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SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

NEWTON GARVER

There are many kinds of truth and many kinds of power, as well as different kinds of speech. So it is far from easy to know how and when to “speak truth to power,” or even what it means. We need to bear in mind how difficult it is to speak the plain, factual truth, with all the accuracy and sincerity which that entails, but the deeper truths are not merely factual. Sometimes these deeper truths concern what is sane or crazy (think of rationalizations for prisons or wars), and sometimes what is moral or divine (think of the light in each person and of other things universal). These deeper truths, too, we are often called to speak. Sometimes the powers to which we speak are the hidden powers suppressed within a person, and sometimes the dominating powers of military might or political authority. Speech is a vastly different act in these two sorts of cases, being encouraging in the first and defiant in the second. So while it is true that we must learn to speak truth to power, that abstract rule has myriad concrete variations.

When we are called to speak truth to power, it is often wisdom and spiritual truth that we are called to speak rather than factual, scientific, or historical truth. If we are called to emphasize scientific truth, it is often not so much for the facts themselves but rather because of the wisdom of taking judicious account of material reality. The powers to whom we will need to speak the truths of the ages are often the persons and practices that regulate and determine our public lives, that is, the domains of economics and politics; but they may also include the suppressed powers of oppressed people. The speaking is rarely a matter of merely uttering words, for in order to be heard and taken into account (which is what matters), we will need to be both imaginative and courageous in our choice of words. We will often need to let our whole lives speak, rather than just our tongues.

David Brooks concluded not so long ago (*NY Times* 8/7/05) that America is becoming more virtuous. This is not a conclusion that appeals to a reflective Quaker. While one can agree that reductions in crime, violence, and teen pregnancy (the criteria Brooks used) are welcome news, and make life easier for many, the larger picture remains that of a nation of arrogant, greedy, self-centered, self-indulgent, and indifferent persons and policies. George Fox taught that our cheerfulness and salvation

depend on our being patterns and examples for all those who are tempted by social conformity and political power. As I look upon our society with my Quaker eyes, it is with horror and disbelief that I note the behavior of American consumers and politicians in the context of Fox's advice. Unrestrained spending on armaments (more than the rest of the world combined!) and on prisons (the world leader here, too), reduction of fuel efficiency through ever-larger and more powerful vehicles, unrestrained and pampering expenditure (14% to 15% of our GDP) on health-care, 5,000 square-foot mansions for small families, second homes that are grandiose but occupied only a few weeks in the year, recklessly increasing public and private debt—these and a host of other foibles are patterns and examples for alienation and disaster rather than for cheerfulness or salvation that come through fellowship—let alone for freedom or justice.

I can neither swim comfortably in this mainstream of indulgent hedonism and paranoid protectionism, nor find a way to swim out of it. A Quaker and a philosopher (and left-handed to boot), I work and breathe easily only at the edge—or at Eliot's "still center," when I can find it. I live a comfortable middle-class life and enjoy deep fellowship with many friends. Trying to live peaceably and constructively, I feel outrage and disbelief at the sophomoric rationalizations for the brutality and indifference that accompany our reckless indulgence and our paranoid reliance on repression. Insofar as I believe at all in hell, I think this country is on the road to hell. I am deeply disaffected, even though I am not unhappy or discontent; I am uneasy in spite of the comfort of my personal living conditions.

I do not mean that I feel lonely in my disaffection. After all, George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, was both beaten by mobs and thrown into prison by the authorities for his views, and Socrates was sentenced to death for his by a democratic vote in Athens. My modern companions include such colleagues at University at Buffalo as Bruce Jackson and Gerry Rising. Bruce Jackson has been vilified by "official" Jewish voices for publishing and defending criticisms of Israeli policy; after Gerry Rising wrote a column urging parents to defend science teachers in the schools, the many unhappy comments he received led him to write that "I feel increasingly that I am in a foreign land." And I find rich companionship among the many Friends who share my unease, and who are also engaged in restorative activities. So we are not lonely, those of us who are strangers in our own lands. It is from our common disaffection that we are called to speak.

