

# Unconventional Joy: The Scandalous Ministry of Befriending

*Plenary Address Delivered by Merry Stanford to Lake Erie Yearly Meeting, July 31, 2015 in Bluffton, Ohio.*

I want to leave enough room in my heart  
For the unexpected,  
For the mistake that become knowing,  
For knowing that become wonder,  
For wonder that makes everything porous,  
Allowing in and out  
All available light.

An impermeable life is full to the edges,  
But only to the edges.  
It is a limited thing.  
Like the pause at the center of the breath,  
Neither releasing or inviting,  
With no hollow spaces  
For longing and possibility.

I would rather live unlocked,  
And more often than not astonished,  
Which is possible  
If I am willing to surrender  
What I already think I know.  
So I will stay open  
And companionably friendly  
With all that presses out from the heart  
And comes in at a slant  
And shimmers just below  
The surface of things.

-From *A Permeable Life: Poems and Essays*  
by Carrie Newcomer, 2013

## Introduction

I wanted to start with this poem from Carrie Newcomer's first book because I think that the basic message of "Unconventional Joy: The Scandalous Ministry of Befriending" is just this. I'm going to be calling all of us, you and me, to leave enough room in our hearts for the unexpected, to live more obviously permeable lives, to live unlocked, astonished, and surrendered to companionable friendliness. To open up to a ministry of the loving gaze.

In order to do this, I need to explain to you how I think of God. Because I'm going to be using that word, "God," quite a bit, and I want you to understand me. But I can't explain. I could give you an impression, some metaphors, some stories about my inward experience. But that would take some time, and another talk. So I'm going to ask you for a favor: please let go of any concepts you have about God, or about people who "believe in God" – belief isn't the word I would use for my experience. Release any stories you may have in your head about seeking and finding, or painful past experiences with creeds and

dogmas, or the church with the flags down the street, or the Bible school where they taught you about hell, or simplistic theologies that cause your toes to curl.

When you are listening to me talk about God, let go even of the beautiful and healing relationships you may experience of a nurturing Father in heaven, or of a saving Christ, or of an evolved Higher Self. Let's just agree that "God" is shorthand for a very complex relationship that I can't explain, but on which I utterly depend, and to which I am accountable with every bit of my being.

When I was invited many months ago to give this plenary, I went into a discerning period. I spent time with it alone in prayer. I talked to God. I talked to my husband, Peter. I brought it to my anchoring committee. In the end I felt clear to accept the Program Committee's invitation. I had no idea how that decision was about to affect my life. More about that later.

Some of you know I have carried a concern for some time about the minimal diversity in our Quaker meetings. We are, most of us, not all of us, very like one another. We tend to be white, middle aged tending into senior aged, quite educated, and middle class. We are increasingly diverse in terms of whom we love and how we sexually identify, though we still have work to do in communally recognizing and celebrating this diversity. We have wonderful Friends of color among us, wonderful young adult Friends among us, wonderful Friends without initials after their names among us, and wonderful Friends of both slim financial resources and wealth among us. I have heard from Friends fitting these descriptions that they sometimes feel invisible to the greater body of Friends. For some this is such a painful experience that they have given up on their meetings, and choose instead to live and worship apart from the meetings in their midst.

I have also personally known of situations in which theological differences have driven Friends away from their meetings. This may have happened because they were unskillfully elderled about the ways in which they joined worship. Some did not feel free to express their experience of God, or not-God, in their particular meeting. Others themselves simply could not live with the theological diversity in their meetings.

I have worshipped in many meetings, within our yearly meeting and beyond it. In some meetings there is a vitality that is contagious and wholesome: newcomers are welcomed, spiritual friendships are nurtured, members and attenders feel a part of a caring, loving network of Friends, First Day School doesn't lack for teachers and families bring their children to meeting every week, the meeting is taking marriages under its care and celebrating the births of babies and the graduation of seniors. Life is happening there!

But other meetings languish. First Day School doesn't exist because there are no children; or the only teachers are the parents themselves. When someone gets sick, no one knows about it, and no help is offered. Unseasoned attenders are placed in positions of responsibility. There is no growth, no depth, no celebration. Members leave, few newcomers appear. If they do come, they don't stick around for very long. (Please note that I'm talking about extremes here. Most of our meetings fall somewhere in the middle of these two extremes.)

What is the difference? Why do some meetings languish while others thrive? Is it the First Day School curriculum? The kinds or number of committees? The skill of the clerk? The adequacy of the budget? The commitment of enough Friends to "do the work" of the meeting? The presence of a critical number of Friends with "spiritual depth?"

While all of these are tools or factors that can help a meeting stay healthy, they are more indicators of health than underlying reasons for health. I have come to believe that the single most important factor in whether our meetings thrive or languish is the love we live out toward each other, and toward the stranger in our midst.

