

Powerful Beyond Measure: Trusting the Call to Leadership
PYM Annual Meeting
July 30, 2011
Jay Marshall

This Annual Meeting's theme of leadership, along with other things happening among Friends organizations, is evidence of a sea change among us. Increasingly, I hear Friends asking about leadership without demonizing it in the process. I am witnessing a sincere interest in pursuing a conversation that, while inclusive of our own individual experiences of leadership, reaches beyond them, critiques our defaults and habits, and dares to imagine what Friends leadership might look like in a less toxic environment. I'm not so naïve as to think it is an absolute transformation in Friends' attitude toward the subject matter. Even so, I would not have expected to speak to Friends on this topic ten or even five years ago.

Even so, it remains a difficult topic. Why is this the case? [\(VIEW SLIDE\)](#) I think the photo of the crown may be sufficient to summarize our reservations about leadership. Look at it. Absorb it. See its jewels, its gold. It is hardly the most ostentatious crown we've seen, but it is still a crown. Think of what a crown represents. Think of the chain of people who support and cater to the one who wears it. Think of the sacrifices made, the suffering endured, in order to maintain it. A royal crown summons memories of:

- Hierarchy (there can only be one monarch; he or she can't manage it alone, so there will be layers of lesser helpers)
- Authority/power by office (absolute, or seemingly so; limited options for challenging or changing the guard)
- Potential for coercion, so often happens when people's only claim to authority is the office they've obtained
- Each of which contributes to inequality and injustice, which are things Friends and the organizations they create detest, stand against, and set out to avoid.

When we talk about leadership in organizations that have been formed by Friends, that is often how we open the discussion. We speak as though it has always been this way, though it really has not. But we act as though it has. From that starting place, we quickly conclude that Friends are opposed to leadership. In an FGC web resource, Bruce Birch refers to the 1909 Swarthmore Lecture in which William Charles Braithwaite identified organizational phases in the history of the Society of Friends: "The early Friends believed in leaders, but not in a system; the Friends of the second period in leaders and a system; the Friends of a later period were content to have a system without leaders." With that, I want to say to those of you working in organizations that claim an identity or affiliation with Friends, leadership is not an anathema and if you work in an environment where it seems that way, then you are suffering the effects of living in Braithwaite's phase three. I should also say that I believe Friends leadership would/should bear the imprint of Friends' convictions, so even as I say it is no anathema, neither does it come with a crown.

A Rubik's cube comes to mind when I think of the challenge of Quakers thinking about leadership. After generations of hereditary resistance have implanted a default mode opposed to leadership, the Quaker leadership cube is mixed and varied. Every move we make that seems like a step toward completing one area of the cube creates another set of complexities and misalignments somewhere else. We work out what it means to have specialized gifts for ministry within the context of universal ministry, then turn the cube and see that equality side of the cube

is now messy. Or we organize the sense of the meeting portion of the cube and discover we have thwarted committee charges or have missed opportunities. And so on.

I've never solved a Rubik's cube; but I also never spent much time trying. My youngest sister experienced a fair amount of frustration from this little cube. One day I came home and found it solved. Every side was perfect. I was so impressed and happy for her. I asked, "Jeanne, how did you do it?" She said, "Oh, it really wasn't so difficult after all. I just peeled off the colors and put them back on in order." I think that Friends have a parallel there, in that in our own frustration, rather than work out our issues with leadership we try to make all the colors match and hope no one notices that beneath the veneer, the mechanics are in disarray. Your organization won't be able to wear that veneer very long before it is obvious that something is wrong.

As I think about it there are at the least three contexts in which the question of Friends leadership circulates. None are exactly the same. I want to name that here, in hopes that somewhere down the road it might save Friends who are in conversation from talking past one another.

