

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
October 11, 2009**

## **Discerning the Call**

**by Donne Hayden**

Last week, Bob Kaminski stopped by the office and stayed to visit for a while. It turns out that Bob has been a pastor in several evangelical churches, including a mega-church in California. But he left the ministry when he realized he no longer believed what he was saying. For the past few years he has used expertise acquired in a part-time job with The Rug Gallery to become an independent dealer in rare and valuable rugs. As you might imagine, the current economy is deadly for businesses like his, and he mentioned that he is considering going back to university for a Ph.D. “Right now,” he said, “I’m just waiting,” and we talked for a while, minister-to-minister, about the necessity of waiting, and of recognizing that necessity, and of how hard it is for us, in the process of discerning a call or direction, to find ourselves required to wait. And wait some more.

I shared with him a favorite piece of wisdom I gleaned from reading the jokes in *The Reader’s Digest* when I was a kid. It concerns a minister who asked members of the congregation to stand and read or say their favorite passage from the Bible. After several people spoke, an old man near the front stood up and announced, “My favorite passage from the Bible is: ‘And it came to pass ...’” Then he sat down. Puzzled, the minister said to him, “And it came to pass ... what? What’s the rest of the verse?” The old man answered, “That’s all. Just ‘and it came to pass.’ I’m glad I never read anywhere in the Bible ‘And it came to stay.’”

Waiting for the Spirit is truly a test of our patience and faithfulness, especially in contemporary American culture. If we are faithful, however, when the time is right and the leading is clear, as Quakers say, “way will open.”

Waiting, it turns out, is one stage in being guided by the Spirit, discerning a new direction for our lives, what Quakers call “a leading” (a leading maybe become “a call”). For those seeking discernment and direction, in a Pendle Hill pamphlet titled *Leading and Being Led*, Paul Lacey identifies three stages of a spiritual leading:

1) "First of all the leading is directed inwardly. [Here we are own our own with the Spirit.] The tight control we may have kept on our inner doubts becomes loosened, and confusion threatens to overwhelm us. We may feel emptiness and separation from other people . . ." [This emptiness or alienation *may* be the beginning of a leading into something new or different.]

2) "A second hallmark of a leading is that we recognize that our endurance comes as a gift, an opening. The waiting is still painful, but our capacity to resist false answers gives us some assurance that a true one will come."

3) "A third hallmark is that we learn about people. As we come to know our own condition, we come also to know the condition of others . . . . that we are part of suffering humanity, so whatever may comfort us will have to be for all humankind. We cannot come to the ocean of light except through the ocean of darkness." (pp. 8-9)

Discerning *leadings* and *calls-to-ministry* is a subject much on my mind for the past few weeks, because Ministry and Counsel has been meeting—indeed, having *extra* meetings—to establish guidelines for the use of monies in the Anderson Fund.<sup>1</sup> To give

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<sup>1</sup> Some of our meetings have included representatives from CFM who are not on Ministry and Counsel, but are interested in helping set guidelines and giving feedback to Ministry and Counsel.

you some background, I'd like to read a few paragraphs from something I've written titled "Encouraging & Affirming Ministry in the Meeting":

*In March 2009, when Cincinnati Friends Monthly Meeting for Business approved use of Anderson Fund monies for installation of new windows in the meetinghouse office, library and meetingroom, Friend Cathy Barney brought the concern that some of the funds be used for "encouraging ministry both inward and outward." Accordingly, from money remaining in the Anderson Fund after installation of new "green" windows—\$42,032.00 as of July 2009—the Meeting approved creation of a fund for supporting and furthering ministry among members and attenders. In June 2009 at Monthly Meeting for Business, Ministry & Counsel proposed—and the Meeting approved—that guidelines for dispersal of the funds be established so the Meeting may begin to use the money as planned.*

*In the process of writing guidelines for dispersal of these funds, we discerned a larger issue, i.e., the need for the Meeting to support and encourage ministry among us even when funding is not an issue. In other words, the ministry is more important than the money; thus, guidelines established for grants from Anderson Funds for Individual Recognized Ministry (AFFIRM) become only one part of the larger endeavor, which is to encourage and affirm the gifts of ministry the Meeting perceives in its members/attenders. With that in mind, we offer the following general comments on ministry among Friends.*