**Love**

This sounds like a simple thing. It's not. Love is the hardest thing there is to do in the world, and the most satisfying. Peter and I lead Couple Enrichment events, and train new leaders to help couples learn skills to express their love for each other in ways that the other can receive. Peter and I know, from the four marriages we share between us, including this last one, that being in a committed relationship of two, or a family of four or five or a dozen, is a complicated proposition. Remaining at the love fest after 30 years when your beloved still doesn't get how much you need spoken appreciation can become a difficult decision. Opening one's home to the adult child who is actively alcoholic and has lost a job, or a family, or self-respect is excruciatingly painful. Putting one's travel plans for retirement on hold to care for an aging parent can feel like a sacrifice. It's the close familial bond that helps us make these necessary decisions.

So in our communities of faith, in our meetings, how much more difficult is it to make the decision to love when we *don't* have that family bond? There are likely to be more of us, making the sheer mathematics of possible relationships overwhelmingly complex. And without that strong family bond, how likely is it that you will keep coming to a meeting where you feel invisible or underappreciated? How likely is it that we will extend a hand to the member who falls off the wagon and misses meeting after meeting due to hangovers and shame? How likely is it that the meeting will travel to the long-term care facility to worship with the bedridden older Friend who can no longer get to meeting? How likely is it that we will respond with both compassion and clarity when our meeting for worship is disturbed by an attender with mental illness? Without the bond of family loyalty, how likely is it that we will find a way to love when it is difficult or inconvenient to do so? It is so much easier to say to oneself, "That's a job for the pastoral care committee. I don't need to address this myself. I don't need to change myself or adjust my plans, or stretch beyond my limits of comfort. It's someone else's job."

So this is where I get to the part of the talk where I explain how accepting this invitation to speak to you challenged me and changed my life. In retrospect, I know that these challenges came to me because God needed me to be able to speak this message with authenticity and humility. I can ask you to consider these challenges only because I have faced them myself. And I can't expect you or exhort you to pick up the yoke and bear the burden with perfection, because I have stumbled myself, and stumbled badly. The good news is that I have also allowed Love to work through me in ways which have enlarged the love within me. It's like another line in Carrie's songs: "I know I get some things right, but mostly I'm a fool." Luckily, I am here speaking with Friends who love me. Someone once said you can tell a real friend by the fact that when you've made a fool of yourself he doesn't feel you've done a permanent job. I'm counting on that!

### **A Short Detour**

So I'm going to take a short but relevant detour in order to tell you about five personal challenges that God sent me to prepare me to give this plenary. There were plenty of others. These are just the five I'm going to tell you about. In all of them I was called to lay down my shield. Brené Brown, a well-known social worker who has written and spoken extensively on shame, talks about the shield of perfectionism that many of us carry to ward off vulnerability. She says that it weighs 20 tons. The shield is quite successful in protecting us perfectionists from the possibility of shame or unwelcome exposure. But it is oh- so-heavy! When you carry a 20-ton shield, your focus must shift from the protection you are hoping for to laboring under the weight of such a heavy thing! I'd like to borrow this concept. I'll be referring to the many ways I tried to protect myself by carrying a 20-ton shield in my interaction with these five teachers, and the extent to which I was faithful in laying it down. This is to remind you that, though I will be calling us to a change of heart, I am very aware that my heart, too, needs conversion.

- 1) I was married before Peter to another man. Our parting was not pleasant, and there was a lot of bitterness between us. I had made some half-hearted attempts to make peace with him over the 27 years since our parting, but these attempts were consistently rebuffed, and I was neither persistent nor consistent. Our chilly failure to create peace at times made our children and grandchildren

uncomfortable. I won't detail the ways I felt slighted and belittled by my ex-husband and his family, but when I thought of them, I felt a significant degree of growliness. And I felt justified in being growly! I nursed my resentments, creating stories in my head about them and their motivations toward me. In public, I coped behind a shield of distant cordiality. But God showed me that this was not sufficient for the growth of my soul. That shield wasn't even very effective in defending me against the discomfort of imagined judgments – because here I was actively imagining them and feeling all the growliness anyway! The importance of moving on beyond resentment became all the more pressing when my son and his fiancée announced this winter that their wedding date would be in June. It was time to lay down the growly shield.

