

# *Each of Us Inevitable*

SOME KEYNOTE ADDRESSES,  
GIVEN AT  
FRIENDS FOR LESBIAN AND GAY CONCERNS AND  
FRIENDS GENERAL CONFERENCE GATHERINGS,  
1977–1993,  
REVISED, EXPANDED EDITION

Becky BIRTHA, Thomas BODINE, Elise BOULDING,  
John CALVI, Stephen FINN, Ellen HODGE,  
Janet HOFFMAN,  
Arlene KELLY, William KREIDLER, George LAKEY,  
Ahavia LAVANA, Muriel BISHOP SUMMERS,  
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“EACH OF US INEVITABLE,  
EACH OF US LIMITLESS—EACH OF US WITH HIS  
OR HER RIGHT UPON THE EARTH,  
EACH OF US ALLOW’D THE ETERNAL PURPORTS  
OF THE EARTH,  
EACH OF US HERE AS DIVINELY AS ANY IS HERE.”  
—Walt Whitman: “Salut au Monde,” II, *Leaves of Grass*

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Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns (FLGBTQC), until recently known as Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (FLGC), is a North American Quaker faith community within the Religious Society of Friends that affirms that of God in all persons—lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual, transgender, and transsexual. It gathers twice yearly: Midwinter Gathering is held over the long weekend surrounding U.S. President's Day in February and Summer Gathering is held with the larger Friends General Conference Gathering the first week in July. Once known as Friends Committee for Gay Concerns, the group has met since the early 1970s for worship and play, its members drawing sustenance from each other and from the Spirit for their work and life in the world—in the faith that radical inclusion and radical love bring further light to Quaker testimony and life.

## Preface to the Internet Edition

The new, revised and expanded edition of *Each of Us Inevitable*—the printed compilation of keynote addresses given by beloved Friends at prior Gatherings of Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (FLGC) and Friends General Conference (FGC)—includes all the talks in the original edition and eight additional keynotes, bringing the total to 19. The added talks were given between 1979 and 1993.

In February 2003, the community united on changing its name to Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns (FLGBTQC). The talks are available as separate Adobe Acrobat PDF files for each author on the FLGBTQC website, <<http://flgbtqc.quaker.org>>.

It is hoped that keynotes given after 1993 also will be published someday; however, the richness of content in these additional already-edited talks suggested moving ahead in the present when the possibility of publication exists.



It may be helpful for some readers browsing on the internet if I offer here at least brief hints, however inadequate, of that “richness” that lies in specific talks.

Elizabeth Watson (1977: “Each of Us Inevitable”) came to help us accept ourselves. Her message is not “love the sinner, not the sin,” but, “I love you, and I love you *for* your givenness, not in spite of it.” She offers an account of the life story and the healing words of Walt Whitman.

Arlene Kelly (1979: “Estrangement and Reconciliation”) brought answers in the form of difficult questions: How can we remain engaged with people who are different? From what do we feel estranged? What has caused hurt and anger within us? Do we see that we come to Gathering both as oppressor and oppressed? Can we find ways to step into the shoes of the other person? What is involved in being “reconciled”?

Janet Hoffman (1982: “Eros and the Life of the Spirit”) spoke on themes of exploring and wrestling with new insights; fiery passion; relinquishing our need; and transformation. Eros, she believes, drives us toward God and gives our life its basic meaning. Love demands a complete inner transformation. Love (not guilt) leads to social change.

Dwight Wilson (1984: “Nurturing Our Relationships within an Often Hostile Community”) spoke from his personal experience as a black man. His message was concerned with trusting one’s own perceptions and understanding—not society’s mainstream view, not scripture, not the internalized hatred that society may try to induce in us. He spoke of the sometimes negative role of the institutional church for blacks, women, pacifism, gays, and lesbians.

Arlene Kelly (1984: “Nurturing Friendship and Lover Relationships”) sees “coming out” as a step toward taking responsibility for ourselves as individuals. In our friendship and lover relationships, are we feeling defective, she questions; have we relinquished some of our power? She discusses ten factors essential to building relationships that are whole.

