

Introductory Remarks, Diane Randall

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How are we called as Friends to speak the Truth through love?

Since 2016, when Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, we have witnessed a precipitous demise of truth in public life, accelerating the already declining public trust in government and elected officials. At that time, I was General Secretary of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, a venerable advocacy organization founded in 1943 to lobby the US Congress on matters of Friends' concerns. FCNL is an organization committed to non-partisan witness for peace, justice, and environmental stewardship before Congress and the Executive branch. It was a challenging time to maintain a non-partisan and hopeful approach to our advocacy.

Lies from political leaders didn't start with Donald Trump, but he made false statements with a frequency that was head spinning. We saw the use of social media for manipulating the public's understanding of what is true and what is false escalate in the months leading up to his election and we have seen it escalate more even in the years since—not only in the US but across the world, often with dire impact on human rights and human life.

Increasingly many people rely on social media for their news and information. And the algorithms that sort news according to our own preferences mean that we receive a version of the news fashioned according to our interests. Those of us who have the time, the curiosity and the skepticism to review multiple sources

may feel ourselves more grounded in reality. Unfortunately, some people gravitate toward extremist behavior by narrowing their sources of information, accepting lies from political pundits and candidates that reinforce their beliefs.

How does this culture of political lies which often promote authoritarian and nationalistic leaders affect the Religious Society of Friends? Does our commitment to truth and integrity mean we have to jump into the fray—to be engaged in politics? Can we find a common ground that moves us toward the world we seek? What is our calling as Friends to speak the Truth through love?

I believe that Friends' faith and practice provides us with a way forward into and through the dramatic challenges facing our world—a way that is grounded in Truth, a way that continuously pursues truth and a way that encourages and supports a life of integrity.

As you weigh the questions of Quaker Truth and Integrity in Britain Yearly Meeting's corporate life and in your individual lives, I want to briefly share a couple of stories of how Quakers in the US are also living into these questions. The work of Britain Yearly Meeting's Truth and Integrity working group and the 2021 Swarthmore Lecture of Thomas Penny have been helpful in preparing my remarks.

In 1981, when I was living in Omaha, NE, the home of the US Strategic Air Command, I got involved with the Nuclear Freeze Movement. My first child was born that year, and I was horrified by the existential threat of the US and USSR nuclear arsenals. This was my first foray into the political world and public life. I organized, I protested, I wrote opinion pieces for the newspaper. I began to see that if I wanted to create a better world, I would need to advocate with elected officials.

When I moved to CT later in the 1980s, I began working with an agency of the Catholic Church that lobbied the state legislature on issues concerning poverty, specifically opposition to the death penalty and the need for affordable housing. My boss was a Quaker, the kind of Quaker who could unwittingly intimidate you with her intelligence and integrity. Consider the blessings and benefits for me, a newly convinced Quaker, of this opportunity to learn political advocacy from a place of moral grounding. I learned how to lobby from a truth teller.

From our earliest days, Quakers lobbied political powers as a way of speaking truth. I distinguish lobbying, that is, talking directly to the offices of those who hold political power—as FCNL practices it and as I have seen in Britain Yearly Meeting practice advocacy—as distinct from other forms of public witness such as organizing and protest—other important ways that we as Friends witness for truth.

In our governments, those who stand for public office and get elected are charged with representing *all* constituents, which means they are called on to listen to not only moneyed interests.

The voices of Quakers and other people of faith *have* an impact—often because we are willing to listen and work to find common ground while holding our truth. Although religion has taken a diminishing role in our society, there is still a disposition to trust “faith-based lobbyists” and to recognize that faith-based lobbyists are compelled by a values-driven mission. For me, as a Quaker, this means an obligation to conduct this work in community with others, to speak truth AND to listen.

Speaking truth and listening are fundamental to our Quaker faith and practice. Not only with one another in our meetings for business, but also in our willingness to speak truth and listen in public spaces. This historic legacy of the earliest Friends is an

ongoing witness of Friends today. When we open ourselves to not only declarations and protests, but also to this listening presence, we find ourselves on “kinder ground.”

Just days just after the election of Donald Trump, FCNL’s annual meeting gathered in Washington, DC with about 350 people—our governance committee and other supporters/activists. People were shaken by the election—maybe in the same way that people in Britain were shaken by the Brexit vote.