- 2) While this was happening, my close friend of 30 years and I hit an impasse in our relationship. We had developed a pattern of interacting that left me feeling deeply dissatisfied. I had received a message in prayer that it was important for me to claim my voice in our relationship. But I felt timid about bringing it up with her: I wasn't entirely clear within myself about the cause of my dissatisfaction, and I knew she had a hard time with conflict. So I was hesitant. But one day I resolved to bring it up during our weekly telephone call. I was not as skillful as I would have liked, with a lot of hemming and hawing, and unclearness. She responded in a way that I had never seen in 30 years – with uncontrolled rage. The more I tried to work it out with her, the more rageful and assaultive she became. The conversation ended with an even deeper impasse than before I tried to talk with her, and attempts to reconnect over the ensuing weeks did not improve things. When we did finally manage to begin talking again, it was shallow, guarded, and unsatisfying, I think for both of us. My birthday, an event she usually recognized, came and went with no word from her. When I tried to check out with her my sense that she was distancing from me, she responded by coolly analyzing all the ways over 30 years that I had disappointed her. I realized that, in not speaking my own needs much earlier, I had hidden behind a shield of timidity, fostering a friendship based on untruths. This was a hard pill to swallow. It was time to lay down the shield of timidity.
- 3) Meanwhile, a woman began attending one of my spiritual gatherings who had a mission to convert us to her vision of reality, which she believed required a lot of suffering and sacrifice. She often criticized things we or others had said, based, it seemed, on imagined stories in her head. On at least one occasion she took special interest in criticizing me. So she became not only an irritating nuisance to me, but personally insulting. I found myself feeling righteously angry at her! I would glare at her while she was speaking, rather than turning to a spiritual practice of patience, as God was urging me to do. I protected my insulted ego behind a shield of righteousness.
- 4) Then there is the relationship which I have been eager to get completely rid of, my relationship with Hunch. Peter and I have been reading a book in which the protagonist is encouraged to name his ailments. I thought it was a good idea. So I have named my digestive condition Hunch, as when you have a “gut feeling” about something, you have a hunch. (So if you see me around, and you want to know how I'm doing, health wise, you can just say, “Hey, Merry! How's Hunch?”) Hunch has been hanging around for nearly two years now, and shows no signs of being willing to leave. The 20-ton shield of perfectionism reared its ugly head as I tried to find ways to get rid of Hunch. I followed various diets to the letter, developed schedules and spread sheets, read about all manner of digestive complaints and ways to remedy them. It was a way of trying to remain in control of something that was actually not so much in my control. So, when Janet Dando contacted me about delivering the plenary, after my period of discernment I accepted the invitation, sure that Hunch would have moved on by the time I was to deliver it. Not so. Hunch remains my teacher.
- 5) Some of you know that I engage in a system of holistic healing, which I've been studying and practicing for six years. I recently decided to get certified as a practitioner. I arranged with a teacher to take the exam, paid her to monitor her class as she encouraged, traveled five hours there and back, lived in an Extended Stay America for five days. This was not cheap. Neither was it easy - Hunch is not a happy traveler! I was to take the exam on the evening of the last class. I was excited. I had

received lots of inward Godly nudges that this would be a momentous experience, that this teacher and I were here together at this time to do something important for each other. Then, at 7:30 a.m. on the day of the exam, she called me to say that she wouldn't give me the exam. She had no reason other than to say we weren't "aligned." I was shocked. I felt as if I had been hit by lightning. I asked her to change her mind, tried to convince her that we could find a way through whatever difficulty she imagined us in. She wouldn't budge. When I realized this, every past trauma I'd ever experienced (all much worse than this disappointment) jumped into activation. I spun down into helplessness and hopelessness. I dissociated a little bit – felt very spacey, in a kind of emotional shock. It took hours for me to rally my spirit enough to drive safely. This was the only teacher in the Midwest qualified to give this exam. It was a terrible thing to do to me. And it didn't make sense. But I had to accept it. I had to put down my shields of strong desire and dissociation and simply accept this thing that made no sense.

In each of these situations I began by feeling like a victim: of my former husband's judgments, my friend's rage, the zealot's criticism, Hunch's persistence, and my teacher's refusal to make good on her agreement. I thought of myself as having been done wrong toward. I wanted to withdraw, to protect myself with the 20-ton shield behind which they could not touch me with their slings and arrows. But God had other ideas, and I began to feel the weight of the shield. In each of these situations I received a strong leading to let go of my fear, let go of the need to be in the right, or to be vindicated, or to be perceived correctly. Instead, I was led to make some peace offerings. One of them has so far resulted in an improved relationship. The other four have not changed yet, either because I haven't been skillful enough, or because the other does not yet want a more peaceful connection with me.

I'm sharing these personal experiences with you now to show you that I'm just like you. Maybe I'm worse than you. I do not easily lay down my shields, and sometimes I don't even want to! So often it's a thankless task, because the slinging doesn't stop just because I'm ready to be peaceful! But God says that it doesn't matter whether we are *successful* or not in love. What matters is whether we, as individuals and as communities, are *faithful* in love.

I believe Friends are being called to a special kind of faithfulness, a peculiar mission. And what is this peculiar mission? To choose an unconventional, "living at the edges" kind of capital-L Love by scandalously, counter-culturally befriending the capital-O Other, and thereby experiencing capital-J Joy.