IDOLATRY

The most common image of idolatry is the golden calf that Aaron made while Moses was absent on the mountain, and it is reported (Ex. 32:27-29) that its worship led to the slaughter of some 3,000 idolatrous Israelites by the Levites. The lesson is made explicit (Ex. 34:14-15): “You shall not prostrate yourself to any other god. For the Lord’s name is the Jealous God, and a jealous god he is.” Anyone searching the Scriptures can find many other instances of idols and idolatry, but the golden calf remains the popular paradigm.

Understanding idolatry depends on understanding what worship is. Worship is one of those grand things we often speak of, with little understanding of what we are really saying. What is worship, really? We might start with forms of worship, the most distinctive of which are kneeling and prostration. Kneeling or prostration puts one in a defenseless and submissive posture, in recognition of a greater power to which one submits. For worship to be religious, in a way that binds the community together, there must also be rites or rituals of obeisance in which people participate together. Conversely, absence and other forms of nonparticipation count as disloyalty or apostasy, punishable by alienation and perhaps even by death. Furthermore, worship normally involves tribute (e.g., taxing, sacrificing, tithing), which serves to enhance either materially or symbolically the power of the object of worship. Throughout the Scriptures we find the practice of these forms toward false gods condemned as idolatry.

Idolatry cannot come into play without a recognition that the proper object of worship is God alone. In Islam this core idea is present in the Islamic ideal of prostrating oneself *only* to God, and never submitting oneself in like manner to any human authority. The practice of Islam may fall short of this ideal where caliphs, sultans, or mullahs seek recognition that borders on idolatry—the very sort of idolatry they criticize Catholics for bestowing on the Pope. It is just at this point that I discern a failure on the part of most Muslims to speak truth to power, that is, to denounce the idolatry of the sultanate, or the caliphate, in the name of Islam and Allah. The ideal of worshiping only God, trusting only in God, submitting only to God, is a powerful ideal that breeds courage and even heroism in true believers, not only in Islam but throughout the Abrahamic religions. There are thousands of stories of persons who remain heroically steadfast, submitting only to what is divine. My own favorite is that of Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian peasant who refused to participate in Hitler’s godless war and was consequently beheaded in

Berlin in August, 1943 (See Gordon Zahn, *In Solitary Witness*). A similar heroism on the part of Thomas Beckett is celebrated in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

The very idea of idolatry involves the conviction that nothing earthly or human, however deserving of respect and accommodation, is worthy of worship. The idea itself entails an ideal, and indeed the very sort of ideal that authentic religions have nourished. Jägerstätter, for example, was a devout practicing Catholic, and his resistance to Hitler came through his being able to see clearly (as his Bishop did not) that Naziism was incompatible with his faith. Everything human falls short of that high ideal. So bowing down to something earthly or human, or having any such thing as one's ultimate master, or giving any such thing the first fruits of one's labor or one's uncompromising submission—*that* is idolatry. Tribute belongs to God alone.

No one can even conceive of idolatry without a commitment to something that transcends earthly arrangements. Even an uncompromising commitment to justice is insufficient, and it may indeed itself be a form of idolatry unless it is rooted in a commitment to the Ultimate and the Transcendent, which God alone is. A charge of idolatry can only be brought by a prophet: someone calling the people back to their original and underlying faith.

