

PYM KEYNOTE

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Introduction

Good evening and welcome! It's so good to see all your faces and be with you tonight. At different moments in our time together I will invite you to write or think about a response to a prompt. So, if you don't already have something to write with and something to write on, I invite you to grab those items now.

When I was first asked to provide the keynote for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting this year, I was simultaneously startled and overjoyed. I imagined myself standing in a room with an enormous community of friends and strangers that shared a similar dedication to Quaker community. The format that we're in now is very different. I look around and see faces through screens, faces connected to bodies in different rooms all across the country, perhaps even the world. The world feels turned upside-down, and I'm sure many of us feel that in our bodies.

When I was planning in February, I knew I wanted to talk about conflict and anger, and how important, and turbulent these experiences can be in Quaker community. As summer unfolded and people across the world rallied behind the Movement for Black liberation, I realized I wanted to speak about abolition. American Quakers have been known for their work around abolishing slavery. When we look back on our histories as Friends, there are examples of Quakers that responded to the call for abolition, as well as those who resisted because it was too divisive or upsetting. In our current moment, Black, Indigenous and people of color are calling for the abolition and demilitarization of our police and prison systems. How do Quakers listen to this abolitionist call today? What can our faith teach us about the abolitionist work at hand?

Tonight, I want to take this community on a journey. I'm going to talk about some of the history of Quakers, how white Friends were involved with -- and rebelled against -- human trafficking known as slavery, and how the way we think about anger and conflict influences our justice work and our conception of the Inner Light. We are not in the same room tonight, and many of us have not been in our Meetinghouses for months, but tonight we create room to talk, imagine, reflect, and dream.

Quaker History

As a young adult Friend, it's been helpful and upsetting to realize that the things I learned about Quakerism followed a specific script that left out important details. I learned Quakers were "the first abolitionists." I learned Quakers were and always have been abolitionists and activists for peace.

[Reflection: Let's take a moment to reflect on your earliest memories of learning about Quakers and abolition. What were you taught about Quakers and slavery? Let's take five minutes to write about those memories, and I'll call us back to share via the text box when the time is up.]

In reality, Quakers were not the first abolitionists. Declaring that the Society of Friends unanimously and eternally stood against slavery doesn't do justice to the fact that the first abolitionists were enslaved African people. Many Quakers supported these first abolitionists, but it took many years for white Friends to formally stand against slavery. Up until that point and even after, many, many white Quakers refused abolition and participated in the slave trade.

I want to take us back in history for a few minutes. In the 17th century world, white English Quakers commonly accepted and practiced enslavement of African peoples. Many of the first Quaker immigrants to North America came via Barbados where Quakers participated in the buying and selling of human beings. After the arrival of Quaker missionaries in the 1650s, Quakerism flourished in Barbados and even developed the title "Nursery of Truth" because it was so filled with Friends. All but four of the white Quakers in Barbados were slaveholders at this time.¹

When Pennsylvania was founded in 1682, Friends mobilized their connections to Quaker enslavers in Barbados to purchase African people and amass wealth. When George Fox visited Barbados in 1671 and witnessed the Quakers participating in slavery, he did not encourage abolition or anti-slavery activism. Let that sink in - George Fox witnessed the enslavement, torture, and dehumanizing impact of slavery upon enslaved people, and how slavery too altered

¹ Gerbner, "Christian Slavery and White Supremacy."

the enslavers' minds. In his "Letter to the Governor of Barbados," Fox even promised not to interfere in the institution of slavery. He did, however, encourage Friends to worship with enslaved people - a subversive act because it jeopardized the relationship between white enslavers and Black enslaved peoples. The justification for slavery at this time was religious difference, so "Christian-izing" enslaved Africans would change their status as property under the eyes of the law.