To befriend the Other means to choose to operate beyond the limits of our preferences and comforts. It means laying down the 20-ton shield of comfort that protects us from the unexpected.

### **We certainly have a history of this.**

It was scandalous that early Friends did not take off their hats to greet others. It was scandalous that they did not make use of the many terms that denoted their rank in polite society. It was scandalous that kitchen maids and fine ladies were all welcome at the same Meeting for Worship, on the same benches. It was scandalous that women were ministers. Friends were locked up when they preached a gospel of direct access to the Christ within, without an intermediary, when they would not take oaths, when they acted in defiance of government authority, when they refused to fight in whatever wars were popular at the time. If we were living in accord with *their* testimony of equality, who would we be scandalizing now? Who would want to lock us up, if we were living in the Life that early Friends lived?

### **We also have spiritual teachings that guide us toward this.**

Early Friends drew on a power available to them directly through their experience of the inward Christ. George Fox and others studied the Bible, and they knew that Jesus had a special affinity for the outcasts, and that he was very good at being scandalous! Here are three examples:

- In Jesus' day, devout Jews avoided certain people who were considered unclean. These were the non-Jews, such as the occupying Romans and the neighboring Samaritans; those who collected taxes for the occupiers; women who were bleeding, or who loved someone other than a husband; anyone who had a visible chronic illness. But Jesus welcomed the "unclean." He ate with sinners – the men who collected taxes; the women who were looked upon as prostitutes and whores; the people who were considered unfit for polite society. He asked the Samaritan woman for a cup of water, healed the child of the Roman official, touched and allowed himself to be touched by lepers and by the woman who had bled for a dozen years. I imagine him looking on each of these with a loving gaze. He didn't let protocol or good manners get in the way of loving people.
- Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, in which the rabbi and the scribe pass by the injured Jew on the road. In fact they move to the other side of the road because they are offended by the sight of him! (Maybe they are on their way to work? Maybe they can't be late for an important meeting?) It is the alien, the traveler, the Samaritan, one of those who is despised, who attends to his wounds, carries him to safety and pays for his medical treatment. And Jesus asks, "Who was this man's neighbor?" Those like him, who lived near him, in his neighborhood, but passed him by in his time of need? Or the Other, from the wrong side of town, who stopped and cared for him, who showed compassion? We know the answer to the question posed by Jesus. We can ask ourselves: Who has been neighbor to us? Who are we neighbor to?
- There is another story about Jesus in Luke. It occurs during the period of time when Jesus is being closely watched by the powers-that-be at the temple. He goes to the home of one of these leaders on the Sabbath for a meal. He teaches there, at this banquet, that when one is invited to dinner, one should not seek to sit in the best place at the table. Rather, he says, choose the lowest seat. **"For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."**

Then he says to his Pharisee host: **"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you."** (Luke 14:12-14) Are our Meetings for Worship not banquets? Jesus teaches pretty consistently throughout the New Testament a preferential treatment of the poor and homeless.

And we have our own prophets, our Quaker prophets, who have tried to guide us.

- John Woolman wrote about the inward experience of God, and love: "There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names. It is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, **they become brethren in the best sense of the expression.**" We don't have to look alike, or talk alike, or even think alike to be Friends. We simply have to share this deep and inward experience where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. That is the core of our practice.

Our own time has given us prophets of love.

- One cannot talk about the power of love without mentioning the great prophet of our own time, Martin Luther King, Jr. He taught that violence is a descending spiral that gives birth to the very thing it seeks to destroy. Hate cannot drive out hate. Indifference cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that. We know what Martin Luther King's love looks like. It looks like a mass of humanity walking and singing their way to freedom. We know the risk of it, in the barrels of guns and fire hoses. And we know the power of it, in the inspiration that has fed generations and helped us all to find our own voices.
- One of my favorite authors is Ursula LeGuin. I consider her a spiritual teacher. She writes outside the box, makes fantastic assumptions beyond those which already pin down our lives, and develops new

worlds that are compelling, coherent, and inwardly true. She writes in *Lathe of Heaven*: “Love doesn’t just sit there like a stone. It has to be made, like bread, remade all the time, made new.” We have to make love all the time. I mean it. It’s like that old Beatles tune: “And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

### **Science joins the great spiritual teachers in telling us that we are wired for connection, wired for love.**

There is a field of integrated science which has been coined “interpersonal [IPNB] combines multiple disciplines and ways of knowing: psychology, anthropology, sociology, medicine, neurobiology, and others, linking them up with music, poetry, meditation, art, and scientific writing. IPNB has a number of applications, including parenting, therapy, trauma recovery, organizational development, couples work, and community building.