Elizabeth Watson (1985: “On Wholeness”) recognizes our patriarchal, hierarchal, and homophobic civilization and religious heritage. She discusses the Christian church and Jesus; the power of the human community; “dwelling in possibility,” and her personal odyssey into wholeness. Can we take charge of life and healing by imaging a desired outcome?

Elise Boulding (1986: “The Challenge of Nonconformity”) acknowledges the need to bond across differences—because we need others to make us whole—and the fact that it’s more difficult for those called to “nonconforming witnesses.” For “publicly gay” persons, special strengths are needed; they are the social change activists. The “gay witness,” she says, includes equality, nonviolence, community, and simplicity; gays should be viewed not as embattled victims but as co-workers in reweaving the social web for us all.

Thomas R. Bodine (1987: “Caring Matters Most”), drawing on his own experience, began with a description of the wide diversity of Friends throughout the world. How to change people? How to bridge the differences? he wondered. What happens if we seriously try to practice Christian “gifts of the spirit” in those parts of the Quaker world that hate homosexuality?

Janet Hoffman (Friends General Conference, 1987: “To Listen, To Minister, To Witness”). Her wide-ranging talk includes: living “without seatbelts”; following a corporate leading, not censoring it; “dis-illusionment”—a good thing (“Offend me!” she declares); to minister—sometimes just by being oneself; to love someone—to become in some sense the person we love; to witness—to be faithful to the spirit. She touches on personal growth, the true evangelist, continuing revelation, seeking, stages of development in pacifism, and committed unions.

David Wertheimer (1988: “Bias-Related Violence, Gay Marriage, and a Journey Out of the Society of Friends”) shares some personal, Quaker-related experiences: seeking marriage with his (male) partner under the care of his meeting; studying and later teaching at Quaker schools; enrolling as a Quaker in divinity school. He asks whether Quakerism works well only when it can function one step removed from the harsh realities that it contemplates. He sees FLGC as a committee on sufferings, a critical group to helping Quakerism discover how to survive. Death threats led him to question his Quaker belief in nonviolence. His talk includes input from those present at Gathering.

Ahavia Lavana (1988: “Helping and Healing”). When Ahavia’s son Hunter had AIDS and later died of it, what helped and what did not help? What was healing and what was not? She speaks on accepting what is beyond our control.

Bill Kreidler’s address (1989: “Tending the Fire”) is his intensely personal but often humorous account of learning to tend his spiritual flame following an addictive, abusive relationship—by being honest, by being open, by practicing, and by being easy with himself. He talks of the ministry of our community and of how it helped him reach the goal he had envisioned (“old Quaker ladies” tap dancing).

Ellen Hodge (1989: “Tending the Fire”) offers differing images of fire: Kristallnacht, persecution of “witches,” a 1963 bomb in a Birmingham church, Vietnam and Cambodian napalm; candlelight vigils for the slain Harvey Milk; the Japanese *Bon* festival. She retells, in modern vernacular, the Biblical story of Moses for its relevance to our situation.

Stephen Finn (1990: “Celebrating *All Our Being*”) describes a personal journey, illustrating reasons some people have trouble celebrating their being. He asks, does one feel shameful rather than worthy of experiencing “heaven on earth”? Does one adopt compensatory mechanisms to get through a life without heaven? Does FLGC sometimes serve to shield us from the need to be open about our shame?

Muriel Bishop Summers (1990: “On Living in Integrity”) spoke of living with integrity—the quality of one’s relationship with all of creation—and with oneself: a process. She discusses the balance between integrity and safety; the need of being whole, not fragmented; some essentials for wholeness; and the Divine Presence as ultimate reality, whose nature is love and whose character is truth.

John Calvi (Friends General Conference, 1990: “Laying Down the Weapons ‘Round Our Hearts”) offers steps to healing: surrendering; inviting one’s angels; receiving, with honesty and tenderness, the messages that are sent; entering upon the dance between hope and fear.

Becky Birtha (1991: “Accept It Gracefully’— Keeping Our Creative Gifts Alive”) shares her personal experiences with healing, growing, dealing with pain, and loving herself—often as expressed in her poems.

