a moment with me imagining what might be possible through our Quaker institutions . . .

Imagine if . . .

. . . we truly claimed the power of our faith and practice—to live into the presence of the Divine in the world of turmoil with a radical faithfulness;

. . . the over 500 young adults who come to FCNL through any of our young adult programs or through Pendle Hill's Continuing Revolution started to consistently attend Quaker meetings because they were captured by the welcoming and inclusive communities of our meetings and churches.

. . . in the coming year, every one of you in this room committed to visiting the district offices of your two senators and representative—to tell your story, to establish a presence for peace and justice and to build a relationship.

. . . that every week that Congress is in session, a group of advocates would travel to Washington DC and pack the Quaker Welcome Center to be trained to lobby and then go out from our place on Capitol Hill to lobby.

. . .that Congress reclaims its constitutional authority over war and votes to repeal the 2001 and 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force; that they pass a no first use of nuclear weapons act; and that they commit to diplomacy and peacebuilding as the most effective foreign policy;

. . .that the Republican and Democrat leadership of Congress and the administration together figure out that a fair carbon tax is an immediate and positive solution to the problem of climate change.

. . . the iconic words on the Statue of Liberty. . .”Give me your tired your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” actually meant that we welcome the stranger to our country—refugees and immigrants.

. . . we practiced loving our neighbors without exception every day.

In 1974, our first executive secretary, E. Raymond Wilson wrote these words that have even deeper resonance today:

“Why try to work uphill for peace, justice and freedom on Capitol Hill at a time when cynicism about the character and operation of government and government officials is widespread and when disillusionment about the church and organized religion is so common and so vocal? Because religion should be vital and relevant and because the health and the future of democracy rests upon responsible participation by informed and concerned citizens.”

This message resonates in 2019 as much as it did in 1974 when it was written or in 1943 when FCNL was founded. In the same way that William Penn’s message from 300 years ago still resonates: “True godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it.”

How do we encourage, cultivate and enable the flourishing of this rich faith and practice to create the world we seek? How are we speaking truth to power?

As a Quaker institution, FCNL has committed ourselves to:

- change public policy to support peace, social justice and environmental sustainability.
- grow and strengthen our network of grassroots advocates across the country.
- expand our media and marketing outreach to tell our story.
- stay grounded in our Quaker faith and practice.

After I had worked at FCNL for only a few months, I had a strong conviction that more people should become Quakers and that more people should know about the Friends Committee on National Legislation. I understand evangelism. As I have had the opportunity to get to know Friends across the country and get to know more Quaker organizations and institutions, my belief in what we as the Religious Society of Friends have to offer the world only grows.

Quakers and Quaker –FCNL, Pendle Hill, AFSC, QUNO, Quaker schools and colleges to name just a few— bring value to the world, a world that is troubled, a world seeking truth. At a time when people are looking to make meaning of the political, social and cultural turmoil, the moral grounding of Friends can provide a firm foundation.

This Quaker grounding is a place to stand, a place to build community, to find both challenge and support and renew our spirits, to seek Truth. There is not only one way to Truth, not one way of right action. Steve Cary's ministry was profound and distinct, and his longing to instill the depth of Quaker witness into the institutions he poured himself into deeply resonates with me.

Yet, I know that neither Steve Cary, nor E. Raymond Wilson, nor any weighty Quaker, nor any of the communion of saints—the valiant procession of Friends who precede us—not even any of the everyday prophets of today will alone create the world we seek. It is together as we live into that which is holy that we have hope, that we are able to love one another without exception.

And like Elizabeth Fry, “I look not to myself, but to that within me, that has to my admiration proved to be my present help, and enabled me to do what I believe of myself I could not have done.”