

Christopher Sammond

Address to Illinois Yearly Meeting

July 31, 2004

Introduction by Janice Domanik:

Christopher has had the experience of God asking him to do something. Like that mosquito that's buzzing around you. And he was outside working and he looked over and he saw a red-tail hawk and he said, "Well, God, I'll believe it if it comes over and it circles around overhead." The red-tailed hawk circled around overhead. "Well," he thought, "that could be by coincidence." It took four red-tail hawks circling around his head before he got it that that buzz was real.

When Christopher learned that we wanted him to speak at our Yearly Meeting sessions, he began by discerning whether this was something he was called by God to do. He has spent the year opening his heart so that he would be given the right words. We need to open our hearts and ears so that we can hear what God would have us hear this evening.

Christopher will speak to us out the waiting silence and after he has finished we will continue our worship until our Meeting for Worship is closed in the normal manner of Friends, by the shaking of hands. I would ask that you join me in holding him as he prepares to speak and as he speaks to us.

Christopher's talk:

Though you've played at love and lost,
Sorrows turned your heart to frost.
I will melt your heart again.
Remember the feeling as a child,
When you woke up and morning smiled.
It's time, it's time you felt that way again.
There's just no percentage in remembering the past.
It's time you learned to live again, love and laugh.
So come with me, come with me.
Leave your yesterdays, your yesterdays behind
And take a giant step outside your mind.

The two themes that I've been given to talk to you tonight are contained in that piece of that song. That place of joy and gratitude that many of us woke to in the morning as children and have lost often as an adult, that place of tender-hearted connection to God and to those that we love. And those sorrows that turn our heart to frost, those sorrows that cause us to close up and defend ourselves. And how each of those processes works in our willingness to invite community into our lives. We hope to create communities of peace. My experience is that we don't so much create community, as we spread it. And what we spread, we get from God. That when we open to the vibrant source of love, to our most vulnerable, alive and tender heart there's something that is happening that is spiritual as much as anything else. And when two people can meet on that level, that's a communion of the spirit. And that communion is what we spread. It's a meeting. It's not something we can make structurally. It's not something we can make happen. We can block it, but we can't make it happen. We can invite it, but we can't control it. We can welcome others to join us, but we can't make them.

I knew the title of this talk long before I knew any of the content. The title I was given was "Building Spiritual Community as a Spiritual Practice." It has been my experience that we build spiritual community here first (pointing to his heart), here second (gesturing around the room), and in the world, third. The way in which I build community within my heart, the way in which I welcome that reality, the way in which I dare, at times, to enter the living waters, is what I call faithfulness. And for me it has many facets, and what I mean by that word and what each of you mean by that word might be somewhat different so I'm going to lay some of those facets out. One facet of faithfulness, this root of communion in the spirit, is complete and utter abandonment to the will of God - abandoning my will to God's will. George Fox talked about non-Quakers using the term "will worshippers." It was very pejorative term in his book. It was probably one of the nastiest things he could say about somebody. Those are the people he saw who were trying to be living a spiritual life, were purporting to do so, but hadn't yet found that place within themselves that the Quakers had found where they had surrendered themselves wholly and completely and utterly to the living spirit as they knew it. Once a man came up to him - someone he described as "a flashy, jangly man." He described a lot of people that way. And the man said to him, "When I die, what part of me will be damned?" And George Fox replied, "The part of you that is speaking to me now." That's the will. That's what his experience of being a Friend meant leaving behind. It's not something that is very popular with modern Friends, but it's been the core of my spiritual experience. In that place of surrender I regain that place of childlike innocent trust for God, that place where I first loved God as a child, with total innocence and total trust, that place I witness in myself and others in a variety of venues.

One such venue is at the Gathering - after 3 or 4 days, the FGC gathering - when everybody's armor has dropped away. There's been enough days of people hugging each other and affirming each other in their lives and enough absence of judgment and harshness, that people start unconsciously dropping the armor that they have worn their whole lives and they let that tender part of themselves out. And it starts touching each other and there's this magic that happens that's synergistic.