**Attachment.** I’d like to introduce the word “attachment” as it is used in this field. Attachment refers to the bond between an infant and the primary caregiver, usually the mother. This is not just an emotional bond, but also involves a complex neurological network that can have life-and-death outcomes. Without some level of attachment, children die, as was demonstrated in research following World War II. Children left orphaned by the war were warehoused in orphanages where their physical needs were more or less provided for, but where precious little touching, cuddling and holding happened. These children failed to grow, and a number of them died. We now know how important touch and emotional bonding is to children’s growth and development.

Studies have described different kinds of attachment. About 65% of people in this country enjoyed a secure attachment to their mothers, who were more or less attuned to their children’s needs. (Some researchers believe that number is dropping.) Having a secure attachment yourself is one of the best predictors for having children with secure attachments, and one can extrapolate, secure marriages, secure friendships, and secure communities. You’ll be happy to know that those of us who were not lucky enough to enjoy secure attachments in childhood (I include myself in this 35%) can also raise secure children. Because another good predictor for having children with secure attachment is this: the better a parent understands her life, the more securely attached her children will be. Isn’t that something? The better a parent understands her own life, the more sense she has made of her narrative, the more securely attached her children are likely to be! This is even more predictive than how she interacts with her children!

We can learn to understand our lives. I find this immensely comforting! We can become conscious of ourselves, and so transcend our past. But until that occurs, until we have become familiar with and more-or-less understood our more difficult childhoods, then our attempts to offer authentic, lively, welcoming, and attuned friendship to any others who are not already attuned with us will be limited. We just won’t have the mental hardware for it. This is one reason why we need community, and why we need each other in a community: the person I can’t tolerate is the one you can. Between us, we can love everyone.

**Building Blocks of the Brain:** As for mental hardware, the brain is a magnificent, incredibly powerful, vast organic mechanism. (Now here’s the part that will appeal to those of you who are really into numbers.) The adult brain has about 100 billion neurons, as numerous as the stars in our Milky Way Galaxy. Neurons are the nerve cells of our body. Each neuron has 7-10 thousand connections to other neurons. All of that translates to about 2 million miles of neural highway, which is like driving around the equator of the earth 80 times!

*Neurotransmitters* are the biochemicals that help the neurons communicate with each other. They dampen or excite electrical activity along the nerve circuit. Increases or decreases in these neurotransmitters have a dramatic impact on mood, behavior, and how we relate to other people.

*The synapse* is the gap between neurons, across which the electrical spark jumps. Each brain has 100 to 500 trillion synapses, with potential activation patterns of 10 to the millionth power. This is more than all of the known particles in the known universe!

This brain that we each lug around inside our bony skulls is a complex and awesome system! Sit with that for a moment. Try to feel your magnificent brain, intuitively: 100 billion neurons, 2 million miles of neural highway, neurotransmitters helping to spark the flow of thought and emotion across trillions of gaps. How awesome is that?

**Remembering:** When an experience occurs, everything about it gathers into a “neural net.” Different strands of the experience wind together: images, sounds, smells, emotions, physical sensations. When something in the present resembles a past experience, the whole neural net fires. The sights, sounds, smells, emotions, and physical sensations all flow together. This is called “remembering.” That is what happened to me when I heard that my teacher was refusing to give me the exam. One might be conscious of the tip of the iceberg that is the neural net. But most of the net, if not all of it, remains unconscious, even when it is activated. This is why we might feel or do something that seems to “come out of nowhere.”

So it's easy to understand how it is that we might have come to prefer the people we prefer. Think about the people with whom you spent your childhood: their skin color, lifestyle, income bracket, level of education. Whether you overtly knew these things about your family members, friends, and neighbors, your brain was collecting information about appearance, how language was used, how people behaved, how close they got to each other when they spoke, how they expressed familiarity, how they expressed class status, how they disapproved of others, whom they disapproved of. Think about people you have seen portrayed in movies, books, television programs, the ones portrayed as safe and good, the ones portrayed as dangerous. Again, your brain was picking up all those zillions of bits of information and categorizing them, winding them in with other experiences, creating new neural nets, or adding to neural nets that were already formed. Think about people you felt safe with, people who were comfortable to you. See them in your mind's eye right now. A neighbor who was kind to you. Your favorite TV show when you were a child. Your friends in school. Your favorite childhood story. All of this wound together in a nearly infinite spiral of knowing who is safe and who might not be, who is like you, and who is not like you.

Now here's where loving community comes in. When we share a similar network, all is fine. It is easy to love each other. We are alike. We understand each other, more or less. But suppose someone tries to enter our community who is not so much like those who are already present. We *want* to include them – we're Quakers, after all! We don't exclude people! But perhaps they behave somewhat differently than we are used to. Perhaps they are more talkative than is comfortable for us. Or perhaps they talk about things that make us uncomfortable or in which we are not very interested. Maybe their jokes are a bit off to our taste. Or they give messages that don't speak to us. We get uncomfortable, they feel our discomfort and maybe experience isolation or distress. We did nothing bad to them; we were just uncomfortable. But the newcomer's neural nets of past isolation and distress come alive. Maybe they are very brave and come back a few times. But eventually, if there isn't enough shared neural net, they don't come back.

