

Britain Yearly Meeting 2017
Introduction by George Lakey, 29 July
“Living and loving on your edge”

“Stop it! STOP IT! HELP!”

I could hear the young woman’s voice clearly. I’d left the windows of the second floor open to catch the breeze on this hot night.

“Call 911!” I called to my granddaughter as I rushed down the stairs toward the front door.

The voice sounded far enough away so the woman was probably on the other side of the street, I reasoned as I opened the door and stepped onto the porch. I couldn’t see anything at first so I walked to the end of the porch and peered across the dark street. The light from the streetlights was filtered by the trees along our sidewalks.

Then I saw her, across the street and down to my left, struggling with a young man. “Stop it!” she yelled again.

I immediately felt two conflicting urges: to intervene on her behalf, and to stay safe. There are a lot of guns in my city and I don’t want to get shot. I decided to act, but to be cautious at the same time.

On the edge of my porch I took a deep breath, aimed my voice at the fighting couple, and said the first thing that came into my mind: “I’M WATCHING YOU!”

Both of them stopped for a second to look at where my voice came from, saw this tall white man standing on his porch, and went back to their fight.

I stood there, embarrassed by what I’d said. Surely, George, I told myself, after all these years of studying Gandhi and King you can come up with something better than that!

Still, I wasn’t dead yet, so I decided to make another move.

I walked down the steps from my porch to the sidewalk. Confident that something better would come from my mouth this time, I took a deep breath and yelled.

“I’M STILL WATCHING YOU!”

This time the two stopped longer, looking at this strange white guy in what looked like disbelief. Then the man hit her and they went back at it.

Again I berated myself for my lack of creativity while I advanced toward the edge of my sidewalk. I didn't see a gun yet. I was still alive, so I took another deep breath and out came – you guessed it – “I'M STILL WATCHING YOU!”

This time the couple stopped completely, nonplussed. I heard doors opening on my block as neighbors who had heard me came out on their porches. Good, I thought, reinforcements. The energy is really shifting now.

I started to walk into the street, still cautious, but willing to keep closing the gap between them and me.

Just then a tall, older African American woman moved down the sidewalk toward the couple, walking with measured steps and great dignity. She reached the couple and hooked her arm around that of the girl. She started to walk her away from the young man who stood with his arms dangling at his sides, seemingly at a loss. When they had moved a few yards away from him, the older woman turned slightly in his direction and said firmly, “We don't treat our women *that way*.”

I retreated from the middle of the street, then sat on my front steps breathing a sigh of relief.

So *that's* what it was about, I reflected: I was a place holder, filling in until something happened that would really make the difference. My clumsy words and hesitant steps didn't prevent me from doing my job, playing my part in the larger drama of the evening.

Inspired by Lucretia Mott, Martin Luther King and other heroes in social change, I've wanted to make a big difference in the fight to replace injustice with a decent world. What I've found is that the size of the difference isn't necessarily mine to predict. Sometimes my role might be the supporting actor rather than the star of the show.

The main thing in making a difference, as Woody Allen said, is to show up. And that often means vulnerability, which is my invitation to you this week, and something I'm doing this morning.

Of course there's a lot that stands against our showing up, including the fear that I felt so strongly that night, the fear about getting shot. There are many fears: fear of disapproval, fear of economic insecurity, fear that we won't have the right stuff. These fears are all heightened when we place too much emphasis on results – I *will* save that woman from getting badly hurt by her boyfriend!

There's another way of thinking about living a life that might be worth considering. For those of us who focus first on results, it may help to add the value of intention.

I'd invite you to consider, as you seek the Light, this intention: ***to live and love on your edge.***

I have good days and bad days, like a lot of people. When I forgive myself for the bad days, I find I have more good days. What animates me, and therefore shows up especially on the good days, is my intention to live and love on my edge.

