

How to Walk Cheerfully?

2024 Sunderland P. Gardner Lecture

Margaret Slavin

Canadian Quaker Learning Series

Be patterns, be examples, in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one; whereby in them ye may be a blessing and make the witness of God in them to bless you.

George Fox, 1656

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About this Pamphlet

Sunderland P. Gardner (1802–1893) was an outstanding figure among Canadian Friends. He ministered with great plainness and vigour. Day or night, he was ready to travel in all weather to be with those who were sorrowing. He left behind a legacy of great tenderness. (adapted from *The Quakers in Canada: A History*, by Arthur Dorland)

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Greetings and gratitude to all of you who helped with the development of this talk in spoken and now in written form. To all who sat in on it in person or online, and to readers who now engage with it in the form of a publication of the Canadian Quaker Learning Series, I greet you and I am grateful that you are there. Thank you.

The Religious Society of Friends has been my beloved spiritual community for forty-two years. There have been difficult and confusing moments in this journey, but by and large for forty-two years as I have tested our core practices, what I am here to tell you is that we Friends genuinely have something to offer to our broken, bewildering, self-destructing world. What we are on about as Friends is challenging, but it is not a mistake. Or, since nothing is certain, probably it is not a mistake! And all of it is reflected in this short, familiar passage from the writings of George Fox. Friends are not the only ones who have figured this out, and we are not always exemplary in living it, but I am reporting to you that in my experience, our practice around leadings and around testimonies is a true helpful gift to the times we have landed in.

It has become hard to miss that our planet and our societies are confronting deep evil. As recently as last year, many of us would not have expected that a nation we in Canada respect and consider an ally would commit a ruthless genocide upon citizens who have not harmed them, with no one able to find a way to make them stop. So many of the deaths have been horrific and unthinkable, thousands of children and families choking to death under the rubble, and it keeps going on. I am in daily communication with one family in Gaza, friends of a friend. Their mail delivery got stopped at their border a long time ago, but the





Amira



internet has mostly stayed in place. They send photographs, and a small group of us have watched the children in this family grow up.

You know the story of October 7 last year, and after the shock of that day of death and armed resistance, you can scarcely have missed the war crimes that have continued since then, the atrocities, the targeting of schools and hospitals. In the dusty camps where many of the remaining Gazans live in tents, the adults organize games and festivals to give the children some sense of normalcy and fun. Less than a month ago, adults organized a soccer game on a school yard, and children did turn out for it—in this case I think they were all boys. The Israeli Defence Force dropped a shell on the soccer game. Those boys and their supporting adults are now dead.

In the brutal attacks in 2014 called Cast Lead, we nearly all became aware of four children kicking a ball about on a beach, and the video footage that showed the moment when they all died. We felt shocked. This time, the soccer game massacre hardly hit the news at all.

The other deep evil that I have had to learn over the past three years is the fear and hatred that we Canadians show as a society to poor

people. In particular, to people who have been forced out of their homes and find themselves living on the street or in a tent. I was naive enough, three years ago, to assume that just about everybody I meet would agree that as a society, we need to take care of one another. It has been a terrible learning to discover that no, we fear one another and we see the poor as criminals.

I know that the inequity that has gripped you may well have to do with the Indigenous Peoples of this land or persons living with disabilities or women or racialized careworkers or wherever your own leadings have taken you.

I want to say that it is safe to support one another in actions and attitudes that, in the wider society, really do look peculiar. Actions and attitudes that in fact can stir up discomfort and even animosity in our cohorts and colleagues. It is not a popular view in any Canadian communities that the way to deal with engrained evil and violence is to refuse to kill. To find another way. When we confront deep evil, it feels as if the only right and courageous course is to set out to wipe it from the face of the Earth. That means beefing up our military, doing what is called 'our share' in NATO, and basically accepting that we have to have warriors among us who are trained and supported to kill. Well, as a good slogan recently says: Peace Too Takes Courage. When we take killing off the table as an option, and set out to create a society with strategies and boundaries based on respect and the right to heal, transformation takes place. Light breaks through.

It is also far more effective, and extraordinarily difficult. To wage peace takes even more time and resources than to wage war.

How to walk cheerfully?

To a non-Friend, that question may sound like something out of Monty Python and the Ministry of Funny Walks! But for Friends, our vision is probably not of John Cleese, but of a young man "in old leather breeches and shaggy, shaggy locks," carrying a sturdy walking stick, striding across the English countryside, bearing his message of Light. In this vision, George Fox is smiling, and the question is: why?



The fresh air is good for him but wasn't he living in times much like our own, with changing social mores and a darkening future? He didn't have climate change, but the oppressive hierarchy of British society at that time was inequitable and frequently harsh. Didn't his colleague James Nayler have his tongue drilled through for speaking heresy? Didn't whole families of his followers spend months in jails which were cages piled on top of one another, with shit and urine dropping through from upper levels to lower ones, in a scenario that included children? How can he be walking cheerfully?

