

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
May 17, 2009**

**“No Direction Home?”
by Donne Hayden**

I'd like to begin today with a poem titled “Who Goes to Heaven?”

I was shocked, confused, bewildered
as I entered Heaven's door,
Not by the beauty of it all,
nor the lights or its decor.

But it was the folks in Heaven
who made me sputter and gasp,
the thieves, the liars, the sinners,
the alcoholics, the trash.

There stood the kid from seventh grade
who swiped my lunch money twice.
Next to him was my old neighbor
who never said anything nice.

Herb, who I always thought
was rotting away in hell,
was sitting pretty on cloud nine,
looking incredibly well.

I nudged Jesus, 'What's the deal?
I would love to hear Your take.
How'd all these sinners get up here?
God must've made a mistake.

'And why's everyone so quiet,
so somber? Give me a clue.'
'Hush, child,' said He, 'they're all in shock.
No one thought they'd be seeing you.'

This poem expresses the theological concept of “universal salvation,” i.e., that everyone, even the worst sinners, will be forgiven. It may come as no surprise that universal salvation is a source of deep division and much controversy among evangelical Friends, but you may be

surprised to know that one of its most outspoken proponents is Phillip Gulley, an evangelical Quaker pastor in Indiana.

I first encountered Phil Gulley in the fall of 2002, my second semester at Earlham School of Religion, when I attended the annual Writing Colloquium where he was the keynote speaker. A graduate of ESR, Phil Gulley was serving as minister at Fairfield Friends Meeting in Indiana and had written a series of novels about a Quaker minister in a small Indiana town called “Harmony.” He began writing short stories for the church bulletin which then were published in the church newsletter. His writing career began when he was “discovered” by the famous radio personality, Paul Harvey, whose son sent him copies of the newsletter. By 2002, he had published five books in the Harmony series and Quaker bookstores carried all of them.

I had never heard of Phil Gulley, nor read his books, but when, near the end of the colloquium, Phil Gulley read from his most recent novel, *Just Shy of Harmony*, I was hooked. If you’ve never read any of the “Harmony” books, think of a Quaker Garrison Keillor (personally, I find Gulley even funnier than Keillor). (By the way, our library has all of these books and Suzanne Johnson has left her own copies in the library for people to borrow if they wish.)

So why am I talking to you about Phil Gulley today? For one thing, our Meeting has been approached, along with the other two meetings in Cincinnati, with the idea of inviting Phil Gulley to speak in Cincinnati next fall. It would take the financial support of all three meetings because Phil Gulley’s speaker’s fee is now \$1200.

In the years since I first heard him read from *Just Shy of Harmony*, life has changed significantly for Phil Gulley. Perhaps the main source of change is the book published in 2003 which he co-authored with James Mulholland, another minister serving at Irvington Friends

Meeting in Indiana. If you haven't read their book, *If Grace is True*, I recommend it to you, as well as its sequel, *If God Is Love*

In *If Grace Is True*, Gulley and Mulholland, both evangelical Quaker ministers, spoke openly about universal "salvation" to an audience of evangelical Quakers who generally believe that only by accepting Jesus Christ is one saved from burning in the fires of Hell.

When the book first came out, I went to the Quaker bookstore (operated by Friends United Meeting) in Richmond, Indiana to purchase the book, I was told they didn't carry it. Apparently it went against the beliefs of Friends United Meeting. Within a week or so, however, First Friends Meeting in Richmond, the meeting I attended, had acquired thirty copies of the book which it made available for purchase, and later that year, Phil Gulley and James Mulholland came to speak at First Friends Meeting. The meetinghouse holds about two hundred people and there was standing room only. I attended with my daughter who was also a student at Earlham School of Religion at the time. I remember Phil talking about all the things we were taught in seminary and warned never to share with our congregations for fear the flock would not understand. At one point, my daughter leaned over and whispered to me: "I have waited all my life to hear someone say this from the pulpit." That seemed to be the general response among Friends that night.

Not everyone was thrilled by what Gulley and Mulholland had to say, however. Even before the book was published, they faced censure from evangelical Christians. Multnomah Press, a Christian publishing company which had published all of Phil's "Harmony" novels, refused to publish *If Grace Is True*. This turned out to be a blessing in disguise because the book was then picked up and published by HarperSanFrancisco. The reception among evangelical Christians, including evangelical Friends, was bitterly critical. For instance, Albert Mohler,

president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville wrote that in the book Gulley and Mulholland "jettison the whole structure of Christian conviction."

Now, six years later, the controversy continues among evangelical Friends in Western Yearly Meeting and Indiana Yearly Meeting. Both ministers, Phil Gulley and James Mulholland, are supported by their own meetings, but they have been attacked by others in their yearly meetings. In 2007, the Executive Committee of Western Yearly Meeting brought a minute to "remove Phil Gulley's pastoral credentials."¹ In the heated discussion that followed, the Yearly Meeting Clerk "discerned that there was no unity on the issue" and sent the matter back to the Executive Committee.

Last year, I was invited to sit in on a Ministry & Counsel meeting at Community Friends Meeting in which they were to consider a request from Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting that individual meetings respond to a query from Irvington Friends where James Mulholland is minister. The query asked if Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting would consider accepting pastored or programmed meetings as members, and if so, under what conditions. Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting (or "OVYM") is part of Friends General Conference, the liberal branch of Quakerism. A couple of weekend ago, in conversation with Friends from various yearly meetings, one ventured the opinion that OVYM would reject the suggestion because the membership of Irvington Friends Meeting alone was as much as the total number of Friends in Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting. Since it is pretty clear several other programmed meetings would seek membership if OVYM would accept them, it would thus completely change the character of the yearly meeting.

¹ Steve Angell, "Opening the Scriptures, Then and Now," *Quaker Theology* #14, <<http://www.quaker.org/quest/issue14-angell-01.htm>>

The issue boils down to this: Programmed Friends who are liberal theologically are not welcome in any yearly meeting. Because we are programmed, we are not welcome in Friends General Conference Yearly Meetings; because we are liberal theologically, we are not welcome or comfortable in Friends United Meeting yearly meetings. The question seems to be, is it time to organize another yearly meeting? If so, perhaps it could be the rebirth of “Progressive Friends,” a group of 19th century Hicksite Friends whose statement of beliefs could include the following drafted by the Independent Progressive Friends from Salem, Ohio in 1863: "Our object is the cultivation of personal goodness, and the promotion of practical righteousness among men. No test of opinion, belief, or creed, shall ever be made the condition of membership."

Friends who support Mulholland and Gulley have been exploring this idea. The website of Fairfield Friends Meeting where Gulley is minister refers to “our messages of progressive faith” and in 2008, meetings were held at Irvington Friends to determine whether there was an interest in “forming an association of progressive Quakers.”² At one such meeting, three questions were offered for consideration: 1) What excites us to want to connect with each other? 2) How are we divinely led as Friends to speak and act collectively? 3) What might such an association look like? These three questions are much more interesting to me than the three questions regarding the divinity of Christ and authority of scripture recently sent to meetings in Wilmington Yearly Meeting by the Clerk of the WYM Executive Committee.

What *would* an association of Progressive Friends look like?

² *Valley Voice*, newsletter of Valley Hills Meeting, March 2008, <http://www.vmfriends.org/ValleyVoice-03-2008.PDF>