

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,
Elizabeth Watson,
David Wertheimer, and Dwight Wilson

EDITED BY ROBERT LEUZE

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Elise Boulding’s “The Challenge of Nonconformity” first appeared in the October 1987 *Friends Journal*.

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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*

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.

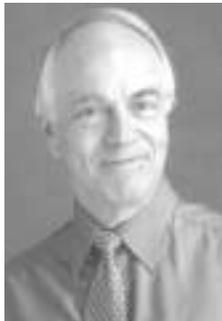
George Lakey (1991: “Our Bodies, Our Elves”) sought a vision of the new creation. He emphasizes, in six general areas, gifts that lesbians, gays, and bi’s can give to the Society of Friends and the larger world; the areas are embodiment (in a human body); the erotic (as a bridge to spiritual experience);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

WILLIAM KREIDLER

Midwinter Gathering
Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns
February 1989
Minneapolis, Minnesota

I'm 36 years old and I finally figured out what I want to be when I grow up. I want to be an Old Quaker Lady. *[Laughter, applause]* I don't say this lightly. I have thought long and hard about growing up to become Gene Kelly. *[Laughter]* I never learned to tap-dance, though—at least not yet—and I suspect that even if I do learn to tap-dance, I *still* won't be Gene Kelly. And besides, learning to tap-dance does not exclude becoming an Old Quaker Lady.

And before I go on, I should explain what I mean by the term “Old Quaker Lady.” Old Quaker Ladies are the ones you see sitting in meeting. They sit with their eyes closed. You're looking around the room. *[Laughter]* And they have a look on their faces, and you can't see in the mirror, but you're pretty sure that look is not on your face. *[Laughter]* It's a kind of a glow. And I look at them and I think, “Their feet are on this earth and their heads . . . They are hearing voices, they're hearing voices from somewhere that I am not.” And when I see an Old Quaker Lady in meeting, I'm never sure what's the right word to use—if it's serenity or if it's ecstasy. And maybe they're not mutually exclusive.

Now, an Old Quaker Lady isn't necessarily old, isn't necessarily a woman, and isn't necessarily a Quaker. In fact, one of the best descriptions I've ever come across is one that Victor Hugo wrote in *Les Misérables*, and he is describing, in fact, an old Catholic woman. And he says about her, “Her life, which had been a series of pious works, had cloaked her in a kind of transparent whiteness, and in growing old, she had acquired the beauty of goodness. What had been thinness in her youth, was in her maturity a transparency, and this ethereal quality permitted glimmers of the angel dancing within.” And Friends, I read that and I thought, “Hot damn, that's for me.” *[Laughter]*

Now, one thing that is very clear to me is that that kind of glow comes from a very well-tended inner spiritual fire. And I have a confession to make: I don't know how to build a fire. Not a physical fire. My idea of building a fire is you take a bag of charcoal briquets, you douse them with lighter fluid, and you toss in a match and stand back. *[Laughter]* I do know this much about fires. Every fire starts with a flame, and every fire has to be tended or it will go out. And this is true of physical fires, and it's true of spiritual fires as well. And as Friends like to say, this I know experientially.

So, I'm standing here today. I'm someone who's not an Old Quaker Lady, and who knows very little about tending fires, spiritual or otherwise. And I have tried to resist the temptation of doing the spiritual equivalent of dousing charcoal with lighter fluid. *[Laughter]* Which, Friends, doesn't leave me much choice but to just tell the truth. I hate that. *[Laughter]*

How *Not* to Tend a Spiritual Fire

Now, what I'd like to do, what I feel I need to do, is to talk very personally today, and share some of my experiences with you. Because, Friends, I am a living, breathing example of how *not* to tend a spiritual fire. The way I think of it is I have stepped in a lot of stuff the past few years, and I've stumbled over a few things trying to get out of what I stepped in.

The first thing I stepped in was a relationship. *[Laughter]* It gets better. *[Laughter]* Seven years ago I met a man, and he was smart and he had good politics and he was funny and he was good-looking and he was emotionally distant. He was perfect. *[Laughter]* And I loved him. I loved him so intently that it became an addiction. Now, I am not someone who runs around applying an addiction model to everything, but there are times when nothing else quite explains what went on.