*A "minister" is a person called to the service of others, and for Friends, that service must be characterized by Truth and Love. Friends recognize 1) that God may choose any instrument to serve Truth and express Love, 2) that anyone may be a minister, and, 3) that ministry may take many forms.*

*Friends encourage the development of a variety of spiritual gifts or ministries, and identify things as “ministry” that no one else may recognize as such. For instance, at Earlham School of Religion, a Quaker seminary, one can receive a Master of Divinity degree in one of seven areas acknowledged as forms of ministry including, of course, Pastoral Care and Counseling, and Pastoral Ministry, but also Peace & Justice, Spirituality, Teaching, Unprogrammed Friends Ministry, and Writing. When a Friend goes back to the Meeting, however, even with seminary degree, he or she is just another minister among a congregation of ministers.*

I have said before from this place: I am in a room full of ministers.

We are still working on guidelines for encouraging ministry in the meeting; our aim is to finish the preliminary work and begin educating the Meeting about how such encouragement might look. How would we encourage ministry among us? Paul Lacey’s “third hallmark” of spiritual leadings or calls is where community becomes crucial. In this stage, “we learn about people. As we come to know our own condition, we come also to know the condition of others.”

I am going to work backward through these three stages, beginning with community, because that’s where we (i.e., Ministry & Counsel) started. Then we realized that, in order to understand what people may be experiencing, we should identify the earlier stages of a call or leading.

Quakers have long held that we need *community* in order to discern fully God’s leading in our lives. Belonging to an entire community which is open to being led is a powerful thing, and certainly helpful in later stages of a call, yet it is important to recognize what Lacey laid out, i.e., that at the *beginning* of a call, one may be very much alone. First, and before we can use the resources available to us in community, Lacey

says, because "the leading is directed inwardly" and "We may feel emptiness and separation from other people." Even though members of the Meeting and others in your personal support systems may see you struggling and want to help you, they may not be able to offer much more than friendship. The first throes of discerning a calling can be times of great trial in our lives.

George Fox himself is a prime example. At the beginning of what became his "call to ministry," Fox wandered away from others, alone in his discernment. "The Lord . . . said unto me," he wrote in his *Journal*, "Thou seest how young people go together into vanity and old people into the earth; and thou must forsake all, both young and old, and keep out of all, and be as a stranger unto all." Lacey describes this period in Fox's life as "alienation from human society" and an "anxious search for meaning." During that time, Fox occasionally sought answers from "priests, professors and dissenters," but as Lacey points out, "these are wanderings rather than leadings." Only *after* he received his "openings" and understood where God was leading him did Fox come back to community, and in effect, with what he learned in his solitary searching, he created a *new* community of believers.

When we are struggling to discern a call or leading, the most important thing for us to listen to is the most difficult thing for us to hear. Laboring alone to discern a call, "We must listen in silence, for stillness and silence enable us to hear. Elijah did not hear God in the mighty wind or in the earthquake or in the fire but in **a still, small voice**" (*Listening Hearts* 31). We humans create "mighty winds" and earthquakes with our busy-ness. But a noisy, clamoring life can be, as the fallen, despairing Macbeth phrases it, "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Unless and until we

are able to hear the "still, small voice," we may be too distracted by human concerns to follow leadings for our spirit/soul.

How can we in the Meeting encourage someone struggling to discern a leading? First of all, perhaps, is to recognize the signs. In the first stage of their discernment, we can encourage them to be quiet and still; we can sit with them in the silence; we can help them cultivate patience and wait.

In the second stage of a spiritual leading, according to Lacey, we recognize "that our endurance comes as a gift, an opening. The waiting is still painful, but our capacity to resist false answers gives us some assurance that a true one will come." In other words, patiently waiting is a test of one's readiness. When a person is ready to listen for "true answers," others in the Meeting can act as sounding boards. We can share our own experiences of how we find the source of the still, small voice; perhaps of how we became aware of its *power* for good in our lives. If we are inclined to follow spiritual guidance, ourselves, we must have paid attention to it *at least once* in order to hear the truth in what it tells us. We can share what we each have discovered about how to pay attention and what to pay attention to, ways we know to keep ourselves open to the Spirit's guidance. The most obvious way is through prayer and straightforward requests for guidance. But if we remain tuned in and receptive, alert to responses in whatever ways they may come, we find guidance in various forms, such as dreams.