Of all the forms of idolatry we practice in this country, our idolizing of the Pentagon is the most egregious. As with police and prisons, one can acknowledge that armed forces may sometimes be beneficial. I myself remain unconvinced, because the military establishments of the world generally consume rather than produce national wealth, and the benefits seem incidental and accidental (such as racial integration, and quality education for service families) rather than intrinsic to the mission. But let us grant that, in proportion, some level of defense force is indispensable for a modern nation. In USA the expenditures are all out of proportion, and the continued increases are by any rational assessment insane. But of course, it is not a matter of reason. Reason has been blinded by paranoia and drugged by our worship of the Pentagon as our only and true refuge and strength against "terrorism." We lay at the steps of the Pentagon the first fruits of our labors. Over half the national budget (excluding Social Security) goes for military expenditures, and in 2004 our military expenditures accounted for nearly half the world's total and exceeded the combined expenditures of the next *fifteen* countries. The Pentagon budget increases each year, sometimes more than the Pentagon requests, without regard to which party is in power and inde-

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pendently of how good or bad a job the Pentagon has done. Inefficiencies are mind-boggling, but irrelevant. Disputes in Congress about Pentagon spending resemble instead disputes as to whether a goat or a lamb is the “right offering” to the god.

A visitor from Mars who understood the categories would have to conclude that the Pentagon is an object of worship rather than of practical reason. Our refusal to apply rational criticism and assessment to the budget and the practices of the Pentagon constitutes the foremost example of idolatry of our time. Speaking truth to power in this instance—naming the Pentagon and the imperial presidency as idols—means calling the American people back, not only to their origins, but to the ideals embedded in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

The prophets were never voices of the mainstream, which at least since Constantine has too often sanctified what I have labeled as idols. But the prophetic voices are voices embedded in tradition, not simply voices in the wilderness. Nor is my voice a voice in the wilderness. It is the voice, or one of the voices, of dedicated people all over the globe, in all sorts of cultures, who share a common sense that there is something friendly and cooperative and immeasurably valuable in every person, and who seek to nurture and encourage that “something” through service, servant-leadership, education, and fellowship. My naming of idols and false gods has roots in this broad and buoyant fellowship.

THE STANDPOINT OF A FRIEND

To fashion one’s thought and action as a Quaker involves more than maintaining membership in the Religious Society of Friends. It requires first coming to terms with both worldly and spiritual realities and then incorporating certain characteristic patterns of behavior into one’s life.

Chief among these spiritual realities are Light and darkness, however conceived.

Light is sometimes conceived as God the Creator, omnipotent and omniscient, and then further identified as a loving father, as is done so magnificently by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. This image stems from Judaism and is generally retained by Christianity and Islam, but it represents only one possible way of conceiving of the principle of Light.

Buddhism and Hinduism provide others, as does George Fox. To my mind there are four essential aspects or manifestations of Spirit or Light, and none of them requires that this Spirit be either a material cause or an agent in history. They are as follows: 1) It is eternal, beyond being and non-being, one and the same for all peoples at all times, though appearing differently at different times and to different people because of our varying backgrounds and circumstances. 2) It manifests itself through love, hope, joy, truth, and peace, and thereby always represents a force or power for unifying rather than dividing people. 3) It is equally present or accessible to everyone everywhere, but never fully disclosed or manifested at any one place or time and never to be identified with any one person or institution. 4) In spite of being a power, it is also in a way impotent, for it depends on our hands, our feet, and our tongues to bring it to fruition in the material world, where it constantly encounters the opposing force of darkness.

Darkness, too, is often portrayed as a quasi-human devil or tempter, as in the accounts in Matthew and Luke about the temptations of Jesus at the end of his 40 days in the wilderness. The image of a being with horns and a tail, bathed in sulfur, is part of our culture, but it appeals to me just as little as conceiving of the Light as an omniscient and omnipotent father figure. It is correct to identify certain persons or institutions as being in some respects agents of the devil, just as they may at other times and in other respects be instruments of the Light. But what is essential about darkness is not that this or that person facilitates it or falls prey to its power, but rather that it represents a challenge and temptation for every person, at all times. That is a spiritual reality.