And we spent four years together, and in that time he abused me verbally, and emotionally, and physically. The verbal and the emotional abuse were pretty much constant, a pattern that was established very early in the relationship. By the third or fourth month, I found myself living with a constant pain. I could even feel it. It felt like a lump, right in my chest, all the time. I cried; I cried all the time. I would like to say this about crying: Crying is a highly overrated activity.

Eventually, this pain became so intense, so constant, that I really couldn't stand it, and I started to drink very heavily. I needed to give myself a few hours of relief from this pain. Very soon I was drinking just about every night that I wasn't with my lover. I also started to do cocaine on a regular basis, and I started smoking two packs a day. All of this was in the first year of the relationship. Do you get the idea where this story is headed?

There were other things I did in that period that helped me not to tend my fire. One of the things my lover used to do was to tell me that he didn't love me

and then tell me why. It was from him that I learned the six worst words in the English language, which are, “You know what’s wrong with you?” The eight worst words in the English language are, “I think we’d better have a little talk.” One result of being told what was wrong with me was that I tried to change myself to suit him. I wanted him to love me, so I thought, “Well, I’ll change this,” or “I’ll change that.” Big mistake! Don’t do that. Once you start that process—of giving yourself up, of giving yourself away—it’s very hard to stop. And it makes it very hard to tend a fire.

Another mistake I made was to stop attending meeting for worship regularly.

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In large part that was because it was really difficult for me to sit for an hour: It felt as if my pain attacked me if I sat quietly for an hour. Unfortunately, I then began a process of cutting myself off from both my meeting community and my spiritual life.

His friends became *our* friends, and I began to lose touch with all of *my* friends. This was exacerbated because my lover was very active in gay politics. As he became better known and more prominent, I became even more invested in his life and had less of a life of my own. We became this famous fag couple in Boston.

He had to go to a lot of “events”: events where we had to go together and where we both were very invested in maintaining an image. He needed a husband, and I needed him for my identity. So we had a public face that was this perfect gay couple, and then we had a private face that was really very sick and very abusive. I think of that as the icing on the dysfunctional cake of our relationship.

Finally, after four years, we ended the relationship. It was horrible. Even when you want to end it and even when you know you should end it, it’s still hard. Unfortunately, when it ended, all the controls on my drinking and drug use ended with it. All I cared about was deadening the pain that I felt, so I added another addiction, work. Very soon I was locked into a really hopeless—it felt hopeless—pattern of drinking, drugging, and working.

All of this went on for a year, and somewhere in the middle of that year, my fire went out. I would wake up in the morning and just lie there, wishing that I had died in the night. I was endlessly tired; I can’t tell you how weary I was. Dying felt comforting, it felt cozy. I wasn’t at the point yet where I was suicidal, but I truly longed to die.

My life was really unattractive. I couldn’t believe that here I was, in the Valley of the Dolls. *[Laughter]* Anyone who has addiction problems will tell you that you just can’t believe that this has happened to you.

I kept this very well hidden, and that's one of the pathetic things about this story—and this is, by the way, a really pitiful story. I tell it well, but it's a pitiful story. *[Laughter]* I did good works during this period, I even did important work. But I was just going through the motions. I was running on empty. And one of the problems we Friends have, is that we know very well what those motions are. We know what is “good work.” So it's very easy to get caught up in doing it without having it coming from a centered place, without it having love behind it, and there was no love connected with any of what I was doing. I was just completely self-absorbed, completely wrapped up in my own pain.

But I did get one bit of hope during all this. I attended a gay Quaker wedding that May—Bruce Grimes's and Geoff Kaiser's wedding—and I had there the first spiritual experience that I'd had in, literally, years. It made me realize that there might be just a spark left of that fire that had been in me.

I held on to the spark for about a month longer and then finally called a friend, a Quaker lesbian, who took me to a program for recovering alcoholics. She literally held my hand through it. Even then I didn't stop drinking; in fact, I drank more than ever, and if I had had half a brain, and half a million dollars, I would have gotten on a plane and gone to the Betty Ford Center. Instead, I hopped on a plane and went to Friends General Conference in Oberlin. Friends, I got on that plane only because a gay Quaker man bought my ticket and put me on that plane. I was that badly off. But that FGC really changed my life, partly because it was there that I got sober, and that I detoxified from alcohol, an experience that I don't wish on anyone. Well, maybe *one* person. *[Laughter, applause]* I also learned how to take that little spark and nurture it into a little flame, which felt like major progress.