Quakers and other Protestant groups came under fire for converting enslaved people and threatening the power dynamics of slavery. As the threat of Christian conversion increased, the first laws using the language of "whiteness" began to appear. For instance, when enslaved person Charles Cuffee was baptized as Anglican in Barbados, Barbadian lawmakers introduced a law that would redefine citizenship as a freedperson to include the word "white" as well as "Christian." The law "declared that 'every white Man professing the Christian Religion . . . who hath attained to the full Age of One and Twenty Year, and hath Ten Acres of Freehold . . . shall be deemed a Freeholder.'"²

Friends of European descent in every yearly Meeting in North America benefited in some way from the enslavement of African people. Wealthy Quaker Philadelphian merchants and ship-owners from Rhode Island profited exponentially from the practices of human trafficking, and wielded power within their Quaker communities. Many of these wealthy Quakers in New England owned slave plantations in the West Indies where enslaved Africans were brutally "seasoned" and tortured in preparation for their arrival to North America. By 1700 white Quakers owned as many as half of all enslaved people in the commonwealth.³

Theologically, many Quakers accepted slavery without questioning it. While some found the issue perplexing or troubling, most Friends relied on the brutal process of slavery for acquisition of wealth and property. Economic interest vied with Quaker ideology, and for many years Quakers stood by economics before faith. From the 1680s-1750s, leaders of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting dominated conversations around slavery, discouraging Friends from engaging in emancipation work at the risk of economic danger. In 1676 Friend William Edmunson described

² Gerbner, "Christian Slavery and White Supremacy."

³ Julye & McDaniel, *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship*.

the situation that “enslavement presented a dilemma to Quakers who believed in the sanctity of property rights on the one hand and in the notion that each person is free to experience his or her own relationship with God on the other.”⁴

It would take Quakers until the 1780s to become the first white Christian denomination to formally condemn slavery. This conversation, though, took nearly a century. It would take another twenty years for Quakers to practically fulfill their mandate against slavery, and even longer for white Friends to actually allow Black Quakers and non-Quakers to worship in their Meetinghouses and study in their schools.

In recent years, scholarship on Quakers has nuanced our relationship to slavery and altered the notion that Quakers were eternally and unequivocally abolitionist. At the same time, there were certainly Quakers fully committed to abolition, and we can name many of those names today - Lucretia Mott, the Grimke sisters, Levi Coffin. I want to take a moment to talk another abolitionist, Friend Benjamin Lay, one of the first white Quaker abolitionists and activists in the 18th century. On September 19, 1738 Benjamin Lay walked into a Meetinghouse in Burlington, New Jersey, many of whose members participated in the slave trade. Having smuggled into Meeting a sword and an animal bladder filled with red pokeberry juice inside a hollowed out book, Lay stood to give a Message. He denounced Quaker slaveholders, pulled the sword from his cloak, stabbed the book, and declared: “Thus shall God shed the blood of those persons who enslave their fellow creatures .”⁵ Red juice burst across the faces of weighty Friends in the Burlington Meetinghouse.

Because of this, and other impassioned anti-slavery activism, Lay was written out of the Meeting and forced to live in exile from his community. An important point I want to highlight is that Lay was a little person, or dwarf, and lived with kyphosis, a condition of extreme spine curvature. It is quite likely Lay was written off not only because of his abolitionist leanings, but because also his disability made him more vulnerable to ableist assumptions. Other white Quakers had demonstrated in similarly dramatic ways - public nudity or interrupting church

⁴ Julye & McDaniel, *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship* p. 9.

⁵ Rediker, “The ‘Quaker Comet’ Was the Greatest Abolitionist You’ve Never Heard Of.”

services - and were praised as holy fathers of the faith. Had Lay been a wealthy, able-bodied man his message may have gone further, but as a disabled activist he faced even more obstacles.

The way Lay behaved in Meeting also brings to mind the expectations we set for decorum in our faith communities. Can we imagine today the uproar in Meeting if someone had done something as theatrical as Lay? If fake blood had spattered across our plain cream-colored walls? How might our expectations prevent passionate conversations and testimony around abolition and racial justice? We'll come back to this point later on tonight.