We need to recall the point that our Friend Jeff Dudiak made to us recently, that the very word "cheerfully," when interpreted through the lens of four hundred years ago, means something more like "confidently".¹ Being confident can connect with feeling cheerful, but more likely Fox saw himself as trampling down the world and all its vanities—he was walking to a different drummer—and much to my surprise when I looked into this, he was not even outside! He wrote his advice from a dark and fetid prison!



¹ "Understanding Meeting for Worship for Business: Who Speaks and Who Listens?" Canadian Yearly Meeting of Friends, August 9, 2022.

As I understand the tradition we stand in, George Fox rejected the notion that Christ will return in a blaze of glory, preceded by famine and flood. Instead, in his carriage and in his life George Fox preached that the Kin-dom of God is already here: we are the Blessed Community. We have only to open our eyes to see, and we can live right now in the Spirit of the risen Christ. This conviction was and is revolutionary. The powers-that-be of England recognized that immediately. If a man will not take off his hat to his superiors, because he does not recognize master and servant, but sees every one he meets as brothers and sisters, that man is subversive, and Fox was.

In 1656, George and two other Quakers, Edward Pyott and William Salt, set out to preach their good news in the region of Cornwall. It was virgin territory for the Children of Light, and they were not winning many converts. In every village and town, they looked about for the 'sober' people—often they explicitly asked to find the Baptists. They wanted to find 'sober' folk who already considered the spiritual journey to be a serious matter. They would take on the Baptists in arguments about water baptism. Their style was confrontational, not exploratory, and an army captain named Peter Ceely and a justice of the peace called Captain Braddon went looking for them, found them, and demanded that they must swear an oath of allegiance or swear a bond for good behaviour. They refused, and Ceely decided that his best course to remove this societal nuisance was to place Fox and his two friends in the local prison, a noxious place called, then and now: "Doomsdale"!

Fox tells the story as Captain Braddon told it: "When Major Ceely and I came by you when you were walking in the Castle Green, he doffed his hat to you and said, 'How do you, Mr. Fox? Your servant, Sir.' Then you said unto him (and here is George Fox answering that of God in this man he hardly knows, but who can make a difference in how long George will be held in jail): 'Major Ceely, take heed of hypocrisy and a rotten heart, for when came I to be thy master and thee my servant? Do servants use to cast their masters into prison?'"²

² P. 250, *The Journal of George Fox*, Cambridge University Press, 1952.

In Fox's own words in his *Journals*: "Doomsdale, a nasty stinking place ... where the prisoners' excrements had not been carried out for scores of years, as it was said." He goes on, "It was all like mire, and at some places at the top of the shoes in water and piss ... Some friendly people of the town brought us a candle and a little straw, and we went to burn a little of the straw to take away the stink." Their jailer and some others who were charged as thieves were in the cage above them, and the smoke went up into that place. "The gaoler was in such a rage that he stamped with his foot and stick and took the pots of excrements of the prisoners and passed it down a hole a-top of our heads.... [W]e had the stink under our feet but now we had it on our backs. In this manner we stood all night for we could not sit down."³

When we use the metaphor of early Friends having stirred up a lot of shit, it turns out that we mean it.

So when George Fox wrote the letter exhorting you and me to walk cheerfully over the world, he was not striding across the English countryside. He was incarcerated in Doomsdale.

Conditions did get a little better. They actually were allowed out into the village to buy meat but had to return under strict surveillance, and at some point were allowed to cleanse their space. According to the plaque on the present-day Dooms-Dale Launceston Castle, George was there for eight months. He issued several letters and papers from this place. I have trouble imagining how he managed to find clean paper and a quill pen and ink, never mind composing the messages he sent out, but he did. One of them, which he calls "an exhortation to Friends in the ministry," and which includes a warning to "take heed of false joys"—a thought we may want to return to—in paragraph two suddenly moves into the passage that most of us have heard many times: "And this is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you all in the presence of the living God, be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come: that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them.

³ P. 253, *The Journal of George Fox*, Cambridge University Press, 1952.

Then you may come to walk cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in every one; whereby in them ye may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you. Then to the Lord God you will be for a sweet savour and a blessing.”⁴

Written with difficulty in a literally stinking cell.

Fox’s idea of cheer was very specific to getting it right about God. On a day-to-day basis, he sought out travelling Baptists, but the real power he was tangling with was the institutional Episcopal church, the denomination that held serious power in England, and in theory still does. Charles the current king is also Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Although, this most recent coronation explicitly included other faiths, and involved a statement by Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby that specified that the Church of England “will seek to foster an environment in which people of all faiths may live freely.” I doubt that this would have satisfied George, because that free environment still involved headgear: two crowns, not counting the one for Camilla, and Charles performed the only part of the ceremony that is actually required by law, an action that Quakers never do: he placed his hand on a King James Bible and swore an oath. He pledged to uphold the law and the Church of England, along with a pledge that he is a “faithful Protestant.” To George Fox, this ceremony was a dangerous and sacrilegious error, directly resulting in the imprisonment of preachers such as himself, who were walking the land to spread the good news that Christ is risen and you no longer need to pay your tithe to the Church of England or to swear an oath of allegiance. You are free. And anyway, you are bound to tell the truth and not to lie. Only liars need to swear an oath. The oath distinguishes their truth telling time from their more normal, lying time.