Nurturing My Spiritual Flame

All of that was a year and a half ago. Since then I have had to work harder than I have ever worked at anything to stay clean, to stay sober, and to keep nurturing that flame. I also learned to do four things. I hated every one of those four things at first, which is really odd, because they are all things that I thought I was doing all along. These are the four things I've had to do: I've had to be honest; I've had to be open; I've had to practice; and I've had to be easy with myself. I really hate that last one.

1. Being Honest. Okay, when I was a kid, I used to have a book. I've forgotten everything about it, even its name, except that people in this story were taking a journey somewhere to seek their fortune. There was a good fairy who would get them started, and she would give them a pair of glasses, and she would say something like *[in a high voice]*, “These are the glasses of honesty. They will help you see the way clearly.” Now, the catch was that most people would put these glasses on and would see things *too* clearly, and they'd go, “Aaah, take

them away!” And the fairy (who, it strikes me now, was kind of a pill) [*Laughter*] would say something like, “Oh, alas, you cannot even begin the journey without the glasses of honesty. So you will remain a peasant the rest of your life.” [*Laughter*]

I have thought of that story a lot, because the first thing that I had to do was to be honest at several points along the way. I’ve had to be honest that I had a problem—with alcohol and with drugs. As I said, I couldn’t believe that a nice boy (I’m a nice boy) ended up in the Valley of the Dolls. What am I doing here?

I DID GOOD WORKS DURING THIS PERIOD, I EVEN DID IMPORTANT WORK. BUT I WAS JUST GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS. . . . AND ONE OF THE PROBLEMS WE FRIENDS HAVE, IS THAT WE KNOW VERY WELL WHAT THOSE MOTIONS ARE. WE KNOW WHAT IS “GOOD WORK.” SO IT’S VERY EASY TO GET CAUGHT UP IN DOING IT WITHOUT HAVING IT COMING FROM A CENTERED PLACE, WITHOUT IT HAVING LOVE BEHIND IT, AND THERE WAS NO LOVE CONNECTED WITH ANY OF WHAT I WAS DOING.

I had to admit that my life was unmanageable, and I had to admit that I was powerless over it. I hated that for a lot of reasons, but in some ways, I was fortunate, because the facts were like a billboard: “Bill K. is in deep shit!”

I also had to be honest about needing other people’s help, that I could not do this alone. That was hard for a couple of reasons—first, because I was raised in the great “stand on your own two feet” tradition. But even more difficult was the fact that asking for help meant in part facing the pain and talking about it. I had spent an enormous amount of time and energy running away from that pain, and honesty meant I had to face it. It was like those glasses of honesty: It’s hard when you see things clearly. It drove me crazy that if I wanted to begin this journey, I had to wear those glasses just as in that dumb story. But John Calvi once said to me, “Just because something is

stupid doesn’t mean it isn’t true.” [*Laughter*] Isn’t that good? I like that.

As painful as honesty was, it was also very clear to me that it was dishonesty about what was being done to me and about what I was doing to myself that had helped to extinguish my fire in the first place. But the problem with being honest is that it’s an ongoing struggle. I really thought that I could do it once or twice and then call it quits. And I can’t. There are times when I feel honesty is too much for me, that it’s going to overwhelm me, wash me away or something.

2. Being Open. But I met a woman at that Friends General Conference in Oberlin who had something to say that helped me with this. The woman’s name was Julian of Norwich; she was a fourteenth-century mystic, an English mystic.

She had 13 visions—she called them “showings”—where she talked with God, and she spent the rest of her life writing about them. They are very special to me. One of the things Julian says is:

God did not say to me, “You will not be tempested.” He did not say, “You will not labor hard.” He did not say, “You will not be troubled.” But he did say, “You will not be overcome.” Our Lord is with us, taking care of us, and leading us into the fullness of joy.

So for me, honesty has been the first step in nurturing the flame, so that I too can be led to the fullness of joy.