In addition to conducting the business of the organization, participants lobby their representatives and senators on a focused issue—for this gathering, it was criminal justice reform. Sometimes the Hill meetings are with members themselves, often they are with staff. When we heard the report back from those Hill meetings, it was clear that FCNL advocates not only spoke truth about criminal justice reform as a step to addressing racism and equity, but they played a pastoral role for the congressional staff they met with. The Capitol Hill staff—both in Republican and Democrat offices were equally stunned by the election of Donald Trump. Quaker advocates listened to them and provided a “kinder ground.” In what is often a rough landscape of power jostling and competition, kindness can have an impact.

I have seen faith leaders in Washington and people of faith from local communities provide moral and spiritual support to elected officials that encourages them to take or hold fast to the courageous positions they have staked out in the face of harsh opposition.

Have you experienced this kind of wholeness that happens when we are fully present as human beings, being human with one another? Then the power to speak Truth comes more clearly, and Truth may be most manifest by speaking of what is in our hearts, not only of what comes from our heads.

When I consider the earliest name of Quakers—Friends of Truth—I understand that the Truth those early seekers experienced was capital T Truth; they were convinced of the presence and power of God as Truth—the truth described in John 8—you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.

As I understand Quaker truth-seeking, the truth I seek in my outward life is distinct from, but connected to, the Inner Truth I know from a place of faith. That Truth with a capital T, Truth, I also know by the names Light, Holy Spirit, God—and through worship and prayer, I grow in the constancy of this Truth. But the pursuit of truth in a cultural, social, political sense recognizes that truth *does* change and evolve.

Seeking truth is a practice of staying open to what we don't know and haven't experienced. Seeking truth is a continuous effort because I may not know the full story and because what is true today has not always been true. Small 't' truth changes because we change—because of education, experience and culture. Things we were certain of 100 years ago may no longer be true; in fact, something we might have been certain of 3 years ago or 3 months ago may no longer be true.

For example, three years ago, I thought the truth was that everyone who worked at FCNL needed to show up to the office to do the work; however, the pandemic which forced lock-downs demonstrated that wasn't true. We managed to do our work remotely.

Here is a dramatic example of how Friends have changed their views on truth in North America. It is that of Indian boarding schools in both Canada and the United States. During the 1800's and up until 1950, Quakers participated in developing and

operating boarding schools for Native American and Alaska native children. An idea premised on Quaker regard for learning and education, included the notion that children would be better off away from their families and tribal communities, that their lives would improve if they weren't allowed to speak their native language or dress the way their families did; if their hair was cut; if they adhered to the true way of life that Quakers offered in these schools. Other Christian denominations created Indian boarding schools as well and they, like Quakers, are going through their own reckoning for the devastating harm that was done in destroying individual lives, families and communities.

Friends in Canada have been in the forefront of truth and reconciliation, and US Friends are coming to understand our historic complicity and to take action to confront the injustice we have perpetrated as we listen to the truth spoken by indigenous people of the historic and continuing trauma of these boarding schools.

While this truth-telling may seem to be only a retrospective regard, in fact, it represents a spiritual, moral and just action that challenges us to recognize how we might be acting unjustly now. This knowledge of a truth our ancestors held that we now know was a lie and a sin can spur us to humility. It can open our eyes to oppression that people who are not part of the dominant culture experience every day. This truth-telling is less about making judgment than it is about making wholeness. It alerts us to vigilance in our efforts to live with integrity and requires us to listen for prophetic witness.

How is Britain Yearly Meeting recognizing or hearing prophetic witness today? Is it in the wisdom of elders? Is it through the honesty and fervor of young adults? Is it in interfaith common ground?

A year ago as the US was moving toward our mid-term elections, a group of Friends, initiated by retired heads of agencies, convened to raise the concerns about risks to democracy in the US and the very real threats of election violence. The January 6, 2021 insurrection at the US Capitol put the country on high alert for danger. The dogged belief by a small but highly vocal group who continued to insist the 2020 election of Joe Biden had been stolen alerted us to the durability of election lies and a persistent deep division in the political and cultural life in the United States. A number of states had election-deniers running for governor, US Senate or for roles as state election officials. The situation was volatile, and the small group of Friends who gathered asked the question: what are we as Friends called to do?