Examining Quakers' involvement in slavery gives us some insight into how we operate today as a Society of Friends. George Fox had the opportunity in Barbados and North America to speak out against slavery, even if the language of abolition had not yet reached the table. Instead, Fox opted for a more discrete method - while revolutionary in its own way, without follow-through, Christianizing as emancipation hit a brick wall with the invention of legally-approved whiteness. Wealthy white Friends in Philadelphia opted for economic safety and prosperity over protecting the humanity of their neighbor. Sanctifying property rights over human dignity, leaders in our Quaker history turned away from the dangers of abolition to the safety of financial security. Even with the slow approval of abolition, white Quakers continued to discriminate against those of African and Carribean descent.

Abolition is not a one-time event. While many white Quakers followed the witness of abolitionists like Benjamin Lay, Lucretia Mott, and the Grimke sisters, the Religious Society of Friends has taken centuries to move on the issue. Surely we can see the remnants of this history play out today, in the Society of Friends, our families, or our governments.

As I think about the history of Quakers and slavery, I wonder what stimulated Quakers to join the abolitionist movement. For some, it was proximity to the practice of slavery - some Quakers witnessed the suffering and evil of enslavement and this personal experience motivated them to action. For others, it may have been in community and conversation that they became aware. Inertia kept many white Friends from acting on abolition even after being exposed - the few names we do have of early white Quaker abolitionists are exciting to talk about, and yet these same people were ridiculed and exiled from their communities. In thinking about our present moment, I witness this same pattern play out.

Anger and Conflict

In order to commit to justice, we have to become intimate with our feelings. Much, if not all, of abolitionist work is rooted in the struggle against white supremacy. White supremacy dictated the rules of slavery, just as it dictates the rules of the police and prisons in our present system. White supremacy is a behemoth but it is not faceless. White supremacy is actually a culture - a culture with rules that we can only fight once we are able to name.

Some of the rules of white supremacy have been written by activists Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun. These rules include: perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, objectivity, and right to comfort.⁶

The rule of white supremacy culture I want to talk most about tonight is defensiveness, fear of open conflict, and by extension, fear of anger. We see these faces of white supremacy show up often in our history - George Fox straying from emancipation, wealthy Philadelphian Friends discouraging divisive conversations on slavery, and white North American Friends in general valuing comfort over the discomfort of truth. We can see this in our present, too. As Quakers we often struggle to express conflict. As a young girl I remember learning in Meeting that conflict and anger were the opposites of peace, and by being angry I was violating my principles as a Quaker child.

[Reflection: Think back on a moment you were angry in Meeting. This can be worship, a committee, business meeting, or a personal encounter. Describe the encounter and the feelings that came up for you.

What would you need to feel supported in anger or conflict? Did you feel that support in the moment you described?]

⁶ Okun & Jones, "White Supremacy Culture."

Quaker scholar Jack Giesecking writes about anger and the necessity for Quakers to express aggression as part of their spiritual path. Here is a part of their thesis I want us to listen to. You can follow along on the slide:

“To be present, to stand the tension of love and hate, to be real - this all takes aggression. This aggression in Quakerism comes out in Meeting, in prayer, in love, in hate, in life. We must learn to welcome the dependence upon one another and God that this integration creates and allow it to become shared interdependence, regardless of the healthy channel we choose.

“Where Quakerism has repressed and projected its aggression can be healed. The passivity confused with pacifism can be overridden. We can be made whole again and prevent our disintegration by our own will, our own aggression. We must withstand the tension of our love and hate, our fear and anger, and survive, and we can do it together. We must be the tiger we were created to be for we shall never overcome the tiger within us, we can only allow ourselves to be who we are and reside in the ecstasy granted by God.”⁷

White supremacy culture teaches us to hide or mask aggression and anger, to keep conflict stifled and hidden under the table. When I say aggression is important, I’m not advocating for the kind of aggression used to manipulate, harm, and oppress people. Aggression is a necessary part of being human. It is distinct from violence and hatred, though may overlap at times. Aggression is the manner in which we express our anger if our boundaries are violated, or if we see another’s boundaries violated. To leave aggression behind is tempting but ultimately means cutting off a part of ourselves intrinsic to Spirit.