I just said I had to be honest about needing other people’s help. I’ve also had to be open about accepting it. There’s a difference. Have you ever noticed that people don’t always help you the way you think they should? [*Laughter*] (I didn’t think I was the only one to have noticed that.) When I was first in recovery, I was trying hard to nurture my spiritual flame. I was having some trouble talking with God, with prayer. And I was talking to someone about it, another recovering alcoholic, and she said to me, “Well, you should get down on your knees in the morning and pray.” And I said, “I’m a Quaker, and we don’t really do that. You know, we think that God is in us . . .” and she said, “Shut up.” [*Laughter*] “Just do what I tell you to. It works for other people, it will work for you.” So of course I took an attitude about it, but I did try it, and it worked, to my amazement. And now, in fact, getting on my knees each morning to pray is one of the most special parts of my spiritual discipline to me.

I’ve also needed to be open to the variety of ways there are of thinking about God. When I was a kid, my concept of God was like many people’s—an old man with a long white beard, a *big* old man with a long white beard, an old man who did not seem to me to be cold and severe but felt very warm and loving. So I have fond memories of that concept of God, one reason I still use the term “God” even though my concept of God changed very radically by the time I was 18 and became involved with Friends.

My concept of God changed for various reasons. It’s always been important to me to have a God that doesn’t have a gender and that isn’t sort of “out there.” But when I first got sober, I found myself reverting to that old-man-with-a-beard concept of God, and that troubled me. William Penn once wrote, “None fall so low that they fall beyond the reach of God’s arms.” That was what I needed at that time; I needed a God with arms. [*Laughter*] I needed to think of God that way, as I went through that period, and learning to accept that vision of God was really important for me.

At this point in my life I no longer need to think of God that way. But, it’s funny, trying on that concept again opened something in me. Last fall, in my meeting’s Bible study group, we talked about our different names for God. I was

surprised at the variety and wrote them down. People talked about the Great Spirit, about the Source, about the Holy Mother, the Mother Spirit, the Universal Mind, the Creator, and the Light Fantastic. (It was a straight boy who said that last one.) [Laughter]

Since then, I have been trying on these different names for God, trying to imagine God as being each of those names. I find that doing so enhances my concept of the Spirit to think of God, to think of the Spirit, in those different ways. And one of the first things I learned, incidentally, was that those different names for the Spirit, those different names for God, are all compatible with each

other. I have also learned that different names for the Spirit fill different needs in my life. It's become very important to me to stay open to that.

I AM SO GRATEFUL THAT THIS
COMMUNITY TENDS ITS FIRE.
GRATEFUL THAT IT IS
HONEST, THAT IT IS OPEN,
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ITSELF. BECAUSE, FRIENDS,
IT IS SO IMPORTANT THAT WE
ARE HERE.

I've also had to stay open to the variety of ways there are for knowing God. One result is that I have come to love to hear people's stories, to hear them talk about how they experience the Light, how they experience the Spirit—listening to people in meeting or in other spiritual arenas, reading the lives of people like Saint Teresa, Julian of Norwich, or early Friends, or reading the Bible. What I have learned is the variety of ways there are to

tend your fire and the variety of fires that there are.

Since you know now more of my secrets than you ever wanted to know, let me tell you one more. I am a very nasty, judgmental person. And so the openness that I am talking about is hard for me sometimes. I have a very critical mind, and I tend to push these things away. I don't want to hear. But the first piece of advice I got when I joined a program for recovery from alcoholism was to listen to other people's stories and to identify rather than to compare. Now, for an alcoholic, that's important, because comparing is one of the ways that we use to distance ourselves. We say, "Well, my story's not like that, *ergo* I don't have a problem like *you* do." [Laughter]

But I've found it's useful in other parts of my life as well. Suspending my judgmental nature temporarily—and I can only do it temporarily, sorry—allows me to really listen to people, to stay open to them, and to feel the Spirit move through them. I really need that, because as a fire-tender, I really am starting from scratch, so I need anything I can learn from anybody.

3. Practicing. Having just said how much I enjoy hearing how others tend their fires, there are some ways that are just not my way, and that's very clear. I

am not someone, frankly, who gets inspiration in a flash. I have never walked down the street and heard a voice say, “There is One, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition.” [*Laughter*] Nearly everything in my life, whether it was becoming an alcoholic or developing a spiritual life, has happened in small steps, small undramatic steps. So I have to practice tending my spiritual flame every day. It has become important to develop habits—to make time to pray, to meditate, to get to meeting, to read the stories of people’s experiences.