The 1600’s were a tumultuous period. Friends preached that the hierarchy of church and state was contrary to spiritual truth. We can organize to take care of one another, but we cannot bow down to any other human being or else we betray the presence and authority of the living God.

⁴ P. 263, *The Journal of George Fox*, Cambridge University Press, 1952.

Cheerfulness comes from confidence, not mirth. It turns out that Fox had little use for laughter as such. In every place he visited, he not only explicitly looked for the folk who understood that we are in trouble, but he even tells one story about a man who irritated him because the man laughed too much. This may have some connection with the notion of “false joy” mentioned earlier. I never have thought that George Fox was much fun. But that makes it even more intriguing that he calls on us to walk cheerfully.

Now we have a context, perhaps, to think about this word. The days we live in now do not lend themselves to cheer. It can even seem outrageous to allow ourselves to enjoy life, knowing that in several places in the world, people are living in prisons and circumstances horrifyingly similar to Doomsdale Prison in 1658. You may be aware, day to day, of what is going on in Ukraine and in Russia, in Yemen or Sudan. For twenty years now I have been following the daily life of this family in Gaza, friends of a friend. Through generous donations from a network of friends, and using GoFundMe for special needs, we have been able to send them a little hope in the form of money and emails—until this past October 7. Their little house in Gaza City, the rooms and yard of which have become so familiar to us through photographs, is now a dustbowl of rubble.

The family landed first in an UNRWA—United Nations Relief and Works Agency—refugee centre, totally overrun, with a thousand people to one toilet. They moved on to six families crowded into their married daughter’s apartment in Khan Yunis and then to living in a tent in a camp near Rafah, a site which has rapidly become a huge garbage heap. They dig pits for makeshift outhouses, a struggle which has never stopped. Access to water is the other daily struggle, along with access to anything like food. They have been grinding up animal feed to make flour. Pets and donkeys have starved to death, along with thousands of people, many lying in the streets and becoming food for the dogs. The camp near Rafah has taken on the noxious stink of the Doomsdale.

How can I walk cheerfully over the world, in Canada, in 2024? How dare I? Is this the end times? In an ironic, modern inversion, the corporations that our nations have set up to control and save

the planet are in the process of vanishing. The International Seabed Authority was established in 1994 with the dual mission of authorizing and controlling development of mineral-related operations in the international seabed and also of protecting the ecosystem of the seabed, ocean floor and subsoil beyond national jurisdiction. Uncontrolled mining of the seabed not only wreaks havoc on the ocean as a carbon sink and home to rare and diverse species, but also disastrously warms the water. In the past few years, the International Seabed Authority has capitulated to the forces who want to mine the sea.⁵ Very big players now probe the ocean depths, and with their machines they pluck the minerals which lie there. When the sea reaches 21 degrees, sea life comes to an end. With the end of the cooling oceans comes the end of temperatures on land that can sustain human life. When the oceans go, so do we.

Already many of us are dying or dead, many risking everything to cross bodies of water and get to Greece or England or trudge through deep snow trying to cross the border into Canada, which recently led to at least one family freezing to death out of sight.

Two issues have taken over my life in my old age, both against the background terror of the climate emergency. George Fox believed he was living in the end times, and now so do we. My two issues are: homelessness, and Palestine/Israel. Yours may include newcomers in Canada, truth and reconciliation, gender fluidity, mental health challenges and the whole psychiatry industry, forestry practices, little kids, or species extinction and the saving of animals. Or the opioid crisis. What have I left out? American politics. We rush off to Meeting, usually on a Sunday. We sit in silence with all this injustice circling in our heads and hearts.

How can we dare to walk cheerfully in these days when it seems more and more probable that the end of human existence as we know it is coming more quickly than anyone predicted, while the rulers of the world continue business as usual, bringing it on?

⁵ *Deep Rising* (documentary film) directed by Matthieu Rytz

I have had to redefine hope, and I think I understand the experience George was pointing us to as a fundamental cheer that allows us to confront deep evil. If you define “evil” as that which separates us from the Light, then the question becomes where and how to look for that Light.

To me we can find direction in the quote with which we began: “... [W]alk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.” Answering that of God is a matter of listening to leadings, and it is a matter of responding with the words and actions of truth.

The first Friends’ Meeting I ever attended was in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1962. A man rose there, answering some nudge I did not yet understand. He spoke with confidence about a delegation he had participated in during the preceding week, straight to some weighty politician in Washington DC, raising concerns about nuclear testing in the atmosphere. It was still a year or two before I became aware that there would be strontium 90 in the bones of any children I might bear and that, because of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, those things had changed forever. I was glad, though, that somebody from a religious group was on it and doing something about it. I had grown up in the United Church of Canada, and although that church has long since exercised an admirable political presence in the public scene, at that time I had never heard of men from the United Church forming a delegation to confront politicians about an issue like this. In that New Haven Friends’ Meeting, being faithful to Spirit in 1962 was already quite normally seen as travelling with a delegation to speak truth to power.

