

By Love: Gathered, Transformed, Sent

An address given at Illinois Yearly Meeting in 2005
By Elizabeth Gates

So here we are Friends – gathered together in the loving embrace of Illinois Yearly Meeting. Over the past several days I have felt the love of place that draws you to this quiet spot in the cornfields; I have heard about your vision for the future – your dreams and hopes, your concerns about cost and about being good stewards. I have seen old friends greet one another, have sat on the porch to listen and talk with you, and sat with you as you remembered beloved Friends now gone. We have danced and sung and broken bread together. We are truly gathered together in love. It has been a blessed time.

Tomorrow we will travel forth from this place, out into the world to discover what the coming days hold for us, sent forth in love. This evening I would like to pause for a moment between those two events – our gathering together here in McNabb and our going out, going home, moving forward.

The theme you chose for this Yearly Meeting was “By Love: Gathered, Transformed, Sent”.

By Love:

Gathered,

Transformed,

Sent.

We have come from many places to gather together in McNabb; we will be sent out into the world again tomorrow. Have we been transformed? William Penn wrote of early Friends, “They were a changed people themselves before they set out to change others.” How are we changed?

Do you know the story of Samuel Bownas, a British Friend who became one of the most influential traveling ministers of his generation? In his Life and Travels, he wrote about his experiences as a young man:

On First-days I frequented meetings and the greater part of my time I slept, but took no account of preaching nor received any other benefit, than being there kept me out of bad company which indeed is a very great service to youth ... but one First-day, being at meeting, a young woman named Anne Wilson was there and preached; she was very zealous and fixing her eye upon me, she with a great zeal pointed her finger at me uttering these words with much power: “A traditional Quaker, thou comest to meeting as thou went from it, and goes from it as thou came to it but art no better for thy coming; what wilt thou do in the end?”

At that, Samuel sat up and took notice and started to question himself. How many of us sit on the bench next to Samuel, comfortable and quiet? How many of us attend meeting faithfully yet it could be said of us: “... thou comest to meeting as thou went from it, and goes from it as thou come to it ...”? It’s painful to admit, but some days I, too, doze in meeting, I am there, but not there – making mental “to do” lists, daydreaming, woolgathering, at times startled alert by vocal ministry. Other days, I know experientially what Isaac Pennington was describing when he wrote, “There is that which is near you which will guide you. O wait for it and mind that you keep to it.” There is a blessing there, but it is not always a comfortable blessing.

“Wait for it and mind that you keep to it.” God, Light, Divine Spirit, Holy One, the Great ‘...and Yet’, Seed, Inward Guide, Mother, Father, Jesus, Living Christ, the More, Yaweh. We don’t have the words to adequately name that for which we wait and to which we must keep. “Mind that you keep to it”; mind the light.

What I would like to do this evening is to turn to a different Isaac Pennington quotation that has to do with transformation. I would like to spend some time with it, to meditate on it, to see what might be there for us, to see what it might offer. I would also like to share one year of my life when I was finally forced to live into the advice Pennington offers.

In Some Directions to the Panting Soul Isaac Pennington wrote,

Therefore ... be no more than God hath made thee.
Give over thine own willing,
give over thine own running,
give over thine own desiring
to know or be anything,
and sink down to the seed
which God sows in thy heart
and let that be in thee,
and grow in thee
and breathe in thee,
and act in thee,
and thou shalt find by sweet experience
that the Lord knows that
and loves and owns that,
and will lead it to the inheritance of life,
which is God’s portion.

* * * * *

Give over thine own willing
give over thine own running,
give over thine own desiring
to know or be anything,

I can’t think of anything more difficult for Americans to do – to let go, to give away control, to stop bustling around getting important things done, to cease hurrying. Yet Pennington asks us to do just that.

