

BETWEEN REALITY AND POSSIBILITY: LEADING INTO THE GAP

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ONE OF THE GREAT IRONIES of the religious movement known as “Friends” is that you don’t have to look very far to find tension and conflict. One of the questions that currently baffles me most isn’t where the tension comes from or what we should do about it, but how do we build communities that allow for the tension created by our differences to be transformative and heart-opening? How can we make our faith communities into spaces where we foster empathy for one another and see within each other the possibilities presented through God’s grace working in our lives?

Recently, I had the chance to go to Philadelphia to participate in a consultation with a Quaker foundation. Fifteen young Friends from different branches of Quakerism were invited to be a part of the foundation’s discernment about the future of their investments. The thought was to turn to Friends’ young leaders in hopes of gleaned useful ideas about where the Religious Society of Friends is headed in the next twenty-five years. I have no idea if the board members got what they hoped for, but I thought the meeting was inspiring! Here, gathered together at Friends Center in downtown Philly, were fifteen bright, energized, and creative young Quaker leaders. All were doing their best to be faithful to their own leadings, hailing from varied backgrounds and places along the Quaker spectrum.

The old joke goes that if you get more than one Quaker in the room there is bound to be a disagreement, especially on religious matters, and in a room of fifteen young Friends you might expect to find fifteen different understandings of God, faith, and Quakerism. Yet from the moment I arrived, I had a very distinct sense of being in a safe space and welcomed by community. There was a tension these Friends were able to embrace that made the space both affirming and lively, filled with honesty and grace. I think some of this simply had to do with our not being invested in perpetuating the family dysfunction, and I have no doubt if we had enough time together we would have at least more clearly identified our differences. But the sense of instant connection and inclusion was what stood out to me.

During the gathering, one of the groups sharing ideas put its finger on a primary tension that all of our meetings, yearly meetings, and tradition knows too well. They said: “Quakerism is open to all people, but it isn’t whatever you want it to be.” As they wrote these words on the whiteboard, silent agreement appeared around the room.

Here are two questions for you, the reader: What is the tension being held here? And what do you hear when you read that statement?

I gather that it could mean that while we are open to all, no one individual has the power to decide or control the direction of the group. Holding the tension of community together takes a process of listening and coming to clearness before God before we move on anything. Many of us believe that only Jesus, who is living and present, gets to be our Teacher, final Word, and guiding Light. So, while Quakerism is an “open-source” movement, as my friend Peggy Parsons likes to say, it is not whatever you or I want it to be. It is open, but it is subject to the direction of God within the gathered community, guided by our collective knowledge.

Inclusion, Possibility, and Leading in the Tragic Gap

Not only is it true that our faith communities are filled with tensions, but so is the rest of life. Some of the tensions we find are in our relationships, jobs, families, aging, health, and social injustices. In all of these tensions we are faced with what Parker Palmer calls the tragic gap between reality and new possibility. In our lives we experience a divide between the reality we live in and the hope that we aspire to, between heaven and earth, between realism and idealism. There

is often a difference, for me at least, between where the GPS says I am and where I meant to be and this 'gap' creates tension in all of us. So we gravitate to one pole or the other: pulverising realism or impervious idealism. But, rather than resolve this tension by moving to one pole or the other, as leaders we are called to "stand in the tragic gap." We are invited to hold the tension and lead in the midst of the tragic gap.

In other words, to be truly open means to include the dissenting voices, the doubters, the "minority" positions, and the betrayers. This was the practice of Jesus' "table fellowship" throughout the gospels. Back then, who ate with whom was essential. It was partly about being righteous religiously, but it was also about social class. In the time of Jesus, who you ate with was a statement about who you saw as equals. So when Jesus dines with fishermen, tax collectors, sex workers, Roman soldiers, zealots, people with disabilities, drunkards, Pharisees, you name it, he was breaking all kinds of rules. If you've watched any British TV at all you know that the chauffeur is not supposed to sit down and eat with the lord of the manor! Or As Ryan Bolger likes to say, "The problem with Jesus isn't that he ate with people, it's who he ate with. Jesus invited all the 'wrong' people to be his dinner guests."

