

No Person Is Our Enemy

**Address to the Opening Session of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
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It seems so long ago that Arlene Kelly asked me to speak this evening – it seems like world events are changing at warp speed. The title “no one is our enemy” seemed perfect. It was even serendipitous because when I picked up the phone that Saturday, I was wearing my AFSC t-shirt that proudly proclaims “no human being is illegal”.

But as events changed so did my thinking about what I would say to you this evening. My thoughts and prayers turned to witness and those who came before us ... and what we do “together” in the future.

But before I begin, I want to say a word about prayer. Many of you may have read last Sunday’s Parade magazine that reported, in the last 10 years, hundreds of scientific studies, at some of the nation’s top universities, have proven a link between health and religious faith. A sampling of these included:

A Duke University study of 4000 found that those who prayed regularly had significantly lower blood pressure than those who don’t. A Dartmouth study of 250 heart surgery patients showed that one of the best predictors for survival was religious faith and prayer. In additional studies at several other medical centers have shown prayer and faith speed recovery from everything from depression to hip surgery to rheumatoid arthritis.

I bring this to your attention because while the article does not say that praying will get us out of war – clearly we will be healthier while we are trying to do so.

Almost two years ago President Bush and Vice President Cheney promised us an unending “War on Terror.” Today that war grows ever wider.

An invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, intended to capture a few men, has become a quagmire—and U.S. military advisors and military aid are swirling out around the globe. Last week, the U.S. launched “Operation Iraqi Freedom” -- a preemptive invasion of a country with no known connection to the events of September 11.

In the aftermath of September 11, Leaders from around the world sent their sympathy to the U.S. Nations that have spent generations mired in conflict sent their good will. Countries around the world stood in friendship and support with the U.S. There was an opportunity to work together for peace in the world. But no more!

That opportunity has been squandered.

Today, the U.S. has defied the will of the United Nations Security Council! Our diplomacy increasingly relies on acquiescence and threat. It is the noon of our arrogance.

Members of the administration speak of our need for “full-spectrum dominance” and our militarism has risen to the point that relief organizations are labeled “force enhancers” and expected to report to the Pentagon.

What is the place for Quakers in this new situation? What does it mean to be a pacifist in this particular time of war?

It is not a new question. Each generation that has gone before us has had to wrestle with the question, whether they were English Friends, or German Anabaptists. The epistle to the Hebrews speaks of our being surrounded by a great cloud of witness. Of the mighty in faith who have gone before us.

As Quakers, we have our own cloud of witness; those whose presence we feel in times like these. Those who have suffered in body and spirit and even given their lives rather than be parties to violence.

Even as we honor and draw strength from these heroes of our shared faith, it is easy at the same time to feel the – sometimes unbearable -- weight of the cloud -- To measure our own doubts and fears against the giants and to feel that we are wanting.

We forget that each generation must make the peace testimony its own. And, sadly, each generation is given the opportunity to test its faith. For every name we remember, a thousand are forgotten. For every public test passed, there were a thousand private trials.

Living the peace testimony begins with owning and confronting our own anxiety. It is all too easy to push our discomfort to the back of our minds. To feel guilty at our inner turmoil in times like these. This is an individual and corporate problem.

Too often as a body we feel we must rush to action before we create space to renew our strength and support one another. I hear from some Friends in meetings in Philadelphia and beyond that there has been tension in the last year. Not over Afghanistan or Iraq, but over budgets, committees and expectations. I wonder how much of this is really because we feel we cannot voice our anxiety. That we feel our inner turmoil must find an outlet far from our souls’ most tender places.

This is the pain of owning our faith. It is a growing pain! To take our belief in peace from being an intellectual proposition to being a part of our inmost self requires a painful rearrangement of the soul. We must really stretch to accept not only what it demands, but what it offers.

In the garden, Jesus wept bitterly and asked God that his burden be lifted. His followers asked him to increase their faith so that they could contain what he had given them. It is a peculiarly modern and Western belief that we can receive and assimilate wisdom without preparation. It is easy to pull facts into our heads, but we need preparation to take things into our hearts.

I would urge you in the days ahead to examine the demands of our faith in your hearts—to own its weight, to listen to your sadness and confusion, to speak and draw strength from one another. Let the Spirit speak first to still your own heart, then turn to the needs of the world.