It was twenty years between my first Friends’ Meeting and the Sunday morning in 1982 or so that I felt pushed in through the door of the Meetinghouse in Ottawa and, in a word, joined Friends. I knew from that first Meeting that I had come home. If they didn’t want me, too bad, because I was not going away. A year later, we made it official. I always remember a comment from our late Friend Peter Harkness who was on my committee for clearness for membership. “Well, Margaret, it sounds as if this is the next step for you right now” — with a bit

more that said to me that possibly in the future Spirit might lead me differently. “Don’t they want me?” I wondered. A step into some different religious or other community was within the understanding of Friends. For the time being, then, I was accepted into membership. So far this membership still fits. Along with other seekers, I find comfort and sustenance in Meeting for Worship. Additional meetings, for Business, for Clearness, for Care, for whatever seems called for, offer other ways to find the Light as we seek together to sense leadings, to take the next steps.

The basic conundrum is whether cheerfulness simply shows that you don’t understand the seriousness of our predicament. But in Fox’s advice is the fundamental fact that in God’s provenance there is only joy, only hope. Death has no dominion. Something is going on and it is utterly beyond our grasp. It is not a “plan” as such but an inevitable unfolding. We are part of it, but we are not in charge of it. We can swing our legs one after the other down the snowy sidewalks and the walking trails, propelling ourselves forward in the joyful—or at least cheerful—confidence that it can all work out. Our part is the forward motion—the walking, knowing that there is that of God in every person we meet, and greeting that: “answering” it: whether that means you are hanging a banner from a bridge or taking a few chocolates to a friend. Or for some of you, perhaps, standing in the road with the Wet’suwet’en. Or fussing about how to get Faith and Practice translated into French. Inclusion. Respect for the fact that our very perceptions and senses differ. Our testimony is not Equality, but Equity.

If you can actually believe that in every person you meet is a compassionate soul who would not hurt a fly, that belief takes you a large part of the way. You have laid aside judgement, for one thing. You are not laying aside common sense. But you start from the assumption that what presents itself as ruthlessness, cruelty, ignorance, hating and fear is actually pain. Pain and grief. Pain and grief have misshapen this person’s instinct for caring, and made them into a being whom, push come to shove, they themselves do not respect. But you do. I do. I respect that you are still standing, still trying to protect your family from the ravages of people whom you see as criminals and drug addicts,

but whom I see as simply poor, disabled by their own pain or fear or terrible circumstance. With this reminder, I find it easier to search for solutions that will benefit us all, not just those on one side or another.

That said, the fact is that George's way of walking over the world appears really different from mine. I respect that of God in every one and mostly I really do try to answer it, and my own experience is a lot like what he said in that exhortation: I feel usually that the person picks up on my respect and actual sincere enjoyment of who they are, beyond our differences, and that indeed it helps them think better of their own selves, which results, as George says, in a blessing for me too. All good.

But gracious. I do not use some of the language which came naturally to him and which may well have contributed to his many times of being held in custody. I do not, at least so far, say to some of my City Councillors, "Take heed of your hypocrisy and your rotten heart!"

George does not seem to me to be very good at "I" statements or "owning the problem," or at asking questions. These skills came later in the evolution of the Quaker movement. If I had been in George's position and feeling feisty, first I would smile. Then I might say something like: "I actually have a problem with your calling me your master and saying that you are my servant. . . . I mean, do you think that a servant would cast his master into prison?" I can't quite hear myself suggesting to the officer that he has a "rotten" heart. Isn't that pretty close to namecalling? It doesn't follow the first rule of nonviolent communication, which is to state facts. History does not tell us the physical state of Major Ceely's actual heart.

I must admit, however, that the record shows that Fox's "answer" to the officer did break through the false relationship they were both in, and it made the officer think. In a society built on class differences, Fox's "answer" was experienced as an actual blow. Ceely charged Fox with having struck him with his hand, of having given him "such a blow as I never had in my life." When the matter came before a judge, no one would support the Major's charge. The upshot was that the judge fined the Friends thirty marks each for not taking off their hats, and that was the end of it.

I think we get the point, though. To answer that of God in every one you meet is serious business. To live as if we are equals and refuse the easy distinctions between homeless people and landowners, white skinned and coloured, university-educated and dropout, sane and shamanic, differently abled and abled—to walk in the blessed kindom as if it is real and among us, is to stir up a lot of shit. According to George Fox, it will make you cheerful.

How to walk, first of all, and not collapse? That is the question I want to spend the rest of our time on. How to walk cheerfully? How to keep the forward momentum, grounded as it must be on this actual Earth, and not collapse or cower, get under the bedsheets and stay there, or disappear into a fantasy world, easily accessible through drugs? How not to disappear down a rabbit hole of addiction? Crack or video games or doomscrolling on the internet? It has never been so hard to stay in the real world, to stay non-virtual.

What is this God thing we are supposedly answering, from whence comes all that is left of our hope?

I don't know all of these answers, but I do know that my forty-two years as a Friend have given me some useful experiences and clues.

