

*Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
October 5, 2008*

Bearing the Beams of Love by Donne Hayden

Community is much on my mind today. Yesterday at the Cincinnati Friends Fall Picnic we had a wonderful experience of community—a golden afternoon on the Hadley family farm, good food, good company, the laughter and antics of children. Earlier this week, some of us met as a Clearness Committee for Membership for Carol Hoffman who wishes to become a member of this community.

On Thursday, I experienced something that surprised me a bit at the same time it made clear to me the power of community. I drove that morning to Richmond, Indiana to pick up Margaret, a friend of mine who was in the area and going to spend a couple of days with me. She was giving a presentation at the weekly Peace Forum in the dining hall at Earlham School of Religion. When I entered the dining hall, a room where I had eaten and talked and been part of the community for over four years, I was surprised at how disconcerting it was. It took me a few minutes to sort out the experience and understand exactly why. The dining hall food smelled the same, the sounds—clatter and clink of dishes and silverware—were the same; everything *looked* the same. Except, among all those people, I saw not a single familiar face! Eventually I picked out a professor here and there whose face I recognized, and finally I spotted Margaret sitting at a table with three others from our ESR class. That table of four was instant comfort and community for me. Community—we long for it, we know we need it, but why is it so important?

Friends in particular have always known the value of community, of “corporate worship,” witness the comments of two Quakers centuries apart in time; first, British Friend John Punshon, who said in 1987, “I came to understand why it is impossible to

be a Quaker without a meeting.” And George Fox who wrote in 1652: “Mind that which is eternal, which gathers your hearts together up to the Lord, and lets you see that ye are written in one another’s heart.”

As I drove my friend Margaret to the train station at midnight last night, she asked me what my message would be about this morning. I told her *community* kept coming up, and that I had finally realized a few years ago at seminary that life really is all about relationships, God really is all about relationships, and the place where relationships happen is in community. Margaret said she experienced God through community. In fact, she confided, without community, she wasn’t sure she would believe that God exists. That’s it precisely, of course, for those of us who believe that “there is that of God in every one.” In community, that of God in you encounters that of God in me and vice versa. Problems arise when that which is *not* of God in each of us encounters that which is *not* of God in others. In relationships, in community, we are *most rewarded* and *most tested* in our spiritual seeking.

Quaker writer Parker J. Palmer expressed it this way:

*In true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and the world. In fact, we might define true community as that place where the person you least want to live with lives!*¹

¹ Quoted by Catherine Whitmire in *Plain Living: A Quaker Path to Simplicity*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2001, page 143.

At seminary in a course called “History and Literature of the Old Testament,” I first understood that in Judaism and its offspring, Christianity, the most significant concept is *relationship* between humans and the Divine. The ancient Israelites were not monotheists the way we understand the term, i.e. believing that only one god exists. They were monotheistic in a different way—they believed that one particular deity, a power they knew as *Yahweh*, but referred to reverently as “*Ha Shem*,” or “The Name,” had *chosen* them to be his followers. This divinity, in fact, made the first move toward relationship with them! He contacted them through Moses, and again through Abraham, always seeking to establish a covenant with them, binding them all—divinity and worshippers—into community. This idea is referenced throughout the Old Testament; for instance, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, *Ha Shem* tells the Israelites:

. . . this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel. . . says [Ha-Shem] the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other “Know [Ha-Shem] the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest . . . (Jer 31:31-34).

Over centuries the understanding of this particular deity developed into the view we know today of the One God, the Almighty Creator of everything, who still is, nonetheless in relationship with human beings. What’s more, this Almighty cares about how human beings treat *each other*. In fact, all questions of ethics and morality require relationship: an isolated human being cannot *be* ethical or unethical, moral or immoral, because ethics deals with how we treat others—whether those others are humans, animals, or the environment; without relationship, ethics and morals have no meaning. Our greatest tests of love, compassion and courage come in our relationships with other human beings. Parker Palmer says,

Community reminds us that we are called to love, for community is a product of love in action and not of simple self-interest. Community can break open our egos to the experience of a God who cannot be contained by our conceptions. Community will teach us that our grip on truth is fragile and incomplete, that we need many ears to hear the fullness of God's word for our lives. And the disappointments of community life can be transformed by our discovery that the only dependable power for life lies beyond all human structures and relationships.