Over several weeks, we developed an Urgent Call to the Religious Society of Friends and asked for individual and meeting endorsements. In the summer we held five national zoom calls. These calls provided Friends a community to share concerns; moreover, they provided resources to Friends in how they might take public action locally. Some Friends were already actively working on candidates' campaigns, although we were clear that we weren't promoting specific candidates. Rather we were promoting non-partisan fair and free elections, meaning everyone eligible to vote could vote and there would be no election violence. Some Friends were motivated to be non-partisan poll workers or to engage with local NGO's that had developed structured programs to talk across political divides.

Friends were very grateful for how this online community offered encouragement and resources. Now this ad hoc group is asking: "What's next? How are Friends called to act? Why is this concern for the health of our democracy particularly salient for

Quakers? What could we lose in these fraught times; moreover, what might we gain in speaking truth, in acting boldly?

It's a live dialogue of what we will do in preparation for the 2024 presidential election. We have helped name the concerns of many Friends in the US and that we've taken some steps to connect Friends to one another, to encourage them to carry these conversations into their local meetings and communities.

Not all Friends feel called to protect or fix democracy as a way of acting on truth. In fact, most people understand that speaking truth is not only speaking about the fissures in our democracy. Many, many urgent concerns press Friends to take action grounded in love—addressing climate change, racial injustice, immigration, gun violence, income inequality/capitalism—these are all moral imperatives.

This ebb and flow of inward movement to outward action, of a community gathered to listen, to discern and then to act is essential for who we are as Friends. It is essential to our practice of truth and integrity.

Integrity is both the personal and corporate practice of integrating Truth and truth to live our lives. Integrity is not about perfection, it is about practice. That integrity and truth are testimonies of our faith and practice is so aspirational, so motivational and so difficult. Sometimes, Friends are hesitant to declare their Quaker identity because we feel we aren't "good enough Quakers." At least that's true of Quakers in the US, maybe not here in Britain.

I think the antidote for this hesitancy is to come out of the closet as Quakers and practice our public presence as Friends, to practice the gifts of our faith: truth-telling, accountability, community building and hope.

When I went to work at FCNL, I felt I was becoming a "public Friend" that I would be "out" as a Quaker. Not that I had particularly tried to hide it, but in my previous work and with friends who weren't Quakers, I didn't speak of my faith upfront. I tried to "let my life speak," I love that about Quakers—that our practice is to let our lives speak, but I also see the value in claiming and naming our Quaker identity in a public way—maybe especially at this time. By that, I mean letting people know why we object to politicians' lies or why we oppose the war in Ukraine or why we believe that meaningful action on climate change requires compensation by wealthy nations for loss and damage, or why we expect government officials and media companies to adhere to a code of ethics.

Doing the difficult work of discernment as a corporate body of how God is leading us is only the first step, taking the actions that put us into the public fray must follow. It isn't necessary to work for a Quaker organization to be public. Many Friends who aren't in paid Quaker work are publicly showing up, speaking out OR perhaps behind the scenes are conducting the kind of quiet diplomacy that we know is a hallmark of the Quaker United Nations Office.

Not to be too lofty here—most of us are unlikely to do quiet diplomacy with the United Nations, but we can do quiet diplomacy in our communities, in conversations with family, friends and strangers, speaking courageously about the truth in our hearts. I regularly hear Friends describe the blessing of having conversations with strangers with whom they disagree politically and then finding common ground. Human beings being human with one another. This is establishing kinder ground to open space for truth.

When we are willing to be public Friends, we can bring a Quaker presence to public spaces. We can bring integrity and accountability. We can bring the gifts of listening deeply, speaking courageously, and building trust.

What is needed to be public truth-tellers? What do Friends who choose to be public as a Quaker need?

- humility and courage
- prayer; being held in the Light
- a support circle; I think especially for those Friends who hold public office, a confidential gathering of trusted Friends
- time for worship, a community of Friends
- training and practice in how social media can be used for Quaker truth-telling
- access to elected officials and decision-makers
- collaboration with other faith-based advocates

Friends, as you move forward with this yearly meeting's witness for truth and integrity, know that Friends in the US, and perhaps across the world, are holding similar questions. Do listen to young Friends for their concerns and their advice. Be courageous in speaking truth and in listening for the truth you may not yet know. Take joy in practicing the gifts of our faith: truth-telling, accountability, community building and hope.