One substantial actual walk, the one that has influenced all my more recent efforts, was more or less literal. I set off, not walking but on the Greyhound bus, on the morning of January 10, 2004, and over the next two years and a bit, I followed a leading to visit every Friends group in Canadian Yearly Meeting, and if possible to be there for Meeting for Worship. How did that happen?

We have all heard about leadings, that strong urge or nudge that your direction lies in a certain choice, a certain turn that perhaps was not where you thought you were going to go. During the time that I lived on Vancouver Island, I was inspired by the story of our Friend Jerrilynn Prior, a medical doctor and researcher who was practising in Vancouver, and who followed a leading to the Supreme Court of Canada—twice!—in a very admirable attempt to create a trail that would allow others who, like her, cannot in good conscience pay that portion of our taxes that supports the military. That story took years and created a piece of history, even though in the end it did not bring down that barrier.

The leading which came to me was much less onerous than that one, but nevertheless it changed the shape of my life. If you are going to walk cheerfully and confidently, answering that of God in every person that you meet, it may help if you also have a sense of leading, that this is where you are led to go, no matter whether or not your friends and family approve. (Although my family and friends were fine!) You cannot know that you are doing the will of God. If you think you do, if you think that you have God by the tail and you know it beyond any question, then you are ipso facto on the wrong track. You have left faith behind. The Sunday in 2002 when the leading to travel began to stir, turns out to have been a significant one. Several things had opened me up to new thoughts.

In preparation for telling you about this, I rooted back through old minutes from the former Peterborough Allowed Meeting, looking for that particular Sunday. I had a vague memory that some Friends from Wooler had met with us for worship that day. We in Peterborough were under their care, but they were even fewer in numbers than we were, and so it was a very special occasion when they came to visit with us. I found the minutes for October 6, 2002. I had not remembered that the Wooler Friends also stayed that day for Meeting for Worship for Business. Perhaps the matter which had brought them to us was an agenda item on Financial Matters. Our Clerk was John Hillman, and I was Recording Clerk. The minute begins: "The Clerk raised the question of what kind of financial obligations Peterborough Allowed Meeting needs to be aware of, since we are under the care of Wooler Monthly Meeting. . . . Tim Benson explained that CYM has asked us to increase our quota by 15%." This was heady stuff for our tiny Allowed Meeting, as was having nineteen people present for our Meeting for Worship for Business.

It happens that October 6 is also the birthday of my second child, and so now I see that the visit from Wooler was one part of a heightened sense of awareness for me on that Sunday. I lived mere steps from the Traill lecture hall, in a rented apartment that I was becoming aware that I could no longer afford. I was making a transition from a

busy and engaged and happy life in Victoria, B.C., to the same kind of life in Peterborough, with significantly less financial security.

During Meeting that morning, I had been visited by a recurrent thought or urge, and it was still fussing at me as I took down those minutes after our potluck lunch. Who else is out there in the Religious Society of Friends in Canada? I knew about Ottawa Friends and about Friends in Victoria, and now the basically two families, the McMechans and the Bensons, who had held together a presence in Peterborough for nearly fifty years. I had met the Friends from Wooler Monthly Meeting who attended that Meeting on October 6, 2002, because they were the same people who had taken me in one terrible Sunday a few years previous, when I had flown in from Victoria to visit my mother who was in hospital and was dying, and she did die. I was staying on for the funeral in her beloved United Church, and that Sunday I desperately wanted to sit with Friends. I phoned Elizabeth and Rick Rolston, using the CYM directory to find them, and they picked me up from my sister's and wafted me to the old Meetinghouse in Wooler, and to silence, potluck and Friends.

You can see that there was quite a nexus of emotions and relationships from my life as I worshipped in the silence that morning in the Traill Lecture Hall.

So that may explain it. Either I was more open to leadings, or else the sense of leading came from the already-existing emotions.

A word about our choices: we cannot know the outcome. Just as we can never be certain about our leadings, we also cannot be certain about the outcome for better or for worse, of the choices and times we are in. Scientists regularly give us the results of their modelling for the future. Most of the time, the collapse of eco-systems is found to be happening faster than the modelling suggests. However, the combined effect of the millions of tiny decisions worldwide is too complex to say that we know. We think we know, but we are always in the I-don't-know space. As we heard with an earlier SPG lecturer, Caroline Balderston Parry, the I-don't-know place is a fertile, spiritual place. Below is a poem from Caroline's last collection, *Turbulent Times* (p. 65), and at the end of it there is one thing the poet does know.

The Sea of Spirit

Despite my strange resistance, doubts,
some stubborn denial, false self-reliance,
Spirit is a wide, persistent presence,
sometimes insistent: breathe this in, waves
of your goodness, life's abundance, growth.

Although I may often fail to feel or see
My deep connection, the flow—yea, Sea—
Of Spirit is clear, continuous, near,
Washing through my hours of small fears,
Unceasing, vast here—and ours, I know.

So the poet knows that the Sea of Spirit is “ours.” Does that mean that Spirit is an area of the human psyche or brain, limited by but accessible to every human being? Or does that mean that Spirit, although larger and different from “us,” is there for us? It is a resource? In that sense, it is ours. It may be a resource for other creatures and planets and constellations too.

