

## Bridge

Written for the panel presentation "On Being Other in Community"  
*On Being a Spiritual Nurturer*, September 2013  
(9th class, 5<sup>th</sup> residency)

Mary Linda McKinney

Recently, I spent a number of hours with a home healthcare provider while we cared for my 102 year-old grandmother-in-law together. Theresa is a kind person who cares lovingly for her patients and has a deep sense of integrity about her work. It didn't take us long to begin talking about spiritual matters. She is Pentecostal but became frustrated by the hypocrisy and lack of spiritual depth she felt in any church she attended for long. She would like a spiritual community but has almost given up on the idea of finding one. She had never heard of Quakers so asked a lot of questions what we're about.

My grandmother-in-law, Margie, has old-age memory loss. She's sweet and gentle but can only keep the memory of anything recent in her head for about 3 minutes before it floats away. Because of this, I answered the same handful of questions approximately 20 times each hour she was awake. She would ask what my husband's name is and where he was. I'd say that he was at a church retreat. Sometimes she would then ask what church we go to. She's a life-long Pentecostal, as well, and as far as she is able to remember has never heard of Quakers so would ask what Quakers believe or the difference between Quakers and Baptists. I tried answering her in various ways until I finally honed my explanation to one that worked for her. I would say that Quakers don't believe in baptism by water but rather baptism in the Holy Spirit. I'd tell her that we believe that God speaks directly to each of us and because of this, we don't have a minister but believe that we all have the potential to be ministers and so sit in silent waiting on God until one of us is given a message to share during Sunday worship. This seemed to make sense to her and didn't lead to a lot of other theological and memory challenges (having a conversation with someone with 3 minutes memory duration can be an interesting exercise but it can also be very confusing for everyone involved).

Having spent several days perfecting my Quaker elevator speech, I was prepared when Theresa asked almost identical questions. Pentecostalism is on the same mystical branch of Christianity as Religious Society of Friends, albeit at the opposite end, so it's not really difficult for a Pentecostal and a Quaker to find common ground. Of course, there are a number of theological differences, but for the sake of our conversation, I focused on the things I thought Theresa could relate to. And relate she did. She was very interested in what I told her and said she would look up more info on-line after work.

That day after Theresa left, I struggled with whether to give her more info about the local Liberal Friends meeting. I think she very well might find the worship to be a positive experience. But she made it clear that she is also looking for a spiritual community and Liberal Friends, I think, would not be a good fit for her.

It shames me and hurts me and pisses me off tremendously to say this but it's true: Most working class and poor people and even many rural and suburban middle class folks would not feel welcome at a Liberal Friends Meeting. Theresa is a Certified Nursing Assistant. She has obviously not always had access to dentistry. She is is friendly as all get-out but when she talks, it's clear she is not well educated. I kept trying to imagine a scenario in which she would visit a Liberal Friends meeting and feel comfortable. First, she'd have to get over the "new experience" barrier to just walk through the door. Then, there's the strangeness of meeting in silence with no singing, no one directing anything, the sounds of stomachs growling and shuffling feet and the possibility of NPR messages...for a whole hour. Next there are introductions and announcements which totally puts newcomers in the spotlight. If it's potluck First Day, there may be quinoa, tofu, tempeh, or other vegan foods to discover. Oh yeah, there are the weird terms and jargon: First Day and meeting for worship are just the beginning.

But let's say she's intrepid and can accept all that. What happens when she tries to get to know the community? How welcoming is it?

I come from a working class background. My dad has an Associates degree in Warehouse and Traffic Management that he earned going to night school when I was a baby. The smell of cardboard always makes me think of him. My mom was the youngest of 6 children raised with a richness of love but in financial poverty by a single mom who worked as a waitress after my ne'er-do-well grandfather deserted the family. My mother believed that being a wife and mother were the roles created for women by God. She sometimes watched children in our home for rainy-day money. My parents were hard-working and frugal. They weren't social climbers but wanted to provide their family with the stability and security they lacked when they were children.

My extended family are all blue-collar middle class. My cousins are nurses and cops, skilled laborers, career military and cosmetologists. Very few, if any of us earn a salary; we're mostly hourly workers. I think one cousin was a college professor for a while but he began buying rental property and makes his living renting to college students. They, and the majority of the people where I come from, are overwhelmingly Red-State, Fox News watching Conservative. Of my 90+ cousins, I have 2, maybe 3 who are liberal in their beliefs and attitudes.

I was raised Baptist by parents who were earnest in their faith. Being Baptist in the '70s didn't require one to choose for or against things like evolution, social programs, or a woman's right to use birth control. Now, it seems, the common thought is that if you are a Christian, you must side staunchly with the most regressive elements of the conservative movement.

I frequently wonder how I came to be so very different in my beliefs, faith, and understandings of how the world works. I've been fairly liberal since my late teens and I don't think I took a contrary stance to my upbringing as a matter of youthful rebellion. I think, though, that my parents being such firm and sincere Christians, and being frugal, and setting standards for me that were so different from the dominant culture taught me from a young age that I wasn't going to fit in no matter what I did so I may as well follow the rhythm of my own drummer.

