

Loving in the Light: Quakers Response in Times of Crisis

Minga Claggett-Borne – Keynote at 2020 Annual Sessions of South Central Yearly Meeting

Introduction

I'm Minga Claggett-Borne, raised as a Friend in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 60 years ago, and a convinced Friend for 35 years. Join me as we explore "Loving in the Light: Quakers Response in Times of Crisis."

So, this deadly virus was a surprise and a threat. The USA, or occupied Turtle Island,¹ has been in crisis for years. COVID-19 (Corona Virus Disease-2019) is just the tip of humanity's crisis. But in the arc of life, Quakers are asked to find that of God at work during the pandemic. The fear of the pandemic is not the main event to pay attention to. In this paper are hints of how to pay attention to the clarion call of God at work among Quakers.²

For thousands of generations, over 100 centuries, a great tapestry is being woven. Spirit is weaving this majestic tapestry especially during crisis. Today I'll tell a few threads of how Quakers are part of the world's weaving. We, bright beings, are weaving along with the Great Mystery, or the Holy One, Yahweh, the Creator. The first part of this talk are my encounters with the current epidemic. The second part is about evil and how we transform it with the power of love. Evil is something morally reprehensible, it's greed in the midst of hospitals crushed; it's pipelines for the rich; it's bailouts for banks when children lack clean water. The last part of the talk is facing the evil of the southern wall— the domestic war this nation is doing at the Border— with people who have every right to be here. *Let the Words of My Mouth and the Meditations of my Heart, be Acceptable in Thy Sight. Oh, the Light!*³

Journal Writings March/April 2020

March 22 — Every day is a new reality of others suffering, while my body is rolled up safe in a cocoon. We are asked voluntarily to 'shelter in place' which includes more spiritual discipline than a quarantine. Quakers aren't good at following imposed rules.

March 27 — For three weeks I'm sheltering at home. No parks are open, so I run by the Quinibecquin River⁴. If I can't physically be with people, I give thanks for the birds flying, chattering, calling. Animals have more habitat space now that humans have receded into dens.

¹ Turtle Island is the name for North America by many Native Peoples (Iroquois, Lenape, Seneca)

² Quakers have overcome many periods of crisis: in 1660 in England hundreds were imprisoned, in 1800s in the Carolinas when whole villages left for Ohio the diaspora from slavery, in 1950s Bayard Rustin, gay Quaker, jailed as sex offender

³ The Song by the Rivers of Babylon, references the Psalm 19:14 NIV

⁴ This is original name of Charles River in Massachusetts land

Forcing myself inside, I appreciate new joys. I love watching the trees in dialog with the sky. See the amazing billowing clouds. Thank you Divine One.

March 29 — I can isolate myself physically from humans for two months... with difficulty. I still want control of my actions, my comings and goings. Why? I feel childish and whiney. Physically I will stay safe, but emotionally I fight the social control. I'm a Quaker from Maryland, raised a fragrant Southern belle (with many magnolias); and converted into a fierce Yankee clipper ship, with a stiff upper lip during rough seas. How am I now asked to surrender? I pray using Rex Amblers' *Experiments in the Light*⁵.

In this practice of praying, Ambler asks us to form a specific query. So here goes, "Will I break the social code when someone is sick and needs me to change the bedpans?"

In an epidemic confining myself is surely protection of the masses. Would God require me to break human law, our safety code? For instance, I don't like being a war tax resister. I feel God asks me every paycheck to break the law. I do not pay taxes that feed the war machine. We may never know God's will in the times of COVID. I ask for my feet to be guided as I walk in the dark. Maybe I would leave the cocoon to nurse my Mom who is sheltered in Maryland. Even though our path is unknown, we still can receive guidance. I emblaze that fact inside me.

April 3 — I fight loudly with my spouse about how to help each other when sick. I'm angry and afraid. After riotous words, I calm down and apologize. Fear of COVID is real, but I won't act out of fear.

I listen to heartbeats, and breath. I limit my diet of the news, Trump's tirades. I listen to *Al Jazeera*, alternative news. I focus on breath... I start sending a daily report to my far-flung family which includes a photo of ordinary encounters.

I begin other habits, other mantras. I roll my shoulders back and adjust my backbone. I take snippets from yoga: long back, heart open to sun, hands sweep the sky. I invent my litany. I write what I'm grateful for in my diary. Am I grateful for a new life? Does COVID offer new paths away from our acquisitive fever?

COVID-19 offers me new ways to treat ecosystems with respect, to love, to share communion. We, right here, are practicing communion.

Story of Transformation from Evil

When you encounter evil can you see Grace as well? Can we look at the ocean of darkness and see beyond it an ocean of Light? I work in nonviolence, the practice of peace. We don't preach

⁵ Ambler, Rex <https://www.experiment-with-light.org.uk/medits.htm>

but need to explain steps of how to ‘love the enemy’. We don’t preach peace but need to preach the practice of peace. How does centering worship help?

