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Shannon Craigo-Snell

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EMPOWERING THE TRUTH

SHANNON CRAIGO-SNELL

My task in this essay is to address the issue of empowering the truth from the perspective of a Quaker theologian. To do that, let me begin by commenting briefly about the particularities and peculiarities of Quaker theology. Quaker theology is not an exercise in manipulating abstract ideas about God in separation from religious life. It is neither explicating magisterial truths, nor reinscribing—in ever-tightening circles—the limits of what can be said about God. Rather, Quaker theology is reflection that comes out of, and feeds into, life lived in community and commitment, sustained and energized by the presence of the Spirit.

Quaker theology is a word out of the silence of Quaker worship. It attempts to continue the character of that silence, while inviting the integration of our whole selves—including our intellects—into relationship with God. The words of Quaker theology emerge from the depths of silence, among individuals in community. This silence—in which individual and community are not in binary opposition—generates a multiplicity of leadings, insights, and messages. In this way, the silence of Quaker worship rejects the regulating primacy of tightly grasped words and concepts. Instead, it fosters an abundance of intertwined ideas, held lightly even as they are articulated with passion.

Silent worship, and the Quaker theology that connects with it, recognizes the ongoing, creative presence of the Spirit in community. Quaker theology is therefore not governed by creeds or precise formulations of acceptable doctrine. While we are sometimes tempted to elevate the leadings of early Friends into definitive, permanent revelation with near-creedal status, the works of these Friends resist such treatment. Fox, Fell, and others remind us that Quaker theology is founded upon an openness to the Spirit that has ever-new integrity, a unified light that shines in a full spectrum of hues. As a Quaker theologian, I hope to address empowering the truth in a way that is evocative and new, while also in keeping with other renditions of Quaker theology, especially as it is practiced in silent worship.

The topic I am addressing is a serious one. In a world in the midst of political, climatological, military, and religious turmoil that is fueled by falsehood, empowering the truth is a matter of life and death. Indeed, the situation is so serious that it demands of us the kind of fresh per-
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perspectives, energy, and resilience that comes from play. Like silence, play is a space of openness, creativity, and committed engagement. While enabled by structure, play is not predetermined; it invites and requires the new.

As I have been thinking about this topic over the past several months, I have been haunted by a memory. I recall being at New England Yearly Meeting in 2002, in a bare college classroom one late evening, after all the scheduled events of the day were over. A group of Friends, perhaps fifteen to twenty of us in all, were gathered to discuss the situation in Iraq. John Humphries organized this meeting, and through him and other Friends we had received trustworthy, reliable information. We knew that there were no weapons of mass destruction discovered in Iraq. This truth was known before the war. Various stated reasons for invading Iraq as part of a larger war on terror crumbled, even then, under close scrutiny and investigation.

We gathered that night to brainstorm about how to publicize this truth and how to counter the dominant narrative that was being proclaimed in Washington and disseminated by various mainstream media. We wanted to empower the truth. This was not an intellectual exercise, nor simply an interesting project, nor even a long-term concern. It was an immediate, desperate, fervent attempt to prevent war! A completely unnecessary disaster was about to take place—one which could be diverted, it seemed, if Americans had access to the facts in our possession.

In the following weeks, we worked to broadcast this truth, only to find unreceptive audiences. Years later, when the facts we knew back then made it to the front page of the newspaper, we watched in awe as this news had little real-life effect. Knowing the stated reasons for entering this war were false pretenses did not convince the American public to demand a change of policy. The truth was less important than the commitment to stay the course. Despite arguable evidence that the President of the United States had lied to us, on issues of life and death for hundreds of thousands of people, we, as a nation, chose to endorse his leadership for a second term.

As I reflect on empowering the truth, I must grapple with the reality of our collective failure to do just that. The people in that bare classroom four years ago did not stop the speeding train, and the citizens of America did not rebuke presidential dishonesty at the ballot box in 2004. This failure, however, is not unique, nor is it even uncommon. History is littered with the damage of deception: the stories of those
ardent truth-lovers whose good works fall short of saving the day. It is in this context that I speak today, attempting to articulate an account of empowering the truth that can stand up to that bare classroom in New England, to the failures of truth in the world, and to the shattered lives that result from it.

Looking at this from the very particular lens of a Quaker theologian, it is important to note that Quaker understandings of both “truth” and “power” are not mainstream. These understandings are deeply connected to experiences of silent worship and apply primarily to the reality of God in relation to humanity.