1. Friends meetings, monthly, quarterly, yearly, or parachurch-- When it comes to leadership, they suffer from the quicksand of tradition, individually interpreted of course. An egalitarian approach to process and temporary leadership can potentially work in that setting, though I think it suffers some strain and stress at the yearly meeting level; it has severe limitations beyond that context.
2. Quaker organizations that have boards of trustees, employees, and departments. This gets particularly messy if Quaker groups appoint the boards without knowledge of the types of skills needed by board members, or appreciation for other spheres of influence such as state or federal regulations. What the founders of those organizations thought was "some assembly required" in terms of Quaker egalitarian temporary leadership model applied to socially admirable service organizations becomes an exercise in backyard mechanics making modifications that work for the moment. In the worst scenario, the whole car ends up on blocks with nothing working but the radio.
3. Friends who work/lead in non-Friends settings, or vice versa—It is like landing on another planet and trying to learn the rituals and taboos. Friends' gravitational forces that keep one grounded in a Quaker universe don't exist here, and we can look a bit clumsy.

In each context, those of us who have been called into or hired for the purpose of leadership arrive at the task wanting to be faithful in service, leading integrated lives where our values root our practice and season our actions. That is true whether we are religious workers, educators, businesspersons, and ministers in a more traditional sense, even volunteers.

Ours is a heritage that depends mightily on our belief that the Light is within us—powerful beyond measure as described in the annual session brochure. How might that Spirit, so trusted in worship and in the lives of individuals, be relied upon as we think of leadership? I suggest we start by facing a few challenges that frequently entangle us.

Challenges rooted in our past

1. The cyclical nature of Friends consultations
Friends love to consult. This is truer of organizations than monthly meetings. We'll stay for two or three days. We each will have an opportunity to talk about how we see it, be inspired by how others describe it, and see a few light bulbs turn on. The good facilitators ask us what we will do when we leave that will take advantage of this energy. We have a wonderful time!

We go home. We get busy. Often very little follow through occurs. I may be more of a cynic than others in this regard, due to my work in an educational organization. It is easy to ride a wave of enthusiasm with each consultation until one realizes that 20 or 30 years ago, Friends looked in the mirror, saw the same problems, and said much of the same thing. As a result, I've come to believe that Qoheleth knew what he was talking about when he said, "There is nothing new under the sun." I acknowledge the value of group conversation, but I am even more of an advocate for implementation. Follow through. I heard it as a kid in learning to shoot a basketball or swing a bat. It is good advice as an adult in a professional setting. If we want to see change we must learn to implement the new insights and ideas that have inspired us as a group.

2. The challenge of making peace with our past

I think we all know that there is a lot of Quaker baggage around the topics of leadership, authority, and process. I can ache alongside Paul Lacey's words in his PH pamphlet, *Quakers and the Use of Power* that: among Friends

- An invitation to serve . . . seems increasingly like an invitation to waste substance and break one's heart in dedication to illusory Quaker ideas of participation in and responsibility for decision-making.
- . . . boards, committees and constituents do everything they can to neutralize those leaders' abilities to act, while evading responsibility themselves for unpopular decisions.
- . . . deep and unexamined ambivalence about the exercise of power.

When we observe this behavior over time, it affects our willingness to be identified as a leader. It dampens our readiness to undertake responsibilities. I have met several cynics who tell me directly they won't risk trying to lead among Friends because they have seen what we can do to one another. Our default reactions to authority, our worry about coercion, and our subsequent fear of being asked to lead in that environment is a 3-piece set of luggage we can't afford to own.

In that context and partially because of it, frequently Friends struggle with talking about leadership. We tend to justify our aversion to power, elevate our belief that everyone has access to the Source of Truth, highlight experience, we emphasize community and continuing revelation, cobble together a few sentences about leadership that grows from group process, and present that as our model. It is myopic at best and narcissistic at worst.