Consider those Jesus included at his final meal. It's a beautiful and challenging picture of his ability to hold the tension in his community. In Luke 22:14-34, the author refers not only to Jesus' betrayer being one of the people invited over for dinner, but also to Peter's betrayal, and to the disciples who totally miss the point about his death and are more concerned about who was to be Jesus' successor. Luke's gospel foreshadows these betrayals and yet Jesus still ate with them as equals. Jesus' supper table is an act that projects what is possible within the "kingdom of God" right here, right now.

Another example of this tension of the tragic gap between reality and possibility has to do with my five year-old daughter and her severe food allergies. She is allergic to peanuts, almonds, eggs, gluten, dairy, citrus and probably other things we've yet to identify. When we finally diagnosed her allergies, we felt both a huge sense of relief and bewilderment. Now we knew how to help her desert-dry itchy skin, but we also had to go through a major lifestyle transition. And of course, all of her favorite foods were not on the new list of foods she could eat.

Today she often finds herself at school, friends' houses, community gatherings and birthday parties where she is unable to eat most of the 'fun' foods her friends are eating. She has learned at a very young age what it feels like to be left out. One of the ways she has coped with this is through imaginative play with her three-year-old sister. Their favorite game is "Family," and everyone in the game has food allergies. Part of the game is where she tells her imaginative playmates, or her sister, "You can't eat that because you are allergic, but you can eat this..."

At first I thought this was a strange thing to play, but then it dawned on me: in her imaginative play everyone has allergies and therefore she is no longer left out. Furthermore, because everyone has allergies, everyone knows how it feels and thus can empathize with her. If I were her I would have pretended to eat bowl after bowl of ice-cream and pizza! But instead of pretending there is a magical cure, she creates a world with an enriched level of empathy and everyone is equalized by a shared point of view. Her reality is one in which people don't understand just how difficult it is to be five years old and have terrible allergies and eczema, and what it feels like to be left out of so much of the fun. Thus, in her play world of new possibility, no one is left out.

The work of Quaker leadership is being able to experience the tensions found within our communities as transformative possibilities and stand within the tragic gap of reality and possibility in a way that 'breaks the rules of acceptability' and builds on fostering better empathy with others. In my view, the best leadership finds ways to hold the tension between reality and possibility, while working to expand the perspectives and capacity for empathy within a community.

Expanding Umwelt, Expanding Empathy

In her book, *Journey Inward Journey Outward*, Elizabeth O'Connor writes about Esther Harding, a biologist who argued that all of nature has a very limited awareness of the inward and outward world. In her studies she found that every creature, both great and small, only sees and hears what concerns itself—it ignores everything else. Following this, Harding suggests that each animal lives in a world of its own or *Umwelt*, a German word that means "environment" but can be translated as "self-centered world." Every creature has its own *Umwelt* to which it responds while ignoring everything else.

To illustrate, Harding gives the example of the wood tick. A wood tick needs blood from a warm-blooded animal in order to reproduce. When the time has come it attaches itself to a tree, sticks its thumb out, and waits to hitch a ride on an unsuspecting mammal passerby. Because there are so many wood ticks in the forest and not enough warm-blooded animals to go around, Harding says that some wood ticks have waited for a ride for as long as 17 years! The wood tick is so fixed on its own situation that it will not change trees, move around, or find an alternative. A wood tick is an animal unable to hold the tension between reality and possibility. It is unable to expand its horizons to change in a way that could make its life better.

We can be caught in this kind of limited Umwelt too. Many times we find ourselves in need of making adjustments, changing our expectations, or learning how to do something new—and yet we will just hang on that same darn tree for 17 years, refusing to budge. It is easy to be like the wood tick and only focus on what concerns us, to live in a self-centered world, while being blind to the realities of others. The Quaker leader helps the worshipping community to move out into the world, out into challenges and transforming experiences so that it won't be caught on the same tree 17 years later, starved and alone.

Do Not Remember the Former Things

The broader our Umwelts, the easier it is for us to be able to hold the tensions of reality and possibility, and the more capable we become of growing and moving past those stuck places in our spiritual and emotional lives. The hard part is that having our Umwelts expanded can make us feel fragile. Just the thought of having our lives changed in some significant way causes a lot of fear and anxiety. We are afraid our hearts will break.