Another place I've noticed it has been in children.

Another place I've noticed it has been in attending to the dying. I was a hospice chaplain for a year and I had many, many opportunities to visit many, many people from all walks of life and some of them from horrendously dysfunctional and tormented families. And for most of those people who had enough time in their dying, they shed all the hurt, all the anger, all the bitterness, all that separated them - all the armor. And they

became these beings that emitted this light that was attractive like a porch light attracting moths on a summer night. People wanted to be in their room with them. People didn't want to leave. They were transparent to that of God in themselves. That Inner Christ. The Seed cracked open. The Light within. When we bring that to each other in communion, then we are spreading Community. That's our true nature, Friends. That's who we are deep down. I've seen it again and again and again. I know it, and I trust it. That's the "that of God" that we will say we believe is there in each other. In some people it is hard to see, but I have seen people who were incredibly hardened in their hearts and in their lives and at the very end, there it was. Shining very brightly.

I try to speak from that place when I speak and I would ask those of you who are willing and able to join me in that place of that tender love. That innocent love of God. That open-hearted place that is our natural state. That is the image of God that we were created in. And join me there. Because it'll be easier for me to hang out there if some of you are hanging out there, too. Because it's a hard place to be in when other people aren't.

And what I have to share with you next is a harder piece, particularly as I invite you into being tender. In my work, I hope always to emphasize the Light, and emphasize the tender heart, and the message I've been asked to bring you tonight also talks about what eclipses that tender heart. And it's a hard piece to be with.

ITEM: There are several past clerks in my monthly meeting who are no longer Quakers.

ITEM: The melt down of the Gathering staff and volunteers behind the information desk at FGC each year is anticipated and strategized around because of the barrage of harsh, negative, bitter, judgmental and rageful responses they get when they set limits on Friends.

ITEM: I know of a meeting that had a painful incident years ago that has polarized the meeting to the state where, if one faction's people are nominated, the other faction will not approve them and vice versa. They've been in a deadlock for years.

ITEM: I know of a seasoned Friend who, after a bitter set-to with their meeting, has resigned. I'm sure many of you know of many such people. I know of many people who have worked for Friends and frankly we have a very bad reputation as being employers. Most people who have worked for Friends have a lot of scars from their service.

ITEM: I know of a leader who served as the head of a National Quaker body for years and was not sure at the end of their tenure if they could continue to worship with Friends based on their experience of Quakers.

ITEM: Marty Grundy wrote a compelling Pendle Hill pamphlet entitled, "Tall Poppies" which outlines the way Quakers behead their leaders.

ITEM: I know a Friend who was the clerk of a major committee of a major National Quaker organization. After a flare-up that person resigned from that committee as well as the governing body and has not served for years. I could go on and on. And it's when I approach this with a hardened heart I feel judgmental toward us and when I approach it with an open heart it makes me want to cry. We try so hard to create communities of peace and we are so hard on each other. We try so hard to create the Kingdom of God here on earth and we wound each other horribly. So a lot of my openings and learnings in this past year have been about the nature of that wound and the nature of that wounding. And I've learned a little bit, perhaps, about how we might do that differently.

I'm going to start with a story from my own past. I'm a teenager – name a year. I'm sitting with my 3 brothers at dinner. My father has gotten home at 7:00. I play a sport every season, so by 7:00 I'm famished. At that point I was growing about 6 inches a year. My mother pleads with my father to please come to the table and fix himself his plate of dinner. After almost a harangue, he eventually gets up and slowly fixes himself his second scotch and soda and sets it on the table. Then he leisurely walks into the kitchen and serves himself his plate of food and comes to the table and sits down. By then my mother's, and my three brothers' and my food are all stone cold. This happens night after night after night, and was one of the many rituals in my family where I learned that I didn't matter, that I was not valuable, and that I interpreted it that I wasn't lovable. That's what I would call "the wound." And many of us have had those experiences from classmates, from family, from colleagues, from strangers, and we're lucky, if in our formative years, we get enough messages to the contrary to balance that out. My experience is that there are a lot of people- most people - have a part of them that is "in the wound." And the problem happens when that wound is hit in the present.