And the normal outcome is this: we end up all looking and behaving the same. Or nearly the same. Those few who are very different, and who are very brave, or very ornery, stick with us, but maybe never feel a part of things in the way that they yearn to feel.

If we have done our own work, if we are in the midst of becoming conscious of ourselves, then science tells us that we can shift the normal outcome by meeting the differences with a loving gaze. If we have enough consciousness to release our discomfort and replace it with a loving gaze, then, when someone is reliving a distressing experience, they feel *seen*. Our loving gaze gets encoded along with the other



strands of related current and prior experience. There is something new in the mix! And that can make all the difference in forming secure attachments within a community.

### **That's enough science. Let's go to the movies!**

There are two powerful movie images I want to share with you involving this loving gaze. The first is from the 1960's Japanese film, *Red Beard*. The story is about the patients of a rural charity hospital in a previous century, a grumpy but big-hearted older doctor, and his arrogant intern from the big city. In one scene which deeply affected me, the doctor brings a young girl, very sick and unconscious, to his clinic. She has been abused and mistreated, and is very distrustful of these male doctors. The intern tries to give her a spoonful of medicine. Although she is afraid, she is also feisty. She flings the liquid into his face. The intern gets Dr. Red Beard to help. As I remember it, the doctor offers her the medicine on a spoon. She flings it in his face, too! He just gazes at her, then offers her another spoonful. She flings it in his face again, and laughs. He repeats his gesture. She repeats hers. You hear a small grunt from the doctor. Then he offers again, with a loving gaze. Finally, she takes the medicine, and swallows it down. When I first saw this, I was beside myself for the girl. "You fool!" I was shrieking silently. "This is your chance! He's saving your life! Don't blow it!" But of course, with him, she couldn't blow it. He saw her. He knew what she needed.

The other is the scene from *Les Misérables* where Jean Valjean has escaped the prison and stolen some silver candlesticks from the home of the bishop who had given him shelter. Jean Valjean is caught by the gendarme, the stolen candlesticks are discovered, and he is hauled to the bishop's house to return the stolen goods and be taken into custody. The bishop, however, surprises us. He tells the police, very convincingly, that he has given the valuable candlesticks to Jean Valjean, that they are a gift. Everyone is surprised: the housekeeper, the police, Jean Valjean himself. As he is leaving, the bishop looks at Jean with that same loving gaze, and tells Jean to make good use of them. We are surprised because we know that the bishop has a right to his candlesticks. But he releases this right, gracefully, lovingly. He sees Jean Valjean, not as a thief, but as a person who needs a break.

These are loving acts. The doctor continues to offer what is being rejected, with patience, seeing the Other and her need. The bishop does not make his rightful claim, but gives it away, seeing the Other and his need.

### **So we have a history, we have spiritual teachings, we are wired for connection, our best mythic stories encourage us to love each other. Why don't we do it better?**

Maybe you think we already do it well enough? Look around, right now. Who is it that we *don't* see? Or who are we surprised to see, or who makes us uncomfortable, when they walk into our meeting rooms?

We may pride ourselves on moving beyond society's limits of comfort. We have demonstrated against popular wars in the streets, against popular legislation outside federal and state government buildings. Some of us go further, some go less far. But on First Day morning, when we sit in worship and look around at our beloved companions, who is not present? Or who may be present but not out of the closet about their affiliations or characteristics? Let's think about some of these affiliations that a Friend might feel are not so welcome among Friends.

- Voting Republican. (Do you really think a person can't be a Quaker and also vote Republican? I've actually heard someone say at the rise of Meeting, "Thank God for Quakers and Democrats.")
- Having wealth. (At one time Quaker services depended on the generosity of wealthy Quaker business people. Where are they now? Some have told me that they don't feel welcome.)

