

# FRIENDS JOURNAL

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QUAKER THOUGHT AND LIFE TODAY

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## Crossing Cultures



# We Think We're SEPARATE

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ROBIN MOHR

In September 2001 I was pregnant with my second child. It was a high-risk pregnancy with a lot of anxiety and restrictions: bedrest, the whole nine yards. For months I had been cutting back on my involvement in things that were outside my direct circle of influence. And then these planes flew into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the world went crazy. In light of my difficult pregnancy, I withdrew even more. As those months went on, I just couldn't deal with my own physical and emotional issues and the world's insanity.

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But some of it got past my blinders. The thing that surprised me the most was how many people were surprised. I couldn't believe so many people thought this could never happen here. Sure, there had been car bombs in London and sarin gas in Tokyo, but many people were still surprised that this happened in New York: not just outraged at the loss of life—tragic as that was—but shocked that it could happen here, as if we in the United States were somehow immune from this kind of violence. Do you remember that? We thought we were separate.

Last year I was in Northern Ireland for a Quaker committee meeting with people from all over the world. One lunchtime, I was talking to two local Friends. One of them had given a ride to the airport to a Friend who was from Rwanda. And the Friend from Rwanda had said, "Thank you for

your kindness. So when are you coming to my country?” and the one Irish Friend said, “Oh no, my goodness! I couldn’t come to your country. It’s too dangerous. You people are killing each other with machetes over there.” And the other Irish Friend just nodded, and said, “Yeah, I couldn’t do that.” I just stared at the two of them. And then I couldn’t help myself; I stammered out, “You are from Northern Ireland, of all the violent places on earth. How can you be judgmental about Rwanda?” Now it was their turn to stare at me with incomprehension. “Well, okay,” they said, “but it was different here. That was just some places; it wasn’t everywhere, and as long as you navigated around it, you were fine.” At that point, I realized I just needed to shut my mouth because nothing I could say was going to help. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. But it is true: we think we’re not like that. We think we’re separate.

I know that hundreds of people are killed on the streets of Philadelphia every year, but even I think, oh that’s those neighborhoods, those people—until it is one of us. In Philly, I live in a transitional neighborhood. My square block is mixed, racially and economically. If you go five blocks in one direction, it’s quite posh, but five blocks in the other direction, it’s quite blighted. Right where I live, I feel safe. Not more than five blocks from me, people get shot, and yet I feel separate.

It happens to people who thought it could never happen to us. I wonder about the Syrian refugees who are fleeing to Europe because they think it will be safer there. But with the bombings in Paris and Brussels, it isn’t so separate any more.

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would like to pretend that those people, those foreigners, those suffering people, “those people” are not one of us, we know in our hearts, in our minds, in our stories, that we are all one people under God.

### **It’s All One Story**

In the Bible, many of the stories are about how the Israelites feel like a special and separate people, but God tells them that they have to take care of the stranger in their midst, that they are their responsibility. The strangers are your people; they are us. When the Sabbath commandment is given in Exodus, God says clearly that it’s not just for you. The Sabbath includes all your children, your sons and your daughters, your maid servants and your man servants, and all the foreigners among you: all will be given this day of rest. You are not separate.

In the gospels, Jesus says, not just his blood relatives but any who do the will of God are his mother and sisters and brothers. He doesn’t see himself, the Son of Man, as separate from the people, and he is continually teaching us that we are all connected.

Quakers have named this connection as gospel order. Lloyd Lee Wilson from North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) wrote, “Gospel order is . . . the right relationship of every part of creation, however small, to every other part and to the Creator . . . an organizing principle by which Friends come to a clearer understanding of our relationship to God in all of the Divine manifestations and the responsibilities of that relationship.”

Many years ago, my friend Carl Magruder from Pacific Yearly Meeting taught me that there is no such place as “away.” He pointed out that when we throw something

away, it doesn't really go very far. It's all still here on this planet. Everything you and I have ever thrown away is still here. In California there's a Quaker retreat center that operates on a septic system. In every bathroom stall there's a little sign that has a list of instructions of what not to flush. And it points out that everything you flush never leaves the property. Everything stays. There is no such thing as away.

I think that material reminder is also helpful to our relationships with people. We can't actually throw people away, but when we think we go away, we don't actually go very far. We are all still here on this same planet. We are all still affected by all their decisions and the relationships of all of those people, since the beginning of human consciousness.

Melinda Wenner Bradley, a member of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and the Quaker Religious Education Collaborative, told this story at the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) World Plenary Meeting in Peru this January. "One Sunday morning, after I had told a story in First-day school, the children settled into their own activities in response to the story. My youngest son told me he was going to 'do nothing,' but after sitting quietly by himself for a time, he came and whispered to me, 'It's all one story.' I was uncertain of his meaning, and asked him to tell me more. He gestured to the materials around the room we used to tell Bible stories and Quaker stories and explained, 'It's all one story. We put parts of it in these different boxes and baskets, but it's all *one* story.' Clearly, doing 'nothing' was something that morning." We are all part of the same story.

