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THE SEARCH FOR UNITY IN DIVERSITY AMONG FRIENDS

WILMER A. COOPER

The following lecture by Wilmer Cooper was given at the Friends Consultation on Diversity and the Future of Friends at Quaker Hill Conference Center, Richmond, Indiana, May 29 - June 1, 1997. Minor editing has been done and a few paragraphs included that were deleted because of time restraints when the lecture was given. This Consultation was the final one in a series Wilmer Cooper helped institute in 1980 and coordinated for the first ten years, along with Eldon Harzman, then Director of Quaker Hill Conference Center.

All my life I have had a deep commitment to the Religious Society of Friends. It is my spiritual home. But during my working years I have been equally concerned about the divisions and lack of unity in the Society of Friends. Just as I believe the divisions among the Christian churches are a scandal for those who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, so I believe the historic separations of Friends and the subsequent divisions among Friends have constituted our own Quaker scandal. Isn't it a disgrace that a religious body that has proclaimed a strong peace testimony for nearly 350 years has suffered serious internal division and discord during most of those years?

Because of this blot upon our record I, along with many others, have tried to work for greater unity among Friends. It is not enough simply to tolerate each other's differing points of view. And this is not to rule out diversity, which can be very healthy for the life of the Society. But what is the common denominator of our faith and practice that holds us together and justifies our calling ourselves the Religious Society of Friends? What is our identity as Friends that enables us to claim a common heritage and to exist under one name? In this age of multiculturalism and religious ecumenicity it would seem imperative that we come to know who we are, what our purpose and mission is as a Religious Society. We need this in order to enter into dialogue with others and for us to serve as a healing agent in the world. To achieve this we need to heal ourselves before we can hope to heal others. It is for these reasons I have had a passion to

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search for greater unity in our Quaker diversity. And the unity we seek is not unanimity or conformity to a particular creed or point of view. I am not assuming we will ever become one big happy family devoid of significant differences. After all strong families do have their differences.

I have always believed that God has a very special purpose for the Religious Society of Friends. If this be true then we need to prepare ourselves as best we can to respond to this call for mission and service in the world. To what extent do we seek God's leading in fulfilling that purpose, or do we simply do what satisfies and pleases us? If God has a purpose for us, then surely we need to be divinely led into a sense of unity about what that purpose is and how we should discharge our responsibility regarding it.

MY ATTEMPT TO SERVE GOD'S PURPOSE AMONG FRIENDS

Early in my search for God's will in my life I had a transforming experience which provided a new sense of direction and commitment. I saw clearly that it was to be related to the Religious Society of Friends, but the details seemed only to unfold as the way opened through the years and as I remained faithful to the leading of the Holy Spirit. I tell more of this story in my forthcoming book on Conservative Friends and my experience of growing up among them. Evangelical Friends would probably have called this a conversion experience, whereas liberal Friends would probably have called it a new sense of intentionality and purpose in my life. In any event I was convinced God was at work within me, and specifically on behalf of the Religious Society of Friends.

During my adult life I have worked for Friends in various capacities with a clear sense of leading. The jobs I have held included a short time as Secretary of the Peace Board of the Five Years Meeting of Friends (now FUM); a couple of experiences with the American Friends Service Committee (one as administrator for one of the CPS camps for conscientious objectors during World War II); a short teaching experience at Friends University; and seven years as administrative secretary of the Friends Committee on National Legislation in Washington, D.C. Then for 30 years I was involved with Earlham College and the establishment of the Earlham School of Religion. I have been a member of four Friends Meetings in three branches of

Friends, and more recently an attender at two other Friends Meetings in Florida. I have served on three boards of Quaker institutions and have served on Monthly Meeting, Yearly Meeting, and other Quaker committees. I have moved about among all branches of Friends both at home and abroad, and served for seven years as FUM'S Quaker representative to the World Council of Churches. Among other things I taught Quaker studies for 30 years at Earlham School of Religion, the first 18 of which I was dean. Through these years I have done a fair amount of writing and publishing regarding Quaker faith and practice. As a result of all this I have had an unusual opportunity to observe and experience the condition of Friends from several vantage points.

