

Spring 1999 Monday Night Lecture Series
What Canst Thou Say?

Growing Up Quaker and Choosing It, Too

by **Ingrid Lakey**
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If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophesies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For NOW we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

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In preparing for this talk, I was trying to think about what is -- at its most basic -- being a Quaker? And it is as I just read from 1st Corinthians 13, it is to love in a clear and intentional way.

It was an interesting choice for me to start by quoting the bible because the bible is not a large part of my life or of my faith. But this piece of it, has loomed large for me this year. I am in an ensemble called TRIBE 1 and we sing a song called 1st Corinthians 13. My husband and I went to a wedding recently and it was one of the readings, and I will be giving this reading at a wedding in June. Most importantly though, the truth of it has been challenged for me this year and I had to truly KNOW the words of this passage. I had to be angry at it and reject it and come back not merely accepting it to be true because my community wants it to be but because I KNOW that it is true EVEN WHEN we can't see it. Love is always there for us to choose.

I want to back up for a moment to give you some background. I was born in 1971 and grew up in a VERY non-traditional household and community. My family was part of Movement for a New Society, also called the Life Center, which was an amazing environment in which to grow up...an absolute heaven for an extrovert like me...I'll come back to that. Neither of my parents were raised as Quakers. My mom was raised in Norway as a Lutheran (for those of you who listen to Prairie Home Companion, this should not be a big shock). My dad was raised as an Evangelical Christian which is so hard for me to even

imagine. My dad became a Quaker in college and my mom never really became a Quaker although she did embrace the meeting for awhile when I was little and always supported me as a Quaker.

One of the experiences that I think in many ways saved my life, was attending Friends Select School. My parents tried to be committed to public schools but I was having a hard time and needed a safer and more supportive environment in which to learn. I chose Friends Select for two reasons:

#1. Stephanie Judson taught there -- when we lived communally, Stephanie lived with us so she provided a safety and Friendship, both capital F and lower case that I wanted -- #2. Friends Select has a pool. I'm sure my parents had some additional criteria but that's pretty much all I needed to know.

To leave the public school I had been attending, I had to go on strike. My teacher would hit students to discipline them and I thought that was wrong. I went to the principle and he agreed to putting me into another class. That wasn't good enough though because all that would do is keep me from being a witness to it. I knew that it was wrong to use violence and I decided that to stay at that school would be to cooperate with a system that allowed violence to be used against children. The principle didn't want to allow me to leave the school mid year. So I went on strike. Clearly to pull this off, I had to have the support of my parents and I did. My dad felt that to honor that of God within me, he had to support my standing up for my beliefs. So he backed me all the way. I really GOT IT even in 3rd grade. I was practicing what my Quaker beliefs dictated.

So the principle finally gave in and let me leave the school (can you imagine the public relations disaster if he hadn't?!). So my dad picked three schools that he would be fine with me going to and left the decision about which of those, totally up to me.

That is a powerful example of what an ally he was for me and also of what being a Quaker family means to me.

So I started at FSS in 3rd grade. One of the reasons that FSS was such a positive experience for me was because the commitment of the teachers, and indeed the very mission of the school, is to the whole of life which to me translates into, supporting young people and the community to BE the TRUTH that each of us owns. That means stretching beyond the artificial limits that have been set for us by others. I'm not pretending that this actually happens for everyone or even for me but knowing that that was there for me meant that I could expand in the ways that I wanted to.

My own Quakerism was supported there too... it wasn't weird and people knew that we don't drive black buggies with the orange triangle and that we do use electricity and, No, the movie Witness was not about us. Because I went to FSS, we attended meeting each week at Central Philly which was and is still my meeting.

In fifth grade two important things happened for me. I was put into Andy Doan's advisory and my best friend Sunshine came to Friends Select when her dad Stuart Land came to teach there. Many of you may know Andy, he is a Friend and a truly wonderful teacher. He really held for me a vision of what I could be. My brother and sister, Peter and Christina, were busy acting out, creating crisis after crisis for my parents to deal with. So even though there was mayhem at home, I had this man at school who provided this clear picture that I was not defined by Peter and Christina.

That he is a Quaker also provided another connection between us that made me feel like he understood me.

One of things that was sometimes hard for me about going to FSS is that there were so few Quakes there. So many of the students came from a different culture than mine. Where my family valued simplicity and struggled to not get sucked into capitalism and had a commitment to non-violence, many of my classmates had completely contradictory values or beliefs. I remember in 5th or 6th grade having a huge argument with a classmate about nuclear weapons. I didn't have any friends in school who were Quakers...that is until Sunshine came to FSS. She was also in Andy's advisory and we became best friends almost immediately. 18 years later we are still best friends.