In our Western world today, temptations are generally conceived in sexual terms, thereby ignoring the temptations that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell of Jesus confronting. Those temptations were the power to turn stones into bread (the green revolution of chemical fertilizers and pesticides), the power to survive a catastrophic plunge from on high (universal high-tech health care), and dominion over all the nations (invincible political power). Except by a few fringe groups like some Buddhists and the Amish, the green revolution, high-tech health care, and domination and control, are more often regarded as positive worthy goals than as temptations in most of the world today, giving forces of darkness enormous influence. The forlorn hope to control what is ultimately uncontrollable, the temptation that Jesus turned

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aside, in modern times leads all sorts of people each day to squander resources and to miss redemptive opportunities.

As a Friend I believe that the Light shines in and through every person, and through no person perfectly. So all of us can act in the Light, manifesting in our behavior its distinctive characteristics, despite the powerful temptations of darkness; but no one of us can speak solely for God, or bring the full and absolutely true message. As a Friend I further know that my words are worthless if they are not manifested in my behavior, even though no words or behavior can manifest the Truth perfectly. I also need constantly to test my special sense of the Light, since confidence that my work has been illuminated from above can easily become dark pride: a common work of the devil. My companions are those in every time and place who share this sense of spiritual realities.

Realities of the world are also of two radically different kinds: material and social. The material realities are hard facts about the natural world, both scientific facts and facts of natural history. Spinoza thought of material reality as just one aspect of God, and therefore he saw natural science as a way of beginning to know God. I like that idea, in part because both natural laws and God are realities that we just have to accept, which we cannot fudge or get around. For clear thinking about reality, it is vital (and these days extremely difficult) to distinguish sharply between hard facts and interpretations, the ubiquitous speculations about their explanation or their meaning. A large part of speaking truth to power, though by no means all of it, consists in insisting on plain facts plainly stated, as is increasingly being done with respect to the environment.

Another part of the world consists of social realities, among which we again can distinguish great variety.

Greatest of all social realities is that partisan and commercial interests are regularly disguised as necessities or as hard facts, or even as divine gifts. Politics is in its essence a struggle for control and domination and hence is always divisive, but it regularly disguises itself as the heart of government, which is the very different struggle for stability and prosperity, depending on unification and cooperation rather than on zero-sum political contests. Justice comes disguised as death, or at least as imprisonment. Health is conceived as the product of drugs and potions. Obedience and submission come disguised as cooperation. Conformity wears the mask of maturity. Disagreement is portrayed as treason.

License parades as freedom. Hopes and wishes are asserted as knowledge. And so on.

These disguises can be difficult to recognize, and they sometimes lie buried deep within our own consciousness, making it a real struggle for us to speak the truth even when we desperately want to do so. Beyond that, it is extremely difficult—perhaps the greatest challenge for a person of faith—to speak truthfully about the horrendous acts of rape, mugging, murder, torture, and war, while continuing to love and respect the divine spark that lingers in the perpetrators of these deeds. This is especially true regarding blatant idolatry and blasphemy, which are among the great disguises of our time, adopted often unwittingly by persons of admirable faith and sincerity.

Idolatry is the worship of false gods, and their worship is devotion and tribute that makes no rational sense. Fads and fashions, commercial and amateur sports, movie and TV idols all qualify for consideration as objects of idolatry. Are not cathedrals, synagogues, churches, mosques, and all the architectural and institutional structures that George Fox had in mind when he spoke of “steeplehouses” and “hireling priests,” often objects of worship rather than places for worship? Do we not likewise deify our prisons and “security forces”? But none can outdo the Pentagon and military might in general. If the military proves itself incompetent in Iraq, the US Senate votes 100 to 0 to increase its budget. Neither the Vatican nor the Oracle at Delphi ever did so well!

Blasphemy is taking the Lord’s name in vain. To me it seems to be practiced by far too many priests and pastors, when they intone religious formulas as the word of God and treat ecclesiastical rituals the same way the Israelites treated the golden calf during the absence of Moses (Ex. 32:27-29). Whether concerned with ritual or with creed, formulas designed to manipulate unity function to divide as well as unite people, leading me to question whether they further the work of the devil rather than the ways of God. They too often reflect attempts to attain control and dominion—one of the very temptations Jesus turned away from. Their work seems political, rather than a spiritual quest for truth. Struggles for wealth and power within the great religions, as well as those between them, are always more political than religious, however pious and well-meaning the thoughts of those involved.