Many white liberal-leaning Christianities struggle with the expression of aggression and anger. There’s a tendency to want to see ourselves as only rational, simple, and decent, to bypass the darkness and wildness among us and within us. This kind of theology limits us because it does not allow anger or hurt to be expressed.

Quaker worship reflects the culture in which it has stewed. An elder once said that Quakerism is like tofu - it soaks up the taste of whatever it marinates in. As Friends, we have marinated in white supremacy for centuries. In the United States, Quakerism found traction

⁷ Giesecking, *Ecstasy Has Been Given to the Tiger: Aggression in the Quaker Meeting for Worship*, p. 48.

among middle and upper-middle class white people, which influences our understanding of ourselves, including our emotions and understanding of the Divine.

From marinating in the culture of white supremacy, many white American Quakers develop unwritten rules about proper behavior in our communities. For instance, there are expectations that one should speak in full sentences, using standard English, keeping your body still and your voice calm.⁸ We may emphasize the cerebral and the peaceful, and discourage the expressions of frustration, anger, and conflict. When we limit behavior in this way, we also limit the expression of the Spirit.

Anger and Abolition

So, what does anger have to do with abolition and Quaker history, and why I am talking about it today? Disconnecting from anger means disconnecting from our awareness of systematic oppression. It is nearly impossible to bravely witness the suffering and oppression of this movement without being brought to anger. Anger is an energy. It is a gift. It is a tool, and a process by which we learn what matters to us. Connecting to this anger means connecting to a profound network of love - we become angry because we witness the suffering of another. We become angry when we are made to suffer. Sometimes, we're angry for no reason, but this too is a lesson. Being angry means we cannot be spiritually still. Anger stirs us to action and reconnects us to our core.

In order to fully commit to abolitionist work as a faith community, we will need to engage in conflict and aggression. There is no way to be both anti-racist and fully conflict avoidant. Anti-racism work and abolition require an investment in our relationships unlike any other - and this investment will require honesty and will generate tension. Many, perhaps most, of us have been taught that anger and conflict are antithetical to our morals as Friends. We have a lot of re-learning to do. But just as we've learned white supremacy culture, we can also unlearn it. We can recognize the culture we've marinated in and get creative to resist and change the narrative.

⁸ Imani, "How Does Culture Influence Quaker Worship?"

Being angry doesn't mean departing from our Quakerism but living more fully into the call for a just world. Getting angry doesn't mean random violence but acknowledging the sacredness of anger as a tool, and finding ways to express our aggression that honor the "ecstasy granted by God" as Giesecking writes.

The Light

The title of this presentation tonight is the "Fire of the Light." As I was thinking about an image that inspires me in abolitionist work, I kept returning to the image of the Light.

[Reflection: Let's take a moment to reflect upon the image of the Light. Think back to your first introduction to Quakerism. How was the Light described to you? If you're able, I invite you to draw a picture of the Light.]

The Inner Light goes by many names - the Inward Light, the Seed, the Light of Christ. Early Friends got the expression from the first chapter of John, where we find in verse nine: "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." For early Friends this was no metaphor but the real presence of Christ within. The Light signified more than a singular flame or a cozy fire - for many Friends, it served as a beacon. The Light shown upon injustices. It taught, directed, clarified, and emboldened Friends, revealing profound and distressing truths about ourselves.

For much of my life, I've envisioned the Light as a candle. Something quiet, inward-focused, and comforting. This is certainly one aspect of the Light. Tonight, though, I want to invite the image of a more ferocious Light. A mama-bear Light. Not small and quavering like a waxy candle, but bright and crackling with plenty of firewood.

The language of white Light can often be a sneaky way that white supremacy shows up in our language by associating lightness with goodness and darkness with evil. But our Light is not a white Light - it contains multitudes of colors, and it contains darkness too.

We kindle this Light in community. Each person brings with them fuel for the fire, and though we each have our own private, glorious connection to such Light, in community it becomes fire. In community, in revolution, in gatherings, whether virtual or physical, we unite in a fiery embrace of love and justice. This, to me, is what it means to be known as people of Quaker faith.