A peculiar conception of truth has been central to Quakerism from its earliest beginnings, even before it became a distinct sect. Howard Brinton writes of the early proponents of the spiritual insight and experience that took place in silent worship:

At first there was no desire to organize a new sect, but only to tell others of what they themselves had found. This they called “the Truth” and truth is beyond and above all sects and opinions. This Truth was not so much a new doctrine as a new life. It gave a feeling of heightened power and insight, an uplift of the soul to a higher existence, which in some mysterious way was generated in the group waiting in silence upon the Lord.”

The understanding of truth that is vital to Quakerism is not primarily a matter of facts or accurate propositional statements, but rather the reality of the Divine in intimate relation to humanity, as experienced in silent worship. “Truth” is sometimes used as another word for the Inward Light or for the Holy Spirit. Thus when Friends attempted to convince others of the “the Truth,” they did not expound detailed doctrines, but rather they tried “to persuade [others] to wait upon the Lord, to experience directly and immediately the life and power of God brought to bear upon their souls.”

This use of Truth to refer to the Spirit of God in relation to humanity does not lead to a diminished appreciation for getting the facts right. Instead, a form of extreme truth-telling sometimes arises in Quaker communities. Brinton writes of Friends in the 18th and 19th centuries: “Quakers leaned over backwards and sometimes made themselves objects of ridicule in their efforts to tell the exact truth. Fearing overstatement they resorted to understatement.” Quaker emphasis on honesty persists today. A telephone caller asked to speak with a houseguest of a weighty Friend in my own meeting. When the guest asked the Friend to say she was not there, the Friend replied that the guest would

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need to leave the house for this to happen. Small lies are often disregarded and, indeed, expected in contemporary culture. However, there is a strong element of the Quaker tradition that rejects any form of dishonesty whatsoever.

Brinton connects Quaker truth-telling with the historical interest of Friends in science and with the “initiation of the one-price system” that eliminated haggling between merchants and customers. More famously, Quaker truth-telling is connected to the refusal to take oaths in court. Friends refused to swear to tell the truth in judicial matters both because of Biblical injunctions not to swear and because swearing to tell the truth in one context implies that untruths may be told in other circumstances. Friends were to speak the truth at all times.

The Quaker stress on honesty in all matters is funded by the larger, theological understanding of Truth as Spirit, as the reality of God that is in relation to humanity and can be experienced in silent worship. Because God is intimately connected with humanity, no part of human life is separated from the Divine. Rufus Jones writes,

There is a very close and vital connection between this central truth of man’s [sic] relation to God and the way of worship which the early Friends inaugurated. They were careful not to bisect life into sacred and secular divisions. They wanted all the activities of life to be sacramental. They attempted to carry their lofty faith in the real Presence into every aspect of home and business.

For Friends, truth is not primarily a propositional statement to which we assent, but rather a reality that we try to live out of and into. It is not an objective fact that an individual accepts intellectually, but rather a whole-personed conviction that cannot be separated from community and commitment. Honest, sincere, and straightforward telling of the truth is profoundly important precisely because it is part of this larger sense of truth.

Quakers also think about power differently from many people. Similar to the pattern seen above with truth, power is understood primarily in an expansive, theological sense as the Power of God who is intimately related with humanity. In response to the God who gives Godself in creation, to Jesus who offers himself for others, and to the Spirit poured out on all persons, Quaker traditions include a theological vision of power that is bottom-up, and therefore in stark contrast to the top-down models of power in much of the world. In our worship and our organizational structure, Friends question hierarchy and offer alternative models of group leadership. These organizational structures reflect a
theological vision of the Spirit of God empowering individuals in community. Human power in this context is not occupying a position of authority, or domination, but rather allowing one’s life to be shaped by the Spirit, seeking to be part of what the Power of God is doing in the world.

For Friends, both truth and power are understood in dynamic terms—they are not things to possess or weapons to wield, but rather realities of God that human beings can, due to the gracious giving of the Spirit, live out of and into. As such, truth and power cannot be fully separated. To live out of and into the truth is to participate in the power of God as it is present in this world.

While noting again that Quaker theology is inherently multiple and fluid, it is fair to say that all of this is rather traditional Quaker thought, deeply resonant with the traditions of Friends. The real question is: how do we do it? How can we live out of and into truth and power? Particularly, how can we sustain our own efforts to empower the truth in the face of apparent failure?