In this religious grounding lies the only real hedge against the risk of disappointment in seeking community. That risk can be borne only if it is not community that one seeks, but truth, light, God. Do not commit yourself to community, but commit yourself to God . . . In that commitment you will find yourself drawn into community.²

Two unusual images relating to community have occurred to me in writing this message. The first relates to a passage about ants in Lewis Thomas' book, *The Lives of a Cell*:

[Ants] seem to live two kinds of lives: they are individuals, going about the day's business without much evidence of thought for tomorrow, and they are at the same time component parts, cellular elements, in the huge, writhing, ruminating organism of the Hill, the nest, the hive . . .

A solitary ant, afield, cannot be considered to have much of anything on his mind; indeed with only a few neurons strung together by fibers, he can't be imagined to have a mind at all, much less a thought. He is more like a ganglion on legs. **Four ants together, or ten, encircling a dead moth on a path, begin to look more like an idea.** They fumble and shove, gradually moving the food toward the Hill, but as though by blind chance. It is only when you watch the dense mass of thousands of ants, crowded together around the Hill, blackening the ground, that you begin to see the whole beast, and now you observe it thinking, planning, calculating. **It is an intelligence, a kind of live computer, with crawling bits for its wits.** [Emphasis mine.]

At a stage in the constructions, twigs of a certain size are needed, and all the members forage obsessively for twigs of just this size. Later, when outer walls are finished, thatched, the size must change, and as though given new orders by telephone, all the workers shift the search to the new twigs. If you disturb the arrangement of a part of the Hill, hundreds of ants will set it vibrating, shifting, until it is put right again. Distant sources of food are somehow sensed, and long lines, like tentacles, reach out over the ground, up over walls, behind boulders, to fetch it in.

² Whitmire, page 143.

Ants seem to be guided by a community-intelligence, if you will, a force that leads them to do certain things, to build, to cooperate, to rebuild when something disturbs their community. We humans are far superior to ants in our intellect, of course, but perhaps in our understanding of God, the Spirit, the larger purposes of the universe, we are as pitifully ignorant and limited as these ants are in our estimation. Imagine the earth as a giant “Hill” and all of humanity as struggling individuals, each striving to do a tiny part in some larger purpose we have little or no conception of. We have a consciousness, however, that permits us to catch glimmers of the force that compels us toward our higher purpose together, the force we call Love (*agape*) that moves us to vibrate and shift until things in our human community are “put right again.” Perhaps humanity as a whole “*is an intelligence, a kind of live computer*” whose components are connected by a spiritual energy or force; perhaps we are the moving “bits for its wits.”

This idea is beautifully expressed by Teresa of Avila who wrote:

You are Christ's Hands
 God has no body now on earth but yours,
 No hands but yours,
 No feet but yours,
 Yours are the eyes through which he is to look out
 God's compassion to the world;
 Yours are the feet with which he is to go about
 Doing good;
 Yours are the hands with which he is to bless [people] now.

A second image that I'd like to leave you with today is stirred by this snippet of verse by the great mystic, William Blake. “*And we are put on earth a little space, / That we might learn to bear the beams of love.*”

That phrase, “bear the beams of love,” intrigues me because it contains two quite different, equally powerful metaphors. First, thinking of love as a great beam, as in the

beams that support a roof—we humans are here to learn to *bear* these beams. Why learn? Are the beams of love heavy? Difficult to carry? Do they require that one end of love rest on my shoulder and the other end of the beam of love rest on yours? How does one balance such beams?

The other metaphor comes in visualizing love as light beams. Light so powerful that we must learn to *bear* it—it is not easy to bear, this love. Visualize this room, crisscrossed with beams of light, connecting each one to each other one. Can we *bear* it? Community is where we “*learn* to bear the beams of love,” something difficult to do, but worth it.