

Plenary Address

“It Takes Courage: Quaker Values in Action”

Presented by Joyce Ajlouny,
General Secretary of the American Friends Service
Committee

Thank you for inviting me to join you today.

I feel very much at home with you here today. As a life-long Quaker and a person who has worked in both Quaker schools and now the American Friends Service Committee, it is always a welcome experience to be among Friends.

I have been aware that my life choices have been rooted in my identity as a **Palestinian American Quaker woman**. Each of these shaped me in profound ways.

Living in **Palestine** for most of my life, under an oppressive military occupation and experiencing its horrific and traumatic manifestations, is where I derive my unwavering commitment to justice, but also where I find courage to resist and stand by those oppressed wherever they may be.

Being an **American** allowed me to experience what democracy and freedom feel like. That “we the people” have a voice that matters and that drives societal change. It also brought closer to home a different kind of experienced racism, rooted in ethnic privilege.

As a **third generation Quaker**, I have come to honor the practice of seeking inner peace – or the Light, as we call it -- not only in myself, but externally in others. I lived knowing that I do not own the ultimate truth. I was drawn to listen to the stories of those who come from unfamiliar cultures and faiths and those whom I don’t agree with: continuous revelation, always looking for ways to refine my truth and to be willing to change my mind.

And finally, as a **woman**, I know how it feels to be a female in a patriarchal structure where attempts to undermine and exclude women are prevalent. I have experienced brutal attacks on my

right to speak, to lead assertively, and to share a vision. I have persevered and stood firm, knowing I will be judged by more stringent measures. But I also learned to take ownership and be true to my gender, especially in leadership.

So, it is with these identities and experiences that I am able to share with you at this annual gathering “To Do Justice, Love Mercy, and Walk Humbly with Thy God: Finding Our Calling in Disturbing Times.” At first, it seems like a pretty tall order that the prophet Micah is calling on us. “Do Justice.” “Love Mercy.” And “Walk Humbly with Thy God.”

I have been giving some thought to what sustains the habits that lead to justice, mercy, and humility. What inspires these character traits? How can we, as part of the Religious Society of Friends (of Truth), create the conditions for more justice and mercy in our world, in our meetings and worship groups, and in our communities?

The answer is that **It Takes Courage.**

Maya Angelou, the great poet and activist, famously said that “Courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can’t practice any other virtue consistently. You can practice any virtue erratically, but nothing consistently without courage.”

As I reflect on what it is that impacted me the most from my experiences with Quakers, I realize that it is my readiness to take calculated risks founded on strong personal convictions, to voice my own truth with confidence and exercise courage to do the right thing despite consequences. A key element of change, transformation, and leadership is, indeed, courage.

At Ramallah Friends School, at Earlham, where my son recently graduated, and in the American Friends Service Committee, I see a common spirit. They have a spirit of truth-seeking and risk-taking. A social conscience.

So what makes us humans take risks? I encountered many courageous people when I visited with the migrant caravan in

Mexico City last December. One young woman, whose name was not relayed to me, was mute, vulnerable, and simply seeking dignity. She fled her town in Guatemala in the hope she could find work – in Mexico or in the United States. She was desperate to find work and send money to her mother. She risked being subjected to violence – a woman travelling on her own in what is a very dangerous terrain, yet packed a small bag and joined the caravan hoping to receive some added protection. Her courage inspired me but also reminded me of the times I risked my life or that of my children as I strove to secure my freedom, free of violence and oppression.

Courage is the mental or moral strength to venture, persevere, and withstand danger, fear, or difficulty. It is ignited when one chooses to act despite the fear. Nelson Mandela stated **“Fear and courage are brothers [and sisters, if I may add]. It happens when one follows the heart, when one perseveres in spite of adversity and stands up for morality and doing the right thing.”**

Courage becomes habitual with time and translates into all walks of life, work included.

My nearly two-year service with the American Friends Service Committee has given me yet another opportunity to see Quaker courage in action. Founded on Haverford College’s campus in 1917 as a way for young people of conscience to serve humanity without serving in the military during World War I, AFSC is, like you are, committed to bold truth-telling and putting Quaker values into action to improve the lives of communities around the world. In fact, we popularized the phrase “speak truth to power” with our famous anti-militarism booklet published during the height of the Cold War.

How, then, do we Quakers foster courage in ourselves, our communities, and our institutions? We need two things: First, we need to be vulnerable by admitting mistakes and learning how to do better – “walking humbly,” indeed; and second, we need to be open to taking some bold risks to follow our leadings.