On that summer night in West Philly I was operating from my intention, and that's what outweighed my fears. To live and love on my edge meant to zoom down those stairs and get out on the porch to see how I might be useful.

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Tourists love the ancient capitol of Sri Lanka. Kandy has beautiful batiks, handsome temples, a quiet lake alongside a green that features an elephant giving rides, and strolling orange-robed monks carrying their trademark black umbrellas.

Peaceful appearances to the contrary, in 1989 it was also a conflicted city, with loyalties divided between the government and an insurgency led by young leftist students. Among those caught in the middle were human rights lawyers, who fought for the rights of those the government accused of ties with the insurgency.

Elements in the security forces found these human rights lawyers to be more than a nuisance; several lawyers had already been assassinated by hit squads. Those remaining were scrambling for some way of staying alive and still standing up for civil rights.

Peace Brigades International offered protective accompaniment to threatened lawyers, and I had just concluded negotiations with one on the conditions of accompaniment. (One condition: he needed to give up his gun for the duration of our relationship, and rely instead on the nonviolent protection of his unarmed bodyguard. He agreed, seeing accompaniment as more likely to be effective than his gun against a hit squad.) The student who had led me to this lawyer joined me as I left and we began to walk toward the city center. Walking along the quiet residential street with its stately palm trees was a relaxing interlude for both of us. After the interview and the tense prospect of starting the accompaniment after reporting back to the PBI team in Colombo.

"I need to go back to Colombo to report to the PBI team, and get ready to start accompaniment of this lawyer," I said. "When is the next train to Colombo?"

"Six o'clock," he said, "and it will get us there at ten. But I wonder if I could ask a favor? Ten is past curfew. It's dangerous for me with all the checkpoints.

Could I stay with you in a hotel room tonight here in Kandy, then we could take the early train tomorrow morning?"

I agreed, thinking that a few hours difference wouldn't matter to the project. I was tired, and an early bedtime would be good for me.

"I don't know what to do about my father," the student said as we settled into bed. "He is so worried that I will be killed by the police or the army. He says I must go to Switzerland and stay with my big sister and her family. But I refuse, because my work is here defending democracy and human rights. If everyone who believes as I do leaves the country, there will be nothing here but dictatorship!"

"I understand your dad worrying about you," I said.

"And the thing is, in my culture a boy does not defy his father. If my father believes strongly that I should go, how can I stay? I feel disloyal to him, like a bad son. I don't know what to do."

The boy punched the pillow in frustration and I turned to face him. Clearly, what this boy most of all needed was the listening ear of a neutral person, someone who would not urge him to one or another course of action.

The night sounds deepened as the student examined his heart, torn between political calling and personal duty. He wanted to know about my relationship with my father, and with my son. By morning's light he looked relaxed, his inner conflict resolved for the moment by a re-commitment to the movement. I was surprised that I wasn't more tired. It was OK to spend the night attending to father-son, son-father.

"I'm home," I called as I walked into the PBI project house in Colombo. Bue came quickly from the back of the house, and Quique came bounding down the stairs. Tall, blue-eyed Bue was from England and had previous experience doing protective accompaniment during the civil war in El Salvador. She was the coordinator of our little team. Quique was a medical doctor from Spain with bushy beard and a ready laugh. He also had experience in Central America; I was the new kid on the block in this accompaniment work.

"Your wife called yesterday while you were in Kandy, and left a message for you to call her," Bue said.

In a heartbeat I knew: one of my children was dead.

"You can't use our phone in the house for outgoing calls abroad," Quique said, anticipating my question. "We don't have that service yet. You have to make your call from the neighborhood post office."

In Colombo the street noises are loud, but I couldn't hear them for the pounding of my heart. "Who is it?" I kept repeating over and over. "Is it Christina? Is it Peter?" I willed myself to walk, not run, and told myself there's no way I could know someone had died. It might be something far less drastic. But with each step the question insisted with the power of a kettledrum, "Who is it?"