- Having less education. (Do you believe that a person can have interesting and compelling ideas without a Master's degree, or even a college education? How many such folks do you know well?)
- Having a chronic mental health condition. (In my experience, people with these kinds of conditions have experienced some kind of emotional or physical trauma; or their brain chemistry is vulnerable in ways most of us do not have to contend with. How do we show compassion, and still hold the center of our meetings for worship?)
- Owning a large and successful business. (Small businesses are okay with us....)
- Working for a multinational corporation. (Do you remember David Green, who retired from a management position at a multinational corporation? He was a loving, gentle Friend, a true teacher. He was so very patient with me.)
- Being a person of color. (Yes, we have some brave people of color among us, and thanks to the efforts of Friends of color creating invitational space, and some white Friends doing their own work, we are blessed that our numbers nationwide seem to be including more Friends of color. But all of us who are white need to prioritize how to create safer and more welcoming space for Friends of Color. This isn't optional, Friends.)
- Having a physical disability. (Are our meeting places accessible? Do we greet and hang out with people who have physical disabilities? Once I came to meeting and at the door sat a newcomer, a young man in a motorized wheelchair. He had a condition that looked to me like cerebral palsy. His mother was standing next to him. I didn't know what to do, so I'm ashamed to say that after some hesitation I just disappeared.)
- Wearing a lot of makeup, a dress, and high heels with nylons.
- Listening to country music.
- Being a person of non-binary gender, or a transgendered man or woman. Do we have unisex restrooms in our meeting houses? (Here's another story on me. I used to clerk a committee of about 13 people. One day I was sitting with several committee members in a restaurant. I commented about how all the women were sitting on one side of the table, and the men on the other. One of the members, who had been a part of our committee for about a year, jumped up and yelled at me, "Will you stop calling me a man!" What a surprise! I fled to the restroom in tears. In the moment, it felt so unfair to me. But the truth is that we were both in an unfair situation. I had no idea that this person did not identify as a man, because this person appeared to me to be a man, and I made an assumption that "he" was a man. Meanwhile, this person was receiving other people's projections about who this person was *all the time*. It is a terrible thing to be interacted with as if you are something you are not; to be invisible. We have all experienced that to some extent: the parent who expects us to enter a profession that isn't "us;" the partner who wants you to be more macho, or more femmy, or sexier, or better with your hands, or more intellectual, or more spiritual; the boss who doesn't see you as intelligent enough to make an informed contribution. Imagine how it is when everyone you meet does that to you, and most of them innocently. As clerk, I hadn't given us a chance to discover the gender of the Other. This is why Peter and I now always ask at the beginning of our workshops what people's pronoun preferences are.)

I think the reason we still have so much work to do, that there will always be people who are invisible to us, is that we naturally draw fences. We sort people into groups as "of us" or "not of us," and either we do not see the ones who are not "of us" or we hide from them. I think this is left over from our tribal days. We want at our cores to stay safe, and having a shorthand for who is safe and who is not can be effective at avoiding attack. But we are no longer living in the Age of the Tribes. We are living in the Age of One Tribe Becoming.

God tells me that we Friends have adequate desire for peace, but as yet inadequate skill to manifest that desire in the real world. We need to start developing those skills yesterday. I'm not being flippant when I say that the window of opportunity is closing. Tribal culture is making its last gasps, struggling to dominate in Syria and Nigeria, France and Ukraine, Afghanistan and Pakistan; and in Hempstead, TX;

Lafayette, LA; Charleston, SC; Ferguson, MO; Cleveland, OH; Inkster, MI; and Staten Island, NY. It is now in the immediate interest of our survival as a species to experience each other as being of the same tribe. So any errors we might make in identifying someone as “not of us” carry a much higher cost for species survival than they did when we were hunting woolly mammoths.

## **Story in My Head**

Peter and I teach a concept in our Couple Enrichment work called becoming aware of the “story in my head.” The idea is that we human beings love to create meaning from our experiences. Remember how memories are formed? Remember how much information gets unconsciously unleashed when a memory gets triggered by a present-day experience? We can unconsciously shape that information into a story which we take to be fact. The trouble is, our “facts” can be very, very wrong.

So, as an example, Peter comes home from work. I’m expecting him to greet me with a hug and a kiss, but instead he rushes past me to go upstairs. Now, because I had a childhood that included a lot of rejection, I might interpret his behavior as rejecting. I might spin a story in my head that he is angry with me about something, and so is withholding affection. And I might think, “What the heck am I supposed to do if I don’t even know what he’s angry about?! How does he expect us to help other people learn these skills if he won’t use them himself?!” And then maybe I get angry, because he’s clearly having unreasonable expectations of me. And then I’m really indignant and feeling victimized by his of-course-unexpressed anger, which isn’t fair because if I confront him about it he’ll just deny it anyway! And off to the races I’ve gone. I’ve made up a whole story in my head, complete with plot, motivations, emotions (his and mine), and probable outcome.

It’s not reality. Maybe Peter was feeling angry at me when he rushed upstairs, but I had nothing on which to base that assessment other than my own prior experience – and maybe some other ways of knowing. But before I start down the road of indignant story-inventing, I would do well to check things out with him. Ask him why he rushed past me and headed upstairs. Maybe he just had to pee! And if he is angry, just imagine how much easier it would be for me to hear it, and for him to express it kindly, if I can find the resource within myself to greet him with a loving gaze and neutral inquiry, rather than a story in which I’m already a victim!