Last winter, as people were seeking asylum and coming to the U.S.-Mexico border, our government stepped up hostility toward all immigrants and potential immigrants. As an organization that works in Guatemala and El Salvador, where many people were fleeing poverty and violence, at the US-Mexico border, and in many communities on immigrants' rights, we took a leadership role in calling for action at the border. People from many faiths joined us in San Diego and in dozens of local events to risk arrest and make a public witness for human rights at the border. Inspired by this, thousands contacted Congress. Our event sparked notes of affirmation and courage from people who were despondent at the situation. Thank you notes poured in. We saw people, inspired, standing up for justice in less usual places, not just the college towns and big cities, but small towns in Idaho and Wyoming, getting on local news, and calling their government to create more humane action.

Courageous truth-telling, when demonstrated, is contagious.

More recently, meetings around the country joined AFSC and several immigrant-rights groups to call on our government to shut down the child detention center in Homestead, Florida. This effort is very new, with public activity only this spring and summer. Keeping children locked up is a grave wrong and a great shame on this nation. Children belong with their families and communities, not in prison camps.

As a Quaker who believes that there is "That of God" in everyone, I believe it was my duty to stand for justice and mercy for migrants everywhere, stand for the dignity and freedom of every person, and stand up for the truth that everyone, no matter where they were born, deserves a chance to live in safety and peace.

It was humbling to have the fellowship of thousands as we marched against immigrant detention. Just last week, we delivered a petition with more than 120,000 signatures to shut down the Homestead detention center. Many Quaker meetings across the nation supported us, amplifying our call for justice and simple humanity.

And the good news is that, in the past week, we have heard that the government is transferring a thousand children out of that detention center to be in homes with sponsors and relatives. We hear reports that Homestead may, in fact, shut down in the next year. This is a **big win** for these children and for our nation. But we are staying vigilant. We need to ensure that all these children find their way to safe homes. And we need to make sure that this one detention center, once closed, is not replaced with another.

Our Homestead work is just one example of activism that walks a courageous and humble path to advance justice and mercy in our world. I will be visiting Homestead next week.

I'm proud to work at AFSC with so many courageous colleagues who demonstrate to me every day that we need to continue doing radical and sometimes unpopular work. Time and time again, I found AFSC in spaces that others choose not to go.

So, some of this work is controversial. I am sure that not everyone in this area agrees with AFSC's take on immigrants' rights. We are not risk-averse. Being a pacifist is not about avoiding conflict, but engaging conflict directly, truthfully, humbly, with the faith that conflict can be transformed over time by truth and love.

Historically, AFSC stood by its values despite the odds. Sometimes this courage creates company. But not always. There are many stories of courageous people who found themselves isolated from their communities.

After the end of the First World War and during the Armistice, AFSC engaged in the controversial efforts to feed malnourished and disease-stricken German children. Quaker relief work recognized that children – regardless of who their parents are – are often the ones who suffer the most during wars.

One hundred and two years ago, a gifted professor of Bible studies and Greek at Haverford College was concerned that a military draft could ensnare members of peace churches. Henry Cadbury called the meeting that soon became the AFSC. But this was not without controversy. For speaking out against the war, Henry created controversy at Haverford. While the college campus was

the training grounds for the first AFSC volunteers headed to Europe to care for those displaced by war, Henry Cadbury had to resign for stating his truth.

In 1963, despite opposition of many, AFSC published Martin Luther King's letter from the Birmingham City Jail. In that letter, King was responding to white clergy who were asking him to moderate his activism, to slow down the protests for Civil Rights. We later demonstrated that we were on the right side of history with this action. A year later, MLK received the Nobel Peace Prize. And I'm proud to say that AFSC, as a Nobel laureate, nominated him.

These are but a few examples. Today AFSC continues to take risks in the name of courage and mercy. Here are some examples of courage:

- Myanmar – Rohingya and Buddhists working together to promote humanitarian conditions.
- Work with the impacted – formerly incarcerated. Commitment to decolonization, through our staffing
- North Korea work
- No USAID funding. Losing funding – principles first.

Lastly, on Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) – an issue that is close to home.

Quakers have a long history of supporting economic activism, including boycotts, to advance movements for social justice. In the 19th century, Quaker activists such as Lucretia Coffin Mott spearheaded the Free Produce movement to undermine the market for goods produced by enslaved people and to promote the buying and selling of goods produced by free labor – a form of economic boycott. More recently, AFSC supported boycott and divestment campaigns to support the rights of Black Americans, farm workers, the imprisoned, and Blacks in apartheid-era South Africa.