When I began in 1959-60 to work on the establishment of the Earlham School of Religion for the purpose of training Quaker ministerial leadership, I was probably overly optimistic about the preparation of a new generation of Quaker leadership to bring about significant changes among Friends. Through this means I believed it might be possible to help forge a new sense of unity and community in order to rise above our difference and work together in unison. After 38 years of effort in this direction my hopes and dreams have been only partially realized. My optimism has been tempered to the point where I realize that achievement of long-term religious and institutional goals of this kind come slowly and will sometimes get sidetracked.

FOUR EFFORTS TO WORK TOWARD GREATER UNITY

Let me list some of the things I have been involved in vocationally and professionally where a measure of accomplishment has been achieved. Undoubtedly my role in the development of the Earlham School of Religion to prepare and train Quaker leadership has been the most far-reaching effort that has claimed my attention. But there have been other efforts as well. At the Conference of Friends in the Americas at Wilmington College in 1957 I called together the first meeting of Friends interested in the formation of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, which met annually for many years and has published *Quaker Religious Thought* from 1957 to the present, 40 years. The aim of this effort has been to help Friends of diverse backgrounds, persuasions, and beliefs to dialogue together with the hope of helping them reach greater understanding and unity.

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Then in the 1970s and early 80s the Faith and Life Movement of Friends emerged from the 1970 St. Louis Conference on "The Future of Friends." Initially this was suggested by several Evangelical Friends who had met at the U.S. Congress on Evangelism at Minneapolis the year before. This was probably the most representative conference of Friends (by official appointment) ever held in North America. One hundred thirty-five Friends came from 24 American Yearly Meetings and Associations of Friends. The follow-up included another large conference at Indianapolis in 1974, and a series of regional conferences throughout the United States during the next ten years or more. A Central Planning Committee was appointed to plan these gatherings. Also, a Faith and Life Panel, which I chaired, produced a series of study booklets for these conferences. Gradually the Friends World Committee Midwest Office, under the secretaryship of Robert Rumsey, began to service these regional conferences. This special effort at Quaker ecumenicity ran its course in the early 1980s as it became absorbed into the work of FWCC.

Beginning in 1980 Quaker Hill Conference Center and Earlham School of Religion under the leadership of Eldon Harzman and myself began this series of annual Consultations of 50 Friends invited from all branches of Quakerdom in North America, and occasional participants from abroad, chiefly England. The aim was to worship and consult together at a fairly deep level on issues and concerns that divide us with respect to Quaker faith and practice. Each year we published the findings of these conferences in reports, which were sold to a wider group of Friends throughout the country. When Eldon Harzman left the directorship of Quaker Hill Conference Center he was replaced by David Edinger. I also withdrew after the 1990 Consultation and John Punshon from Earlham School of Religion took my place. Although the Consultations in the 90s have changed somewhat in emphasis they have continued to the present. It is now deemed the time to discontinue this series of consultations, which have served a very useful purpose over the last seventeen years. In a significant way they have moved along the Quaker dialogue and our search for greater understanding and unity among Friends.

Then of course there have been many other Quaker efforts to work at some of these same questions not only in North America but throughout the world via the Friends World Committee for Consultation. And we should not overlook the role of our Service and

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Mission bodies in the Society of Friends, in addition to Quaker Education Conferences, Young Friends Conferences, and recent Quaker Women's Conferences—all of which have had an impact on the whole issue of unity and diversity among Friends. All of these twentieth-century efforts have brought together many thousands of Friends from diverse backgrounds and experiences to dialogue and interact. Nevertheless we are still left with a very widespread diversity in our faith and practice. Certainly we have become more conversant and articulate about our differences, and we have come to know a much larger number of Friends of various persuasions than was possible fifty or a hundred years ago. But isn't it possible that our diversity is on the increase with even less unity than we had a generation or two earlier? For every three steps we take forward we seem to take two steps backward. Perhaps we should be thankful and satisfied with the one step gained in the process, if indeed that is happening. But the rate of progress seems frustratingly slow and usually falls short of our dreams, hopes, and expectations.