I see it kind of like breaking in a baseball glove. When my dad helped me break in my first glove we put oil on it repeatedly, stuck a ball in the pocket of the mitt and then held the glove closed around the ball with a couple of rubber bands. Then we let it sit for what felt like years. The goal was to make it more pliable, easier to open and close quickly, with a pre-formed indentation where the baseball would magically fall. It never did that last part for me, but you see the point. Can we move from having brittle to pliable hearts? Maybe our hearts need to be broken in like the baseball glove.

As our hearts become more pliable, the more readily we are able to accept the differences of those around us and the new possibilities that break upon us by God's grace. We might define grace as God's help expanding each of our Umwelts of our hearts and imaginations. I believe that this is the kind of work that Jesus was constantly engaged in, as were Paul, John of Patmos, and the Hebrew Prophets.

Consider the passage found in Isaiah 43:16-21, which was written most likely in the late sixth century during the Hebrew exile in Babylon. There was a lot of suffering in this time, and people felt the weight of oppression from their Babylonian captors. The hearers of the prophetic message are invited to have their Umwelts expanded so that they can be ready for the new thing that God is about to do.

The first part of this text reminds the people of their foundational liberation narrative of the Exodus. The God who hears their concerns now is the same God who has worked to liberate them in the past, who "makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters." Babylon is no match for YHWH. When times are difficult, when the tensions get to be too much, we are to first move back and draw on our collective memory of the ways in which God has helped us, brought us life, and walked us through the valley of death.

But then the text says something even more interesting. "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing: now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

In other words, the wood tick is called to get down out of the tree. The baseball mitt is prepped for oiling. The hands slowly turn upwards, opening from clenched fists to a friendly, receptive position. God is about to do something different, unexpected, and the people are challenged by the prophet to be prepared to receive it.

I do not think the prophet is suggesting we throw out our tradition, and become purely individualistic persons cut free from the narrative of community. That would be to repeat the sins of modernity. What I think the author is saying by placing these two poles of reality and possibility next to one another is that it is important to embrace your tradition and story, without being limited by it. Do not let it become the excuse for clinging to a limited Umwelt. Instead, be ready to have your imaginations broken open by the Living God. If you are the wood tick and every time up until now, hanging out on this old tree really worked for you, it may be time for a new way. The prophet-as-leader is the one who reminds the community of their shared story,

while also helping the people to forget “the former things” so they are able to traverse new contexts, meet new challenges, or respond in faithfulness to fresh calls that God may be leading them into.

Up until a few months ago, I was spinning my wheels with my dissertation. I had done all my research. I had even written four or five chapters, yet if a person asked what it was about, they would fall comatose before I could finish explaining the project. Each new question about the project became a new opportunity for me to try to figure out what I was doing. I had all the pieces and parts, but I kept running into the same brick wall. It seemed I was just hanging on that tree, waiting year after year for a deer to walk by.

Then one afternoon while I was sitting in my favorite coffeeshop, it hit me. I had a notebook sitting open, and the pages were filled with summaries of everything I had been working on. But a blank page stared up at me. I felt like I had a cart full of treasure but I couldn't convince anyone that what I had found was worth a dime. What I began to tell myself was to forget how I had understood it in the past. Then, as I gazed out the sun-filled window, I fell into a kind of daydream. I don't know how long I sat there or how it happened, but eventually and out of nowhere a number of images came to me that synthesized and summarized my entire project in ways I had never considered before. Every piece of the puzzle fell into place for me, and it finally made sense. Finally, in an off-hand moment, at the breaking point of frustration, I let go of what I knew and something new came.

The old methods, all the summaries, all the ways I had tried to bring my project together failed. I didn't have to throw out my research, but I had to let go of it just long enough that it could be reassembled in a new way, with new insights and possibilities. It was in that moment that the rest of my dissertation wrote itself. Every chapter fell into place and everything made sense in a way I could never have planned or manufactured. Now I can even explain what my project is over Twitter: I have developed a model of renewal for faith traditions that is both convergent and participatory.