In the introduction to Catherine Whitmire’s wonderful book, Plain Living, she describes her struggle to take control of her life when she was younger. She sought to simplify her life so that it would be more centered, less stressful. She made detailed lists of the things she wanted to accomplish, timelines so that she would not procrastinate. She imagined that good organization would lead to singleness of eye and purpose. She planned everything out and stuck to her plan, yet she found that it made no difference. Her life was still too busy and too stressful. It wasn’t until a friend asked her an unexpected question that things began to shift. Her friend asked, “How do you know what God is planning for your life?”

“How do you know what God is planning for your life?” My first reaction when I read that question was strongly negative. The God I love and worship is not a puppeteer controlling us all down here on earth. But of course, that was not her friend’s assumption; she was inviting Cathy to go deeper, to set

aside her own agendas and lists and shoulds and oughts, to set them all aside and start to listen. There is a still small voice that whispers in our hearts if we only have ears to hear. Parker Palmer writes: “Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you.” “There is that which is near you that will guide you.” Each precious life is a gift from God, a miracle needing the space to unfold.

Give over thine own willing,
give over thine own running,
give over thine own desiring
to know or be anything...

I cannot tell you how many years it has taken me to live into Pennington’s advice. Becoming a parent helped; caring for an infant helps to break down anyone’s egocentricity. Watching that same child begin to stretch his wings and stumble and make mistakes, watching him try to discover who it is he was created to be – an unexpected joy of parenthood – has also required that I set aside my own desires, has meant that I must nurture from a distance with understanding and love, even when I do not understand the path my child is following.

As I have gradually given up my assumptions about myself and my life, I have begun to find my center. A small example: for years I was active in my meeting’s First Day School. I had training as a teacher, I had children of school age, and teachers were always in short supply. I just assumed that had to be my ministry. I climbed into that box, I taught, I became clerk of the FDS committee, but it never quite fit. After years of forcing myself into that mold, I more than burned out – I found myself at a great distance from God, unsure how to get in touch again. So, I stopped teaching and lived with much guilt over stepping away during a painful fallow year when I struggled to find where I fit in the meeting.

There was more that year that wore me down, that almost broke my spirit; I will speak of that later. It is enough, for now, to say that it was a year of learning to let go, learning to wait.

I struggled to

give over my own willing,
give over my own running,
give over my own desiring...

I found that the harder I worked at letting go, the more tightly I clung to my guilt, my past and my assumptions.

A Zen proverb that has helped me:

The three steps to enlightenment:

Quit trying.
Quit trying not to try.
Quit quitting.

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Give over thine own willing,
give over thine own running,
give over thine own desiring
to know or be anything,
and sink down to the seed
which God sows in thy heart...

What a beautiful metaphor – God uses our hearts as a garden. It reminds me of my own experiences with seeds – planting seeds as fine as dust in my flower bed and seeing them emerge as sweet cleomes; planting tiny tomato seeds in pots early in the spring anticipating a harvest of ripe, juicy fruit in July; planting large, flat pumpkin seeds in the warm soil, picturing the abundant harvest that might follow. There are also the seeds that never emerge – planted with hope, but unable to complete the mysterious transformation that happens underground.

...sink down to the seed
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In James 1:21 we read, “Submit to God and accept the word that he plants in your heart.” The bible is filled with images and planting and sowing. Many of Jesus’ parables speak of the seed –

the good seed and the weeds (Matthew 13:24),
the mustard seed (Matthew 13:31, Mark 4:30 and Luke 13:18),
the seed growing in the night (Mark 4:26-29) and
the seed and the sower (Matthew 13:3-9, Mark 4:3-9 and Luke 8:4-15).

... sink down to the seed...

Douglas Steere wrote, “Seeds, not fruit, are given in prayer, but they are given for planting...” Seeds hold only potential; unplanted, unwatered, unnourished they do not grow, do not change, do not become what it is they were created to be.

“Seeds, not fruit, are given in prayer.” How well do we tend the seeds we are given?