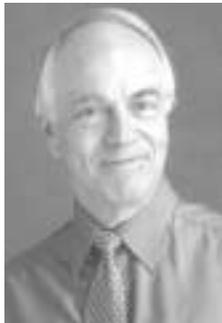
George Lakey (1991: “Our Bodies, Our Elves”) sought a vision of the new creation. He emphasizes, in six general areas, gifts that lesbians, gays, and bi’s can give to the Society of Friends and the larger world; the areas are embodiment (in a human body); the erotic (as a bridge to spiritual experience); vulnerability (seen as a doorway); facing pain; reaffirming difference; and love (moving beyond judgmentalism).

Elizabeth Watson (1993: “Night and Day”) relates how the titles of some Cole Porter songs evoke reflections from her own life. “Night and Day”—falsely dividing the world (a continuum) into opposites. (Are we the “good guys?”) “Down in the Depths”—unlearning the shame and guilt inspired by our Judeo-Christian tradition. (If there is sin, it is in not caring.) “In the Still of the Night”—embracing the darkness; finding it full of possibility, a time for gestation, for creation, for rest.

—ROBERT LEUZE



EDITOR ROBERT LEUZE has been involved with gay Quaker groups since 1973, first in New York City where he attended Morningside Meeting and subsequently with the group that evolved to become the present-day Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns. He grew up in rural Northern New York near the eastern end of Lake Ontario, amid the extreme homophobia of the McCarthy period. During his college years at Yale University no one he knew (or knew of) was openly gay. He came out (to himself and two or three others) his senior year and, a year after graduation, moved to New York City. He and his present wife Sarah fell in love in the late 1960s and were married in 1969, believing that psychoanalysis had changed his orientation. He came out for the second time in the mid-1970s, but he and Sarah remain very happily married after 34 years. He pursued a career as an opera singer in the 1970s and 1980s and continues to perform in solo concerts—concerts that usually include songs relevant to the gay experience. He is a longtime member of the Yale Gay and Lesbian Alumni/ae Association (Yale GALA), and of Outmusic, a GLBT organization for singers and songwriters.



Kim Hanson

Robert Leuze

# Tending the Fire

ELLEN HODGE

*Keynote Address, Midwinter Gathering  
Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns  
February 19, 1989  
Minneapolis, Minnesota*

I would like to start by giving some special thanks to my friends, Jimmy Ilachild, Sarah Forth, Martha Penzer, Vereene Parnell, and to my partner, Mike, for their loving and unstinting support and encouragement as I prepared this talk. And I would also like to thank those gathered here for bearing me up.

The theme of this gathering, “Tending the Fire,” evoked for me many powerful symbols around fire. The phrase, “tending the fire” evokes the warmth, safety, and life-giving properties of fire, and the importance it had in sustaining life, especially in primitive times, when without fire there would have been cold, starvation, and death. The fire was what brought people together, what they gathered around, what gave them a center. But to me, it’s really important to see symbols in their whole constellation of meaning. For me it is important to realize that fire—that ancient, powerful force—has not, throughout all time, been a force for life. It has also been a source of danger and of threat.

I received the invitation to speak to you two nights after the 50th anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. In November of 1938, 191 synagogues were set on fire throughout Germany and Austria. In Europe at that time, if a religious Jew was to have any hope of preserving the holiness of the Sabbath day, that Jew would live within walking distance of the synagogue. For that reason, the Jewish communities were clustered around their synagogues, and together the Jews preserved the traditions which bound them together as a people. On that November night, the sound of breaking glass brought these people into the streets of their neighborhoods or to their windows where, when they looked out, they saw towers of flame coming from their houses of God. Thirty thousand people were arrested that night and taken to the camps, and it was as if the flame which lit the synagogues that night was just the match that later lit the

ovens. The word “holocaust,” by which we remember these events, means “whole burnt offering.”

You can go back to these neighborhoods now, many of them, in Austria and Germany, 50 years later, and ask adults who have lived their entire lives in those neighborhoods, “Where was the Jewish synagogue here?” They will say in all honesty, “There was never a synagogue here. You must be mistaken.” The fire was used not just to extinguish the lives of people, but also to extinguish their very memory.