Sunshine provided for me a friend who had the same frame of reference, values, and culture. Her family also attended Central Philly meeting so we were in the same First Day School. Sunshine and I got involved with Young Friends and we went to Powell House together. We went to Friends China Camp in Maine. In some ways, I felt that she made it ok to be a Quaker and to embrace it. The saying that there is safety in numbers is true. We could support each other in our identity as Quakers. I'm not saying that I wouldn't be a Quaker without her, but teaming up with her gave me the safety to go for it.

When our classmates would go on a ski trip to Vermont, I knew I wasn't the only one who couldn't go because we couldn't afford it and it was certainly not a priority for our parents. We both understood co-op culture and loved getting junk food after school because we didn't have that stuff at home.

When a lot of our classmates were getting into drugs and alcohol, we didn't feel that we needed to give into the peer pressure because we had each other and had a First Day School and teacher, thank you Pat McBee, where we talked about this stuff and could decide what was really okay with us. I'm not going to mislead you and say that I never experimented, but I think it was very different than it might have been had I not had those support systems.

Religious Thought in upper school was also a rich experience for me. I learned so much about Quakerism and was thankful that my classmates did too. I had the chance to look academically at Quakerism and say "yes, that works for me". I also learned how to explain it to other people. Our exploration of other religions was also a blessing and continues to serve me.

Another aspect of FSS that was important to me was its commitment to community service. Because there is that of God in each of us, it is our responsibility to care for those around us and FSS takes that seriously...the whole of life includes noticing those around you. I never felt that there was a self righteousness or superiority that got in the way which does play a role for some who want to do good. It was simply a given that this is what we do. The not so subtle implication of this, is that each of us makes a difference in the community...that doesn't leave much room for apathy and lots of room for empowerment.

Faith and Practice says of education: "Friends have held that all persons are potential channels for inner light and that all can benefit from education. Such benefit is more likely if education is spiritual in its nature and objectives, if it draws people ever nearer to a concern for others and strengthens their commitment to live in accordance with spiritual principles."

I felt this and knew it to be true.

I mentioned earlier that I am an extrovert. When I took the Myers-Briggs type indicator and saw that I am to the extreme an extrovert, I wasn't surprised. If you know me, then it's likely not a surprise to you either. It occurs to me that being such an extrovert, it is an unlikely match to also be a Quaker.

But I love meeting for worship and feel completely at home in meeting. It may be that the structure allows me to experience the silence without feeling that I am in a vacuum. I trust the silence that is there and welcome the messages that Friends share as well. It is intensely personal and communal at the same time. The opportunity to be supported and to support others in opening ourselves to the spirit in an intentional way is profound for me.

I've recently joined a gospel aerobics class at work. When I tell people that, most look at me quizzically. On Tuesday evenings, I join a group of women to do aerobics to Gospel music. Our instructor is also a preacher and she leads us in prayer before and after we work out. It has been so interesting for me because it is truly a cross cultural experience. I am the only non-African American woman in the group and as far as I can tell, all of these women come from a very strong black church tradition. Now I don't have to tell you that that is pretty different from the Quaker tradition.

When we begin we all join hands in a circle...so far I get it. Then the Reverend prays aloud...okay now we are out of my comfort zone partly because she is very Jesus centered and my

co-aerobicizers are verbally responding. Then it is over with an Amen. I feel anxious because I want silence to do my praying. It feels almost like being on a crowded subway and before you can get off at your stop, the doors close and you've missed your stop. It has been important for me to recognize my discomfort and even frustration. It's a process for me to figure out what resonates for me and to make room for difference in this way... a worthy exercise both physically and spiritually.

I love that my religion -- it feels weird to call it a religion because that makes it sound like something that is separate from me or categorizes my experience of Quakerism...in any case --I love that Quakerism celebrates both the individual and the community. For me, without one you can't have the other. I feel respected for having my own mind and that I have the ability to think well and come to my own decisions. I don't need more than that because ultimately I know the answers. That's of course not to say that I don't make mistakes or stupid decisions but when I am aware and clear, I can figure things out because of the strength of my faith.

I had to take a cab recently from Dulles airport home to Silver Spring recently -- that's a pretty good distance -- and I had an interesting discussion with the driver. It started out as small talk but then our conversation made its way -- like so many conversations in America -- to Monica and Bill.

The driver was Iranian and a Muslim and he started talking about how in America we don't have enough rules. People just do whatever they want. But that he has a book which tells him clearly what he can or cannot do. He asked me what my religion was and I told him. Not surprisingly he had never heard of the Religious Society of Friends. I explained as best I could.

But he really wanted to know what the rules are of my religion and he was not talking about Quaker process. I explained that for me, my religion provides the foundation for making my own decisions but doesn't tell me what they are. He had a really hard time believing that that was enough. I hadn't really thought about how different that is from many people's religions but how fundamentally important it is to me.

We are expected to listen to the spirit to become clear. And we even have processes for the community to help us become clear. Going through both a clearness for membership when I was 22 and clearness for my marriage gave me such an appreciation for the role that community can play not just in crisis but in growth.

