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The Empire Is Powerless

Quakerism is desperately needed in these times; not because it's any worth in and of itself, though it may be that, but because we need some orientation to understand who we are, what we are doing here and where we are going. And we need a powerful Quakerism that draws on the wisdom of our ancestors who forged paths through similar wildernesses - developing practices and understandings that shook the foundations of the world and brought new relationships and new powers to bear within themselves and in the world around them.

The facade that the industrialized capitalist world has created - the illusion of continued progress and exponential growth, the lie that materialism can fill the empty hole in our human hearts, the fantasy that getting an education, a stable career and a comfortable retirement equals the pursuit of happiness, and the delusion of individualism - is crumbling. The millennial generation and those younger know that this way of living, and the economic, political and spiritual foundations that underpin it, are no longer sustainable or even tenable. Climate catastrophe and a ubiquitous culture of white supremacy have unmasked the powers that be and the ways of being that these powers lull us into.

This way that the world currently exists has been described in many ways. Biblical metaphor and early Friends simply called it 'the world'. Here I'll call it The Empire. Of course when I say Empire I mean all the outward things of empire; the sprawling military power of the United States to dominate and control other countries, their economies and people, and of course their oil supplies. It includes the genocide, slavery and colonialism that extracts resources and labor through crushing oppression. And it includes the pernicious ways that the owners of capital have designed to control and extract an ever increasing amount of wealth from the rest of society through consumerism, labor and interest based debt all backed by the implicit, and sometimes explicit, threat of state sanctioned violence. I also mean the insidious ways that the Empire has trained us and re-oriented our inward landscape as well. By training us that we are rugged individuals who should not seek help or deep dependence on community and other human beings, and shaming us from showing up as our full and powerful selves, whether at work, in our families and intimate relationships, or in our Quaker meetings. Internally we carry the patterns and wounds of patriarchy and white supremacy which do the Empire's bidding of oppressing ourselves and one another in order to capture the illusion of control that we hope will one day will make us feel secure.

In short, the Empire is a totalizing system of control, or to use theologian Walter Wink's term - a domination system.

The Empire has of course figured out how to sprinkle around enough of the goodies of "progress" to keep the middle and working classes in the thrall of the system and creating the illusion of security. It has trapped some of us with many things too: deflating wages and, the

petit-bourgeois delights of large homes in nice suburbs and gentrifying cities, cheap and easy travel whenever and wherever we may want to go to consume something of the 'exotic', mind-numbing television and movies and pop culture that lure us into a sense of something happening and excitement, an internet that gives us the illusion of creation, information, connection and control while we continue to enact the same tired ritual of staring at a screen.

The Empire has lulled us into the expectation that we have reached the "end of history" and that further *newness* and *revelation* simply won't come - the most that we can do is dabble around the edges of democracy-capitalism to try to improve things a little bit, and in the meanwhile medicate ourselves in order to feel better and conform to the Empire's expectations, whether with legal or illegal drugs, yoga or meditation, blissful vacations free from care, or a peaceful hour of meeting for worship on Sunday mornings.

As the Empire works to strip our humanity from us, and causes us to lose our bearings we desperately need something beyond the world as it is, beyond our current culture, economics and politics that helps us make sense of our situation and what to do about it. The sense of how off-base our culture is and how far we have to go runs deep. We know in our bones that this way of life and this orientation is simply unsustainable.

We know it to be hollow and to hold no answers to the fundamental questions of "Who are we?", "Why are we here?", and "What does it mean to be fully human together in community?".

Into this breach, this tear in the fabric of humanity and society, lies the radical reorientation of the Quaker path. It is not about an easing of the burden of living in the Empire, though it may offer that to some people, but a thorough and holistic upending of the domination system, both inward and outward, through a new covenant with one another in deep relationship with the divine seed within us all and the God of freedom abroad in the world.

The Big Tent Collapses

If this is our divine call - to overturn the Empire and bring the liberation of the Spirit to Earth - then we are going to have to take this Quaker thing seriously.

Thomas Gates, in his pamphlet "Members One of Another," lays out four purposes of membership in the Religious Society of Friends. For each of us the Meeting can be a place of acceptance, a place of shared values, a place of transformation, and, for perhaps a few, it is a place of Holy Obedience. All of these purposes may be present in a meeting community, and indeed in each individual, to varying degrees. In naming these, Gates points to the tension that exists between the first two phases and the second two. Those hungering for acceptance and shared values may feel at odds or uncomfortably disturbed by those urging transformation and Holy Obedience. And those taking on the work of obedience and transformation may be held back by the need for acceptance, shared values and comfort.

Neither the first nor the second set of needs in a meeting are more or less important. In a culture full of hurt and hurting, the Religious Society of Friends has become a refuge for the often traumatized of other spiritual traditions. So, a sense of safety, comfort and like-mindedness are truly a priority for healing and welcoming. My experience is that liberal unprogrammed (and even liberal programmed!) meetings tend to do this well, but sometimes to the exclusion of cultivating transformation and Holy Obedience.

We can fear the sense of rejection and hurt that can come when we invoke the need to change and transform. And in a religious society that has not effectively communicated what it is we are about and what we are doing here, the call to transformation and holy obedience can be an assault on our sense of belonging.

Yet we err if we think that in order to make a big inclusive and welcoming tent we must not tell the full depth of Quaker Truth. Without a sturdy center pole the tent collapses. And in these times of crisis and change, those who hunger for the world-upending power our forebears possessed will be unsatisfied by a religious society that merely seeks to comfort and console.

I hope that this framework, this core, can be a strong center pole in our expanding tent of Quakerism, around which the whirring dance of Friends' faithfulness can be oriented and made comprehensible for all, regardless of what need or hunger brings them into the Society.