Another story about myself - I was the clerk of a committee called the Visioning Committee in my Monthly Meeting. The idea was to look for ways in which we could deepen the spiritual community of the Meeting. We met for 3 years. We did what we thought was some excellent work. We presented a lengthy and

complex report to Meeting for Business. Friends were deeply moved, but were not clear in the moment what to do with it. It was insisted that the entire report be printed verbatim in the newsletter and that the clerk's team would study it and the next month we would address what piece of it to move forward with in what way. The next month the entire business meeting went over to working with the repeal of handgun law issues and the month after that something else came up. So it was three or four months after we presented our report that it actually got around to being on the agenda. And I got to the business meeting late that night and when most of the way through we hadn't gotten to it yet – I saw it on the agenda. I asked about it, and they said "Oh, we did that in the first few minutes of meeting." I asked what happened. "Well, we worship-shared on it and that's what we did with it." At that point I lost my present tense sense of what was going on and I went back into that place of "you're not valuable", etc. The history was stronger than the present moment. I have a lot of control of my emotions so I didn't show the rage that I was feeling. But the recording clerk is a very old friend and highly empathic and he told me that he was quite afraid of me at the time.

I've seen this acted out by many others. I like to tell these stories that are negative on myself. Then I'm not implicating somebody else. I've seen these acted out in my Monthly Meeting, my Yearly Meeting, at FGC Central Committee, in any Quaker venue I have seen people act out of "the wound." And usually with a little bit less skill than I exhibited, and frequently at times when everybody else in the room was in a very tender place, so the lacerating quality of it is doubly painful.

What is this about? In rating Yearly Meeting on our evaluation forms for each session there are sections on directions and publicity, and accommodations, and workshops, and plenaries, and a multitude of other things, and food. The comments on food outnumber all the other categories combined! Does this sound familiar Friends? My sense of what that is about is that food has more symbolic content touching the place of "Am I valued?" "Am I a part of this community?" "Are my needs going to be met?" And when they're not - Look Out!

So I have questions – and actually have been living questions about how to do this differently. I'd like to talk about it in terms of both the person who is in the wound and those around them. It's very hard to bring presence of mind to the wound. You have to catch it very quickly. My experience of it in myself and others is that those who don't catch it, it carries them away, and at best they'll be gone for days. However, if you're somebody else who's there, the most helpful thing you can do is not react; is to recognize what is going on. "Oh, this person is in their wound. This person who I know and love and trust is acting in this bizarre way because they hit a pocket of old stuff that is triggering them painfully. And I know they'll come back. And I don't have to engage reactively with what they're dumping on me at the moment, even though they are pushing every button on the front of my chest."

If you feel wounded and you catch it soon enough, here is the advice I would give you: Keep your heart open. Stay connected to the person or people who you experience as wounding you. It's a very hard thing to do. Most people run away, sometimes for good. State the pain that you are feeling, without the venom of blaming them, of being victim, or any of the other stuff. Just state very clearly that you hurt. And here is the hardest part. Ask them to help you in your hurt. And that is, I assure you, the hardest thing in the world to do. But if we want to be peacemakers, that's it Friends! Jesus said "Pray for those that hurt you." If you can do all that, you are doing very well. Once the other has heard your pain it's possible for you to also hear where they are coming from.