Another really painful memory evoked for me by the image of fire is the history in Europe of the persecution and execution of those women who were called witches. This was done over a period of about 400 years, give or take a century, and it involved a systematic persecution, on the part of both the church and the state. Mostly women lost their lives during that period. They were called heretics or witches. I knew intellectually that this had happened, but about a year and a half ago I knew in my heart and body what this meant—that for 400 years, generation after generation, mothers taught their daughters to behave in such a way that they would not lose their lives.

As a woman of European descent, this is my inheritance. This is my legacy from the fire. And we in this culture have all inherited this, men and women, people of European descent or those from other races who have joined this culture. We have been shaped by this experience; it has been burned into our memories and into the way we *are* as human beings.

**W**e imported this fire from Europe to this new continent. We have seen it burning from crosses on the lawns of black people and white workers in the black civil rights movement. That heat became unavoidably visible to the United States public in 1963 when a bomb was thrown into the basement of a Birmingham church and four little black Sunday school girls lost their lives. That’s our inheritance. That’s fire.

We learned, through our technical prowess, to be so good at making and tending fires that we could take them into the air and drop them, in the form of napalm, on the people of Vietnam and Cambodia. We learned to export that very product to other nations so they could do likewise. And in a real feat of scientific achievement, we brought this fire in a rolling ball over Hiroshima and Nagasaki that turned hundreds of thousands of people into dust in an instant and left others with no trace of their homes, without their loved ones, with their skin hanging from their arms.

When I think about fire, I have to include these things.

There are other images which are much different, though. I went to a play called *The Execution of Justice*, which is about the trial of the man who shot and killed Harvey Milk and Mayor Moscone in San Francisco. And across the back of the stage, high on the back wall, were video screens. During part of this play,

these screens showed actual footage of the candlelight procession that filled the streets of San Francisco to keep Harvey Milk's work and memory alive. Each one of those people carried a flame. Each one of those people bore the fire, and it looked like a river of light slowly, slowly moving down the street, from sidewalk to sidewalk. At that camera angle, the river went *way* back, there was no end; block after block after block of this river of light.

I have another image of fire. I went to Japan last August for the FWCC [Friends World Committee for Consultation] Triennial, arriving about two weeks after the major religious festival of that country. It's called *Bon*, and it's about three days long. In English we usually translate it, "Festival of the Dead" or "Feast of All Souls." I didn't even *see* this; I only heard stories from our guide, but it made a vivid impression on me. This is the festival during which the ancestors are welcomed back, and there's a family reunion. The festival begins on the first night of *Bon*, at sunset, when lamps are lighted at the doorways of the homes and at the gates of the courtyards of all the houses, so that the ancestors can see their way back.

In Nara, which is one of the ancient capital cities, there's a Shinto shrine which is aptly named the Shrine of the Five Thousand Lanterns. There, the traditional Japanese stone lanterns are set up on pedestals, about as tall or taller than an adult. The lanterns are four-sided, and they have the Japanese roofs that curve up at each corner. Before *Bon*, each one of the square openings on all four sides of each lamp is papered with new paper, and on the night of the festival, all of these lanterns are lighted. And in Nara all of the pathways of this hilled shrine are lined with hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of these lanterns, all lighted so that the ancestors can come back.

In Kyoto on the final night of *Bon* there is a festival that is famous throughout the country, and people come from all over the world to see it. Kyoto is built in a basin, surrounded by five mountains. On each one of these mountainsides a huge Chinese character is carved out of the forest. On the last night of *Bon*, each one of these characters is lit with fires, and the ancestors then leave their homes in great celebration and go back to the place of the spirits.

I was amazed, because I thought about our holiday—the feast of the dead in our culture, which is Hallowe'en—where we have learned to light the jack-o'-lanterns to keep the spirits at bay. This is a shame. And I am afraid I know how it happened. The Christians, we Western Christians, did this to ourselves by subverting the ancient, pre-Christian tradition of our own culture. This is really unfortunate, and I resolved not to light the lanterns for that reason ever again.

**I**n this culture that we live in, we don't very often allow ourselves to be connected to our ancestors in a conscious manner. I think that that is one of the things that leads to the spirit of Yankee do-it-yourselfism that gives us the sense that we can sustain ourselves, by golly, and we don't need any help and the

people of the past, well, they weren't as developed as we are, so what do we need from them? And thus we are a rootless, migrating, technological people who don't have a really good sense of who we are, of what past has shaped us, and of what we might become.