Challenges of our present context

1. The challenge of our theology, if we can call it that.

I love the fact that we are non-creedal as much as anyone, but unless you are an avid reader of Quaker history and journals, that leaves us with a less than optimal grounding for thinking about the fundamentals of our faith and how they inform our actions. In lieu of that, our tradition elevates experience to the point where, in practice, all else can be discounted if it doesn't mesh with what we think we know. We call that Quaker practice, but my guess is that it is much more rooted in a 20th century phenomenon spawned by cultural trends toward individualism and relativism where we are our own primary authorities and therefore contrasting points of view must be disempowered if we are to cling to our own notions. While we do want to disempower, we don't to demean, so we let their point of view be their truth and our point of view is our truth. Even if we want to quibble about the tension between community and individual holding "experience" in check, I think we ultimately have to

confess that in practice, there is a lot of “spiritual entitlement” that passes as “good Quakerism” that will attempt to thwart group process, leadership in particular, and will excuse itself from the group when the group’s thinking doesn’t suit it. Here are some of the ways this erupts and spills within our organizations:

- a. A Perversion of Quaker Process, in one of two ways. First, if an action occurs that we do not like, we question the process. I’ve rarely heard a person question a process when they agreed with the decision made. A phrase we often hear in those situations is “that isn’t very Quakerly.” There are surely cases when that is probably accurate, but it is used much more frequently than that. Or, the process is sometimes used to advance a personal agenda. The fact that any can speak allows any to introduce an idea and continue to work the process in the name of dialogue until a favorable outcome is obtained.
- b. Lack of clarity in the concepts we do use. What does one really mean when they say “community?” Early in my time at ESR, it was obvious different ones of us used the term differently. I asked the faculty to refrain from using the word “community” for a few months and instead, say what they meant when they used the word. What does it mean for a community to make decisions? How does the fact that we may look as an organization through the metaphor of community influence the way it operates? Does it refer just to warmth and relational strength? Does it have implications for decision-making?
- c. What does it mean to “have been heard?” On occasion after making a decision I have people say to me, “I don’t feel you really heard me” or “you didn’t listen well.” When they do that, I immediately recount for them what I heard them say and why I believe they think the way they do. After I do that, I ask, did I replay that accurately? If the answer is yes, I say, then it is not true that I didn’t hear you. I simply don’t agree with you. Those are two very different things.
- d. Speaking of different things, consensus and sense of the meeting are different animals. Consensus is a good faith effort to engage everyone and bring about a collective decision with a high degree of buy-in from the group. It is a good thing. If you want a more participative style of governance and you are not a monthly, quarterly, or yearly meeting, it may be your best choice. But let’s don’t confuse consensus with Quaker process. Quaker process uses “sense of the meeting.” The difference can be stated thusly: consensus says everyone has a voice; sense of the meeting asks everyone to listen for the One voice. For me, that means unless your organization is of a religious nature and agrees that God is part of the decision making process, you can’t operate by sense of the meeting because there is no agreement that there is a One to be heard! Consensus can be a good non-religious participative process but I have to warn you. With the component of spiritual seeking stripped from it, consensus is little more than democracy without the luxury of a vote.
- e. I imagine that you have a host of other challenges from your life and work together here in PYM that you could offer as well.

In many Quaker meetings where I have worshipped or offered my services, some of these qualities seem to be planted deeply in the organizational DNA. Perhaps that is your experience as well. Particularly as we attempt to address questions about leadership and organizational planning, many organizations are caught in the web of Quaker experience that struggles to trust others to exercise authority.

2. The challenge of communication

- a. Language is a challenge to begin with. Perhaps as a southerner I struggle with that more than some of the rest of you. Earlier this month I read a minute of appreciation for my service on a Quaker board that referenced my southern and Midwestern drawl; but when I speak of communication challenges I have in mind more than regional dialects and accents.
- b. In 2004 I responded to a leading to learn Spanish. As a result, I spent some time in Central America. One night outside a Friends church in Guatemala, in my best Spanish I asked an elderly woman how she came to be among Friends. If I asked you that question, you would probably understand that I was asking why you worship with Friends rather than another faith group. “How did you come to be among Friends?” I asked. She replied, “I take the bus. It stops outside my house.” It was an accurate, authentic answer to the question being asked, but it did not answer the question that I was asking.
- c. Friends have the challenge of defining effective faith language among Friends that communicates clearly. This is one of the effects of being a group prone to silence—we aren’t well practiced in speaking. When we finally have to say how our values influence organizational mission, structure, and process, it is not easy.
- d. On those occasions when being in leadership might require Friends to go give a directive . . . it feels like we’ve just been overtaken by a big streak of bossiness. At worship recently I observed the person giving the children’s talk say, “If the children will join me. . .” That is a conditional clause, not a complete sentence. Last year at a yearly meeting, the clerk said, “If Jay Marshall will come see me after the session . . .” I wanted to ask, “what if I do? Is there a reward?” It means Children come down. Jay, see me after the session. Maybe that is too direct, so we pose a conditional clause at them instead.

