

13. Not to be discouraged by the great challenges before us: To New England Friends

The concern to write this letter arose in the spring of 2016 after I attended several Friends meetings and committees.

Dear Friends:

More than once in recent weeks, someone has spoken to me of discouragement, even despair, as they confront not only the challenges that come with living a human life but also the challenges of the times. I have spoken such things to others, to myself, and to God, in the quiet. All times are challenging, of course, but the nature of the interlocking systems constructed by, for, or against the more than seven billion people on earth, combined with the wounds and gifts of history and the intricate, beyond-human workings of the world organism, are unlike anything we have seen before.

Moreover, one consequence of our networked lives is that we can hear both the great cries of anguish and the subtle hints of unfolding disarray—perhaps the judgment coming upon us of our social heedlessness and individual inertia or our unfaithfulness by omission. In any case, I am very aware that I am one among many who feels burdened and at the same time called to understand how to live freely, faithfully, hopefully, and truthfully in my time.

In this connection, I have been reflecting recently on this quotation from George Fox's *Journal*:

For the Lord had said unto me if I did but set up one in the same spirit that the prophets and apostles were in that gave forth the Scriptures, he or she

13. NOT TO BE DISCOURAGED

should shake all the country in their profession ten miles about them.¹

When I quoted this in a recent gathering, people chuckled at the small scale of the impact Fox had envisioned—ten miles! Amazing! Quaint! But as I have thought of it over the past few weeks, I find here another tool for addressing the corrosive “spirit of the times”—not the only tool, nor maybe the best tool, but one I need to use to better effect: “not to be more than God would have you be.” This can be understood as a counsel of Quietism and disengagement, but I do not think that is correct.

After all, the Friends who gave such counsel felt they were part of a new phase of God’s world-transforming work, Christ come again in the bodies of his saints. But they were also aware of the facts of incarnation, the partial knowledge that comes with finitude, and the way that our power and our testimony are limited by our divided selves, our many-mindedness, and our temptation to claim what we can envision or can know intellectually but not embody or realize in our life, in our living, acting, perceiving, hoping.

Yet, still they longed for and expected revolution, a top-to-bottom reconstitution of individuals and societies with its motive power and its direction coming from the God who sent the prophets, working through the spirit called Christ, our shepherd, pathfinder, and teacher. They witnessed just such an “overturning” that we, oppressed by possible futures and global news, long for—out of compassion (which strengthens) as much as out of anxiety (which weakens).

Fox’s “ten miles” reminds me to bring into my meditations on concern and action the recognition that my awareness of the global crisis does not equip me to act on a global scale, and *it does not require me to do so*.

MESSAGES TO MEETINGS

I must see as widely as I can and work to understand what my part is—at this moment—in the whole. When John Wilhelm Rowntree prayed, “Lay on us the burden of the world’s suffering,”² he certainly did not mean, “Put the Society of Friends in charge of solving the world’s problems.”

Rather, I understand his words to mean: “Let us see the world as it is, not as we experience it in our favored condition or our little sector of the great globe. Let us not be content with a cheap response to the Ocean of Darkness. In our measure, we have experienced how the Ocean of Light can flow over it, and we are confident in that power, but we know that there is much more growth ahead and that in that growth there is “much to die to,” as Job Scott said.³ Help us see ever more truly, O Spirit of Truth; O Spirit of Love, help us not deny your promptings in our heart; O craftsman God, help us turn our hands to the work that you set before us to do in our time. God of abundance, who yet counts each sparrow and seed as precious, help us walk under your guidance into fulness of engagement, greatness of heart, and our full measure as partners in your ministry of reconciliation and healing!”

Brian Drayton