Well, I want to tell you a story. This is an ancient story that has survived for thousands of years and has come down to us from our ancestors. I have a sense that anything that survived that long because generation after generation saw meaning in it is something worth talking about. And besides, it has a lot of fire in it.

Now, when the story begins, there's this small, not very powerful people. There's a famine, so they move to the great nation, which has a lot of food. This small people had a very wise leader who was recognized for his ability to advise and who understood trends and could sometimes even tell the leader of the great nation what was going to happen and what the leader needed to do to prepare.

So this small people lived quite contentedly in the midst of the powerful nation. But then that generation died, another generation came up, and generations passed until the king that grew up in the great nation never knew that there had been a wise man among that small people. And this king was proud to be the leader of a mighty land. He said, "I want everyone to know, without a doubt, whenever they look at *my* country, that we are powerful. We are not to be trifled with. And I'm gonna start me a building program."

So he looked around and he said, "Who's gonna build me these wonderful buildings that, whenever anybody looks at them, they're gonna *know* who we are?" He thought about it for a while, then said, "Well, you know, I don't see why we should have to do all that work. Hmm, look at this: this alien population. Why, it wouldn't matter much if they did it." So he made himself some slaves. Yes, he did.

These slaves worked hard, year after year, generation after generation, century after century. But they made a lot of babies. I mean, what else was fun, you know? So the leader of this powerful nation looked at all these people of this alien population and he said, "We've got trouble. If these people figure out what's what and rise up, we've got big trouble. There are too many of them." So he called their midwives in. He said, "Now look here. If any of your people have a male baby, I don't want it to have its first breath. You understand that now, don't you?"

And one of the amazing things about these two women is that we still know their names: Shiphrah and Puah.<sup>1</sup> These two women went away from the king and said to each other, "We don't think we're gonna cooperate." This was the first act of resistance.

So babies kept being born. The king called back these midwives and said, "Now look here, honeys, I made myself perfectly clear." And they said to him,

“Now, these Israelite women” (you know whom I’m talking about now?) “these Israelite women are so hardy, why they drop those babies before we can even get there!”

Now, there was a woman whose husband was of a priestly family. She was delivered of a son, and she kept this baby hidden as long as she could. But when the baby got too big and she feared for his life, she made a little basket, put pitch all over it, and tucked the baby in real nice, covered him over, and put him in the water of the Nile. I don’t know if she knew what was going to happen to him. Maybe she was just following a leading that didn’t make any sense. So she put her baby in the water.

Now this little baby’s older sister was watching to see what would happen. And the king’s own daughter came down to bathe in the river with all her serving women. They got into the water, and the king’s daughter heard crying. They found the basket and opened it up, and there’s a baby! The princess said, “This must be meant for *me!*”

Well, this sister was sharp; she was out there like a shot. She said, “Hey, you want someone to take care of that baby for you, don’t you?” She knew what rich women liked. “I can find you a nursing woman who can take care of this baby.” And the princess said, “That sounds great.” To the princess, all of this was like rolling off a log. So the sister went home and got the mother—the baby’s own mother, right?—to be the baby’s nurse. They lived in the palace, and the baby grew up.

When this young man came of age, he went outside the palace. (This part reminds me of the Buddha.) He had been raised in the lap of luxury, and he went outside and saw an Egyptian beating the living hell out of an Israelite slave. And he became angry.

Very angry.

I thought about that. Why would this guy, who thinks he’s an Egyptian prince, care about a slave? Well, he had an Israelite nurse, didn’t he? Those women teach those children *something*.

So he gets real angry, smacks that Egyptian, and the man falls down dead. Moses (you know who I’m talking about now?) utters an oath under his breath and covers the body up in the sand. Later on, though, he hears two Hebrews saying, “You gotta watch out for this Moses. If he gets mad, he can backhand you and that’s the end, you know?”

Moses says, “They know!” And they did. Even Pharaoh knew, and he said, “Moses is a dead man.” So Moses had to leave. He went out of the city, way past the suburbs, found some women at a well, and helped them get water. Evidently this endeared men to women of that era. He ended up marrying one of the women and went to work for his father-in-law, tending sheep.