## WHY DO WHITE PEOPLE

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### What Am I Actively Ignoring?

**W**hen we think about all the things that we don't want to be associated with, whether that is disease or child abuse or war, we think of ourselves as separate. We are afraid of being connected to such terrible things. We construct walls in our minds and our hearts to convince ourselves that it's not us; it's not our problem; we are separate until the day we can no longer pretend, until we find out it is us; they are us.

Have you noticed that the people who get engaged in fundraising for cancer research are people who feel connected? They have known somebody in their family who suffered or someone close in their community, and they felt connected. The rest of us who aren't all wound up about that topic think we're separate. We think that it's not happening to me, so I can't actually think about that.

A few years ago a Friend in my meeting, Gabbrell James, who is an African American woman about my age, and I were talking about racism among Quakers and in our society. She said to me, "If you're not actively doing something about racism, then you must be actively ignoring it, because it's such a glaring, obvious problem that there's no other explanation for why you wouldn't be working on it."

If you're not actively doing something about it, you must be actively ignoring it. Why do white people actively ignore racism? It is because we think we're separate. Because we're afraid. Because we can. Up until the moment we can't.

Recognizing what I am actively ignoring has been important to me: how many things I am actively ignoring! It's helpful to acknowledge how much time and

energy it takes to actively ignore the 99 problems that we're not dealing with right this minute. We can't deal with all the problems we know about. We know about crimes and diseases and tragic accidents in places we have never been, involving people we will never know. And we have to figure out how to navigate between hiding our heads in the sand in despair that we can't save everyone, and dying on every hill we encounter.

At the same time that Quaker honesty and integrity require us to acknowledge what we are addressing and what we are ignoring, our Quaker community connects us to people who are addressing and not ignoring other things right now. We need to know, and we can't do everything. For me, the silence of Quaker worship helps me to sort through my concerns and discern what I am individually and collectively called to do. Knowing Friends in the wider Quaker community reminds me that I don't have to do it all myself.

### What Are We Doing About It?

Learning to talk to different kinds of people is a major issue for the Friends World Committee. FWCC is the association of Quaker yearly meetings across all the branches of Friends around the world. My job is to serve all Friends from Alaska to Bolivia. Our main work is to help Friends recognize each other as members of the same body and learn from one another, so that we can live up to the Light we have been given. As a leader of the organization, I have to think about our actions. Are Friends actively ignoring racism, or are we doing something about it? If I can't point to what the Friends World Committee is actually doing, if I'm not conscious of it, then I have to admit that we're actively ignoring it. Pinned to the bulletin board above my desk are these questions: Are we addressing the racism in ourselves and in our structures? What can we do differently to live up to the Light we've been given? How can I help Friends to face it and to do better? I think we're making progress, but it's a long road.

In the events that FWCC organizes, we often recognize that we need translation between English and Spanish, but there's more to it than that. As we go through life, we all learn many languages. In various parts of life, you may speak different languages as needed. There's a specialized jargon for fashion, for sports, for medicine, at school, for young people, for people who were young in the '60s. Have you thought about it that way before? How often in your daily life do you encounter

people who speak different languages because they have different beliefs, culture, or social or economic differences? For many of us, we cross these boundaries between people daily. For others, this experience occurs rarely, and it's a big deal.

To get to know people who we think are not like us, we all have to learn to be bilingual. I do not mean we all have to learn Spanish, although that's a fine thing to do. A few years ago, I heard a short speech by Colin Saxton, the general secretary of Friends United Meeting. When he said we all have to be bilingual, he was talking about how we need to be able to talk to our own people and to others, to insiders and to outsiders.

He gave the example of Jephthah in the Book of Judges, who had to negotiate first with the elders of Gilead and then with the king of the Ammonites. He had to know how to speak with the ambassadors at the city walls and with the men in the camp of his own army. There in North Carolina, Colin's other example was we have to be able to speak NPR and NASCAR.

This is an increasingly important skill for Quakers in our meetings, our workplaces, and our families. We have to be able to talk with peace activists and military families, with evangelical Christians and Buddhists, with gay and straight, black and white, with generations older and younger than ourselves. Do you know the famous parenting book called *How to Talk So That Kids Will Listen and Listen So That Kids Will Talk*? I think that effective peacemaking requires these skills. Effective education requires these skills. Effective outreach requires these skills.

We need to practice cross-cultural communication—all the things linguists and sociologists have learned about that cross cultural divides of theology, race, class, gender, and language—in our meetings, local communities, and workplaces. How are we learning to be good listeners and effective communicators? Are we teaching that in our First-day schools, in our yearly meeting workshops? When they're offered, do we go?

This isn't a new message. The saying "Live up to the Light you have, and more will be given" isn't new. The Religious Society of Friends and the world need us to live up to the Light we have been given. We need to listen in worship with God and in community with other people, and practice connecting with people who are not like us, including other Quakers.

And remember, we are all one story. □