

Ask anyone, Quaker or otherwise, about the essential beliefs of the Religious Society of Friends and chances are you will hear something about Friends historic peace testimony. “Quakers don’t fight in wars” is something specific that people can say about this peculiar sect, which steadfastly refuses to be defined by creed or dogma. Moreover, in a world where it is considered acceptable, indeed praiseworthy, to go to war and kill one another for the sake of peace or justice, in a world where we have learned to define successes, amass our fortunes or win our arguments at the expense of others like us who lose out, the perception that “Quakers are peacemakers” sets Friends apart and makes them visible.

But Friends’ peace testimony is not a creed, in the sense of a statement of belief true for all time. Nor is it a code of behavior, a set of rules to which all Quakers individually and corporately must adhere. On the simplest level, “testimony” means “bearing witness” and Friends’ long heritage of witnessing to peace can be found in their refusal to bear arms in times of civil and international conflict, in acts of prophetic confrontation and of quiet, reconciling diplomacy. But these are merely outward and visible signs of inward conviction. This conviction springs from a living Spirit, mediated through the human experience of those trying to understand and follow its leadings. It grows afresh in every life, in every worshipping group, in every generation.

At the heart of this conviction is Friends’ experience that there is something of God, the seed of the Spirit, in all people. Quakers believe that more can be accomplished by appealing to this capacity for love and goodness, in ourselves and in others, than can be hoped for by threatening punishment or retaliation if people act badly. This is not to ignore the existence of evil. It is to recognize that there is no effective way to combat evil with weapons which harm or kill those through whom evil is working. We must turn instead, in the words of early Friends, to the “weapons of the spirit,” allowing God to reach out through us to that of God in those with whom we are in conflict. “Spiritual weapons”—love, truthsaying, nonviolence, imagination, laughter—are weapons that heal and don’t destroy.

All this sounds grand indeed; its consequences are for the most part very ordinary. The peace testimony is not something Quakers take down from a shelf and dust off only in wartime or in times of personal or political crisis. Living out a witness to peace has to do with everyday choices about the work we do, the relationships we build, what part we take in politics, what we buy, how we raise our children. It is a matter of fostering relationships and structures, from personal to international, which are strong and healthy enough to contain conflict when it arises and allow its creative resolution. It is a matter of withdrawing our cooperation from structures and relationships which are unjust and exploitative. It is a matter of finding creative ways of dealing with conflict when it does arise, with the aim of freeing all concerned to find a just and loving solution.

Like everyone else, Quakers live in the real world. Insights which are gloriously clear in the spirit translate into words or actions which seem muddled and imperfect. From time to time we fail, we fudge, we are hurt, we hurt others. To accept as a certainty the spiritual conviction

which underlies the peace testimony is not to be certain of the outcome. We cannot guarantee that we will never kill, far less that we will never do violence to those with whom we share the earth. Nor can we, by refusing to do harm and seeking always for a creative response in conflict ensure our own personal safety or the triumph of the causes we support. We can only choose to live day by day as if it were possible always to defend what we value and to resolve conflict without deliberate harm, in such a way that if damage does occur, healing is possible.

If we choose to attempt this, we are not alone. Those who have lived and witnessed before us, by no means all of them quakers, have left examples for us to find and follow. Those of us who are struggling with the same dilemmas can offer each other comfort, courage and support. And we are many. We are beginning to realize that security is common, indivisible, and cannot be assured by military means. To seek to live at such a time in that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars is no longer, if it ever was, a saintly, other-worldly alternative. It is now an urgent and practical imperative.