INTERNAL PROBLEMS FRIENDS NEED TO EXAMINE

Let me make some observations about problems and potential pitfalls facing primarily liberal Friends meetings in Britain and America. Alastair Heron has done extensive research in recent years into what is happening to "post liberal Quakerism" in Britain. Most of what he discovered is reported in his book, *Quakers in Britain: A Century of Change 1895-1995*. Much of what he learned applies equally to liberal Quakerism in America. When a conference of concerned British Friends was held at Manchester, England, in 1895 they had just gone through nearly a century of a strongly evangelical influence on London Yearly Meeting. During the next century there was a marked shift to Quaker liberalism. I will summarize some of their main findings and then ask whether Friends in America face similar problems and need to be aware of the possible consequences.

1. Historically Friends were unapologetically Christian in their faith and commitment and understood themselves to be rooted in the biblical tradition of the Judeo-Christian faith. Today there is a growing number of Friends who no longer claim their Christian and biblical heritage and regard this interpretation of Quakerism as too limiting. Still others have begun to disclaim any "religious" commitment for Friends and apparently some would prefer to change the

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name from the “Religious Society of Friends” to simply the “Society of Friends.” This implies a movement toward greater secular influence with emphasis on individualism, humanism, and universalism.

2. Although most Friends acknowledge the centrality of the Light within as essential to our faith and practice, many no longer acknowledge it as the Light of Christ within, or the Inward Light of Christ. And some Friends no longer choose to capitalize the Light, or the Inward Light as indicative of a divine source. Still others refer to the Spirit in Quaker faith and experience but do not capitalize it or identify it with the Holy Spirit in the biblical tradition. This means that they make no transcendent claim in their spiritual lives; which leaves them with an emphasis on the total immanence of God in the world and all creation. This leads easily to pantheism, which I believe is antithetical to Christian faith and historic Quakerism.

3. An increasing number of liberal Friends no longer accept Scripture and Quaker tradition as authoritative. Insofar as they believe in the revelation of God’s truth and purpose, such as that which is disclosed in the Bible, they claim only what Quakers have called “continuing revelation.” This is indeed a very important aspect of Quaker belief and practice, but historically Friends have acknowledged the primary revelation of truth and the will of God as recorded in Scripture. This means that Friends believed that God was uniquely revealed in the person, the life and work of Jesus Christ. But they also believed that because the Spirit of God inspired the Scripture, and because we today continue to have access to that same Spirit that gave forth the Scripture, therefore any new disclosure of God’s truth and will constitutes a continuing process and should not nullify God’s earlier revelation in Christ.

4. There is a growing emphasis on individualism among Quakers today based on the assumption that everyone possesses his/her own inner guide. Coupled with this is an increased emphasis on diversity and a call for tolerance of other points of view. The result, though probably not intentional, is to disregard the need for unity in the meeting coupled with a sense of corporate responsibility. In Quaker business procedure the call for “consensus” implies that we reach decisions by the accommodation of individual wills, rather than a leading of the Spirit of God, or the Light of Christ, in reaching corporate decisions. Partly because of increased emphasis on individualism Friends have a problem with authority, for fear it means imposed authoritarianism. Many Friends tend to distrust any designated lead-

ership and likewise are fearful of delegated authority. This means a distrust of corporate discipline and responsibility on behalf of the Meeting, or the Yearly Meeting. If this finally means that “anything goes” in our meetings because we can’t agree on corporate disciplines and the delegation of responsibility, then disorder and confusion, if not chaos, are likely to take place.

5. Another sign of this growth of individualism in our meeting life is a lack of common purpose and direction as a Religious Society of Friends. One of the most visible signs of this is that when we gather corporately, such as Yearly Meetings, FGC or FUM gatherings, or conferences called by the Friends World Committee or other Quaker bodies, a growing trend is to form small “interests groups,” including worship sharing groups, with much less emphasis on the gathering of the entire body with a common focus and sense of purpose. For example, at the 1997 Friends General Conference at Harrisonburg, Virginia, there were listed 81 “Workshops” from which attenders could choose. There were other groups to choose from referred to as “Worship & Service,” “Friends’ Centers,” and “All-Conference Programs.” And of course at this and other gatherings various “age groupings” accommodate younger and older Friends.