“Do not Remember...” is the prophet's way of saying don't get stuck waxing nostalgic about the ‘good old days.’ Don't just expect that repeating the same things over and over again will make everything okay. Callie Plunket-Brewton says:

The prophet aims to create an imaginative space in the minds of the people so that their conception of the past can transform their

understanding of the present and, thus, the future: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” In a seemingly hopeless situation, the prophet calls on the people not to lose heart but to look with anticipation for the signs of God's approaching redemption, for the “new thing” that is coming.

Silence can help to create that imaginative space. Scripture can expand our imaginations. Gazing off into space in a daydream can be met by a still small voice. But waxing nostalgic will not aid us in leadership; it will not help us to hold the tensions that exist in our own inner-lives or in our meetings. We may refuse change and use God as our excuse, but could it be that God is the one who is initiating the change in our communities?

Until the Words Fall In

I love that Isaiah 43 in the Bible names the tensions between reality and the possibility of something new that God is about to do with his people and invites us to imagine what could be. It is meant to be a surprise, a kind of shattering of what we expect so that the hearers might have a new capacity to hear something new. It is like a favorite story of mine that Parker Palmer shares in *A Hidden Wholeness*:

There is an old Hasidic tale that tells us how such things happen. The pupil comes to the rebbe and asks, “Why does the Torah tell us to ‘place these words upon your hearts?’ Why does it not tell us to place these holy words *in* our hearts?” The rebbe answers, “It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks, and the words fall in.”

We are often afraid to enter into the difficult space between holding tensions and allowing our imaginations to be opened up, for fear our hearts will be broken. It is very possible that we will discover we have been wrong about something. We may find that others have legitimate and deeply held beliefs and experiences that are different from our own. We may hear stories that are too painful to bear, or find ourselves powerless in the face of tragedy over which we have no power. It is always possible that entering a difficult space while seeking to hold tensions may result in experiencing a loss, but if it is grounded by God's grace, then that brokenness can bring us into a new ability to love, listen, and empathize with one another.

When was the last time your heart was broken open like this?

A couple years ago, our oldest daughter was getting ready for bed and she asked me, her resident theologian, "Daddy, why did God give me allergies?" The wind was knocked out of me. What a heartbreaking and direct question. I did my best to take it in stride. I said, "Well, honey," (I was already losing steam) "God didn't give those allergies to you. Sometimes things like this just happen."

Good job, Mr. No-Emotion. She looked blankly at me. It was clear that answer didn't help her at all. She fell silent. I took what seemed like a second chance and tried again. I said, "What I mean to say is, I don't know why you have allergies, but it makes me very angry that you do. I wish you didn't have them and you didn't have to go through this. Mommy and I will do our very best to help you through this." Not only was that the better answer for her, it was the right answer.

I moved from defending God to defending my little girl. This is my role as Daddy, just as my role as shepherd of a spiritual community is to be on the side of those in my care. I moved from trying to avoid her pain to accepting it and allowing it to hit me squarely. In doing so I was broken open, but it enabled me to help her carry it.

I am convinced that this is in keeping with a God who also sides with the victims throughout human history as scripture so clearly illustrates. When we are afraid to be hurt or experience loss, we will find ourselves defending God, holding others' pain at a distance, and trying to resolve the tensions that exist within ourselves and our communities. But if we allow ourselves to take the hit squarely and be broken open, I think we will gain a new capacity to love and have empathy for those in our care.

I believe that it is not only possible, but *desirable*, to be broken into a new capacity. Just as the Hebrew people would come to desire that new thing God would do in their midst—even if it meant leaning into the difficult unknowns of wilderness life—they would receive that gift.

It is possible to live with a greater capacity for acceptance and love, but it will not be easy and our hearts may be broken in the process.

My prayer is that our hearts are not shattered, but broken open into that new capacity.

As we grow into deeper relationship with those whose values and experiences are different from ours, with those whose pain is deep and whose true selves have been barred access by the gatekeepers

of religion and society, the horizons of our little worlds are pushed back, our Umwelts are enlarged and our hearts are broken open. Quaker leadership needs now more than ever people who are able to graciously hold these tensions and to set a table for everyone who wants to come and eat. If it is true that "Quakerism is open to all people, but it isn't whatever you [or I] want it to be," then we must guide our communities in a direction that will be able to hold this tension even if the way is yet unmarked.