This is where metaphor comes in. Articulation of our own practices and beliefs can help us live into them more fully. To make the articulation compelling for our lives, it needs to be specific and concrete. Yet we cannot be directly specific and concrete about the reality of God without limiting the Holy to our own comprehension, without restricting the mystery we seek to adore. So theologians move to analogy, to narrative, to discursive excess, and to metaphor. Metaphor functions through imperfect comparison and is a favorite tool of many theologians. One dictionary defines metaphor as “a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance, as in ‘A mighty fortress is our God.’” The use of one metaphor does not exclude the use of another. Indeed, the layering and interweaving of various metaphors is a useful theological strategy. Various, overlapping, and disjunctive images gesture toward the indefinable reality of God; they cannot encompass it.

The various traditions of Christianity over the centuries have used many metaphors to describe the power of God. God is Father, Mother, potter, king. God is Son, the way, the door, the vine. God is Spirit, breath, light, wind, fire, and seed. The multiplicity and fluidity of these images prevent us from reducing God to something we can grasp, while the comparison to familiar things acknowledges that we think about God with minds formed in mundane reality.
The image of God as a King in charge of the universe is terribly appealing. It can be profoundly liberating—mitigating the power and stature of all earthly rulers before the one Ruler, God Almighty. God as the sovereign King, sets the stars in the heavens, brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. I look at the world around me and am sure we need that God of might and glory to step in and take over. In the face of all that is happening in the world—of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, outrages in Darfur and famine in Africa, impending ecological crisis and rampant injustice—I want God to exercise top-down power and make this world a better place. But that seems not to be happening. It may well happen tomorrow; indeed, many Christians pray daily for the coming of the Kingdom of God, envisioning a time when justice flows like water, and righteousness like an overflowing stream. Yet today, as we are faced with the task of empowering truth in a world rife with deception, the top-down power of God at work in the world is not apparent.

Understanding the power of God primarily through metaphors of top-down power can be problematic in a number of ways, two of which I will discuss here. First, if we expect to see God working from the top-down, it might be hard to recognize God’s power at work in the world around us. Without evidence of majestic intervention, one can begin to doubt that God is at work in history at all. Second, thinking of God’s power primarily through top-down metaphors can make it difficult to see how we fit into the picture. If God as King will right the universe, why should I struggle for justice now? Both of these questions point to the issue of how to empower the truth in the face of failure and in the apparent absence of God’s top-down intervention.

For these reasons, I want to pose a metaphor for the power of God’s Spirit in the world that is profoundly shaped by Quaker understandings and practices of power. Friends have embraced biblical metaphors that help us understand God in a non-mainstream way, such as Light and Seed. While these images have implications for how we understand God’s power, they do not address issues of power directly. For example, the metaphor of Light, so vital in Quaker theology, was actually a fairly common image used in discussions of epistemology in the early modern period during which Quakerism arose. Light, while given varying contours by different authors, was used in descriptions of how humans know. Quakers used the term Light rooted in John 1:9—a reference to the revelatory Christ—as they offered their own perspectives on human knowledge in relation with Divine Spirit. The Quaker affirmation of the Inward Light has ramifications for understanding power—religious
authority cannot be confined to an elite few if all persons can know God in and through the Inward Light—yet it is primarily an epistemological term. I want a metaphor for God’s power to help sustain us in the commitment to live out of and into Truth—a way of imagining the power of the Holy Spirit, such that we can see it at work in our communities and can participate in it ourselves.

As I was thinking about metaphors for bottom-up power, I found it difficult to focus in the midst of a very busy week. A book chapter was due on Wednesday—a firm deadline. An important meeting was scheduled for Friday morning that required a lot of preparation. Every minute was booked solid. Then my youngest son got a virus. My husband was out of town on business, and our babysitter came down with the flu. This virus was not terrible—he had a runny nose and a fever, and he felt pretty miserable. But the virus was incredibly powerful.

My week changed instantly. My unmovable deadline was moved. My important meeting was dealt with through a phone call and three emails. My family is always my top priority, but suddenly, because of this virus, that was evident in my every action, in every moment.

This got me thinking about the power of a virus. We do not actually see them, only their symptoms. They spread quickly and silently. They are difficult to eradicate. When someone does invent a medicine to attack them, frequently viruses adapt to this—mutating into a new form. Sometimes viruses can use the medicines that are intended to destroy them to make themselves stronger, becoming new, resistant strains. And viruses are opportunistic—preying on weakened defenses, getting a foot in the door anywhere they can, always looking for a suitable host organism. This is definitely a bottom-up form of power. Viruses do not run countries, but they can bring a nation to its knees and have other countries trembling with fear of contamination.