Defining The Core

We didn't set off to identify the Quaker core as an intellectual project, but it emerged unbidden one spring afternoon on a sailboat. A few years ago we took three Quaker friends and one non-Friend sailing on Lake Champlain. At some point in the bucolic afternoon the non-Friend turned and asked the five of us: "what is Quakerism?" And a minor miracle occurred: we all went around the circle, and though we may have used slightly different language, we had the same answer. In an age where many Friends laugh at the joke about five Quakers having six answers to that question, the moment stood out. And I don't think it was entirely a coincidence that the group of us were all young adults, who feel yoked to Quakerism often in spite of not because of what we find in our Meetings. Even at the time we marveled at the natural and unexpected unity that existed among us.

Here's basically what the five of us said:

There is Spirit, a thing alive in the world, which each of us senses inwardly. This Spirit, which goes by many names, can guide us through our lives and speak to us in our moments of questioning and decisions. If we turn our lives over to follow that voice, it leads us into a place of joy and liberation that Friends have identified as the Kin(g)dom of God.

This doesn't seem on its face very complicated. Hopefully it doesn't feel too alien to you, dear Friend, or particularly controversial. We do have spiritual nourishment for the hungry and good news for our troubled world! Rejoice! It is a core that holds the power to unite us as Friends, a

core that can shine a bright light into the world attracting spiritual seekers hungering for this power to our meeting houses.

In the intervening years it's also become clear that there are two necessary corollaries to this basic core, and they help orient us to what we are doing together gathered into a meeting community.

In order to hear that still, small voice, we must clear away the distractions and sift through the din of our Empire-filled society and minds. We need a community to help us discern what is noise and what is the true voice. Following that voice and turning our lives over to it is hard, and we need a community to help us overcome the barriers, whether mental or material, to following.

With this core known and shared it becomes clearer what we are doing together. It can organize how we spend our time and even how we design our structures. And in doing this together we affirm that our liberation from this destructive and dehumanizing culture is not the work of isolated individuals but must be wrought in community. The community is responsible for the nurture and support, exhortation and calling to account one another on our shared journey. And we trust that as Friends deepen their listening and their following that individuals will be gathered up in that deeper unity of the spirit, for as Margaret Fell wrote:

*The truth is one and the same always
And though ages and generations pass away,
And one generation goes and another one comes,
Yet the word and power and spirit of the Living God
Endures forever, and is the same and never changes.*

-Margaret Fell, 1660

As the spirit is the same and never changes, we stand in this moment of crisis as the inheritors of a deep tradition of resistance to the Empire. This thread flows through the lives and witness of the early Friends, and flows through the lives and ministry of Jesus and those early Christians. It flows through the words and actions of the prophets and through the community of resistance that Moses led out of Egypt.

In our modern age it's sometimes hard to see this thread in the Quaker tradition. Again and again throughout history, the powerful eruption of the Spirit into the western world, especially when it moves a large group of people, has been co-opted and domesticated by the powers that be - the Empire - to solidify their control at the top. The biblical tradition is replete with examples of both of these strands. But it is precisely this power - a Spirit untamed by politics, religion or economic 'necessity' - that holds the possibility of subverting and overcoming the Empire. This Spirit and God of freedom is come to ground us in a new possibility beyond the domination system, and to be both the means and the ends of our journey.

Walter Wink shows about how Jesus was doing it, and particularly the innovation in nonviolence. "Looking back over Jesus' ministry, what emerges with bracing clarity is the

comprehensive nature of his vision. He was not intent on putting a new patch on an old garment, or new wine in old skins (Mark 2:12-22). He was not a reformer, bringing alternative, better readings of the law. Nor was he a revolutionary, attempting to replace one oppressive power with another (Mark 12:13-17). He went beyond revolution. His struggle was against the basic presuppositions and structures of oppression - against the Domination System itself. Violent revolution fails because it is not revolutionary enough. It changes the rulers but not the rules, the ends but not the means. Most of the old repressive values and delusional assumptions remain intact. What Jesus envisioned was a world transformed, where both people and Powers are in harmony with the Ultimate and committed to the general welfare - what some prefer to call the "kingdom" of God." (Wink, *Powers*, p.81)

Quaker scholar Doug Gwyn shows how the first decade of the Quaker movement overthrew the inward Empire in revolutionary England, and got surprisingly close to overcoming the outward Empire as well. They even had a term for that inward-and-outward struggle: the Lamb's War.

"The light led Friends into fervid spiritual conflict on many social fronts, causing them to renounce a variety of religious, social, economic, and familial ties. The rigors of this conflict, both inward and outward, bonded Friends together into a powerful solidarity." (Gwyn, *Covenant*, p.108)

Yet as Gwyn documents, that early Quaker spiritual eruption onto the stage of history eventually, as the Moses and Jesus movements had before it, lost its way, as economic and political realignment in England solidified along now familiar capitalist lines, and Friends accommodated the new ruling realities. As the joke goes, Friends came to Philadelphia to do good and ended up doing rather well. Of course that is not to throw all of Quakerism for the ensuing centuries under the bus, there were and are faithful Friends across the Religious Society.

But, that accommodation is no longer tenable. It is now clear that North American Friends long and continued complicity in a culture of white supremacy, genocide and slavery has deep roots and is in need of a powerful medicine. And North American Friends embeddedness in, and continued profit and privilege from, a system that has set in motion catastrophic climate collapse and mass extinction have unmasked our capitulation to the domination system.

To put this Quaker core back into the center not only of our Religious Society but of our very lives is to reorient ourselves towards a program of exorcising the Empire within us and preparing to overturn the powers that be that we have benefited from and enabled through our complicity in oppression, usury and extraction.