Many will face the fear of the first war of their lifetime or the first war since they embraced religious pacifism. Others who remember other conflicts may be surprised to find themselves in pain. It is important to remember where life has taken you since World War II, Korea, Viet Nam, El Salvador, and the First Gulf War.

Do you now have children and grandchildren that you fear for? Do you feel the loss of a spouse who stood beside you in dark times past? Examine your cares and listen for how the voice of the Spirit speaks to you in this new time and place.

And when we own our fears and accept the love and strength freely offered to us, how then do we minister to the broken world around us?

Since the attacks of 9-11, there has been little time to regroup or reflect. Aid to the people of New York gave way in rapid succession to aid for Afghanistan, to protest against a widening war, to preparation to stand by the people of Iraq. And now the war itself!

And all of this in a world where there was already so much to do.

What of the people of Colombia, whose suffering has been submerged by other news? Of Palestinians in the occupied territories, of Israeli victims of suicide bombers. What of the people of Congo and Angola? Completely gone from the front pages. What of our commitment to men and women on death row? Of those on public assistance losing their benefits, and immigrants whose rights seem to erode each day?

Even as we react, we must continue to act -- to work for positive change as we seek to mitigate each new evil.

What do Quakers have to offer in the face of this? What can our small numbers do to aid the plight of millions who suffer?

First I believe we offer ourselves and then we offer our vision.

After September 11, we quickly realized that the most important thing that AFSC could do was to make space for dissent. While leaders were stunned, while other organizations sought to find their voice, we knew that our faith left us one message to give: No War—violence can never be answered with violence.

In answer to the cries for vengeance, we, in the manner of Friends, posed serious queries to ourselves and to the world:

Shall war and societal injustice be the defining principles of the 21st Century?

Shall hatred and divisiveness be our badge as humans?

Shall raw inhumanity be our legacy?

In time, we were not a voice in the wilderness.

As suffering, anger, fear, and bewilderment gave way to calmer thinking, the American people began to question the need for an open-ended war with undefined objectives. As the Bush Administration began to make its case for a war with Iraq, Americans and the world began to question.

While Congresswoman Barbara Lee of California had to stand alone to oppose an Afghan war, one quarter of the house and senate stood with her to oppose war against Iraq. As the Administration raised the fearful specters of biological attacks and terrorist bombings, millions of people around the world said use the U.N., let the weapons inspectors work.

In the days to come, we will continue to offer ourselves.

I think of five AFSC staff members in Amman, Jordan assessing how we can best alleviate suffering in the days to come with the relief supplies that we have stockpiled there.

I think of church groups and schools who are packing hygiene kits that we will ship to the region working with the Mennonite Central Committee and other partners.

I think of AFSC staff, board members and many Friends who have or who will commit non-violent civil disobedience to protest this war.

I think of a young AFSC staff member in Austin Texas who brings articulate passion to explaining the links between big business and the military industrial complex. Did you know that half of all military exports are made in Texas? Did you know that the Bush Administration is going to let \$900 million in no bid contracts to companies with close ties to the Administration for Iraq Reconstruction?

I think of the staff of the Quaker United Nations office who bring quiet dedication to their work behind the scenes.

I think of students and youth across the country organizing marches and teach-ins and concerts.

In answer to the storm clouds of war, we are raising up our own mighty cloud of witness. Our tens of thousands, a year-and-a-half ago have become tens of millions today who say no to war. And that witness continues to grow.

Earlier I mentioned first, we offer ourselves and now, second, in this dark time, we offer vision.

Many in Washington have a clear vision of the future that they are working toward.

Phrases like “preemptive strike” and “projecting American power” camouflage a belief that might makes right and that America’s greatness is directly proportional to the amount that the people of the world fear it.

In the last days of the first Bush Administration, a group of ideologues began to dream of the world as they thought it should be. Their plan, called the project for the new American century, imagined America as a colossus astride the world. They favored unilateralism over cooperation. They believed that no other nation must ever be allowed to approach the United States as a Global Power.

The brazenness of their vision alarmed George Bush, Sr. and during the Clinton Administration, they bided their time. But many found places for themselves in the current administration. And when a bewildered nation asked for answers after the attacks of September 11, their easy answers were ready at hand.

When Americans cried “Why?” in the face of 3,000 dead at the World Trade Center, they were offered a list of scapegoats, an “Axis of Evil.” They offered America their vision of what true safety required. They knew what they believed, and they spoke with great confidence.