I learned through tough times how to center and contact the Inner Guide.

As a teenager I felt exiled. I went to a Quaker high school. I loved it and I hated it. With my friends we used cocaine and also drank alcohol.... often. As a 14-year-old, the evil wasn’t the overusing of the drug, but the entanglement of hating my body. I didn’t think about self-loathing after 3 beers. I didn’t think at all.

I didn’t believe in Christ, occasionally I felt The Presence. Also at school was music and theatre which I loved. When I threw a vase on the potter’s wheel, I had bright epiphanies of the afterlife (Ripple in still water, where there is no pebble tossed nor wind to blow....” —*Grateful Dead*). I worked, I worried. I laughed with my friends at the George School how we were coerced twice a week to go to worship, like prisoners. I got disappointed and angry. I didn’t make the tennis team. I started flunking calculus. I concluded I was stupid, entwined with rejection. I was angry at Quakers by their hypocrisy. When I saw the evil of self-hate, felt exiled, outcast.

In books I found reprieve from self-loathing. I learned to love the human family: Mark Twain’s *Tom Sawyer* and the elf Legolas, (*Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien), Amy from *Little Women* (by Alcott). I felt baptized in newness. I took books and songs and sketches to Quaker Meeting. Sitting in Meeting I had to hide my writing tablet from the elders. I was raised with Robin Hood, Jane Austin. My revelation was God was sexual. I loved the Allman Brothers, Van Morrison, and Carol King. (*I feel the earth move....*)

I sought a link of my rich inner life and Friends who enjoyed worship. I got out of solitary penitentiary. Evil could not penetrate. Centering (or worship) is not passive. Worship is awareness, engagement and Presence. Take three breaths and do some centering because that relaxing into Divine Embrace is God’s love. Breathe in hope, and slowly exhale. Breathe in gratitude, and then breathe out strength. For one more breathe put your hand on your heart. Feel halo of love and strength. It took me decades to know, really know, that opening my heart and my breath are what I can control. God is a verb, an action. God is always inviting me in. To get rid of the Judge (or God as executor), one needs to step past the words I’m inadequate. OR I am stupid. Breathe in another reality.

God is stepping onto a wet beach at sunrise. God is shucking fresh corn and eating it without cooking. Holy One is sparkle, ripe raspberry... really total senses. God is learning to kayak and enjoying paddling without smoking a joint. Ahhh! I started taking all the love songs and singing them to God. Maybe I felt like an outcast, unloved. Nature was hard but never rejected me. Was I perpetrating the myth that I am an outcast? I was grateful sometimes. I got a

chance to visit New York. Once I created a rich glaze for my wide bowl. Alleluia! I wonder if over the years of deciphering God, did I express enough gratitude. I fear my privilege blinded me.

The opposite of evil isn't good. What did I need as a teenager? I needed to hear of revelation, ways to empowered each other, of the power to change, evidence of new streams in the desert.⁶ Quakers started noticing the Seed inside me but where was guidance?

So, after 350 years Quakers are caught up in ravaging the Earth. Christianity hangs on a precipice. Creation isn't in trouble, but humans are. First, we need to name the evil of climate injustice, racism or being hog-tied by the military might. I see these days as similar to biblical times — Noah and the flood, the Exodus, Ester during the Jewish exile, or Jesus confronting the Roman empire. Next, can we point to God's love at work within this evil empire. The awe and appreciation that should go to birds and soil, and rivers was transferred to the best NFL players, the richest oil tycoons, honoring murder of Osama bin Laden, and the Tiger Kings. Here's a quiz to take to see how conversational we are about Quakers building God's Realm.

- Do Quakers know more about Tom Brady than Elise Boulding?
- We do know that Bob Dylan got the Nobel Prize in 2016, but do we know that Emily Balch, a Quaker, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946? Why?
- We know about heroes like Lincoln, but do we teach about Sybil Jones who prayed with Lincoln and went on to build the Ramallah Friends School in 1869?
- Do we honor Alice Paul, a tenacious Quaker who practiced nonviolence with *Silent Sentinels* in front of the White House and was responsible for the women's right to vote?

