

Chapter 6

Faith, Witness, and Community: Virginia, 1993–1998

Susan's and my life over the next half-dozen years was characterized by the interplay of faith, witness, and community. Each of these engaged the others continually, acting either to build up or break down the strength and integrity of all three through the choices and commitments we made in our lives day by day.

We both continued to be deeply invested in the worshipping community in spite of painful relationships in past years. In worship on the morning following Christmas in 1993, Susan offered vocal ministry (which was rare for her) with a strength of emotion that was remarkable. Her voice broke several times during her brief message, and by the time she sat down she was in tears, which continued for several minutes afterward. She spoke in the person of Jesus, inviting each of us to rest our broken bodies in His arms, to be transformed into the beings He had in mind for us to become next. This ministry seemed specially applicable to a family in the meeting grieving over the sudden loss of their husband and father on Christmas Eve, but I soon realized that it was universal.

I was silent, but my own meditations centered around the word *Emmanuel*, "God with us." Until Jesus was born, the wise and religious people of the world knew of "God at a distance," the Lord God Jehovah on Mount Sinai or in the pillar of fire or of smoke. The pagans knew of God at a distance also, on Mount Olympus or in the stars. With the birth of Jesus, the world began to experience Emmanuel, God with us—in diaper changes, games in the town square, trips to Jerusalem, and discussions in the desert. As we, the created, began to experience the Creator among us, we realized that God experienced life among us as well; God could be trusted to understand and empathize with us because God was with us. Christ promised his disciples that he would be with them everywhere and forever (Matthew 28:20). God at a distance had become Emmanuel forever.

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In spite of moments when we felt great spiritual unity with the other members of the Quaker community, there were also times it was difficult to feel that unity. About two weeks after the meeting described above, a Friend who had been mentioned for possible recording in the ministry spoke in First Day worship. She opened by mentioning previous ministry about John the Baptist, misquoted the relevant Scripture passage(s), and went on to misquote the parable in Luke 18:1–8. It troubled me that a Friend who was looked to by members of the meeting for spiritual inspiration should misquote Scripture in this way. If our Bible literacy were higher, this would not trouble me because Friends would be able to sort things out on their own and those who spoke in worship would be more concerned about getting their Scripture references correct. As it is, Friends know so little of the Bible that it is incumbent upon those who quote it to do so correctly.

In Fourth Month 1994, John Punshon stayed in our home while visiting Virginia Beach and Rich Square Monthly Meetings. At Virginia Beach, John spoke about the way in which many Friends look to Conservatives as closer examples of early Quakerism than has otherwise survived, and he briefly described why that might happen. He pointed out dangers in “celebrating diversity” in the way that Friends General Conference Friends do, but he was clear that Evangelical Friends have also deviated from the historic Quaker vision.

John discussed the idea of a “normative” Quakerism: a set of beliefs and practices that should be accepted as standard by the faith community but at the same time not completely binding on every individual Friend. For example, pacifism is a normative Quaker belief, but it would be possible and acceptable for an individual who is not a complete pacifist to be accepted into membership. As long as there is general agreement about what the normative Quaker beliefs and practices are, individual diversity can be tolerated. However, as the consensus about what constitutes normative Quakerism breaks down, our health as a faith community breaks down as well.

John observed that the Quaker periodicals have been dominated by questions “at the margin” of Quakerism posed primarily by those who want to move or expand the bounds of normative Quakerism, either to

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include their own perspective or to exclude some contrary perspective. As a consequence, the Quaker periodicals are not expounding the central themes and doctrines of Quakerism and cannot be expected to do so. These questions at the margins need to be addressed, and perhaps the periodicals are the best place to do that. The point John made was that Friends who wished to see the principles of normative Quakerism preached, understood, and applied could not depend on these media to do that. We would have to be active in the ministry ourselves (in various ways) to find opportunities for direct personal exposition and effective means for delivering our message.