Now we’re getting to the fire part. Some time passes, and the Pharaoh who wanted to kill Moses has died. Moses is out in the countryside, tending his

flock. He sees something out of the corner of his eye. He turns and looks; there is a bush, blazing in fire, but it's not being burned up. He does a double take and says to himself, "I must turn and look at this thing."

Now just as a little aside here, because I want to use my Hebrew somehow, this word *fire* is a *feminine* noun. A feminine noun.

And a voice comes out of this fire, saying, "Moses!" Moses thinks, Oh, man, this thing's got an advantage on me. And the fire says, "Moses, take your shoes off, man, you are on holy ground." And I think Moses did that right away.

So this fire, knowing that it has the advantage of this man, says who it is: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."<sup>2</sup>

I've been trying to think how someone would say something similar to me. They'd have to know my earliest, legendary ancestors and say to me, "Ellen, you know those folks back then, the ones that you came from? I was *their* God."

But not just that. The fire didn't just say, "The God of Abraham." God's making a relationship with one person did not establish relationships with everybody forever after that. No, God became the God of Abraham, then the God of Isaac of the next generation, and when the next generation came along, there was a new relationship—the God of Jacob.

Then this voice, after introducing itself, says, "Moses, I want to set Israel free. I hear they're hurtin' pretty bad. And so I want to give them their own land, and I want you to go to Pharaoh and set them free, OK?"

Clearly, God had found someone who was already angry, who already knew what was going on, saw it for what it was, and was already free. And God was saying to this person, "You go back there and set the rest of them free."

Moses says, "You want *what*?"

And God says, "You don't have to do it alone, because I will be with you, and my presence will be your sign."

That's pretty interesting. God didn't say, "Thunder and lightning! You'll see it all and you'll know that I'm with you!" No; you'll know from my *presence* that I'm with you.

Moses doesn't, evidently, think that is quite substantial enough, for he says to this voice, "Now, when I go back to these people and say 'I'm gonna set you free,' what am I gonna tell them your *name* is?" And the voice answers, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh."<sup>3</sup>

And Moses says, "Oh, sure, you want to explain that one for me? That's got something to do with *am* or *will be* or *am becoming* . . . come on, I *speak* this language and I can't translate that."

So the voice says further, reminding him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

Well, Moses says, "Hey, I can't explain the first thing, and I've already heard the second thing. What if they just don't believe that I ever heard a voice coming out of a fire?" And God says, "Oh, all right. So you've got to have something to

show them. Pick up that stick.” Moses picks it up and it turns into a snake. He throws it back down on the ground, and God says, “Pick it up by the tail.” Moses says, “You’ve got to be kidding.” But he does it anyway, and the snake turns back into a stick. God says, “If they want a magic trick, I’ll give you a magic trick.”

Then Moses says, “Llllllook, I ccccan hardly ttttalk.” God says, “You’ve got a brother named Aaron. I’m not letting you off the hook. He can talk just fine. I’ll tell you what to say, you tell Aaron, Aaron will say it to Pharaoh. Just go and do it.”

So Moses goes back to Egypt (remember, the old Pharaoh is dead). And you know the next part, right? There are plagues, each one worse than the one before. The new Pharaoh says, “OK, OK, I’ll let you go,” and then changes his mind at the last minute. Over and over again there are these plagues that affect the Egyptians all over the country. The last plague is the plague of death, where the first-born sons of the Egyptians die. But the Israelites paint their doorposts with the blood of lambs, and the angel of death passes over each one of those houses.

Pharaoh says to Moses, “Get out. Get out. I never want to see you people again.” And they leave. They leave in the night. They leave with as much jewelry and silverware as they can borrow. They leave fast. Ahead of them, through the night, because they can’t stop, is a pillar of fire. And now everybody says, “Oh, Moses! Is that what you meant?” And this pillar of fire moves before them, into the darkness. And during the day, a column of smoke precedes them, and they follow wherever it goes.