What if the power of God in the Holy Spirit is like the power of a virus? Clearly this metaphor requires a significant creative leap. Viruses are awful and destructive; some of them result not in runny noses, but in disability and death. Viruses bring illness and death, loss and grief. God brings regeneration and life, redemption and joy. I am suggesting thinking about the power of the Spirit of God, which is profoundly and definitively good, in contrast to a virus, which is not good in our experience. The comparison, however, lies in the structure of power. What if the power of the Spirit works in the same way that a virus does: bottom-up instead of top-down?
We are dealing with metaphors here, aiming to gain some small understanding of that which we can never truly comprehend. Our best metaphors will always be inadequate to articulate the glory of God, and surely this one is. Like all metaphors, this one is fatally flawed. It is not an exact match, a perfect description for the power of the Spirit. Yet the communicative force of metaphor lies in bringing two realities that are clearly different into comparison—to say they are, in some fashion, the same. It is the jolt of difference framed as similarity that allows us to see something in a new light. With playful seriousness, let’s think of God’s power as operating like a virus, because it is a metaphor of bottom-up power to which we all can relate.

If the power of God in the Holy Spirit is like a virus, then, for Christians, Jesus is the infection point, patient zero, the place where the virus infects human history. It passes from person to person, often silently and often undetected. Like a virus, the power of the Spirit is opportunistic, infecting those who are weakened. It is passed among families and affects whole communities. Some viruses require repeated exposure to produce illness. Many inoculations prevent infections by exposing young people to a deadened form of the virus.

It is quite easy to prevent or kill many viruses in specific locations. We can separate ourselves from others and wash our hands of messy situations. Yet while many viruses may be defeated in one person or one place, it is often quite difficult to eradicate a virus altogether. A virus can move, mutate, and become resistant to society’s defenses. It can lie dormant for long periods, only to emerge again with renewed strength.

A person who contracts a virus may experience her own reality in a new way. Sometimes illness offers new lenses to see—priorities shift and become clearer. The limits and blessings of the human condition become more apparent; spiritual insights are gained. Infected persons might be embarrassed, no longer be welcome in their communities, and find comfort in the support of other people with the same illness. Viruses spark fear in those who see the symptoms in others and worry that their own lives might be similarly disrupted.

Does the metaphor of a virus for the power of the Spirit of God fit with Quaker theology? I believe it does. It is a bottom-up model of power that portrays the power of God in intimate relation to humanity. The image of a virus does not focus solely on the individual, or entirely on the community, but rather on individuals in community without a binary opposition between the two. In these ways the virus metaphor resonates deeply with the practice and theology of silent worship.
Indeed, Lucretia Mott’s promotion of internal church reform has been described as “spreading the virus.” If the metaphor is Quaker, the question then becomes: is it useful?

We are so used to thinking of power in a top-down way that it can be difficult to recognize other patterns of power. We begin to think of power first and foremost as top-down power, and to look for the power of God in the world to fit that pattern. Looking for God to work from the top-down, we might not see it when God is working from the bottom-up.

If we look at the peace movement before and during the Iraq war with a top-down model of power, then it has clearly failed. There is significant truth to this view. The war was not prevented, policies have not been changed. Thousands of people have died, and the destructive effects of this conflict will continue for many years—indeed, generations—to come. And yet, this is not the entire truth.

In the midst of the peace movement and many other communal efforts to care for one another, there are small miracles—minute displays of divine power that ought not be overlooked. There are acts of compassion and kindness: times when a collection of individuals becomes a whole, a unified community bound by a common cause and relationships of trust.

Since I have been ruminating on the topic of empowering truth, I have asked people involved in that task to reflect on how and why they do it. Thorne Anderson, a photojournalist who worked in Iraq before the invasion and during the beginning of the war, responded to my questions first by telling me how powerful the lies are in this war. How death has been wrought by falsehood, conflict created by fiction and manipulation. How little Americans know about what is really happening there. He said that he spent about a year in engulfing anger, and then he said that in the midst of the chaos of war, you see people make enormous efforts and personal sacrifices for loved ones, for neighbors, and for strangers. You witness moments when people reach beyond themselves in love and care. This is also a truth within this war.

If we have mostly top-down images of power, we might not notice these small miracles. We might miss it when new communities emerge in unexpected forms, and when small steps are taken towards equality. We might not notice when someone’s dignity is restored to them by simple gestures of respect and human contact. We might overlook the miracles of compassion, kindness, friendship, and commitment that take place in social movements which seem to fail in their efforts to change
the world. It is possible that the metaphor of a virus might help us to see
them, to gain hope and courage for the struggle, to be assured that God
is powerfully present in our midst.