Meeting for business is a good place to observe the health of a Quaker meeting. If we truly believe that there is one Truth that all can perceive, then we will enter meeting for business expecting to reach unity. If we believe that each person has their own truth, then we will not expect unity and meeting for business will reflect that.

John made his way downstairs the next morning at the appointed hour, confessed his need for more sleep, and went back to bed. He appeared again just before time to leave for Rich Square Monthly Meeting; Susan inserted him into the car with a mug of coffee in one hand and fresh muffins in the other.

He spoke at Rich Square about loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and loving our neighbor as ourself. Again, one theme was the importance of a core of beliefs that everyone understands to be normative for the community. It is all right for a croquet player to join a tennis club, John said, as long as everyone understands that this does not change the tennis club into a croquet club.

The annual North Carolina (Conservative) Yearly Meeting (NCYM[C]) sessions in Seventh Month revealed a healthy faith community putting forth new growth—although not all our visitors saw it that way. The state of the meeting reports indicated a thriving yearly meeting with real growth in membership, financial strength appropriate to our needs, and spiritual depth. I was deeply impressed, as were other Friends, by the report from Durham meeting, which had concluded a two-year search for clarity by adopting a minute expressing their intent to accept and process applications for marriage from homosexual couples

in the same manner as those from heterosexual couples. They had taken their time, not outrun their Guide, and by so doing had moved together as a community rather than fracturing.

Several of the Ohio Yearly Meeting (Conservative) visitors to our sessions were quite upset by this report and spoke against it with some feeling. One of them read an extended Scripture passage to demonstrate that homosexuality is a sin, and two others spoke against Durham's decision as unwise and disappointing. They pressed the argument that Durham Friends had moved contrary to the yearly meeting's *Discipline* and therefore threatened the authority of the yearly meeting over the monthly meetings. This was not true; a careful reading of the marriage portion of our *Discipline* reveals a remarkably gender-free document that, to most NCYM(C) Friends, in no way prohibited Durham's discernment. I reminded Friends that the first "discipline" by the Elders at Balby included the statement that they were not setting up rules because "the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life."¹ Durham Friends had followed the Spirit in their deliberations, and their outcome demonstrated it. An Ohio Friend rose a second time to protest that the *Discipline* had already been violated, which Friends thought was directed at me personally, but his comment was given the Philadelphia treatment—resounding silence.

Our clerk proposed that a discussion of the Durham report be added to the next Representative Body agenda. I expressed my general reluctance to have business initiated by the clerk. There was no action needed on the part of the yearly meeting concerning these reports from monthly meetings, and if some member of our yearly meeting had a concern, it would work its way to Representative Body through our monthly meetings, according to good procedure. Friends were satisfied with this, and the clerk withdrew his proposal.

In the concluding meeting for worship of the yearly meeting sessions, I rose and spoke of the nature of God—to hear the cry of God's people, to care, to take sides, to get involved, and finally to get other people involved—as in Exodus and elsewhere throughout the Bible. God's heart must be breaking, I said, to hear the cries of five billion souls; can we believe God does not hear or care? Can we pretend God is not

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involved, not breaking into the world right at this moment? Can we deny that God calls on us to be equally involved on behalf of the poor and oppressed?

This message seemed risky enough as it contained themes of liberation theology. To my dismay, when I regained my seat it was immediately clear that I had not yet discharged my obligations for the morning. A few minutes later, I moved into the aisle and went to my knees in prayer. This was the unusual part of the ministry, for I prayed with greater emotion than ever before in vocal prayer, asking God's forgiveness for ignoring opportunities to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, house the homeless, and visit those sick and in prison. I thanked God for the forbearance and patience to keep giving us new opportunities to be faithful, not because we deserved them but for the sake of God's Son, Jesus Christ. This time, when I regained my seat I knew I was clear and felt the assurance that I had been faithful.