They finally get to a point where they’re up against the bank of this big body of water, and they turn around and see dust coming up: The Egyptians have said, “Oh, no, we want them back,” and have come after them. They are between a rock and a hard place. The column of fire moves behind this little band of people to stand between them and their pursuers, and Moses takes his stick—you remember the stick—and holds it out over the water all night long. The wind blows all night, and in the morning there’s a wall of water, and there’s a dry place to walk. That’s what they do—walk to the other side of the sea.

When the Egyptians come along, they say, “Might work for us.” It doesn’t.

Now the Hebrews had been slaves for 400 years.<sup>4</sup> No one among them knows what it’s like to be free. It’s not just that they did slave work. It’s that after so many generations, that was what they knew life was like. That was the natural order: The powerful people are meant to make the decisions; they are meant to tell us what to do, and we are slaves by birth and by nature.

So they are in the wilderness. They don’t even know which direction is safe to move. They say to Moses, “We have no food, we have no place to lie down. There was food back there. What, there wasn’t enough cemetery land in Egypt that you brought us out here to die?”

The first thing that happened to this band was that their basic needs were met. Moses says to God, “Look, I don’t know what to do with these people.” And God says, “OK. I’ll feed them.” So they have manna in the morning—this funny, foamy, bready stuff—and in the evening, there are quails. There is enough food for everyone to eat.

But they still haven’t the slightest idea how to live out there. So God calls them all together and says to Moses, “I’m gonna give you all this little list. It’s a pretty short list. It’s just your basic guidelines, how these people are going to get along. OK? There are no Egyptians making up laws for them, so I’m going to give you some teachings. I’m going to give you a set of instructions.” Evidently this was a pretty major undertaking for God, and it caused a little friction, for when the people looked up at the mountainside, the whole mountain was aflame.

They got this set of 10 or 11 rules, depending on how you count them. Basic stuff, OK?

I should point out now that these stories were told orally for a long, long time. Then they were put in black and white, and that did something very strange. You know, people think that the written version is the only way these stories ever were told. Don’t believe that.

A voice speaks to Moses as the instructions are about to be given (I hope no one is offended, but I’m going to use the real Hebrew word, not the substitute word):

I, YHWH, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,  
the house of bondage.<sup>5</sup>

OK? Not, “I am the God of Abraham.” I am *your* God. I brought you out of slavery in Egypt.

So with this basic set of rules, the people begin to function. They begin to set up an organization that works for them. Most of them. But they are in the wilderness for 40 years. Now, that doesn’t sound like much compared to 400, but when you look at the number of stories we have and the information we have about this period, we know *lots* about this wilderness thing. About 80 percent of the first five books in the written-down stories are about this wandering-around time—when they really could not get a Sense of the Meeting to save their souls.

They wander out there blundering and making mistakes, having fights with the wrong people, quarreling, badgering Moses, complaining, for 40 years, until

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finally they are on the brink of the Promised Land. They're just about to cross over and get what they've yearned for.

Think about that. Forty years. Babies have been born out there in that wilderness that are full grown now, who never lived in slavery. There were people who came out of Egypt as adults who are very old, and some of them are beginning to die. And here they are on the brink of the Promised Land.

What does Moses say? Now, Moses is old. He has worked hard, and he's tired. He knows by this time that he's not going to get to the Promised Land; he's going to die first. And so he thinks about what these people need. He thinks, They're going to cross over, they're going to be out of the wilderness, they've been out of slavery for 40 years, and I'm not going to be there any more.

So he tells them their own story, starting with the wilderness part—*every* little mistake they made, every little time that God said, "Go that way," and they said, "We don't like that way, we're going *this* way"; every little quarrel they had, every time they said, "They don't look too tough, I think we can beat them!" Moses made sure that everybody in that party knew what those 40 years out there were like.

Then he says,

Take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things which you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children. The day you stood before YHWH your God at the mountain, when YHWH said to me, "Gather the people to me, that I may let them hear my words, in order that they may learn to revere me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children."

Moses is saying that these instructions aren't just for the benefit of the people who are there listening to him. And he continues:

You came forward and stood at the foot of the mountain. The mountain was ablaze with flames to the very skies, dark with densest clouds. God spoke to you out of the fire.<sup>6</sup>

Don't you forget it.