After what seemed like forever I heard Berit answer the phone. "I got your message," I said. "It's Peter," she said in a hollow voice. "He was found dead yesterday."

The return to the house was a hodgepodge of heightened visual images: beggars with outstretched palms, a buffalo blocking my path in the alley, the searing sun in a cloudless sky, a vine of pink flowers stretching out of garbage. And all the while, a shrieking sound inside my head drowned out all other sounds.

I stumbled into the house for the second time that morning. Bue and Quique were in the living room silently waiting. "My son is dead," I said, my heart breaking. I fell into their arms and sobbed, huge belly sobs, and the three of us sank to the floor holding each other.

Quique said they could put me on the next plane out, and Bue knew with British certainty that a cup of tea would be the right thing for now. One of them was always beside me as the waves of grief hit my shore, seemingly as inexhaustible as the ocean. Somehow the packing happened, somehow the taxi got us to the airport. I remember the last moments of waiting, where I drew strength from the deep compassion in the faces of my team-mates.

I was placed in the central row of the wide-bodied jet bound for Amsterdam. Two seats to the right of me was a white European couple holding a dark Sri Lankan baby. Three seats to the left of me, another white European couple with another dark baby they were adopting. Unable to sleep, I spent the flight watching the new parents touching their little ones, counting the tiny fingers and toes, smelling their heads, pressing them close, remarking to each other every new discovery. I remembered doing just the same with Peter when he was our newly-adopted baby.

The couples must have known I was gazing at them, this big white man with tears trickling down his face. I'm forever grateful for their tolerance, not minding my grieving while they continued delighting in their new loves.

A rash appeared all over my body during the flight and I was itching everywhere. Amsterdam seemed every bit of a hemisphere away. I kept praying, knowing that Jesus was very close, knowing that my team-mates were holding me in their hearts.

When we touched the runway in Amsterdam I remembered that there is a chapel in the airport, and I headed there after confirming my flight to Philadelphia.

“There is a balm in Gilead.” The empty room was the essence of peace, and I took deep breaths of gratitude. I don’t mind crying in a crowded place, but the introvert in me deeply cherishes solitude. As I settled into prayer the door opened and a woman walked in, quiet as the angel she turned out to be. She sat behind my left shoulder, and after a pause leaned forward and said, “God can heal it all.” The trickle of tears turned into a torrent once again, and the itching eased.

I don’t remember much about the transAtlantic flight. There were no newly adoptive couples in my row. I was numb with exhaustion, but I doubt that I slept. Questions about Peter’s death recurred; later I learned that he was found on the bathroom floor of his apartment. The night before he’d gone to a party and gotten drunk, as he usually did. Someone gave him morphine. Someone gave him crack cocaine. Perhaps he waited until he got home to take one of those two, but the coroner said both were in his body. His heart just gave out.

In the past year Peter had seemed to be getting a grip on himself. He was going to twelve-step group more often, was holding a steady job as a painter in a large apartment complex, moved into an apartment with a friend. One by one Peter was reconciling himself to the family members he’d alienated with his lying and stealing. He even remembered Father’s Day, with a card to me signed, “Your only son, Peter.”

After years of holding myself ready for the news, any day, that Peter had overdosed or crashed in an auto accident or gotten knifed in a fight, this past year had been a time of relaxing into hope. Maybe Peter would make it, after all. He was twenty. Maybe he would be one of those young black men who actually made it to twenty-one. I checked the date. Two months short of his birthday, almost to the day. My eyes were dry. The rash was back.

I was met by Ross Flanagan and Susan Taylor, two very dear friends. They were living near the Philadelphia airport in a Quaker study center, Pendle Hill. “Come with us,” they said, “you can stay at Pendle Hill until you’ve decided what to do next.”