There was no direct response other than a silent squeeze of the hand from Susan. George Parker did rise later in the meeting, reflecting on the ministry he had heard in meeting that morning and concluding that, based on what he had heard this morning, the yearly meeting was in good hands. There was nothing to indicate that he had my words in mind any more or less than those of other Friends who had also spoken. However, Susan commented later that I did not appear to be desiring any approval other than our Lord's.

I felt that if liberation theology was the direction in which God is leading me, and if God was helping me get out of my head and into my heart and gut, then experiences like these—deep emotion on my part and silence from the auditory—were likely to be my lot in the days and months to come. If I continued to be faithful to the Inner Guide and listened to Susan's counsel, I would be able to do what God asked without need for encouraging words from others.

Susan and I continued to work on discerning our calls and vocations, both individually and jointly, in the following months. It seemed clear that I was to use my gifts as a writer in the ministry, and that meant I must structure my life to provide opportunities for that giftedness to be exercised and developed. For the past year, I had used

the 6 a.m. hour to do consulting work at home, but Susan reminded me that I had once reserved this time slot to write *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*. We agreed that I should begin using this time to write once again, before our daily devotions. Susan's only condition was that I bring her a cup of coffee as soon as it was ready each morning, which I was more than willing to do. I intended to spend this time journaling and writing new material for public consumption.

Late in Seventh Month, Susan and I drove to Langley Hill Meeting in McLean, Virginia, to meet with a yearly meeting spiritual formation group. This was the third year I had done this and the second time Susan accompanied me. My chronic back pain was flaring up, so Susan did all the driving and I spent the time with my head immobilized with pillows against the motion of the pickup truck, which made the trip bearable.

After a potluck dinner, we gathered for a period of waiting worship and whatever else the Spirit might bring. Prepared messages continued to be less comfortable for me than the give and take of question-and-answer sessions because the latter format assured me that I was dealing with matters of importance to people in the group. So, after the worship ended, I spoke a little about gospel order and the restored harmony of creation, about the mystery of "Christ died, Christ arose, Christ has come again," and about George Fox's message to seventeenth-century England. Then we moved to questions and answers. Questions came fairly quickly, and the energy level immediately rose. In this case, some of the questions were, "Who was Jesus?" "How do we deal with the contradiction between 'Be thou holy' in the Old Testament and 'Be thou compassionate' in the New Testament?" "Could a non-Christian be accepted into membership in a Conservative meeting?" "What about plain speech and plain dress?" and "What or who is a Christian?" We had entered into worship at 7 p.m. and did not close until after 10 p.m. Several Friends were taking notes during the question-and-answer period, and all seemed to be paying close attention—it seemed to be meaningful for all.

One First Day in Eighth Month, I shared a message in worship recounting the plights of several women (without giving names) who had been tenants at the small apartment building in Norfolk that Ben and I owned through New Dominion Housing and had sought housing there or

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had sought shelter from domestic violence at Samaritan House (where I did the financial record-keeping). The gist of the message was to ask where the gospel was for these women if their circumstances were not changed for the better. I concluded by offering a query: "How are we, as individuals and as a meeting, the body of Christ for these women today?" I did not want to give this message, but it seemed to be the message I was given to share, so I did. I had a sense of having been faithful when I regained my seat. Meeting had been entirely silent before I spoke and was pretty much silent afterward except for a message about the importance of praying for people one couldn't help physically.

Around this time, we began discussions with other Friends and peace activists that led to the formation of Norfolk Quaker House, a military counseling center on religious and moral issues for servicemembers and those considering enlistment. As we did, the need for such a service became clearer and closer. A young Friend shared with Susan and me that he would be eighteen years old in a week, but he felt constrained by his religious beliefs not to register for the draft. Our announcements at meeting had prompted him to come to us requesting guidance.

We talked about the possible and probable consequences of nonregistration and the importance of building a portfolio of documents that would demonstrate his consistent commitment to this position and to pacifism overall. I promised that I would record our encounter in my journal so that I could point to the date it had happened and to this young man's strong convictions at that time, if the need ever came, and told him he should do the same. This was the second young man to seek out counseling since our first meeting, and it seemed like additional confirmation that we were pointing in the right direction.