When I visited my first Quaker meeting for worship, spiritually I felt right at home. The silence and the invitation to sink down and really listen for the voice of God felt instantly right to me. At first, I had few problems with the culture. I found the lack of usual religious jargon refreshing. I'd just started homeschooling my children and was getting involved with an inclusive, diverse homeschooling community in which the values were pretty similar to those of Liberal Friends. I think I'd been attending Friends Meeting a year or two when I was first confronted with a cultural wall. I'd organized a trip to visit to an Episcopalian minister's labyrinth in a town about an hour away and 6 or 7 of us were in a van traveling through beautiful rural Tennessee. I'd said something about being a city girl who loves the country and begin torn between wanting to live in each place. A Friend who I admired tremendously said, "That's why my family keeps a summer home!" I felt terribly naïve, unsophisticated, and outsider in that moment. Since that time, I've had many experiences of feeling the outsider in community with Friends. There is an assumption that all Liberal Friends are well educated, have the resources to travel, including the financial ability to attend activities in the larger Quaker world, and have stability. I did not go to college and, so far, neither of my adult sons is showing interest in going. I've never had the time or money to travel or attend Yearly Meetings and gatherings because doing so requires taking time from an hourly job, the cost of travel and the cost of the event for myself and my children. I was in a very unhappy marriage when I began attending Friends meeting. The longer I attended, the more outsider I often felt. For many years, I felt like I needed to keep a lot of facts about me and my life close to the vest in order to assimilate.

At the same time, God was calling me into a deeper relationship with my community. I was active in many facets of my monthly meeting, was at the meetinghouse almost every day of the week, taught First Day school, and had several close friendships with Friends. I was learning to become a leader and facilitated a number of workshops and classes. In doing so, I was also learning that to create true intimacy, vulnerability is required. Through success and failure, I was taught that when I, the leader, opened and shared my true self, including the things that made me feel like an outsider, others felt safe to also do so.

Sometimes it has been challenging to reveal the fact that I have no formal education to a room full of "more degrees than people" in Quaker circles (as my friend Geoffrey says). The responses I've received have included an unjoking, "Well you must go to school immediately" to, "You're very articulate and no one would ever guess." to, "Really? You seem smart." Friends! Intelligence doesn't necessarily equal education. Education equals opportunity, that's all. What I've observed about Liberal Friends is that, in large part, our community is made up of people who grew up with the resources to ensure they were well-educated. I have nothing against higher education. What I am troubled by is that in the Religious Society of Friends, FGC branch, it seems to me the entire culture is founded on an unconscious expectation that everyone has a base level of education much higher than what is found among the general population of people in the U.S.

Because I am able to "pass" as part of the dominant culture (e.g. white, educated-meaning highly verbal and articulate, middle class, politically progressive) while also being sensitive to my roots (white, working class, politically nostalgic, socially conservative), I feel like I've been given the opportunity to be a bridge between two worlds. There are many times when I am able to advocate for those with fewer resources as with the wording used in documents that assume an advanced vocabulary and when Friends set costs for things high enough to have once prohibited me from attending. (I suggest a sliding scale because one thing

Liberal Friends don't understand is that working class people loathe the idea that they might be taking charity and so would be unlikely to ask for scholarship. Sliding scale allows them...us...to pay what we can afford without feeling like we're taking a handout). My upbringing, adult experiences living hand-to-mouth and now with plenty, even my decade of work collecting sociology data all allow me to have a broader perspective about what different people might experience when attending meeting for worship.

I think about this frequently, about how we make cultural assumptions seem like part of our religion when they shouldn't be. The level of education or even how intelligent a person is, her political affiliation or where she shops has nothing to do with how God uses her. As I said to Theresa, "Quakers believe that God speaks directly to each of us and because of this, we don't have a minister but believe that we all have the potential to be ministers". Early Friends seemed to have practiced the same radical inclusiveness as the community that grew around Jesus. Many of the Valiant 60, some of our most influential founders, were servants and laborers. They were supported in ministry. Their intelligence, lack of book learning or couth didn't matter; what was important was that they lived up to the Light given them: They were faithful servants of God.

Maybe it's just me, but it seems like our convincements are quietly intellectual rather than profoundly spiritual. Symbolically, baptism is a public declaration of one's commitment to a new life: a "washing away" of the old and a rebirth into a new identity. Friends don't practice baptism by water but believe in baptism in the Holy Spirit. What does that mean to us today? Do we have this experience? If we do, why do we not share with one another about it publicly? Imagine how transformed our Friends communities would be if we shared our experiences of being baptized in the Holy Spirit! Differences would fall away so how we were raised and what news source we believed would no longer matter. The fast food worker would be as valued as the college professor and the single mom living in a trailer could worship side-by-side with the psychologist.

When I think about the energy I expended trying to figure out what I could safely share of myself and what I needed to keep hidden for so long, I feel such wasted potential. Even now, the nervousness and trepidation I feel about how my self-revelation will be received by you is not useful. I end with this query: What would happen with us if we got to know one another, not by talking about the temporal aspects of our lives but about how Christ moves in our lives?