I was recently clerk of Northern Yearly Meeting and at one point we were dealing with a difficult item of business and I had asked us to focus on one area and several Friends had spoken to another area and I tried to bring us back. I said "No Friends, this is the area we need to focus on at this time." The last person who spoke before I said that came up to me after that session and said, "You *humiliated* me in front of everybody. You stepped on me and you gutted me." At first I tried to tell him that really wasn't my intent. And I told him that several times. It didn't help him at all. It didn't help me at all. It didn't help the situation at all. It was only when I received his hurt and said "I'm really sorry that I hurt you." And I made it clear that I really got it that he was hurt. Then we could move on to something a little more subjective. But until I could hear that he was hurting, we weren't going to go anywhere. And I tried several times. In retrospect what I learned from that situation was: My trying to explain myself is a way of defending myself. I can't offer my tender open heart to him if I'm trying to say, "Well, I really didn't screw up. Listen. Hear me out." It doesn't matter – it's not helpful.

One aspect of people dancing with the wound that I have lived with in the last 4 or 5 years, is around racism. I've had the pleasure and the privilege and the scars to serve on FGC's Committee for Ministry on Racism. It has gotten to the place where we expect, without a doubt, that one or the other of us will be deeply wounded when we structure a conversation on race for Friends. It has happened almost every time in every venue. So I have learned a lot about what causes the blow ups and I want to try to talk about that through this lens of the wound. I don't want to trivialize the experience of people of color, yet my experience of racism is that everybody is wounded by it, but wounded by it in different ways. White folk, in listening to them and talking with them, and witnessing them talk about race, I see an enormous fear of being considered racist and doing it wrong. But this may help you some: I'm a racist. I was born in a racist culture. I've been bombarded from my birth with a multitude of messages that give me a racist framework for understanding the world. I can spend the rest of my life trying to recover from it, but that's the air that I breathe and the water that I swim in, and just trying to see that is very difficult. And yet my experience is that most white folk are terrified of being called racist. So, let's try that on for a minute. Well, maybe you are. And the question then isn't "Am I or not?" its "What do I do about it?"

I was once talking with a gay man and he casually mentioned his own homophobia. I was astonished. I said, "You seem to be so comfortable in your sexual orientation and your life seems like you have fully integrated that into every aspect of your life and I'm astonished to hear you refer to your own homophobia. And he said, "Are you kidding? There's no way I can avoid being homophobic having been raised in this culture."

Another thing I've learned is that white folk don't understand systemic racism. That's the air that we breathe and the water that we swim in. After four or five years of listening to people of color talk about their experience, I'm having the experience, kind of like those books that have all that myriad of what look like random dots and yet, if you get really close and kind of tune your eyes out from the way they usually work, all of a sudden you see a number or picture. That's been my experience with systemic racism. That it's not something that I see easily and when I do, its like, well, it's always been there, but I haven't been able to see it. And in the blow-ups that I've witnessed between white Friends and Friends of color, usually it hinges around the fact that white folk do not understand or see systemic racism and when people of color talk about their experience in the framework of systemic racism, the white people respond defensively, like I did to that person in Yearly Meeting. "I didn't mean to do that" or "You don't understand" or "What you're seeing really isn't true, let me explain it to you." The result is usually nuclear.

I also have experienced most white folk as carrying a great deal of guilt and shame around racism. On some level we know that we're not getting it, but we don't know how we're not getting it. And for many of us feeling badly about ourselves is a way of addressing the situation and I've talked with some people who have been partnered to people of color who talk about that being an unconscious strategy they have for dealing with race. "At least if I feel badly about it then I'm doing something." That's a seduction. It actually doesn't do anything for anybody. So I experience white folks' woundedness as guilt and fear and shame.