Discerning the truth about these matters of potential idolatry and blasphemy is profoundly challenging, and speaking such truth as we can discern requires wisdom as well as courage. The religious quest, howev-

er, can involve seeking the truth—and even testifying to it—if submitted to the reverencing of God alone.

For all of its foibles, Quaker process and practice is centrally devoted to seeing what love will do, or how the Light will dawn in the minds and hearts of those who listen quietly to God. It is also concerned to speak truth, which is a product of accuracy and sincerity, as Paul Lacey has pointed out (*Friends Journal*, January 2004). None of this is easy, and I doubt any of it can be defined, but it does get expressed and becomes recognizable in various patterns of behavior. Briefly:

- Avoiding preaching, but showing others the transforming Spirit in our lives. George Fox said that we should let our lives speak, and be models and examples to all people everywhere, but it is only their understandings of the Light (not ours) that can guide them.
- Worshiping with a close local group who can hear and assess our leadings. We nurture one another by being present in the Spirit when we meet face to face.
- Treating expression of our leadings as a sacrament, but avoiding pride in them. God has no hands but your hands and my hands, so part of what we do should be God's work; but we never get it altogether right, and we need to remember that.

Crossing popular boundaries to bring despised or excluded “others” into our lives. The boundaries may be geographical, institutional, creedal, racial, economic, social, and so on. John Woolman's trip to visit with the Wyalusings at the time of the French and Indian War¹ is a splendid example, as is Quaker work in prisons.

- Building ties and increasing discussion, collaboration, and interaction with Quakers everywhere. This will lead to various surprises, sometimes cooperation, sometimes appreciation of diversity—always greater personal depth and greater presence in the world.
- Suggesting and modeling alternatives where others speak of necessities or impossibilities. Few contributions are more urgently needed in a society where people repeatedly and persistently construe the world in terms of dichotomies and necessities.
- Refusing to participate in war and violence and other denials of the Spirit. Our Peace Testimony can best be understood as rejecting all the categories that marginalize or demonize others, such as

“alien,” “jihadist,” “communists,” “fanatic,” “terrorist,” and so on. People often do horrible deeds, which need to be condemned and deterred, but the Spirit remains alive in them, however hard to reach.

- Avoiding partisan politics but nurturing good government, including world government. Our public service focuses on mutuality and cooperation, with an eye on justice and peace, rather than on partisan control. It is no accident that Friends are not in Congress but have effective lobbies both in Washington and at the United Nations.
- Insisting on clarity in discussion, including the pragmatic implications of words. Integrity is impossible without clarity of thought. I think it was Isaac Pennington who said, “Reason is the recipient of revelation; take away reason and there is nothing left for revelation to act upon.”
- Distinguishing the authentically religious from its structural and dogmatic counterparts. What is genuinely religious celebrates the Spirit common to all and thereby brings people closer together. Organized religion easily separates priesthood from laity, as well as one group from another. Ecclesiastical and theological doctrines mean to give voice to the religious, but rather than bringing unity, they are too often divisive.
- Waiting for consensus or for the sense of a meeting rather than voting. The waiting is rarely easy, but if our role is to be religious rather than political, the waiting is necessary.
- Leading and showing the way without dictating or controlling. Robert Greenleaf calls this “servant-leadership.” It is a useful model in all sorts of activities and stands out as a prominent aspect of Quaker parenting.
- Using queries rather than rebuttals, so as to strengthen the Spirit in others. This provides another aspect of servant-leadership, and it is also a guide in a wide variety of interpersonal activities.
- Not fearing or panicking, knowing the Spirit is at work even in moments of darkness. Panic or crisis is the ground for what the world considers justified violence or oppression, so maintaining calm is a basis for nonviolence. Our commitment to outward peace includes the cultivation of inner calm.