I admit it, I also need reminders of the Creation at work. I get blinded and caught in my own complicity with the evil system. *By the rivers of Babylon, where we laid down. And there we wept, when we remembered Zion. ...how can I sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*

I taught First Day School for many years and I didn't teach children that God is at work in fossils, in oceans, in Creation itself. What did I teach young Quakers? Well, I was taught the Creation Story of Adam and Eve. In Genesis the canonized Bible talks of two stories. I adore the first one of creation. On Day One God said, "Let there be Light". Light was separated from the Darkness and it was good.....⁷ On Day Six and it includes two Trees: Tree of Life and of Knowledge. Which Tree do we hear most about? Isn't it the Tree of Knowledge? (Oh yes, maybe Quakers value knowledge more than Life.) The second creation version describes Adam/Eve eating the forbidden fruit and exiled from Eden and with a severe punishment. Unbelievable! The apple is good for you, correct? I know this is a metaphor, yet the action of

⁶ Isaiah 43:19 NIV version

⁷ Genesis 1 NIV

God being exclusive and choosy and condemning is frightening. And Quakers accept that part of evil disguised as God, the magistrate. So along with biblical history and popular culture how can Quakers show the Living Spirit or the joy of God at work.

This story is so different than other creation stories of the Navajo, Seneca, and Hopi. No loving God would boot us from the web of Life. WE can change the carbon footprint all we want, but we have to remove the myth that God punishes. My teen years included a long process of healing myself as I learned that God is much bigger than the Bible. How did I emerge from this judgment told by western culture? Self-hatred is destroying our youth and can be life-threatening.⁸ Images of Spirit, the Seed, the Lamb, a hen gathering chicks⁹ that early Friends use are ways to transform such Self-condemnation.

I needed to turn myself around and try something radical. Jesus' first ministry is "Repent." One interpretation I appreciate is "turn yourself in a different direction, reorient yourself." Why do that? We need to know the facts on the ground, but the other reality is that God is at work. For the Kingdom of God is here now.¹⁰

Another Story

At 24 I had no job and a boyfriend, Rico, who was abusive. I was artistic; a teacher; a vegetarian; a good Quaker. But I was still smoldering inside, not exactly brimming with the Light Within. I was committed to nonviolence, and I didn't have inner peace. Lack of aggression isn't peace. I wanted to move out before Rico attacked me. I prayed and threw pots. I got a great job teaching 8th grade on Navajoland at Rough Rock. YES! I was on top of the world *proud*. I moved 2,000 miles away from home and from Rico.

I moved west by bus. I had no community on the Navajo Reservation, and no car. How does anyone survive in the high desert of Arizona without wheels? I was not doing too much drugs. I had a few friends, with one store in town. I loved the students, but the classroom was hard work. Rico wanted to join me. Out of loneliness I said "Sure." We did plenty of drugs. And he hit me. I loved the beauty of the orange mesa, but I had no wisdom, no song.

I was far from Friends, or any church. I worshipped with Bai Hai's once in a Kiva with Hopis in the village of Oraibi, Arizona. Now, I was born/raised in Maryland by Quakers on the gentle shores of the Third Haven Meetinghouse. It was built in 1684 by European settlers, my ancestors. Quakers were homesteading on stolen land. Third Haven is said to be the oldest frame house of worship still in use in the USA. I don't know about you, but I detect some

⁸ Research shows that youth from 18-24 in US have a high rate of risk of poverty, early pregnancy, suicide and violence. <https://parentology.com/study-americas-most-at-risk-youth-2019/>

⁹ Matt 17:20; Rev 17:14; Matt 23:37

¹⁰ Matt 4:17 Repent in Greek is "metanoia" or change of mind, it implies turning around, facing a new direction.

arrogance. What is it about White Culture that we have to be *the first*? I spent all night worshipping in a Kiva, this place of worship for 1,000 years, in the village of Oraibi. Christianity isn't the civilized hallmark of worship.

Rico was both loving and abusive. He was a hyena that kept coming back until I finally shook him off. How did I exit from the evil of domestic violence? I give credit to Quakers and to girlfriends who took me hiking, they kept me connected. I moved to Tucson to study and work. This community of loving Friends who were praying with me got me out of abuse and drugs. Now I realize the love was my protective shield, when I was in my 20s, I'd say it was my self-determination. That ideal of the self-made man, that self-reliance makes success is quite false.

I became a success because the Quaker community loved me into adulthood. What is this attitude we still fawn over the Declaration of Independence — life, liberty and pursuit of happiness? Seriously! Interdependence gave me stamina and resilience. The idealism of an individual independence is idolatry.

It's funny that I was raised in southern Maryland during civil rights in the 1960s, and living with Navajos in the 1980s, and I was still ignorant of the evil of racism. European-American Quakers work inconsistently on structural racism. The Quaker attitude over 300 years has been, that African Americans are "fit for freedom, not for friendship."¹¹ In the 1980s I joined the Sanctuary movement and learned that we as a people are quite xenophobic. I have a hard time loving myself. In the peace movement we focus on loving our enemy. BUT in Sanctuary I learned about loving those who aren't white. How do we welcome the stranger as neighbor?¹² We each gradually can become 'woke,' but my privilege drags me often into somnolence.