There’s another factor in the way of practicing that has to do with how I approach each of those. It has to do with turning my life and my will over to the Spirit, and with trying consciously to let the Spirit work through me, waiting for guidance and waiting till I think I have it before I act. You have to remember, I have a lot of evidence what happens when I try to run my life myself. Another recovering alcoholic once said to me, “Bill, look where your very best thinking got you.” [*Laughter*] I thought, “Well, this is annoying.” And part of the reason it was annoying was because it was true. I need the help of the Spirit in running my life. There have been times when I feel I have succeeded in accepting that help, and when I have felt the Spirit move through me, working through me. Something wonderful happens to me, and I think [*claps his hands*], “I will never doubt again. I will always turn my life and my will over to You.” Then, two minutes later, I am like, “Yo, God, let’s do it my way. You could be running the universe twice as well in half the time.” [*Laughter, applause*] “Just listen to me.”

4. Being Easy with Myself. I get really frustrated with myself for thinking like this. I start thinking, “Well, no *wonder* you don’t have any grace, you don’t deserve any.” So the last thing I’ve had to do has been the hardest of all, and that has been to go easy on myself. When I was first getting sober, people used to tell me, “Take it a day at a time.” Well, that was good advice then because there were times—there are times still—when I could only get through my life a day at a time, sometimes an hour or a minute at a time. But it’s good advice even now because it reminds me to stay centered in the present moment, and that’s very hard for me. “Turn yesterday over to the Spirit, turn tomorrow over to the Spirit, and stay present where you are” (from Douglas Steere’s wonderful Pendle Hill pamphlet on staying present where you are).

Also, about being easy with myself, I am very impatient with the healing that I have to do. You may have noticed that I have a lot of anger and resentment toward a certain person. And if you didn’t notice it, let me make it clear. [*Laughter*] Friends, that feels like a burden to me, and I am weary of that burden. I would love to do what my friends tell me to do, and that is, “Oh, for Christ’s sake, would you get over it?” I’m trying. But a dear Quaker man, a gay Quaker man, said to me once that these things have their own timetable and heal in their own time. Not long after that I heard someone say in meeting that when

you have a wound, there is really nothing you can do to make that wound heal more quickly, but there is a lot you can do to make it heal more slowly.

So I live with it and try to let it heal in its own time. I try to focus on nurturing my flame and not nurturing my resentment. You see, as much as I want to be done with these burdens right now, as much as I want to be an Old Quaker Lady right now, as much as I want to be free of all my character defects right now, there is still enough of a measure of Light in me to know that these desires represent the charcoal-and-lighter-fluid approach to building a spiritual fire.

George Fox is very clear on the fact that the ocean of darkness and the ocean of light exist side by side and that the ocean of light illuminates the ocean of darkness. It illuminates all those defects in our characters. He goes on to say, “We must abide in the patience and endure the fire, the spiritual fire that trieth all things and severeth all things.” In other words, according to Fox, if we tend our fires, the fire will cleanse us and purify us.

My take is a little different on spiritual fires, and for me what all of this is about—all this honesty and openness and practicing and being easy—is about faithfulness. It’s about taking a slow process, but a process of tending a fire and developing a faith in the Spirit to work through my life. The greater my faith in the Spirit and in the Light, the more steadfastly my fire burns. That’s what I feel I see when I see those Old Quaker Ladies on the bench. This I know a little bit experientially.

I quoted Julian of Norwich earlier, and I’d like to read the rest of the quotation: “Our Lord is with us, taking care of us, leading us into the fullness of joy. Our way and our heaven is faithful love and sure trust, and the fullness of joy is to behold God in everything.” That’s the kind of faith that can really set your spiritual fires roaring.

The Ministry of Our Community

I would like to close by saying a few words about the context in which all of this stuff that I’ve been talking about has taken place. I would like to add a few words to what has already been said about the wonderful ministry of *this* community, this community of lesbian and gay Quakers. I’ve specifically mentioned when lesbian and gay Quakers helped me along the way. It was a Quaker lesbian who took me to my first twelve-step meeting. It was the guy who got me on the plane to FGC. At that Friends General Conference, you know, it was lesbian and gay Quakers who stayed with me all week. They talked with me and listened to me; they helped me learn that by admitting I was powerless, I would in fact gain power. It was lesbian and gay Quakers who held me when I cried, which was nearly all the time. All you had to do was say, “Boo,” and I cried. They called me “Tiny Tears.” [*Hushed laughter*] You know, I was in all this pain. I reacted to that pain like Daffy Duck. And they loved me anyway.

