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Howard Macy

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REVIEW OF MARGERY POST ABBOTT,
WALK HUMBLY, SERVE BOLDLY:
MODERN QUAKERS AS EVERYDAY
PROPHETS. SAN FRANCISCO, CA:
INNER LIGHT BOOKS, 2018.

HOWARD MACY

Margery Post Abbott's book *Walk Humbly, Serve Boldly* is a substantial book, in both size and content, that explores the experience of prophetic witness, particularly among Friends. Key to understanding this exploration is Abbott's use of the term "everyday prophets." She uses the term "to describe all those individuals (and this goes well beyond the Quaker community) who listen for the Holy Spirit to shape them and guide them on a daily basis. ... [They are] people who are faithful to the path of truth and love and whose lives project hope and a passion for justice. This path is at the core of Quaker worship and spiritual discipline" (12). She contrasts "everyday prophets" with "radical prophets" who may be called to serve in "highly visible" ways as "public Friends."

These understandings differ sharply from the common notion that prophets are highly unusual people with uniquely specialized service. In that view, we may admire them (or find them bewildering), but would not emulate them. Abbott marks her purpose clearly when she writes: "By focusing on the everyday nature of the prophetic task, I hope to demystify it and to elevate this attitude of following the guidance of the Inward Light as central to the meeting community rather than as the work of a very few individuals who are somehow chosen to be special" (151).

Abbott brings a wide range of resources to this exploration. The first is her own extended experience of learning to listen and to respond faithfully to the Inward Guide. So the book often includes autobiographical report. Additionally, Abbott has been released and supported by her local meeting to pursue a vocation of studying and writing about Quakers. Years of attentive study show often in relevant examples both historic and contemporary. She also is helpfully alert to significant biblical teaching about prophetic figures and themes.

Finally, Abbott has actively pursued and cherished thoughtful conversations with Friends across our very wide Quaker spectrum. She accurately describes and respects the varied practices and teaching that we share. For this book, she asked many Friends to respond to a survey about their ideas and experiences in prophecy. She clearly received a rich treasure of responses, and she cites them generously throughout the book. The survey reached across boundaries to include programmed and unprogrammed Friends, evangelical to liberal, and international leaders ranging from Britain, Bolivia, Ramallah (Palestine), Africa, Australia, and more. The range of responses reflects Abbott's steady service among Friends over many years.

The exploration of prophetic witness moves between individuals who receive guidance that must be spoken or acted on and the communities to which they belong. Abbott writes repeatedly of her hope that Friends would become "a band of everyday prophets" whose lives together would nurture and release faithfulness to the call of the Inward Guide.

Individual faithfulness is rooted in learning how to listen well to the Spirit's leading. It involves becoming aware of a Presence that enlivens ministry. It also involves becoming willing to respond to such leading and undergoing the steady transformation which faithfulness requires. Such transformation includes growing self-awareness of ways in which we might resist or corrupt the leading we receive.

The book title *Walk Humbly, Serve Boldly* suggests complementary movements here. "In the face of the infinite," Abbott writes, "the only sane posture is that of humility" (42). In tension with humility comes boldness. She writes, "To serve boldly, at least for me, means to offer words *and* actions that name truth firmly and with clarity" (53). This tension echoes the experience of prophets in the Bible who responded to God's call in humility (or even disbelief), "Who me? Do what? I couldn't possibly!" Yet when they acted boldly, often listeners would challenge them ("Who do you think you are?!"), would reject them, hunt them down, throw them in prison, and even kill them.

Living in this tension requires self-awareness. How do we listen well? What are the sources of reluctance or of acting too eagerly or even recklessly? How do our personality, our fears, our preferences enter in? What would hinder our acting firmly with clarity? Abbott's reflections on such questions (and those of her respondents) are thoughtful and challenging.

A key theme of the book is that individual prophetic witness takes root in the life of the community, ideally in a community which has become “a band of everyday prophets.” In developing a vision of what kind of community can nurture and sustain ministry, Abbott uses the extended metaphor of “a healthy ecosystem.” She writes, “A healthy human ecosystem is one in which many individuals are willing to minister to the community and to cherish their interdependence despite the painful demands it may place on them. No one is totally isolated” (202). The multiple roles and layers of interaction as we share life together is complex and requires steady attention.

Out of this practical spiritual ecosystem come a variety of actions that open the way for and strengthen prophetic ministry. Community discernment, for example, is key, whether by elders, clearness committees, or other forms to attend to leadings about messages or particular forms of service. Abbott speaks warmly of her local meeting appointing an “anchor committee” for her to guide and support her in following her call.

Another dimension of a healthy community is in how we “walk with” one another or find ways of being present to one another. This includes an expectation that the Spirit will be actively present among us and may minister to us through any one of us. In living this out we may discover that prophecy is a communal, widely shared work.

A healthy life together also includes learning how to hold each other accountable, to oversee and draw out the best of each other’s faithfulness, and to receive this willingly. Abbott rightly notes that this is difficult and that we may be reluctant to do it as we should.

Sometimes a community resists a particular prophetic leading, message, or person. Abbott helpfully explores the variety of paths forward when such conflict arises. These include patience, holding paradoxes, learning the right time (*kairos*, when God acts), gentleness, seeking reconciliation, attending to forgiveness as needed, and more.

In a section called “Headwinds,” Abbott uses the metaphor of sailing to reflect on how prophets need to recognize and respond to the conditions they face. I’m not a sailor, though I’ve gone with experienced sailors before. Still, her discussions of tacking into headwinds, running before the wind, and not crashing into rocky shores give helpful guidance.

The last section, “Making Space for the Prophets Among Us,” moves toward not only understanding everyday prophets, but

prospering that sort of faithfulness among Friends. Among the topics covered, Abbott asks, “What is the Friends vision for today?” (389) To which she answers “grounded hope.... a hope grounded in the knowledge of the power of compassion, the infinite mercy of God.” I found this compelling and fully consistent with the deepest root of the prophetic witness.

The book includes several helpful appendices, including a notable talk given by William Taber, “Ten Ways We Enter Prophetic Ministry.” It also includes at the end of each chapter “Queries for Reflection and/or Discussion.” I find the questions unusually well done, and think they would serve well to invite thoughtful responses, whether privately or with a group.

I commend this book to Friends (and beyond). Margery Post Abbott has helpfully explored the pragmatic challenges of the listening and response by both individuals and communities that emerges in prophetic witness. I am grateful for all she has done and for the sharing of the broad Quaker community that has made this available.