Today, attempts to criminalize supporters of the non-violent Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement in support of justice and the freedom of Palestine, have become a sad reality.

Unfortunately, this movement has become controversial only because the Israeli lobby wants all of us to believe that opposing Israel's oppressive actions is an anti-Semitic act and pushes the narrative that conflates two very distinct notions. The BDS movement does not target Jews or Judaism, but rather the human rights abuses perpetrated by the Israeli government against Palestinians, and the various states that enable this or the companies that profit from it. AFSC encourages divestment from industries that are complicit in and profit from military occupation – any occupation and oppression systems such as building illegal settlements and walls. As a result we have made it (with honor) on the list of six organizations banned by Israel.

We know that we are again on the right side of history as we take risks, lose supporters, lose funding, and face extraordinary scrutiny on this issue.

And we see how these issues of justice intertwine. Just last week, the president of this nation called on four Congresswomen of color to “go back to where they came from,” a clearly racist call. The taunting of Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, in particular, has been racist, and the moment at a Trump campaign rally in which a crowd chanted, “Send her back” was a chilling moment. Some of the president's supporters claim that Congresswoman Omar is critical of Israel and that means that she is an anti-Semite. By some twisted logic, they think that justifies their racist behavior.

As a Quaker, as someone who loves mercy and tries to be just, I cannot sit by while our government is spreading Islamophobia, racism, and sexism. As a Palestinian-American who has experienced the effects of Israel's dehumanizing occupation first-hand, I cannot see criticism of a military occupation as an equivalent of anti-Semitism. We need to be welcoming of criticism of militarism, we need to be welcoming of people of all faiths (and none), and we need to call out any in our communities who amplify messages that make it seem like Muslims, people of color, women, refugees are less valuable community members.

As Quakers, we need not be bystanders when injustice and bullying are going on in our towns, schools, and social media conversations. Our nation – and our neighbors – need us to be allies to those who face oppression. We are needed now as much as we were when we were at the forefront of the abolitionist movement.

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The gap between who we hope and aspire to be, and the truth of *where* we are and *how* we are, is the place where transformation can occur, but it can't happen if we cling so tightly to our idea of our-selves that we are unwilling to take the risks of experimentation, vulnerability, and faith to bridge that gap and work for transformed institutions and communities.

One consequence of inaction is that we don't learn from trying – prayer, thinking, and imagining can only take us so far, and we need the information from experience in order to really know what might work. And, in our broken world, our work is needed now.

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Now before I conclude, forgive me for going out on the limb and allow me to share a personal message. I started this talk by saying that I'm very glad to be here. I feel at home among Quakers. The unfortunate news is that many Quaker institutions and meetings will not welcome me, for the mere fact that I am of Palestinian origin. We have seen this starkly played out when Friends Central School alarmingly disinvited our distinguished peace activist and scholar Sa'ed Atshan because of pressures from parents in an attempt to silence his voice. I too have received similar messages from other Quaker institutions. Even AFSC as a whole has been excluded from some schools because of similar pressures. These are compelling misfortunes. Quaker institutions have a choice to put principles before pressures, to engage rather than to create barriers. I am very happy to be welcomed here.

We cannot take a backseat on the justice issues of our time and still claim that we are living up to our Quaker values. With so many mil-lions suffering from oppression and poverty in our

world, the need for mercy today is acute. We need the humility to live in service of our conscience while following the lead of those most affected by oppression, so we are truly walking with God. And we need the courage to try, the humility to learn, and the fortitude to keep going. We need to follow truth most when it's not convenient. And that's not comfortable.

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Next, I'd like to share with you ways that you can easily use to take part in this courageous work and partner with AFSC:

1. Sign up for our Action Alerts so that you know when we can exert political pressure.
2. Take one of our Sanctuary Everywhere trainings.
3. Join our Alumni Network.
4. Become a monthly donor.
5. Contact Lucy Duncan and participate in her webinars.
6. Quaker Social Change Ministry is a transformative approach to social justice work that combines Spirit and Action.
7. Visit <https://www.afsc.org/friends-engage> for more information.

Whatever path is a good fit for you – we would like you to be part of the AFSC community.

I have seen the strides that Quakers can make when we are allied for justice. I look forward to seeing what we can do together.

Thank you!