In opposition to this vision, Quakers and the other peace churches had another vision to offer. We saw the same facts, but the eyes of our historic witness made us see those facts very differently. Our experience tells us, and you may have heard me say this before, that the true axis of evil is pandemic poverty, environmental degradation, and a world awash in weapons.

While Washington speaks of dire necessities and safety in our strength, we are called to speak of the road not taken. This is the way of peace – the road of cooperation

whose bed is an unshaken belief that all people are a unique creation, an irreplaceable image of God.

While others demonize the leaders of Iraq, the Arab world, and even dissenters at home, we must redouble our cry that swords can be beaten into plowshares, that the final triumph belongs to Love.

Many call us naive. Some say we ignore reality. But what our faith tells us is answered in the hearts of others.

On Sunday, a week ago, I stood on the steps of a candlelight vigil at the Lincoln Memorial. It was one of thousands of spontaneous vigils in over a hundred countries. That morning, I got on the Web and read vigil listings from across the country. I heard the goodness of America.

“This is a dog and child friendly vigil.”

“Meet in front of my house and we’ll move to the park.”

“Be sure to dress warmly.”

“Soup for all afterwards.”

This is the generosity on which our country prides itself. This is not the voice of preemptive war. This is the America that knows her greatness is tied to her goodness; the America that knows no child is collateral damage.

Those gatherings brought together a stunning array of people. True, there were many vigils sponsored by AFSC, Quakers and peace churches but we found ourselves joined by people of many faiths, by civil rights groups and labor leaders, by local elected officials and former members of Congress.

Even now as the shadow of this war grows darker, I remember the hope of that moment. I think of the governments of Germany, Russia, France, and China who have refused this war. I draw strength from the six smaller nations on the Security Council who withstood enormous pressure to say no to this war.

As we believe in a humanity that springs from a shared inner light, our vision must be one of international cooperation. As some have sought to marginalize us as naive, the AFSC has lifted up a practical idealism, a counter vision that shows how this war could have been avoided. It includes:

- Ratification of the International Criminal Court so that wars are increasingly replaced with trials under the rule of law.

- Ratifying international agreements to stop the financing of terrorist groups.
- Limiting the trade in weapons, especially small arms
- Strengthening verification procedures for chemical and biological weapons
- Abiding by nuclear non-proliferation agreements and working toward nuclear abolition.

This is our message as we answer the immediate reality of war, but even these are interim steps. Our vision is larger still.

Last fall, students at the George school in Bucks County asked me what the alternatives to war are. I told them that there are few alternatives once we are already at the brink of conflict. Lasting peace depends on the hard and proactive work of prevention. Our work is to take away the occasion for war and to examine our own behavior for the seeds of war. But if we are to finally take away the occasion for war, we must lift up an articulate vision of the world we want.

Some of you may know the American Friends Service Committee has spent the last two years in its own visioning process. In expectant worship, we have listened to discern where God is calling us to be. We are clear that in the present, we are compelled to stand against the immediate evil of war.

But in this Visioning Process, hundreds of people from around the world devoted themselves to dream and plan together. The final document they produced begins:

The AFSC envisions a world

Where security and fundamental human rights eclipse violence and oppression;

Where opportunities to make a living as part of a sustainable community supplant poverty;

Where appreciation of diverse gifts and cultures replaces exclusion and rejection;

Where commitment to love and dialogue prevails.

The document also contains six goals expressing our commitments to work for peace, humanitarian assistance, economic justice, the rights of migrants, for equitable systems of justice, and to support young people in their work for peace and justice.

We have committed our energies to five years of practical first steps, after which there will be next steps, and next steps and steps after that. The path to peace is arduous. But we will be faithful! The audacity of our vision requires a courage equal to that of any warrior. Violent conflict seeks to change a physical reality. As people of peace, we

commit ourselves to fundamentally change the human heart. It is a journey of decades, and centuries.

We do not face our path with grimness. We do not speak of how harsh necessity dictates our course. Instead, we own our fears. We freely look to one another for solace. We see the fundamental goodness in others who will join us along the way.

In the words of George Fox, we prepare to walk cheerfully over the earth answering that of God in every person. This is the path of peace. This is our journey toward that great cloud of witness and into the Spirit of God that lies beyond.

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The American Friends Service Committee is a Quaker organization, which includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace and humanitarian service. Its work is based on the worth of every person, and faith in the power of Love to overcome violence and injustice.

Learn more about AFSC's work for Peace, Justice, and Human Dignity at www.afsc.org.