

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
January 24, 2010**

*“ . . . if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.’*

*Jesus said to him, ‘If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.’*

*Immediately the father of the child cried out, ‘I believe; help my unbelief!’*

—Mark 9:22-24

## **“A Hundred Handy Doubts”**

**by Donne Hayden**

Listening to news accounts of what our Congress is doing and saying, I have come to the conclusion that we no longer have a *government* in this country; we have an *argument*. We have continual political campaigning, with the party that’s out seeking, not to govern alongside the party that’s in, but to obstruct in every way possible anything the other party attempts. We have no unity. We have disunity. We are the *Dis-United States of America*.

This competitive, obstructionist approach pervades every imaginable part of our lives. It’s as though we have allowed reality television shows to become the models and arbiters of behavior. Unfortunately, the only instruction many of our youth receive in how to act is what they see in the media. And they see the same sort of behavior whether they watch newscasts, interviews with politicians, or if any ever bother to turn to C-SPAN, the halls of Congress itself. In all of our public discourse, we appear to be a nation of rude and hateful, bickering factions.

I was delighted to read in the most recent issue of *The Christian Century* magazine that church leaders in New Orleans, including priests, ministers, rabbis and even an *imam*, are stepping forward to denounce the rudeness and incivility that reigns in our “Christian” nation. The group drafted a “Faith Statement on Public Discourse,” urging “members of their congregations and the public to show basic respect to those with whom they disagree.”<sup>1</sup> In addition to circulating it among their members, these New Orleans clergy are sending “copies to local, state and federal politicians urging them too, to keep a civil tongue.” Their action, they say, “is founded on the shared Christian, Jewish and Islamic premise that ‘since we regard all human beings as God’s children . . . we regard an offense against our neighbor as an offense against God.’”<sup>2</sup> The Faith Statement “calls on people to display respect for those with whom they disagree; to debate issues, not demonize opponents; to stop misrepresenting opponents’ views; and to stop circulating e-mail messages that ‘demonize or humiliate persons or groups.’”

Unfortunately, such uncivil rhetoric—“debating, misrepresenting and demonizing”—characterizes disagreements among religious groups. Even in the Religious Society of Friends, some are guilty of adding to the general lack of civility in contemporary American society. We’ve seen it at all levels in the discussion of certain issues, from our own Monthly Meeting for Business to Wilmington Yearly Meeting and Friends United Meeting.

On Thursday night, I was giving an overview of Quaker history to the Quakerism 101 group. After I pointed out the Hicksite-Orthodox separation, the Wilburite/Gureyite division in the late 1800s, and the current dissension among Friends, a young woman asked, “Isn’t all this contradictory to what Friends claim to believe?” In other words, if Friends embrace the understanding that there is that of God in everyone, why can’t we just acknowledge this Inner

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Nolan, “Clergy Unite to Urge: ‘Thou Shalt Be Civil,’” *The Christian Century*, January 26, 2010, page 15

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Light in each other and get along? She's right, of course. I had no answer save that we Quakers are after all only human, and to mention that there seems to be a push from Young Adult Friends toward unity in groups like the Convergent Friends.

This is not a new or recent problem. Friends have always been challenged by the call to unity through trusting the workings of the Holy Spirit. This is apparent in "one of the most distinctive features of Quaker practice,"<sup>3</sup> the Queries. The practice was begun by the earliest Friends who sought to be unified by guidelines for living and worshipping together. Queries were sent out once a year to be considered by each monthly meeting and responded to honestly; the "underlying question of the Queries collectively" was "How does Truth prosper among you?"<sup>4</sup> The *earliest* query among Friends, and still used in many yearly meetings, was: "Is love and unity maintained amongst you?" with these later additions, "Are tale-bearing and detraction discouraged? And where any differences arise, are endeavours used speedily to end them?"

The crux of the problem seems to be that we do not trust each other. We say we believe "there is that of God in everyone," but we sometimes act as though we seriously doubt it; our actions with each other belie that claim. *We believe; help our unbelief.* We are most challenged in matters that come up in Meeting for Business.

I found a good expression of the conflict within us in an article in the same issue of *The Christian Century* where writer Paula Huston makes this observation:

*... I was impeded by a problem I never knew I had: my hidden but stubbornly entrenched skepticism about the existence of the spiritual realm. Like most postmodern Westerners, I grew up in a*

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<sup>3</sup> "The Queries," *Journal of the North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative)*, No. 2, Winter, 2003.  
<http://www.ncymc.org/journal/ncymcjournal2.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

*culture permeated with empiricist notions about reality. Philosopher Charles Taylor writes that often we consciously hold one set of values and assumptions but unconsciously live by another. This conflict leaves us in a state of persistent uneasiness. As Christians, we know that we should believe and even want to believe, but as members of a society in which science and technology reign supreme, we find ourselves torn when faced with a high-priced spiritual demand. Under these circumstances, it's easy to find ourselves waffling. . . . my hidden skepticism provided me with a hundred handy doubts right when I most need them.*<sup>5</sup>

It occurs to me that this is true in the Society of Friends these days. In this very Meeting are those who have “a hundred handy doubts” that impede the maintaining of love and trust among us. In Meeting for Business, especially, some of us are uneasy with the idea that a person who voices an opinion with which we disagree, might be speaking from the Spirit. We are uncomfortable with the idea that a Meeting for Business does not operate like any other meeting; it is *not* a democracy. We like the idea that our decision-making might be Spirit-led, yet we are skeptical that the Spirit is present unless we agree with all that is said. We like the idea of being Spirit-led, but surely the Spirit could move a bit faster—why draw things out for hours, or even months? We like the idea of being Spirit-led, but we chafe at relinquishing control to the Spirit—who can see the Spirit? (*We believe; help our unbelief.*) When we find our own desires or opinions challenged, “a hundred handy doubts” assail us about the motivations of others in the Meeting. Such doubts lead us away from the unity Friends seek.

Some of the best advice for how to deal with this tendency toward division and distrust comes from the Advices of earlier Friends, such as this paragraph written in 1925 in

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<sup>5</sup> Paula Huston, “Wake-Up Call,” *The Christian Century*, January 26, 2010, pages 30-31.

*Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends* (London Yearly Meeting, 1960):

*A loving spirit should be the mark of the Friend at all times. Outspoken comment within the family circle it would be unreasonable to check, but it must be remembered that bitter criticism is more hurtful to those who indulge in it than to those of whom it is uttered, though the latter may suffer indirectly through the creation of a hostile atmosphere; also that remarks uttered half in jest may have more effect than is imagined . . . Seek ever to speak the truth in love.*

“Violence begets violence, in speech and in action,” says the “Faith Statement on Public Discourse” from a New Orleans clergy group. Another way to say this is that we reap what we sow—if we plant animosity, we harvest animosity; if we plant distrust, we grow distrust. We get out of anything what we put into it. If we permit bitterness and suspicion into our meetings for business, we will reap more bitterness and suspicion. If, however, we can bring ourselves to “seek ever to speak the Truth in love,” we will harvest more love and trust. But that requires help with our unbelief, it requires deflecting our hundred handy doubts, it requires trusting the Holy Spirit, and it requires trusting each other.