I will ask my friends of color to forgive me as I speak outside of my own experience and speak about what I've experienced and heard from Friends of color. Most of the time when I hear Friends of color speak about their experience, they are speaking systemically, and it's based on a life-time of being barraged by wounding messages that they're not okay, valuable, wanted, included. The historic wounds are enormous. So if you mix these two together and try to have white Friends and Friends of color talking about race together there's usually a disconnect around the systemic piece. And there's usually enormous pain. And usually a huge blow-up. Not always with the Friend of color being the one who blows up. I've witnessed both. A lot of times the locus of the blow-up is the question: "Was this or was this not racism." The white folk are defending like you wouldn't believe, because they don't want to be named racist. So they are doing everything they can to explain why this moment was not a racist moment and they're not hearing the fact that the people of color experienced it that way and are hurting. And it usually escalates from there.

Do you understand what I'm talking about in terms of the wound and why this happens this way? Focusing on this locus of hurt meeting hurt is what I would offer to Friends around having this very necessary discussion. It seems like this is the stuck point we're at in terms of us becoming a racially-positive Society. We have to get beyond this place of arguing about the objective reality about whether or not an incident was racist before we engage with the subjective, emotional pain.

So if you are in one of these situations, the first thing I would recommend you do is to hear the hurt of whichever side you are on. Let it in. Let the other person know that you hear the hurt. Then you might be able to have the learning conversation that goes, “You really experience this as racist? Tell me about it, because I don’t see it at all.” There have been times in hearing incidents from my friends of color where there is no doubt in my mind that the event they described was a racist moment. There have been other times where I thought, “That just sounds like an over-anxious white person trying to do it right and putting their foot in it.” I have few friends of color who I can say that to, and not wound them. Where there’s enough trust between us where I can say “You know, I hear you experience that as racist, but that’s not what I’m hearing here. Can we talk about that?”

I experience most Friends, particularly white Friends, wanting to deal with race from an ethical imperative. This is the right thing to do – everybody knows it. There is not a doubt in anybody’s mind. I would urge you to also consider the spiritual imperative. I experience racism as embedded in a nexus or a matrix of racism, classism, homophobia, sexism – all the ways in which we set up a paradigm of the rich, white, good-looking, well-educated male as being the head of the cultural hierarchy and then it goes down from there. The problem with that, aside from the fact that it is ludicrous and infinitely culturally reinforced in us, is that in trying to accommodate that system we have to cut off parts of ourselves that don’t fit the stated norm. And that’s a spiritual dilemma, Friends. When I can’t acknowledge the parts of me that are like the parts of the people we would make the “other”, then I’m putting myself in a box. That it’s a part of who I am, and it makes me a little more spiritually dead. That’s why we need to address racism and homophobia. And if you want to do a diversity workshop and really see the sparks fly, engage in classist dialogue.

Friends, we are being called. I feel that God is always calling us into community where God’s love is shared, openly with all. That’s what Jesus modeled. There is no “other.” That would include conservative right-wing Christians, Republicans, George Bush. As soon as we make someone “other,” we are stepping out of that tender heart and engaging in judgment. We will not create communities of peace that way. I believe we are called to create the Peaceable Kingdom. I believe that God has always been calling us to do that. Early Friends recognized it. I don’t think that it’s ever stopped. I think the stakes are higher now than they were before. I don’t think we’re going to be successful at making peace in the outer world until we can do a better job in our own Meetings. The good news there is that it’s been my persistent experience that people, particularly in leadership roles, but not only there, who are deeply faithful, who are deeply in that place of being centered in God with their hearts open, can have an enormous impact on the group that they are with. And the wound level of the others drops down. That’s some of the good news.

Other good news is that as we practice our Faith and Practice we can do better and better at being faithful. And Friends accentuate the aspect of our Faith and Practice that is about moving toward the Light all the time. We duck it, we try to do an end-run around faithfulness and integrity when it’s time to look at our shadow and how we lacerate each other. That’s the other part of the spiritual practice we need to be better at if we are going to build communities of peace. We need to know when we are in our own woundedness; we need to know when someone else is in their woundedness, and we need to act with more skill than we are doing.

It’s not a message I like to bring; but it’s the message I have been given.