Although this kind of variety seems very plausible because there is something for everyone, yet isn’t it likely to fragment Friends further and contribute to individualism? The question is: What is the uniting ingredient of such gatherings? What is the common focus or purpose of Friends coming together? Is it to bring Friends together, or to create greater diversity? Is there anything in this experience to draw Friends together in that which is eternal?

6. Still another problem with our diversity is the extreme difficulty Yearly Meetings have in revising their Books of Discipline, or Faith and Practice. This long-suffering exercise often produces more despair than it does unity. At a recent occasion of this effort one Friend suggested that to even have a Discipline or Faith and Practice means that some feel the need for “closure.” He seemed to be suggesting that Quakers are a society of “seekers” and that to come to “closure” in order to produce a common Faith and Practice was counter-productive, if not antithetical to Quakerism.

7. In Britain a major question has arisen over Meeting membership and the growing number of people who either by design or default choose to be identified with Friends as “attenders.” This

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means that in some places Quaker membership may be declining while attendance is on the rise. Does this mean attenders don't want to get involved and assume responsibility for the corporate life and work of the meeting? Many "attenders" are "seekers," and vice versa, often because they don't want to commit themselves, or perhaps because they lack deep religious and spiritual experiences. Or maybe they simply want to "experience" their Quaker spirituality without having to name it or try to give it identity. Sometimes this lack of conviction and commitment goes hand in hand with a lack of willingness to assume responsibility in the corporate life of the meeting, or perhaps it is lack of willingness to be accountable to any corporate body.

8. Still another extension of this problem of commitment and assuming responsibility is a reluctance of the majority of Friends to take any interest in the Religious Society of Friends beyond the local Meeting. Membership, however, means not only belonging to a local Monthly or Preparative Meeting, it also means joining the Religious Society of Friends, which includes one's own Yearly Meeting, and such Quaker bodies as Friends United Meeting, Friends General Conference, and Evangelical Friends International. And beyond this is involvement with world Quakerism via the Friends World Committee for Consultation and other international Quaker bodies. Because of this limited perspective and involvement on the part of some Friends, there is a tendency to define and judge all Quakers and Quakerism on the basis of their own local Meeting, or Friends worship group. As a result they often have a narrow, biased, and somewhat distorted view of the wider Society of Friends and what it means to be a Quaker.

9. As a result of these findings there is in Britain, according to Alastair Heron, an uncertainty about the future of the Religious Society of Friends. There seems to be unclearness about who they are and where they want to go. This raises the question whether there is any need for the Religious Society of Friends in the future. Is God still leading us, and if so, where are we being led by God? Do we have any sense of purpose and mission for the Religious Society of Friends? These important questions apply to American Friends just as well as British Friends, and to Friends anywhere in the world.

TESTIMONIES AS NORMS OF QUAKER FAITH AND PRACTICE

For those familiar with my book, *A Living Faith: An Historical Study of Quaker Beliefs*, you will know that I emphasize what I call a “normative” approach to Friends faith and practice. I believe there should be a standard by which we measure our compliance with basic Quaker principles. I do not see this as a creed, which suggests something rather rigid and inflexible from a Quaker perspective. Rather, it provides some benchmarks and guidelines for our faith and practice. Throughout our history Friends have had norms and standards of belief and behavior coupled with a reasonable amount of flexibility regarding interpretation and application.

As an example, one of the norms that seems most clear in Quaker history has been our peace testimony. This has been understood as a principle of faith and practice and so recorded in our Books of Discipline, or Books of Faith and Practice. Friends for nearly 350 years have renounced wars and fighting (Robert Barclay), or war and violence as we might say today. Officially we have supported conscientious objection to participation in war and violence, even though not all Friends have adhered to this advice. Also, many Friends have gone to prison for conscience sake, or they have volunteered for various kinds of alternative service. Therefore, few would argue that peace is not a basic testimony and norm of Quaker practice, and I know of almost no official statements of Friends to the contrary. Thus the peace testimony remains a norm of Christian behavior for Friends to this day.