A Story at the Border

My last story is confronting the evil of the Wall on the US southern border. I flew with family down to Tijuana Mexico in 2019. I arrived early Monday to start volunteering. I got a spotty orientation to the medical and legal projects at *Al Otro Lado*, a human rights agency three blocks from the border.¹³ "This project is an airplane on fire." says the director Luis. What an image of terror! I bite my lips. I get the meaning to be that the travelers looking for a safe country are not the only ones in trouble. We, as a nation, are on a burning airplane. At sunset I walked a bit of this wall waving like a sheet of razor wire. Maybe Luis is right.

¹¹ Vanessa July and Donna McDaniel wrote a fascinating tome by this title about Quaker attitudes in the USA around our legacy of racism.

¹² Biblical passages that repeat the theme of Love your neighbor as yourself. Mark 12:31; Hebrews 13:1-2; Matthew 7:12; Lev 19:33

¹³ See their amazing work at <https://alotrolado.org/programs/border-rights-project/>

I never knew what job I'd be called to do each day. Doing a leading is trusting God in your instincts. Mostly I heard the stories of fear and violence. The guests at *Al Otro Lado* were forced to flee for their lives. I was helping refugees prepare their papers, facts, and the information they must produce at their 'credible fear' hearing. I heard heartbreaking stories ...of a Mexican girl kidnapped who watched other children die... of rape,... of parents holding hungry babies. At *Al Otro Lado* we didn't run on money and strength; we ran on heart and breath.

Elias, my 26-year-old son, was my traveling partner, and I had the support of my Meeting. When traveling I really depended on that support. Cambridge Meeting had joined the Sanctuary movement and recorded a minute for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to stop the evil of separating parents and children at the border.

We gave away lots of oranges, bananas and donated vitamins in Tijuana. I muttered to myself, "Is this just a Noah's ark or are we replanting a new Garden?" We did make up 100 peanut butter sandwiches for the 70 refugees that came in daily. Did we volunteers stop evil? Maybe. At the time it wasn't apparent. I helped many women by offering a pregnancy test. When someone was in trauma, I tried to offer them a place to shake out the fear. The guests and I were both far from home, but these refugees were 'chased out.'

I understood the feeling of being exiled. But how can Homeland Security put children and adults in cages? At *Al Otro Lado* these 'cast asides' were helping each other. They insisted that a pregnant woman come to the front of the line at customs. Another offered to babysit a sick toddler, even though they might have been infected themselves. (Hospital workers take note.) The reciprocity in the community was beautiful. And it was for me and for refugees. Luis called it "the Tijuana magic." Our needs were met, a miracle at work. I came to be with these refugees that the US empire treated as enemies. Somehow, I was healed too. They were being Light to each other.¹⁴ I came to share food from my excess, they shared everything they had.

"Be patterns and examples... then you can walk cheerfully over the earth answering to that of God in everyone."¹⁵ Right? We know this. I came thousands of miles to watch the refugees that I traveled to help, help each other. My lesson is to learn, to stay low to the ground.

Also, I found that we in helping refugees, need to travel in pairs. Friends have done this for centuries. Quakers have great traditional practices that confront structural evil like naming gifts, discernment, and clearness process, aligning ourselves with continuing revelation. One experiment is to do an inventory of each of the Quaker practices and see how that erases evil.

¹⁴ On close exam, this is a general statement. Of course, some of the refugees were rather egocentric.

¹⁵ George Fox famous statement asserts that first you are role models, then you are capable of answering another's need.

We can equip ourselves to deal with white supremacy and aggressiveness, even microaggressions. We can do more courageous work if we have a companion. Take some examples of traveling pairs. Paul and Silas. Quakers Mary Fisher and Ann Austen. Abby Kelley Foster traveled with Fredrick Douglas. Friends General Conference has co-clerks like Jan Michel and Liz Yeats. We have ‘valiant’ pairs traveling, not a solitary hero.

By now you may realize that to encounter evil we use different facets of Love conquering hate. In this remaking of Creation today, can we drop the tree of knowledge with its forbidden fruit. After Eve and Adam left the ‘Garden’, angels with flaming swords barred the gate. George Fox had a vision that all of creation arises anew in him feeling the power to pass through them into the Garden. No longer do we live under a curse. In Genesis Two, Creation is the tree of life. “On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”¹⁶

To confront evil, we pray for three ingredients: bravery, vision, and community. We need to move away from defensiveness. We need to move from stopping evil to creating cultures of peace. I can’t do it alone. Nor can you. Let’s move through the flaming swords into an Eden as if our own health depends on it. Let us behold the New Creation. With centering, courage and humble apology, we will create a new Garden of Eden.

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April 2020

¹⁶ Rev 22:2 NIV