So, that Sunday the Sea of Spirit may have swept through me, or my physical brain and body may have invented the whole experience. It wasn't all that dramatic: it was just persistent. Caroline's poem says: “Spirit is a wide, persistent presence,/sometimes insistent.”

I went home. I noted that the feeling or thought continued to niggle at me: I could visit all the Quaker groups in Canadian Yearly Meeting—and be there for worship. For what reason? I knew a little about travel in the ministry. I had observed Connie Mungall's cross-country travels on a theme of peace, and Gale Wills' persistent visits in the name of preserving our manner of doing business together. Later I would find out about John and Helen Stevenson, and their absolutely Spirit-led travels in their RV, staying as long at each Quaker stop as felt right. In my own reflections, I was far into making connections between what I was learning and experiencing about the writing process, and the parallel learnings about expectant silence. I had just begun to wonder about the rush that came with work on social justice, and to

wonder whether all three were the same thing—were they the rush of Spirit? Did God leave tracks as she passed through like a wind, and could I get better at tracing them? Maybe exploration was the reason I was experiencing this dipstick idea of laying down my business when it wasn't supporting me properly yet anyway, after the disruption of my move across the continent from Victoria, and hitting the road. I figured that it would take at least a year to get to every Friends' group in Canada. I didn't know yet that there were 62 of them and that, what with trips back home for supposed rest and respite, the journey would take two years. Of course it did occur to me that I might just be looking for a way out, as the writer-in-residence gig at Trent was over and my idea of bringing my writing classes with me as online coaching was not, so far, earning me enough to live on. Something had to give.

So I approached my Meeting, which was too small to have a Ministry and Council, and I asked for a Committee for Clearness. There was an air of bemusement when I brought the request, and I felt it too. It felt as if I were asking for a serious conversation with folks about a sort of dream—a passing thought—a feeling—not what the outer world expects: a plan, with timelines and goals and measurable results. I truly had no plan.

You could call the request for a Clearness Committee “walking.” You could call it keeping your feet on the ground and placing one foot after another, so that you keep moving forward. Clearness is just what it says it is: after a while, things become more clear.

The Clearness Committee in Peterborough said that they felt that the urge to visit among Friends was of the Spirit; that I would be a suitable visitor; that the exploration of connections among creativity, spiritual journey and passions for social justice and social change—that those thoughts were interesting but in their opinion not part of this leading, and they hoped I would wait for a year, because the Hillmans would be away on sabbatical, and my home Meeting needed my presence.

Out of that clearness flowed a lot more: do not lay down my online business, but continue it; do search for an income property where I can live too, and pay out my once-in-a-lifetime windfall from the sale of the

marital home in Victoria and move into it. The clincher was when my son Ted told me that if these Quaker travels did happen next year, that he was willing to act as my property manager while I was gone.

Deal.

At the CYM level, further clarity flowed: Canadian Yearly Meeting of Ministry and Counsel heard about the proposal, and offered a further committee for clearness at CYM gathering that year, which would have been August 2003. Did I feel any leading toward concern for children in our Meetings, they wondered. Well, not exactly, but I was willing to take their concern on, and to report back. I was just beginning to notice that the child population of Meetings was plummeting, and that it is not sensible to expect Spirit to continue to pull our Meetings into being if there is no room for little ones, and incidentally their parents. Spirit may not always operate out of common sense, but still it was a consideration I was glad to take on. I could see fundraising in my immediate future, as I had no idea how this visiting would be paid for. As the CYM M&C concluded its session with me, someone pointed out that there was more than \$12,000 accumulated in the Travelling Ministers Fund, and so there was no reason why I couldn't leave more or less immediately. So I did. I posted a note on my website, closing down my business until I could be back, I arranged with son Ted to collect the rents and take care of the maintenance of what was now my income property, I bought a secondhand suitcase with wheels, Way opened for care for my cat, and I got on the Greyhound bus on January 10, 2004.

I definitely felt cheerful.

The opportunities to answer that of God in persons I met started right away with my seatmate in the ride to Toronto. She was a woman on a mission, and by the time we reached Toronto, she was finalizing plans to write a book. I had not understood until that conversation the vagaries and exploitative nature of Canada's immigration system. My seatmate filled me in. The bounceback blessing that Fox described started happening right away. If "answering" is "listening with respect, and asking questions," I could see that my listening ear was a blessing.

People tell one another the darnedest things to the bump and roll of the wheels of a bus! I had begun two years of intense experience where “the witness of God in them” would “bless” me!