It is my view that we have had a whole series of faith and practice norms throughout the history of Friends. They relate directly to our testimonies, which are “faith in action” principles rather than creedal statements that constitute the theological affirmations of other churches. On the other hand, we might call our normed testimonies the equivalent to the creeds of the churches. I interpret the Quaker testimonies much more broadly than simply limiting them to the social testimonies of peace, simplicity, and equality, etc. I believe we need to recognize both our “religious testimonies” *and* “our social testimonies” in the Religious Society of Friends.

Of the Religious Testimonies I would list first the Light (of Christ) within, which is how we refer to our firsthand religious experience of God, namely, our experience of direct communion with God

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through the Holy Spirit. Although we hold that this is our primary source of religious authority, historically we have also held that the Scriptures, the Bible, is a secondary and collaborative source of religious authority. Robert Barclay in his *Apology* says: "We consider them [the Scriptures] as the only outward judge of controversies among Christians" (Freiday ed. p. 60). Because we hold that we can have access to the same Spirit that gave forth the Scriptures, we then rely upon the Spirit to help us interpret the Scriptures.

Another religious testimony of Friends is our unique Quaker view of the sacraments. The sacraments are historically regarded as the means of God's grace. Although we do not partake of the elements in communion, we believe that every meal and every time of worship should be an occasion for holy communion with God. Still another Quaker religious testimony is the belief that we can not only *know* the Truth (or the will of God), but we can and should *do* the truth and the will of God. These are three examples of what I call Quaker religious testimonies but they do not exhaust the list. Through the years there have been Quaker testimonies that served their day but are no longer considered relevant, such as Friends refusal to pay tithes to the Church of England. Also, we need to allow for new testimonies that become important for the future. (For further treatment of the Testimonies see Wilmer Cooper, *A Living Faith*, Ch. 8, "The Testimonies of Friends," pp. 99-111.)

Turning to the Quaker social testimonies, which are more familiar to us, I would list: integrity and honesty in truth-telling, peace and reconciliation, simplicity of lifestyle, equality of opportunity, community, and ecological concern for the environment. As in the case of the religious testimonies there undoubtedly will be others in the future to claim our attention. The testimonies, whether religious or social, give us as Friends "a place to stand" (Trueblood), and I believe they provide us with normative standards of faith and practice. The testimonies are not absolutes, in the sense that death and taxes are, but they do provide us with guidelines that give purpose and meaning to the Religious Society of Friends.

Once these testimonies or norms of Quaker faith and practice are articulated, what about compliance with them? Does one have to live by these norms in order to be a member of Friends in good standing? To answer this I would apply what I call the Purdy principle, which I learned from Alexander Purdy 35 years ago when he retired from Hartford Theological Seminary and came to teach New Testament at

Earlham School of Religion. He told of his daughter who married a non-Friend at Hartford, CT, and who began attending the Hartford Friends Meeting. He became attached to the Meeting and eventually wanted to join. He told his father-in-law that he felt comfortable about the Hartford Meeting except that he could not bring himself to accept the peace testimony. Alex told him that if this was his main hesitation he could probably be received into membership if he would not try to undermine this historic testimony of Friends. If he would keep an open mind about it as he became better acquainted with Friends, then probably he could be accepted into full fellowship and membership with the Meeting. This has always seemed to me to be a helpful way of handling cases of this kind, which enables both the Meeting and the applicant to act with integrity in the matter. Unfortunately, not all attenders and applicants are as considerate and open to such courses of action as this young man was. It does suggest, however, a way to honor our Quaker testimonies and treat applicants with openness and fairness.

SOME PERSONAL CONFESSIONS OF FAITH

I want now to make a number of observations and share some of my own convictions about the Religious Society of Friends today. Probably some will feel that I have already come down pretty hard on so-called liberal Friends. That is partly because the majority of us gathered here today tend toward liberal persuasion and practice as Friends. What I am about to say will still seem to be addressed more to liberal than evangelical or conservative Friends. Most of my conservative and evangelical friends think my biases favor liberals, whereas my liberal friends think I lean much too far toward the conservative and evangelical point of view. It is fair to say I probably fall somewhere in between and feel comfortable with this position.