While I had been raised a Quaker, I was not a birth rite Quaker. So when I became an adult, I decided I wanted to make it official and I applied for membership. That was also the same period of time that my husband and I asked to be married under the care of the meeting. I thought the whole process was wonderful. I had the same clearness committee for both membership and marriage and I felt so loved and respected and challenged by those on the committee. My husband, James on the other hand was really nervous. He called them..."the senate hearings."

James was not raised a Quaker but seems to have a major attraction to Quakers. His first love was also a Quaker so she and her family gave him the intro to Quakerism. He clearly felt a connection because he attended Swarthmore meeting for awhile on his own.

When our courtship began, it was surprisingly important to me that he knew something about Quakerism and what it meant to me to be a Quaker. I had never thought about trying to find a Quaker partner but when I found someone who understood that part of me on some level, it was wonderful. It was also lucky because we didn't have to fight about what kind of wedding to have. James was 100% in favor of a Quaker wedding. After the wedding, he told me he couldn't imagine doing it any other way.

I can understand why people decide that they can't marry outside of their faith and in some ways, it would be easier if James were a Quaker. And there is still time!

The clearness and oversight process is really such a blessing. It is a pretty bad set up to say that we have to figure out everything by ourselves. That can be a pretty isolating message. To have a faith community that is intentionally working to assist the spiritual journey of the members of the community is so smart. It recognizes the wisdom of the person seeking clearness while also recognizing the wisdom of community. I try to carry this paradigm into other areas of my life as well.

When I was asked if I would like to participate in this series, I was shocked. I told Shirley that I would need to think about it. At meeting, I had a wonderful conversation with Arthur Larrabee and told him that I was invited but wasn't sure what to do because I didn't have the slightest idea of what to talk about. Arthur said to me something like, "Ingrid, I think you should just say yes. By saying yes you allow yourself the space to know."

So that's what I did. There are two important aspects of that for me: It is trusting that you have what it takes to figure it out. And it is that intention creates reality. I know that I am capable of a lot but I get into trouble when I start to tell myself that I probably can't do it.

When I was on the swim team at FSS, my dad told me the story of a swimmer he knew that told him that while he was standing on the starting block waiting for the gun to go off, he would visualize himself hitting the wall at the end of the race and winning. Intention creates reality. If I really want to do something, then it seems to me that to imagine all the ways that I can be successful makes lots more sense than imagining all the things that can get in my way.

This is a pretty Quaker attitude as far as I can tell. We aren't all that concerned with why we are already flawed or going to hell or being sinful. We believe that we, every one of us, knows God because God is part of us. That is Truth and we can be in touch with that at every moment.

Pat McBee recently sent me an e-mail which had this quote: "O God, help me believe the truth about myself no matter how beautiful it is." I have it in big blue letters on my refrigerator: "Oh God, help me believe the truth about myself no matter how beautiful it is."

To me that quote is not only an invitation to God but a challenge to me. Truth is not only the hard stuff, it is also the good stuff. Oh and by the way, I found out that Truth can include anger.

Growing up a Quaker left me a little confused about anger. I used to think that anger is a form of violence which means that we should avoid it and feel bad about it when we feel it. That if there is that of God in everyone to be mad at someone means being mad at God.

I have come to value anger, not hostility or resentment or hate but clear and honest anger. If I pretend that I don't feel angry, I am not being truthful. Anger is part of the process of forgiveness and if I skip it, I won't be able to really love the person with whom I am angry. That's when resentment and hostility have a real opportunity. My dad's favorite reminder for me is "honor the integrity of your process". For me that means being non-violent but being fully in touch with my feelings.

I found this out the hard way. I was in a really tough relationship in my late teens, early 20s and this person made me so angry. The problem was that I was really afraid to be angry at him because I was also trying to save him (long story). He had lied to me so many times but I had never been able to be clear in telling him how angry I was which meant I could never get to the forgiveness part which was as important for me as it was him. After the relationship had ended, we still hung out sometimes and he did something which triggered all of the anger that I had stuffed way deep inside of me. It all came flying out like a tidal wave through my hand which hit him hard in the face.

Now you notice I didn't just say "I slapped him." It was blind rage that took over. I had never been responsible for my anger which meant it took over and turned into violence....

I was stunned - "what have I done?!"

I was ashamed - "what kind of Quaker am I? And I call myself a pacifist!".

I was relieved.

I found out that none of us are above violence or of enjoying the power that it can make us think we have... That I can talk about non-violence and think that by being a Quaker I am somehow exempt from that urge. I also found out that for me, to never allow that to happen again, I have to address my anger and accept it and communicate it appropriately. This doesn't contradict my identity as a Quaker.

(talk about dad/role models)

I want to wrap up by quoting a card that I recently found: "It's difficult to hold on sometimes, but someday beyond our tears and all the world's wrongs, there will be love, compassion and justice, and we shall all understand."