Saint Teresa Avila once wrote, "People will tell you you do not need friends on this journey, that God is enough. But I say, to be with God's friends is a good way to stay close to God in this life." This I know experientially. Okay, she goes on to say:

This is to love: To bear with a fault and not be astonished. To relieve others of their labor, and take upon yourself tasks to be done. To be cheerful, when others have need of it. To be grateful for your strength, when others have need of it. To show tenderness and love and sympathize with the weaknesses of others when they have need of it.

When others have need of it. I had need of it. And I am so grateful that this community tends its fire. Grateful that it is honest, that it is open, that it practices, that it is easy and loving with itself. Because, Friends, it is so important that we are here. I look at how cold the world is out there, and how hurting even just the lesbian and gay piece of it is. We don't know who is going to be led to sit by our fire. Some of those people are going to be frightened, some are going to be lonely, some will be dying, some will be angry, some will be bleeding. Many of them are going to be wounded far worse than I was. Because we tend our fire as a community, we can be there when others have need of it.

I haven't said much about joy today. Well, I haven't said anything about joy. I'd like to close by saying something about it. I think that joy is one of the special gifts that we, as lesbians and gay men, have to offer. And I don't just mean that we have better taste and more fun. [*Laughter*] Although, of course, we do. [*Laughter*] Julian of Norwich . . . (This is my last quote, I swear. You'll like this one. This is a real good one.) Julian of Norwich says:

Our soul must perform two duties. One is, we must reverently wonder and be surprised. The other is, we must gently let go and let be, always taking pleasure in God.

Taking pleasure in God. I think we do that pretty well. And I think that's part of what makes our spiritual fire unique, and it's part of what we have to share with the world.

Several years ago, at Friends General Conference in Slippery Rock, there was a group of us lesbians and gay men sitting in the lounge of the fourth floor on the gay dorm. (For those of you who have never been to Friends General

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Conference, FLGC has its own dorm.) It was late at night by FGC standards, like *eleven o'clock*. [Laughter] So we were sitting around, not doing anything special really. We were sitting around eating pizza and laughing and just being together, and a woman wandered in. None of us knew her, but I remember her poking her head in the door kind of tentatively, and she said, "Can I come in with you folks?" She came in and sat down, and she said, "You know, this is the only place on this campus where anyone's having any fun." And, Friends, I truly believe that the warmth of our spiritual fire was what drew her up those stairs and into that room. I also truly believe that when she looked in that door, what she saw was a room full of Old Quaker Ladies, and they were all tap-dancing.

[Laughter, loud and continuing applause, followed by silence.]



William Kreidler, a teacher for over two decades at various levels from kindergarten to college, was an internationally recognized expert in conflict resolution and peace education. A prolific author, in 1984 he wrote a seminal book for teachers of young children, *Creative Conflict Resolution*. Other books included *Teaching Conflict Resolution through Children's Literature* and *Early Childhood Adventures in Peacemaking*. He was co-author with Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith of *The Violence Prevention Curriculum for Adolescents*. He was a profound influence on thousands of children and teachers by teaching and lecturing around the world, including in Russia, Israel, and Canada. In 1997, he received the Margaret Herrman Founders Award from the National Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution. He also contributed articles to several gay journals. He developed educational curricula and materials on such topics as AIDS, violence prevention, world health issues, hunger, nuclear war, and peace, for such organizations as the Centers for Disease Control, Public Television, Children's Television Workshop, Educators for Social Responsibility, and several states' department of education. He served as Director of Conflict Resolution for Educators for Social Responsibility, where he was responsible for teacher training programs. A member of Beacon Hill Meeting in Boston for 25 years, he gave frequent workshops on prayer and forgiveness. He was a scholar of St. Teresa of Avila and St. Julian of Norwich and was a noted expert on the nineteenth-century minister and painter Edward Hicks, best known for his painting *Peaceable Kingdom*. He was keynote speaker at Friends General Conference in 1996. He and his partner, David Aronstein, lived in Boston, where Bill died from AIDS complications in 2000, at the age of 48.



William Kreidler



Step Schiel

Bill Kreidler, tap-dancing
onstage with the
Free Grace
Undying Love
Full Gospel Quaker Choir