My first point is that I believe the Religious Society of Friends is and should remain in the Christian and biblical tradition from whence it originally sprang. This does not mean we should not be open to and in dialogue with other faiths and religious traditions in the world. But to say that the Judeo-Christian tradition is too limiting for Friends seems out of character with who we have been and who I believe we should remain. There is an authentic early Quaker universalism, represented by Fox and Barclay, that is perfectly able to dialogue and join hands with people of other faiths when that seems appropriate. But

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there is a growing Quaker universalism today that finds our Quaker past as too restrictive for the future. To my mind it is out of character, if not unconscionable, for us to deny our past tradition and heritage in favor of a new pluralism and universalism that betrays the uniqueness of historic Quakerism. I believe we should apply what I earlier called the Purdy principle at this point. In the name of Quaker integrity by what right have newcomers to Friends to change the very nature and character of Quakerism? I have no objection to persons wanting to form new religious movements based on their cherished values and religious preferences, which may be historically at variance with the Religious Society of Friends. But I do not believe these should be imposed upon Friends so as to change the very nature of Quakerism.

My next point is to suggest that Friends of whatever persuasion, conservative, evangelical, or liberal, reexamine the nature and quality of our life of worship and ministry. On the one hand it seems to me that some evangelical and conservatively minded Friends have skewed their understanding and use of Scripture and biblical authority in their worship and ministry. In the other direction it is sad to me that the majority of liberal Friends tend to ignore the biblical tradition in favor of a continuing revelation that fits their current religious preferences. I have never forgotten Clarence Pickett's admonition to Friends General Conference at Cape May, NJ, in the 1950s when as clerk he gave his opening address. He suggested that Friends today were "biblical illiterates." That is quite an indictment by one who was respected and probably revered by most of the approximately 3,000 Friends who were present on that occasion.

Regarding our worship and ministry life together, especially among liberals, I am puzzled why vocalized prayer has all but disappeared. Occasionally the suggestion will be made that we hold someone or some situation in the Light, which I expect is intended as a prayer, but this kind of prayer seems somewhat feeble compared to the fervent spirit-filled prayers of Quaker women and men who appeared in the ministry in the past. When I think about this development particularly in unprogrammed meetings I can't forget a conversation I had years ago with the son of a respected and renowned American Friend who said: "I don't believe Daddy believes in prayer." Somewhat stunned, I asked him why? He replied, "I don't believe Daddy believes in God." Obviously if that were true one's prayer would be pretty hollow and useless. But the increasing absence of

spoken prayer in many, if not most, unprogrammed meetings of liberal Friends says something about the spiritual quality of our corporate worship life. I grant that meeting in silent worship is in itself a form of deep prayer, especially when it is what we call “a gathered meeting.” But why has vocalized prayer become so uncommon? And why does our vocalized ministry so many times seem shallow and “out of the life,” as early Friends would say?

This leads me to ask: Do we really believe in and experience God in any deep sense in our personal lives as well as the corporate life of our meetings for worship? Here I am talking about an experience of God that is exalted enough for us to feel a compulsion to follow? George Fox had such an exalted experience of God. On virtually every page of his *Journal* he speaks of “the power of the Lord (or God) was over all.” Every place he went and every encounter he had he expressed the presence and power of God in his life and ministry. How might we recover something of this exhaled experience of God as a way of giving focus to the Religious Society of Friends? I pray that we may all be spiritually baptized with this experience of the presence and power of God in our lives and in our Friends meetings and churches across the land and throughout the world.

Finally, there are two words I believe should characterize our Quaker faith and practice: integrity and hope! By naming these I do not mean to detract from the three cardinal Christian virtues as proclaimed by the apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 13, “faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love.” Many of you know my commitment to the word *integrity* as a means of unlocking the essence of Quakerism. (See my Pendle Hill Pamphlet No. 296, *The Testimony of Integrity in the Religious Society of Friends*.) I would now like to add *hope* to this as a very important part of our Quaker message in the world today. When Hugh Doncaster from England, now deceased, addressed the Friends World Conference at Guilford College in 1967, he said he believed that the world was dying for the lack of Quakerism in action. I agree with this and my prayer is that we become these kind of Quaker agents for the transformation of the world in our time. And let us proclaim this message with integrity coupled with a spiritual message of hope.