I was a wreck, and they could see it. I staggered, couldn’t manage my bags, didn’t know which way to go in my home airport. They cheerfully led me to their car and Susan rubbed my shoulders while Ross drove. In no time I was in the room next to theirs and they were tucking me into bed. “I can’t sleep,” I said groggily. “Will you sing me lullabies?” Stroking my hair and holding my hand, they sang me to sleep.

The next days were busy. Berit and I planned a viewing, not because we especially liked that custom but because Peter’s friends might need it. (“There’s only so much you can do to make him look good,” the undertaker explained, “when the body dies of poisoning.” Our handsome Peter.)

Our Friends Meeting appointed a committee to arrange the memorial service; we chose a date ten days away to give people a chance to change their schedules if they wanted to come. Friends and family needed to be kept in the loop.

I got on the phone with my younger daughter Ingrid, who was studying at Oberlin College. We cried together as she told me how thoughtfully her godfather Chuck had given her the news of Peter's death. "I don't know what to do about coming home," she said. "Of course I'll come before the viewing and memorial service, but maybe I should come right now. It will mean missing the first concert of my a capella singing group."

"It's up to you, Ingrid. Are you getting the support there you need? You know we'd love you to be here."

"My roomie and other friends are being great, Dad," she said. "The concert is tomorrow night, so I guess I'll stay and do it and then fly home the next day. You're the one who taught me that 'the show must go on.'"

Neither of us mentioned that this would be her first performance I'd miss. We talked about it a month ago when I told her about my mission to Sri Lanka. Somehow I'd always managed to get to her school concerts and shows, and even most of her swim meets. She was used to seeing me in the front row, laughing loudly at the jokes even though I was attending the show for the third night in a row.

After we hung up I realized I didn't have to miss her performance at all! I could get on a plane tomorrow and listen to her sing.

By the time I reached Oberlin's campus it was a half hour before the concert. I loitered in an out-of-the-way corner until I was sure her group was backstage, then took my seat toward the rear of the darkened auditorium. I didn't want to test her courage at going through with the concert knowing I was there; I knew she would utterly lose it.

I looked at the program, a collection of pop standards and jazz featuring the group whose name was Nothing but Treble. That got the first smile out of me all day. I remembered some of the happy times playing with Ingrid and Peter when they were little, only two years apart. One of my treasured snapshots shows them in the back of a van leaning against each other, asleep, surrounded by bottles of milk from the Quaker dairy farm that supplied our co-op.

Peter was proud of Ingrid. He was even proud of the starring roles she played in high school musicals, although his own musical preference was hard metal rock.

A tremendous cheer went up as the small group of young women crossed the stage, and I overheard audience members saying Ingrid was being very game indeed

to sing this concert. I was bursting with pride as they swung into their first number, Ingrid as poised as ever.

The fourth song began with a solo by Ingrid, which she introduced with a trace of hesitation. She stopped abruptly, turned to the audience and said, "Sorry, I started on the wrong pitch."

I heard around me in this highly competitive music college students calling out, "That's OK, Ingrid." "Take your time, Ingrid." "We love you, Ingrid."

The pitch pipe sounded, she found her note, and jumped into the song on key. The warmth in the room was palpable. I blinked back tears.

The last encore concluded, the audience receded. I waited a few moments, then walked backstage, searching for the green room where the singers would be surrounded by praise and banter. As I entered the doorway I saw Ingrid at the far end of the room, a bouquet of roses in her arms. She looked up and yelled "Daddy!" We ran to each other and met in the middle, tears and laughter mingling in one of the hugs of my life.

Back in Sri Lanka, when I re-joined the team I joined a nation of mothers and dads grieving for their children. Because the insurgency in the South was partly based on students, and the security services spread a broad net to try to catch young people who knew someone who knew someone, thousands of young people were tortured and killed each year. Add to that the deaths of soldiers, themselves mostly young, plus the civil war in the North between armed groups of Tamils (mostly young) and the government. What to my heart was a monstrous violation – that my son should die before me – was in Sri Lanka a mass phenomenon. Plenty of company in which to walk in pain.