The one important thing that I continued to do that year of letting go (and failing to let go) was to continue to go to meeting. I went every week. I clung to the “discipline of showing up”. That year I did not doze on the bench; I remember going deep during worship. But nothing came – no words, no comfort, no sense of God’s presence, just a deep loneliness and tears. Week after week I came and sat in worship and tears came; I would weep silently.

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...sink down to the seed
which God sows in thy heart,
and let that be in thee,
and grow in thee
and breathe in thee,
and act in thee...

This mysterious unknown that God plants in our souls needs space to grow and breathe and act, if we will let it, if we will prepare the soil that will allow it to grow and to flourish.

Remember the parable of the seed and the sower in Matthew 13:

“A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil; and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

What kind of soil do you provide for the seed God sows in your heart?

For many years I didn't pay much attention to the soil in my heart; I just went to meeting for worship wondering what I would find that day. Life was full, busy with work and children, the garden and cooking meals, too full for anything else. Sleep called to me early in the morning, so by the time I rose there was already much to do.

The mystery of Pennington's advice is this: even when we don't consciously seek to nourish the seed that God plants in our hearts, the seed is already there, being and growing and breathing and acting, slowly changing our hearts of stone into hearts of flesh, even when we are not aware of its presence.

That year when I gave up teaching, when all I could do in meeting for worship was weep, was the year that things finally shifted for me.

There were many other challenges and stresses in the outward circumstances of my life. That year our youngest child left home for college, bringing both financial and emotional stress. Not only did I step away from teaching First Day School, I also left my paying teaching job, sure that I would not teach again, feeling I had lost my vocation. My mother and sister were both diagnosed with cancer. A bleak time.

My inner life was in turmoil, too. That same year I sank into a deep clinical depression, something I had never before experienced; the unbalance that grew out of my depression made me fear that there was nothing about me my husband could love, so even in that precious relationship, I felt lost and abandoned. I could not see any way forward.

My tears in meeting grew out of all these circumstances – but they were also seeds. Remember Douglas Steere: “Seeds, not fruit, are given in prayer, but they are given for planting.” Tears washed away some of my grief; they were also a sign that something needed to grow, needed time to emerge. In the quiet of worship, washed by tears, I was finally able to “give over my own willing, my own running, my own desiring”, to give it all to God. I had no choice. All my thinking and striving and attempts to drag myself up had not worked. My stubborn insistence that I could heal myself, that I didn't need help, just sent me deeper into depression. I listened to the quiet whispers planted deep in my heart. Finally, with reluctance and fear, with great embarrassment and a sense of failure, I sought help, started seeing a psychologist, started taking medication. At the same time I began to write, to pour out my anguish and hurt on the pages of my journal. And I continued to attend meeting. For a very long time, little happened.

Marjorie Suchocki has written that, “God works with what is to bring about what might be. In the darkness, it was painful and uncomfortable for me –but it was also the place I needed to go to be changed, to be transformed. We each walk a path of transformation, each path unique, each path an

invitation. For me, the path included a long period of waiting, not knowing when or how or even if the darkness would lift. It is hard to trust that we are not alone, that God works within even when we are blind and deaf to God's presence.

John's gospel says, "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life".

I allowed myself to "fall into the hands of the living God", allowed some parts of my life to die. As I rested there, my weeping gradually stopped and I began to sink deeper. Something new – greater humility, greater compassion, quietness, even joy, began to grow.

I no longer visit with my psychologist. As helpful as she was, there came a point when she had no more to offer me – the healing I still needed was spiritual. I do continue to attend meeting every week. I am still feeling my way, still waiting to know what God is planning for my life. The shift for me has meant embracing the necessity of spending time with God, time probing, searching, listening – mostly listening – so that I can change and grow and deepen, so that the seeds planted in my heart in prayer can die and be reborn, can be transformed and can transform me.