In his 1852 speech on July 4th, Frederick Douglass declared: "For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and [humanity] must be proclaimed and denounced..."⁹

Frederick Douglas wasn't talking about Quakers specifically, but what if he was? What if our Light did this? What if our understanding of the Inner Light prompted us to action? What if the Light illuminated and fed our righteous anger, our communal sorrow, our profound love and care for one another? What if we understood anger as a force to be channeled, as an expression of how deeply we care? What if we blessed the rage as tenderly as we blessed the peace?

The abolitionist work at hand calls us into new relationship with aggression, conflict, and our understanding of the Light. This call is urgent, but it is not new. A 1967 PYM minute reads: "One of the principal sources of tension has been reconciling the urgency of the [civil rights] crisis with the deliberateness of Friends' careful searching for the Light."¹⁰ As Quakers, can we be deliberate and full of care while responding to an urgent situation? What will we need to release in this journey to better serve the movement for Black liberation? How might our relationship to the fiery Light transform the ways we address injustice? I don't have answers for all these questions tonight, but I invite us to sit with them as we move forward.

Since their beginnings as bounty hunters for enslaved Africans, the police have abused, terrorized, and killed mainly Black, indigenous and people of color. As the call for abolition of police and prisons grows more urgent in the United States, we have options as a faith community. We can look back on our histories for examples - we can imagine George Fox

⁹ Douglass, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro."

¹⁰ Julye & McDaniel, *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship*, p. 364.

encouraging worship with enslaved people, but not supporting full-on abolition. We can imagine Benjamin Lay yelling in Meeting and calling out Quakers engaged in human trafficking. Perhaps we can even imagine the committee and the Minute that wrote Benjamin Lay out. We have a blueprint for this liberation stuff, though the pieces and players look different today than the 18th century.

As a predominantly white faith community in the US, we must listen to the witness of Black F/friends. We may have questions or disagreements but we cannot pretend we do not witness the violence of the police state - a violence we purport to resist through our Quaker testimonies.

As Quakers, and I speak to white Quakers in particular, we have had time to reflect on our past. The ways we were complicit, the ways we rebelled. Whether we are long-time members of the Society of Friends or newcomers, we participate in and inherit this history. I look at the reaction from George Fox and other Quakers ambivalent about abolition, and I recognize my own ambivalence. I feel ashamed. But we can work with that.

Abolitionist work will always be imperfect. As a Friend once said, there are two ways of doing anti-racism work: imperfectly, or not at all. The inevitable imperfection does not mean we should shut down in frustration, but it also does not give us a free pass for harmdoing. We will need to establish systems of accountability to weather the conflict, anxieties, and shame that will inevitably arise. Each moment of anxiety is an opportunity for growth and opening. In an ideal world, our communities would nurture and hold us accountable through these growing pains. We can dream toward this ideal world together.

In closing, I want to offer this poem by John O'Donahue.

In Praise of Fire

Let us praise the grace & risk of fire.

In the beginning

The Word was red,

And the Sound was Thunder,

And the Wound in the Unseen

Spilled forth the Red Weather of Being.

In the name of Fire,

The Flame,

And the Light:
Praise the pure presence of Fire
That burns from within
Without thought of Time.

The hunger of Fire has no need
For the reliquary of the Future;
It adores the eros of now,
Where the memory of the Earth
In flames that lick and drink the Air
Is made to release

Its long enduring forms
In a powder of ashes
Left for the wind to decipher.

As air intensifies the hunger of fire,
May the thought of death
Breathe new urgency
Into our love of life.

As fire cleanses dross
May the flame of passion
Burn away what is false.

As short as the time
From Spark to Flame,
So brief may the distance be
Between heart and being.

May we discover
Beneath our fear
Embers of anger
To kindle justice.

May courage
Cause our lives to flame,
In the name of the Fire,
And the flame
And the Light.¹¹

¹¹ O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, p. 12-13.

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