Rajini's parents were serving me tea on their broad veranda. The sweetness of the blossoms filled the air and the cicadas were doing what cicadas do. A bubble of peace surrounded us even though armed bands roved the forests not far away.

"Tell me more about Ragini," I asked her parents. I knew their loss was recent. Ragjini was a biology professor at the University of Jaffna and almost single-handedly holding together the curriculum that prepared future medical students, since a number of her colleagues had gone into exile. She was herself the object of numerous assassination threats, since she led the Teachers for Human Rights group which protested violations on all sides.

"Well," began her father, "you know we did convince her that she should leave the country for her own good, so she went to stay with a relative in England for a month toward the end of term. We were just breathing more easily when we

heard she was coming back. She said she had to come to give her students their final exams, to qualify for medical school.”

He stopped, unwilling to put into words what happened next. Rajini gave the exams and corrected them, and was on her way to the Dean’s office to turn in the grades when she was gunned down in broad daylight.

We sat together in silence. “We love our daughter.” Rajini’s mother spoke with a tremor. “She loved us. She was a good girl. When she was with her cousins she laughed more loudly than any of them.” She paused. “She loved us, and now she is gone.”

More silence. I suddenly remembered that, as I was leaving Philadelphia to return to Sri Lanka, my close friend Michael suggested I bring back some object from a grieving family, a token of the solidarity that transcends culture. “I’ve admired that plant which grows along this veranda,” I said, “the one with dark green leaves and red veins.”

“We call it Bleeding Heart,” Rajini’s mother said. Would you like to take back some bulbs to plant?”

“Yes, I would, because as they grow I’ll remember your daughter, and my son, and how hard it can be to be parents, and how life continues no matter what.”

“That would be appropriate,” Rajini’s father said in his dignified way. “Let’s do it.”

Michael and I planted the bulbs back in Philadelphia, in small pots where I mixed in some of Peter’s ashes. They took off, growing at a staggering rate. They needed to be transplanted into bigger pots just in time for the annual February gathering of queer Quakers.

“Let’s transplant these in a prayer circle at the gathering,” Michael suggested. “I’ll especially invite people who are close to you, and we can play Faure’s Requiem since you like that. So many gay Quakers knew Peter and your family, so it will be just right.”

The plants were beautiful, all agreed who circled up in one of the rooms in the Friends school where the gathering was held. Large empty pots stood ready, alongside potting soil, water, a trowel. We sat in silence together, holding hands, remembering Peter and praying for solace. The Faure began and I moved into the center, with Michael at my side. It was hard to see through the tears, but step by step I took each plant out of its pot, poured the mixture of soil and Peter’s ashes into a larger pot, put the plant in and added fresh soil, watered the plant, and held it for a long minute before going on to the next.

The wailing started on its own, from somewhere deep inside me. My family has no tradition of wailing and I have no recollection of ever being present when someone was doing it.

I didn't know if I was doing it, or it was doing me.

Quakers passing our room stopped at the door and bowed their heads, reverently holding the space for this chilling expression of anguish.

Then it was over. The circle converged, holding Michael and me in a giant sweaty hug, wet eyes everywhere, bodies swaying gently. Someone made a sidecrack, chuckles started, another wit launched a comment and laughter shook the circle. We disengaged, blowing noses, wiping eyes, laughing and making more cracks. "Grieving sure makes me hungry!" someone said. "Where's lunch?"

On our way to the cafeteria a young man stopped me. "George," he said, "there's something about Peter I'm not sure you know."

I said, "I'll bet there are many things about Peter I don't know!"

"Right, but I want to tell you how he gave me a hand. Last year I was a brand-new father and I didn't have any confidence at all. I really didn't know how to be with my little boy. Peter decided to coach me, and he spent time with me showing me how to nurture and love my baby. That was Peter. I wanted you to know that about your son."