Each of us will implement and witness to these themes in particular ways, inspiring others sometimes to follow and sometimes to lead in other

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directions. At this present stage in my life, I personally am called to three particular missions that witness to my faith. The first is to articulate in detail differences between government and politics, between religion and dogmatism, and between leadings and rituals. The second is to show in detail parallels between Quakerism and the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein, hoping to enable Friends to recognize their core values stated in new ways. The third is to help liberal Quakers of this country and Britain become familiar with the Evangelical Aymara Friends of Bolivia and Peru, while assisting Bolivian Friends to participate more effectively in this world. Unlike the general themes above, none of these particular missions need appeal to other Friends. Although the Light is one and the same for all and leads us into blessed community, witness and testimonies remain widely diverse and are likely to be lonely paths even when blessed by the community. Both the community and the loneliness are part of living as a Friend in this world.

WHAT IS NEEDED TODAY

Consider Mr. Bush's remark that "we do not condone torture." It would be too easy to point out that he has refrained from saying that torture is never justified, for he could quickly claim that that is indeed part of what he meant. Let us grant him that. Harvard Professor Alan Dershowitz has argued that torture is indeed at times justified, and we would certainly say that he condoned it in those circumstances, for that is just what his argument is designed to show. Justifying or condoning torture is a problem, but the truth we need to speak is that the rhetoric of politics and war is a seedbed in which torture, assassination, kidnapping, bombing, and gassing take root and flourish. Mr. Bush has laid the groundwork for torture and war by referring to certain people as terrorists, whose aim is to kill as many innocent civilians as they can. The message is reinforced by referring to them as insurgents or jihadists or Islamo-fascists or enemy combatants. The point is that these people are cast aside as banished from civilized society, ineligible ever to participate in our comings and goings, and incapable of entering into serious discussions or negotiations. The labels imply that they understand nothing but force. The truth is that there are no people who understand "nothing but force"—but far too many who mistakenly believe that dignity is achieved by "nothing but victory."

We have allowed the term "terrorist" to enter our discourse without noticing the evil that it licenses. None of us has, of course, ever met a ter-

rorist. We have only read about certain people described by that term, and we have allowed the description to become the model for our conception of reality. The truth we need to speak is to the power of the media and popular speech, not just to Mr. Bush and Mr. Cheney. It is that there are no “terrorists”—and no “Communists” or “perverts” or “papists” or “racists” or “Islamofascists” and so on. Speaking truth to power in this instance means rooting out a vocabulary that licenses torture and assassination; this will require repeated, gentle reminders and many imaginative interventions in a host of different contexts. Speaking truth is certain to be even more difficult than Paul Lacey has suggested.

With regards to current political rhetoric, other truths are that everything has remained the same after 9/11, and that the struggle against the increasing acts of terrorism is no real “war,” since there is no armed force or defined territory that can be conquered. Because there is no war, there can be no “victory.” Because of the persisting opposition of politics to good government—that is, the opposition of hegemony and domination to cooperation, accommodation, prosperity and survival—no act of war or terror, nor any treaty or pact, can mean that things have “changed forever.” These truths, too, we need to speak.

Other truths that need to be opened in public spaces are that one’s wealth is never earned, but is a gift put into one’s care; that violence is never necessary, since there are always alternatives; that our loyalty is first to God, next to justice, equity, and compassion, and to our nation only when it is just and compassionate; and that there is ever more hidden wisdom and light to be nurtured and encouraged in every person. Sometimes speaking these truths will mean speaking with our lives rather than just with words. There are no rules about how and when to speak truth to power, for each of us has different skills, and the circumstances often require great courage as well as imagination. But opportunities abound, and many of them recur so as to give us a second chance. Let us try what courage and clarity can do. We have nothing to lose but our impotence and loneliness.

NOTES

1. See Phillips P. Moulton, editor. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971; pages 122-132.