I personally also pay attention to odd congruencies, particularly apt symbols that appear in something I'm reading, in a piece of music or even in the material world. Here are a couple of examples.

In the summer of 2005, I was in seminary—absolutely certain I had been led there, but after three years, still not sure why. Although I was attracted to the idea of

being a minister, I wasn't sure I was called to be one. That summer, however, a colleague at seminary who had been part-time minister of a small Unitarian Universalist church, called to ask if I would be interested in applying for his position when he graduated and left the area. I applied and was hired on the spot; I think they had only one other applicant. I was quite apprehensive, however, when, though I was leaving for New Mexico to deal with my mother's continued decline into dementia and Alzheimer's, the church asked me to give a sermon a couple of weeks before my actual contract began. I explained to the person who asked me to speak that I wouldn't have time to prepare a sermon, but, if they were up for something different, I could give a reading of a story that, for me, had a powerful message of love and forgiveness. I was assured that would be fine with the church members.

In Mountainair, New Mexico, the following week, when I checked my email at the local public computer lab, I had an email from a long-retired minister in the church, writing in a UU chat room—and copied to me—about the poor excuse for sermons he was seeing these days—some, he maintained, were nothing more than readings! The tone was critical and spiteful, and, given the situation, not fair. I thought, well, okay—I didn't want to be a minister anyway. I don't want to have to face this sort of meanness. I'll just quit before I start. Still smarting, I left the public computer lab and went to Uncle Walter's Five & Dime, a true hodge-podge of all sorts of cut-outs from other stores. You can find just about anything in Uncle Walter's in Mountainair. I can't remember why I was in the store, but I walked up and down the aisles, unable to stop thinking about the mean remarks of the former minister. Something on the top shelf caught my eye, and there among stacks of dish towels and pot-holders, I saw a stack of boxes: about 20 boxes of "Encouraging Ministry" cards! Have you ever seen an

“Encouraging Ministry” card? They say things like: “Your Service is deeply appreciated,” etc. I think you can find them in certain specialty Christian stores. Naturally, I bought a box. I still have it.

Here is another example, less pertinent, perhaps, but telling in how the still, small voice may contact us.

Around 1989, my life was at a low point; I had no joy and I saw no reason to continue living. I wasn't suicidal; I was so numb I barely felt despair. This feeling continued over a period of months, gradually worsening. Then, one day when I was at work at Fort Collins High School, I answered the telephone in the English office. As I jotted down a message for someone, I saw—in a tiny crevice between the ancient carpet and the wall—my gold earring, from my favorite pair, the only earrings I owned that were real gold. One earring lay in my jewelry box at home, but the other had been missing for over a year; I had searched and searched for it, and had long ago given it up for lost. The English office had been vacuumed five nights a week for over a year, and the rug shampooed at least a couple of times, but somehow, there was my long-lost gold earring, twinkling at me as I answered the telephone.

This re-discovery of something I thought was lost—something treasured, small, delicate, gold, hidden and missing for a while—was remarkably affirming. Henri Nouwen says, “The movement of God's Spirit is very gentle, very soft—and hidden. It does not seek attention. But that movement is also very persistent, strong and deep. It changes our hearts radically.” To others, my experience with the earring doesn't sound like much, but it changed my heart “radically.” I re-entered life, so to speak, and have since then encountered many wonderful experiences—things I would have hated to miss by not being around.

In examining insights and wisdom I've gained through my life, I see it has been characterized by periods of waiting, followed by rather specific leadings that took me into various endeavors. When I was younger, in the waiting times, I felt great impatience. As I've grown older, however, I've acquired patience, recognizing that a period of waiting for clarity and direction is also a period of preparation. I understand now that things happen when it's time for them to happen—in the Spirit's time, not mine. I've come to accept, even when things are difficult, that there are reasons for it to be so, and the difficulty will eventually end. It will “come to pass.”

It is my hope that stories like these might be helpful to people in the “throes” of discernment.

I would like to end with another quotation from Paul Lacey in *Leading and Being Led*:

*At the moment of greatest emptiness or greatest need, God begins to turn all those separate openings to good account. One learns, directly or through the mediation of others, that there is an answering to the human condition, if only one will trust it, and, in this leading to the truth, one may find one's greatest gifts enhanced and focused. . . . The fullest expression of one's fundamental leading may be to do what one does best. (10)*