My mornings have a new rhythm: I rise early to pray and read, to write in my journal, and to reflect on the previous day before I walk our dog, eat breakfast, read the newspaper and start the work of the day. It is nothing complicated or mysterious. After many years of half-heartedly, unsuccessfully intending to set aside time each day to be with God, I now feel a loss when I don't take that time in the morning. My journal these days does not contain my anguish, rather my gratitude for the blessings of the previous day, reflections on the struggles of that day and my intentions for the day to come. The simple "discipline of showing up", of taking time each morning is nourishing and nurturing my soul.

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... and thou shalt find by sweet experience
that the Lord knows that
and loves and owns that,
and will lead it to the inheritance of life,
which is God's portion.

I have to be honest and say that this part of Pennington's words still hold mystery for me. But I do know that for me the transformation from who I was to who I am now has been a sweet experience indeed, more precious than I can say. More than that, the realization that even in my darkest, most unloving moments, in the midst of deep wrestling, God knows my struggle and loves me anyway. "... God knows that and loves that and owns that..."

I said earlier this evening that I struggle to find words to name and describe the God I am coming to now. All our words and metaphors for God are inadequate and limited, but two phrases have helped me this past year. One is "the More", and the other "the Great 'and Yet'".

"The More" helps me to remember how little I know of God and God's ways; "the Great 'and Yet'" helps me remember how God can break into our lives and hearts and help us to see a way forward out of darkness and despair.

Friends sometimes make fun of what has been referred to as “daffodil ministry”, when a Friend begins their vocal ministry in Meeting with the phrase, “When I was walking to meeting today, I saw the beautiful daffodils...” Yet truthfully, for me, I need only step out the door of my house (or out onto the porch of your meetinghouse here in McNabb) to be overwhelmed by the beauty of the world, the miracle of God’s creation, the knowledge that there is mystery beyond what we know just at our fingertips. One night many years ago, my family and I traveled to the north of Kenya to Turkana land, a remote desert area, where the heat was so intense we could barely move during the day. The building where we were to sleep was made of cement block that radiated the day’s heat into the room at night. So we took our bedding up on the building’s flat roof to sleep outside where it was cooler. In that remote place, there are no lights for hundreds and hundreds of miles. Imagine the stars in that night sky. They were so many, so bright, so close that I had to close my eyes. The starlight was blinding. The wonder of so many stars, so many worlds of which we know almost nothing – on that night I experienced “the More”. It surrounds us even when we have no awareness of its existence. We often speak of “that of God in everyone”. Do not forget the greater reality of God beyond all we know.

The idea of God as “the Great ‘and Yet’” is the idea that Something is able to break in, break through to us and help us to see possibilities that, up until that point, we could not imagine. To me the whispers of Truth said, “Yes, you want to solve all your problems yourself, yes you feel only despair, yes you don’t know a way forward, and yet here is a way you can move...” “God works with what is to bring about what might be.”

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Near the end now, I turn to the beginning. Most often when I run across this Pennington quote, it begins with the line, “Give over thine own willing.” I have at times observed among Friends a tendency to edit out words that make us uncomfortable. The line just before that reads:

Therefore...be no more than God hath made thee.

“...Be no more than God hath made thee.” We live surrounded by a culture that tells us to get ahead, to achieve; we are advised to upgrade our software, get the latest technology. We are not content. We have to be all we can be, have to change the world, we have to make a difference.

It has taken me a very long time to accept with grace what God made me to be; it is an ongoing struggle. Pennington’s words echo those in Psalm 100:

Know ye that the Lord is God;
it is He the that hath made us, and not we ourselves;
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

It’s not a matter only of being no more than God made me, but also a willingness to be stretched into uncomfortable places where gifts I never knew I had can emerge. “Be no more than God hath made thee.” Find your gifts; wait in the light.

Remember Parker Palmer:

Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you.

Remember Isaac Pennington:

There is that which is near you which will guide you.
O wait for it and mind that you keep to it.

Remember Marjorie Suchocki:

God works with what is to bring about what might be.

And remember that we live in God's time, not our time. Sometimes the transformation we yearn and ache for takes time. Rest there in the dark and wait. God is there too.

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