If we can think of the power of God like the power of a virus, then
we would not look for it in government offices, and it would not spread
through military force. Instead, we would look in places where people
of all ages gather together. It would spread where people shake hands,
hug, and kiss. It would thrive where those who are weak in the eyes of
the world gather together, and where those who suffer receive care. It
would spread where there are babies, with runny noses and fingers sticky
with strawberry jam: where people share a common meal and drink from
a common cup. With a clear vision of the Spirit’s power, perhaps we can
see the presence of God in history more clearly and participate in the
work that God is doing in the world. Because this is not just about see-
ing clearly, it is also about participating.

It disrupts my life completely when my children get sick, so I spend
a lot of energy trying to keep them healthy. I run my home with the clear
intention of keeping viruses out. My kids take their vitamins, drink their
orange juice, and are fully immunized. I am vigilant in my efforts to keep
the viruses of day care and public school, and the colds of a New
England winter, at bay.

If God’s power works like a virus, the task is not to build up a strong
immune system. Instead, it is to cultivate the Christian virtue of hospi-
tality—to learn how to be a welcoming host. Our work as Christians is
to let down our defenses: to make ourselves good host organisms for the
opportunistic virus of the Spirit. To run our homes such that there are
always drafty windows for the Spirit to enter, unclean companions,
shared meals, and people with weakened defenses. And then, when the
virus surely comes, to welcome the utter disruption of our ordered lives
and embrace the radical reminder of our deepest priorities.

Remembering priorities can re-center lives on the vital Truth of God
in relation to humanity. This central Truth—not simply a fact or a mere
datum—is something many Quakers strive to live out of, into, and with-
in. This living, dynamic relationship heightens the importance of hon-
esty and truth-telling. No part of human life is immune to God’s
gracious Spirit; no interaction or transaction is safely quarantined from
the demands of faithful living. When a person’s frame of reference shifts
so profoundly that she no longer participates in the deceptions aimed at
self-gain or earthly success, she responds to reality in awareness of rela-
tion to God. Living with this virus means speaking with the honesty and
sincerity that we associate with imparting one’s last words; there is simply no room for anything less than pure authenticity.

This is a very limited suggestion—a metaphor for how the power of God works in the world in and through the Holy Spirit. I offer it as a companion to the multiple metaphors of the power of God that intertwine in Christian and Quaker traditions. It does not negate other, more traditional metaphors for God’s power, but it perhaps adds a lens that can help us to see God’s power at work in places where it is not readily apparent by worldly standards of success.

This essay offers a metaphor for understanding the power of God’s Spirit operating from the bottom up. I have acknowledged the deep connections between the bottom-up power of the Spirit and the bottom-up pattern of Quaker worship. These two realities are also related to the practices of Quaker theology, which function in a bottom-up fashion. In our experience of Quaker meeting, we have an embodied, communal experience of bottom-up power, both human and Divine. The metaphor of God as virus is offered to help amplify that conception of power in our lives by articulating this familiar, traditional aspect of Quakerism in a novel, playful way. Such theological up-springing might be of some little use in our efforts to live into and out of the Truth and Power of God in relation to humanity, our struggles to empower the truth.

NOTES

2. Brinton 15.
3. Brinton 139.
4. Brinton 140.
5. Brinton 141.

10. Please note the significant differences between my suggestion of a virus as a potentially useful metaphor for understanding the structure of the power of the Spirit of God and the work of Richard Dawkins, who has popularized the idea that God and/or religion and/or faith is a virus of the mind. A brief article that summarizes his perspective is Richard Dawkins, “Viruses of the Mind,” Dennett and His Critics: Demystifying Mind, ed. Bo Dahlbom (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993) 13-27. While I am using the metaphor of a virus to understand the positive reality of God’s power, Dawkins uses the idea of a virus to suggest that God does not exist; rather belief in God is a malignant infection of the mind. It is sometimes unclear if Dawkins is intending virus to function metaphorically in his work, as his self-location in the discourse of science tends towards positing an identification of God/faith/religion with a particular form of virus. Alister McGrath offers an analysis and critique of Dawkins’ work in Alister McGrath, Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2005). See also John Bowker, Is God a Virus? Genes, Culture and Religion (London: SPCK, 1995).

11. In searching for positive use of the metaphor of God as virus, I found a brief essay by Kester Brewin, “The God Virus,” The Third Way (February 2005). While much of the essay uses the metaphor of dirt, there is this provocative section regarding the Cross: “The authorities thought they had neutralized a hazardous threat, while in fact they detonated Christ’s body on the cross like a dirty bomb. In bidding good riddance to a dangerous agitator, a boundary violator, their nails smashed the fragile phial of his body and the God-virus was irreversibly unleashed. His boundary-crossing Spirit began infecting.” (3-4)