One outcome from the travels that I thought I could control was to write my own book about these people in Canada called Quakers, this spiritual community with a four-hundred-year-old commitment to peace. I set out to write journals about the travels, public weekly journals that I posted by email, and private scribbles where I tried to make sense of it all. In the end, that book never happened. The journals, however, together with some of the photographs, are on [quaker.ca](https://quaker.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/margaret-slavin-travels-in-the-ministry.pdf) at

<https://quaker.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/margaret-slavin-travels-in-the-ministry.pdf>

We are now up against the hard nut to crack, which is who or what is this God thing we are supposedly answering? And how do we do it in these circumstances? Do we really believe that there is that of God in Benjamin Netanyahu? Yes, I guess so, since I worked it out years ago for Adolf Hitler. Adolf failed grade four. There is a photo of him a year later, kids all around him staring proudly into the camera, young Adolf literally a head taller than anyone else in his class, and looking gloomy and humiliated. Humiliation sets people up to be ripe to entertain dangerous ideas, and to follow very dangerous leaders. I am not sure that shaming an oppressor is helpful, given that it is the oppressor’s own humiliation that has likely led to this behaviour. Back around 2011 or -12, Friend Maxine Kaufmann-Lacusta was travelling a bit on behalf of her book, *Refusing to be Enemies: Palestinian and Israeli Nonviolent Resistance to the Israeli Occupation*. She organized a workshop in Ottawa Meetinghouse, and I went to it, and among other great people I met Corey Balsam, then a rather new National Coordinator of Independent Jewish Voices. I heard about Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions and I picked up a button to wear that reads BDS YES.

Back in Peterborough and with our monthly Vigil for Peace, I was again very aware of our Jewish support for peace, as well as Christian and Muslim and specifically the support of the Abraham

Festival committee who often brought their banners celebrating all three Abrahamic faiths to that street corner. We still have a sign that reads Salaam/Shalom/Peace. I was aware that there was no Jewish person whom I knew who was not experiencing intergenerational stress because of the Holocaust. I brought copies one day of the drawings of one of the children I knew in Gaza, drawings of bombs falling and people dead in the street. I scotchtaped them to a War Box we had going in those days—which had a sign saying “Think outside of the box!” One of our strong supporters let me know that she had to think about whether to come back, with the accusation of those children’s drawings on the box. She did come back, and I did not feel that this was something we could discuss. My friendship with the family in Gaza was real but I had never actually met them. Her wariness around the politics of Palestine/Israel was personal and not necessarily rational. Another Jewish acquaintance who seemed to me carefree and open to truth explained to me one day that to be a Jew means that you know that everything can change in a moment. One day you are living normally in a free society, and the next your own government is rounding you up by law and with massive societal support.

It’s only this year that I have begun wearing that button, and I wear it now most of the time. “What’s BDS?” people ask. “Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions,” I say. “It’s the only thing that works. You can tell because Israel gets so upset whenever a celebrity or a sports hero refuses to perform in Israel. It hits them in their economy and that catches their attention.” But already the conversation is over. “It’s complicated,” is about all people say. And it is. Although since October 7 of last year it has become much less complicated. After seventy-five years of humiliation, terrorizing and oppression, Hamas soldiers dynamited their way through the wall and erupted into the site of a rave, guns blazing. Their plan was to take hostages, and they did. By day’s end they were back in Gaza, and so were 100 and some live hostages. Some 1200 Israelis were dead, some from friendly fire. Initial stories of beheaded babies were quickly debunked, and it is unknown so far how many of the other graphic accounts were plain

and simple propaganda. The death toll of Palestinian civilians, though, was accurate from the start. Videos arrived from our friend of people pulling little kids out of the rubble of concrete houses, little intact toddlers in their overalls and shirts, pale and dusty and totally okay, except they were dead. The numbers grew beyond belief. The family we knew went to Khan Yunis in the south, where it was supposedly going to be safe. Six families crowded in, helping one another and making do. The women mostly stayed indoors, minding the littlest ones and rolling out flatbread whenever they could buy flour. The men and young boys strung pipe to bring in water, dug pits for toilets, scavenged wood for outdoor fires for cooking.

Here is a portion of the manifesto of Independent Jewish Voices:

We hereby reclaim the tradition of Jewish support for universal freedoms, human rights and social justice. The lessons we have learned from our own history compel us to speak out. These principles are violated when we allow an occupying power to trample the human rights of an occupied people. Palestinian inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza, living under Israeli occupation and military blockade, face appalling living conditions, with desperately little hope.

I want to show you a moment of cheerfulness. It is from the time when the six families were managing to live together in Khan Yunis, before they had to split into two different tent sites along the road to Rafah. Water, of course, is the prime basic necessity, and much of the outside work was the search for water and getting it back to where they were staying. Incredibly to me, since I haven't been this close before to war, the banks still function. We can wire money through the credit union downtown, and several days later, after it lingers in New York City while somebody at Goldman Sachs collects interest on it, the money turns up in our friend's account. When he could find a big plastic container of potable water, he could pay for it. Prices shot up on the black market, and repeatedly he told us, "Don't believe it if they say that aid is getting through. No aid is getting through." Young lads arrived at the place they were staying, being pulled along on a cart