A key participant in these discussions was Steve Baggally from Norfolk Catholic Worker. One evening, after a wide-ranging discussion about mission, specific activities, organizational structure, and a name for the project, I asked Steve how the Norfolk Catholic Worker House was funded. His answer was simple and without hesitation: "We beg." This made a deep impression on me as an example of trusting in the Lord.

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Part of our discernment process was attending the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of Fayetteville (North Carolina) Quaker House in Tenth Month. After listening to the first set of speakers, Susan said that this was the type of ministry that the Lord was calling her to do and for which she had been prepared over the last year. This seemed to me like the final confirmation that we were supposed to go forward with Norfolk Quaker House, and there now seemed little reason to delay.

The celebration included a bus tour of Fort Bragg guided by a pair of lieutenant colonels from the Delta Force—which at the time did not officially exist. Our primary guide was a friendly, knowledgeable officer who spoke very articulately about life on the base and the military in general. I had to keep reminding myself of the actual content of the things he was describing. For example, he pointed out the marked trees in one area we passed that was used for training exercises. Those trees, he explained, were nesting sites for the red-cockaded woodpecker, which is protected under the Endangered Species Act. When on maneuvers, troops were prohibited from coming too close to those trees to avoid disturbing nesting woodpeckers. That sounds like a caring, sensitive military—until one remembers that the purpose of maneuvers is to prepare the participants to kill other human beings efficiently and effectively.

At the end of the tour, our guide remarked that he had enjoyed being with us but felt a little like Harrison Ford in the movie *Witness* in which Ford takes refuge in an Amish community and experiences profound culture shock. We all laughed together at that, but there was culture shock on all sides. We went into one chapel and saw a large stained-glass window depicting a church surrounded by modern soldiers with automatic weapons and cigarettes dangling from their lips. The wall behind the altar had two large silhouettes of soldiers kneeling in prayer, their rifle butts resting on the ground and helmets on their heads. I was impressed by how well the military had co-opted religion to support its mission and how seamless the integration of all aspects of the military life was. We cannot afford to be Pollyannas and think that we're going to walk up to the military and convince them all to lay down their weapons. The dominant culture is too strong, and we'll be lucky if we are able to

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maintain a consistent witness ourselves. If we are present to help one person through their conversion, that will be success.

Later, the Quakers present held an afternoon meeting for worship on the base. Bruce Pulliam announced we were the largest group of Friends in Fayetteville since 1770.

In Twelfth Month 1994, I was given another hard message in ministry. The Christmas story—thinking of Christ’s family as homeless refugees, as the rural poor—struck me with fresh power, and I began to compare their circumstances with the responses we in the United States make today to the homeless, the refugees, and the rural poor. (President Clinton had just proposed that federal funding for emergency shelters be terminated, California had voted to exclude illegal aliens from all social benefits programs, and the US Department of Defense had announced that it intended to build another nuclear attack submarine.) After some time, I was moved to rise and speak, and I was obedient, though it was not a message I was happy to be called upon to share.

After I regained my seat, there was a deep silence in the room. After some time, a Friend rose in response to the ministry I had offered. I was protected from almost all of what she had to say—I did not hear it then and could not remember it afterward. Other Friends later told me that she took my message personally and defended herself. After the rise of meeting, a seasoned Friend came to me with a fervent look on his face and said, “Thee was favored, Friend. Any time thee afflicts an entire meeting like that, thee was favored!”

For several months, Susan and I had been looking forward to the 1994 year-end retreat at the Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, led by the Franciscan Richard Rohr.² I’d discovered his cassette tapes sometime in the 1980s, and Susan had spent a six-week internship at the center shortly after we were married. His teaching had had a profound impact on us both. I called him a couple weeks before the retreat and described my desire to have an “opportunity” with him while Susan and I were there. I needed some reassurance that my discernment and understanding of liberation theology were correct and, if possible, some guidance about the right use of my gifts.