We create stories all the time. They can be very helpful. But they can also keep us from taking the risks that Love requires. Sometimes it’s not only our own safety that we are concerned about, but other people’s as well. We create stories about what it will be like for them if we act in such-and-such way. For example, remember my failure to greet the young man with the disability? I invented, in a twinkling, a string of stories about him. If I spoke directly to him, I told myself that he might not be able to reply and would be placed in an unfair and demanding situation. If I asked his mother how to speak to him, I risked humiliating him in front of her. If I ignored him and spoke only to his mother, that would also be humiliating to him. My stories paralyzed me. By the time I had thought through all these possibilities another Friend had entered and greeted him, and the moment passed. I felt relieved. I didn’t have to risk anything on either my behalf or his. It is so easy to hide behind the shield of timidity.

So I include myself in this group of folks who want to keep safe, and stay under the radar. I have to pray for courage and strength to be vulnerable enough to interact with someone when I don’t know where it’s going or how the other person will react - when I don’t know the story.

- Will this person of color think I’m racist if I make an assumption that’s not correct?
- Will this physically disabled person feel put on the spot if I ask him a question about himself?
- Can I be friendly with a person who is a wealthy business owner and who, according to the story in my head, probably has unfair employment practices just because they are wealthy?

- Can I be friendly with someone who voted for that party with the values that I reject?
- Can I be friendly with a woman who, the story in my head goes, values herself so little that she wears impossible shoes and slathers her face with makeup?

The story in my head is that these people are “not like me.” Therefore, I cannot predict what will happen, or whether they will be nice to me if I make an error. But God tells me to have courage, to have no fear. If, in spite of my best intentions and doing my own work, my behavior triggers distress for the person, with God’s help I can meet that distress with a loving gaze and learn something important. And if I fail at that, then I will still have learned something about what others find distressing, and I can resolve to learn more about it.

This is difficult and intense spiritual work. In most life situations conflict and difference arises spontaneously and unexpectedly. If we want to live in Love, we are required to be unilaterally vulnerable, without knowing what the other’s intention is. We need a supporting spiritual practice, such as meditation or the dialogue process from Couple Enrichment, to remain faithful to the work. Without a practice we are much more vulnerable to error and reactivity. A spiritual practice offers a sort of stepping stone or way in. It gives us practice in trusting the power of the loving gaze.

But it might be too hard to do this work if we were just doing it for the Other. Sure, it would be *Good*. But most of us don’t really want to be that good.

The good news is that doing this work will enliven our own spirits, and our own meetings. It will bring an upsurge of Joy among us! We will arrive at Love for our own sakes, and not only for the sake of the Other, who also needs us, our worship, our testimonies, and our beloved-community-in-the-making. We can’t even begin to fathom the depth, richness, vitality, and Life that will come to us as we learn to master the ministry of the loving gaze.

As an example, I look around at the many strong, creative LGBTQ Friends who contribute to our Society of Friends. I imagine where we were as a Society 50 years ago, and I think about where queer Friends of that era were. They were closeted, using their creativity to survive internalized and societal homophobia – if they did survive. When the wholeness of any member of a group is suppressed by fear or social “etiquette,” their liveliness is restricted – and the result is that the liveliness of the whole group is constrained. Just notice how we have changed since LGBTQ Friends have been openly among us! We have deepened spiritually. We are more playful. We are more accepting of theological differences. And I believe we are even more passionately committed to social change. Let’s not lose that momentum, because there are other kinds of Friends who are ready to come out of their closets and help make this a deeper, richer, more vibrant Society of Friends.

We need to do our own work to create spaciousness within, to become aware of our stories and reach past them to the Other. As we become more inwardly spacious, we’ll be able to extend our loving gaze to every member of our meetings, to everyone who walks through our doors, and eventually to everyone we pass in the street.

So I have three suggestions for you and for me:

- 1) Let’s practice right now, here at our Annual Sessions. If you are an introvert, and eye contact isn’t your thing, give it a try anyway. Practice gazing into people’s eyes, and smiling. Imagine love flowing on that gaze, watering the dry spots in the other’s spirit and in yours.
- 2) When you go home, identify someone in your meeting whom you tend to avoid. Get interested in them. Pay attention to them. Ask them about their life. Keep smiling and gazing. Nurture your interest in them, and see the love flowing back and forth between you. And if you have the inward spaciousness for it, choose someone who pushes your buttons, just a little bit. Then try being the persistent and patient Dr. Red Beard for a while.

- 3) And please pray for me, and for each other, as I will also pray for you, and for us, that we may be faithful to Love.

I'd be interested in hearing how it goes for you. I feel sure we are on the brink of a global paradigm shift, and that it will be the faithfulness of the Religious Society of Friends, among others, which helps midwife that shift.

So let us live unlocked and astonished. Let us be willing to surrender what we already think we know. Let us stay open and companionably friendly. Miracles really can happen, when we are courageous enough for them.