by a tired donkey. With them came bright yellow containers of water. The idea was to tie a rope to the container, rig up some kind of pulley upstairs, and lift the container the way they used to do at home in Gaza City, get it up to the second floor or maybe even the roof. Then you can run a plastic pipe and get some pressure going. Something like that. Among the photos that got through is one of a hefty, grey-haired man who turned out to be our friend's older brother. He is hauling on the rope. The container is starting to rise. Helping him is Amer, his twelve-year-old nephew. Amer is one of two of our friend's eight children who are already suffering so acutely from PTSD that they are besieged by hallucinations. Before October 7, Amer was on medication to control the waking dreams that disturbed his schoolwork and often made it impossible to think. He's not on any medication now. The pharmacy shelves are bare. But he is helping his uncle with a crazy task that happens to be absolutely crucial to everyone's survival. Over here behind the camera is Amer's brother Mohammed, age 29, who at 17 aced a certificate course in photography. Mohammed catches a moment, a bit blurred but a moment worth the catch. Just for a second, with explosions still going on around them and death a possibility in every moment, uncle and nephew exchange a smile. They're on an adventure. They're having a moment of success. For just a second, there is cheer.

Are they answering that of God? They seem to think so. I am puzzled and awed by other videos that keep coming out, of men at moments when they have every expectation that the next bullet is for them. And yet here comes that cry, that Muslim cry of faith: There is only one God and it is Allah. To Allah we submit. Or: Allah is sufficient. The cry is desperate but it is loud and it sounds, of all things, grateful. Here in Peterborough, I meet my Muslim friend from the Abraham Festival and I say to her, "As of this morning they were still alive," and she says, "By the grace of God."

"Yes," I say, wondering what on Earth I mean. Do Muslims still believe that God is an entity pulling all the strings, and we live or die according to his whim? And that is all right? Probably many Muslims do. Certainly many Christians put their trust in that same God. I catch myself saying "Thank you Jesus," when I am pretty sure that Christ risen among us is not actually paying attention to whether or not I am safely crossing a busy intersection or avoiding a treacherous piece of ice. I don't believe in that God at all, as far at least as I know.

What I do believe, and can't unbelieve this even though from time to time I try, is that something is going on. There is a presence and a power infused into every scenario that pushes things along willynilly in the ecology of this planet and of the universe. We humans are one teeny part of what is going on, and we play our role, but the whole story is so much bigger than we are. Also we know now, at least if we are paying attention, that humans are not at the top of the heap. We made a mistake. At least, some of us did. Indigenous folk mostly seem to get it right: the animals came first, and the birds and insects and fish, and then we humans learned from them, and we came along too. When we take the time to continue our learning, we survive better in all ways. When we take the time to see the divinity in every newspaper headline and every dictator and every babe in arms—well, this is not a fantasy, but a portal into deeper and wiser reality. The next person you meet may have the answer you need this moment. No God you want to know about has sucked the bright life out of thousands upon thousands of children in Palestine.

But those deaths fall within some kind of ecology, and this is the way, perhaps, to say it: nothing happens that cannot be used. Nothing happens outside of the provenance of the conscious Sea of Spirit that flows “clear, continuous and near.” When I reject that thesis, and say no, that what I feel is absolutely nothing other than random physics and chemistry, banging together without rhyme or reason on a planet that can’t last much longer, and its beauty is an illusion that your brain cells are just programmed to see—the honeybee sees a really different world, with lurid colours you don’t even find attractive, and so how can you say there is a God? Why would you? Well, why wouldn’t I? Not that God, not the one who chose which child to take and which one to grant further life—for me that is BS. Not that God, but this one. Here. This God arrives full of choice.

On that basis, I look at the person before me and I take for granted that they have the living God somewhere in there. And I speak to that. I answer it.

I haven’t said much about the tiny homes project that took over my life three years ago. The idea is to provide sleeping cabins, transitional housing for a few people who have become chronically homeless, and to offer them the stability and support they need to move on to permanent housing. The only reason that you would oppose a little community of sleeping cabins in your neighbourhood is that something has made you scared, and I would like to talk with you about that, and see what we have in common, and how we can accommodate one another on the face of this beautiful and disappearing Earth.

Have we covered it?

There is only one truth. Either there is a hand at the end of my arm, or there is not. Either there is a mysterious sense of accompaniment that cannot be denied, or there is not. I am not going to get into philosophies that propose parallel contradictory realities. Paradox, yes. BDS, yes. Gender fluidity, yes. But the God you don’t believe in is the same one that I threw out of my brain stories because of the Holocaust. If God could have stopped that from happening, she would. She didn’t. So it follows that she is not the kind of being who can do that. She

can't stop Netanyahu from obliterating Gaza, or she would. But she can use it. She has used this kind of thing before and she will use it again. There is another way to do things. It starts with a commitment to quit planting the seeds of war. Instead, walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one. And you will find, quite possibly to your great surprise, that you have become a blessing to them and certain things are turning around. By making the witness of God in them, with a true curiosity as to who this person before you really is, what makes them tick, you may even find that, as George said, it bounces back—and blesses you.

The basic conundrum is whether cheerfulness simply shows that you don't understand the seriousness of our predicament. But in Fox's advice is the fundamental fact that in God's provenance there is only joy, only hope. Death has no dominion. Something is going on and it is utterly beyond our grasp. It is not a "plan" as such but an inevitable unfolding. We are part of it, but we are not in charge of it.