He goes on: "Now YHWH made a covenant with us at the mountainside." A covenant. That's a contract, and a contract between YHWH and the human beings is pretty binding. Moses said, "It was not with our ancestors that YHWH made this covenant, but with us, the living, with every one of us who is here today."<sup>7</sup>

Now what Moses says here functions on two levels. It is what Moses said to those people in the past.

But it is also preserved in this story so that anyone living who encounters these words can hear them in the present tense: It was not with our ancestors that YHWH made this covenant but with us, the living, with every one of us who is here today.

Then Moses says, “Now here are the teachings that we heard that day. The first thing that the voice said to you was, ‘I YHWH am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.’<sup>8</sup>” Moses was saying, “This God, the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac, comes to us in our generation, and speaks with us directly.”

Then he tells them, “You’re going to have to practice remembering this. It’s not going to feel like this every day. It would be helpful if you did a few things.” And he says,

Hear, O Israel, YHWH is our God, YHWH alone. You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these instructions which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children, recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up, bind them as a sign on your hand, let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.<sup>9</sup>

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. . . THE MOST IMPORTANT  
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WHERE HAS GOD BEEN?  
WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN  
MOVED? WHERE HAS THE FIRE  
LED YOU? DON’T FORGET IT.

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Now these are so you will not forget—practices which we Christians have thought we could do without.

One thing I’ve learned about biblical study is that if we really believe these stories come to us from our ancestors, then they belong to us, and their interpretation does not belong to people of the generations that came before us. Neither does their interpretation belong to a special class of people. As Quakers, this is one of our deepest convictions.

This story can mean a number of things, and there are things about it that I can’t tell you; you could better tell me :

- Whether this band of people in this room tonight, is in bondage.
- Or whether this band of people is standing, shoeless, in front of a strange fire, getting instructions which are not pleasant.
- Whether this band of people is living in the wilderness and having a damn hard time.
- Whether this group of people is on the brink of the promised land.

I think it's very important for us to know our own histories, but not just the way they've been narrowed down and laundered for junior and senior high school. We need to put together the pieces and the fragments of what we know and make a story that is as true as we can make it. We need to tell that story—because we are ancestors. I was thinking about Elise Boulding's idea of being in the middle of a 200-year present. No, no. We're in the middle of a 6,000-year present. We've got 3,000 years behind us that we know about, and we're beginning to piece together little bits about the time before that. That's real stuff. We've got 3,000 more years ahead. What we do now is important. The fire we tend is important.

Don't make mistakes with fire. It's really too dangerous. And when people tend the wrong fires, they get out of control pretty quickly.

I think the most important thing is to be very clear and honest about when we have encountered God. Where have we seen this Holy One at work? How do we know this Presence? Don't forget it. Tell yourselves those stories over and over again. Find a group of people you can trust, and begin to share those stories with each other. Where has God been? Where have you been moved? Where has the fire led you? Don't forget it.

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| 1 Exodus 1:15 (All specific biblical quotations are from the Jewish Publications Society Bible, the <i>Tanakh</i> , sometimes with minor alterations.) | 4 Genesis 15:13      |
| 2 Exodus 3:6   | 5 Exodus 20:2        |
| 3 Exodus 3:14  | 6 Deuteronomy 4:9–12 |
|  | 7 Deuteronomy 5:2–3  |
|  | 8 Deuteronomy 5:6    |
|  | 9 Deuteronomy 6:4–9  |



Ellen writes: “I believe in God because God has shown up in my life in undeniable ways. So I'm a witness to God's love. My call is to be a faithful witness, in my life, in my work, in my words. That's the important part. I attended the World Gathering of Young Friends in 1985 (one of the key moments that God showed up). I attended Earlham School of Religion in 1987–88, and learned to love the Hebrew Bible from Ellie Beach, who taught Intro to Old Testament that year. The next year, I took Hebrew at Christian Theological Seminary down the street from my house in Indianapolis. Then my life took one of its unexpected turns like lives do, and I didn't return to school for years. In December 2002, I completed a master of arts in pastoral care and counseling from CTS. I now witness to Love as a practicing pastoral psychotherapist in Indianapolis, where I live with my husband Mike Fallahay and our swell dog, Chris.”

—Ellen Hodge, May 2003