3. The challenge of moving beyond the “servant model,” or at least, to redefine it.

One model of leadership Friends have been able to accept is that of servant leadership as developed by Robert Greenleaf. Well, really, developed by Jesus and popularized by Greenleaf. I latched on to the servant leader idea when it was first tossed to me as the antithesis of corrupt power models. When I actually read the book, I discovered that I disagreed with two key principles: one, Greenleaf opted for faith because it was the “noble choice.” I’ve never equated a decision to practice faith with a noble act, so that left me cold. Two, his assertion that leaders give selflessly because the group needs it sounds like good, compassionate theology but it is a recipe for dysfunctional disaster among Friends. While his work was probably a good check for businesses in the 1970’s and today, it is not healthy among Friends because it teaches leaders to serve the dysfunction of our group without reservation. The position is rooted in a sacrificial understanding of the atonement (which many Friends can’t accept) and then makes servant leadership a model for how we imitate Jesus. A mentality that sees itself in service to others is a useful characteristic of leadership, but I would have to explain and qualify in what sense servant leadership works within a Quaker context. It strikes me as ironic and somewhat inappropriate that a group who hangs its hat on the testimony of equality can only endorse leadership if the one leading adopts a submissive posture to the rest of the group.

These are a few of the challenges facing leadership for Quakers or others in Quaker contexts. In the spirit of speaking truth to power, I think they must be named if we are serious about leadership. But Friends also have a few well-ingrained commitments that could serve us well as we think about leadership that can function in our context: our practice of deep listening,

thanks to the quality of our spirituality; a non-anxious presence in the face of differences and conflicts, fueled by the same practice; plain speaking (though some of us will need to work on tact) as a means of promoting simple and transparent processes; a willingness to consult and labor prior to decision making, growing from our business process.

1. As I hear Friends talk about ourselves, the idea that the Inner Light/Spirit is an interior guide always has a prominent place in the discussion. That is what makes this such a powerful faith. It is living. It is dynamic. It is present and engaged. It is the primary source of our vitality. Good Quaker leadership absolutely depends on the truth of that assumption. Quaker leadership is not about one's personality alone, or cluster of traits one possesses, skills one has developed, or degrees one has earned. It claims the internal power/ direction/ leading not only as the ground from which we breathe, and minister, but also from which we lead. At its best, leadership is Spirit directed, either directly or by virtue of values we hold and discernments we make as a result of our spiritual formation. This keeps Friends' emphasis on the Spirit as Source for wisdom and analysis in leading. Hopefully, others can recognize that guidance and be supportive. If they do, our leadership is then endorsed by the group rather than propped up by position.
2. If we leave aside coercive leadership, as a Friends model must, it is essential that a group affirms our abilities and invites us to lead. This may be a board of trustees, a personnel committee, or the Annual Session of a Yearly Meeting, for example. There are some contexts in which this also includes those staff or residents being led/served. For instance, as the dean of ESR, the President and Board may decide whether or not my employment continues, but if the faculty did not assent to my leadership, my work would be much less effective and much more difficult. If Friends groups wish to benefit from that "power beyond measure" we will need to be able to affirm the leadership gifts and abilities of those we choose and allow them to operate. There is evidence that some Friends are making that invitation. Affirmation is a start; but we will need to move a step further toward trust of those we invite to lead. We speak so much of "that of God" in every person giving value to the other; I wonder at what point the other becomes trustworthy? Is there ever a moment when the emphasis of "that of God" in every person might shift from "therefore my voice must be heard" to "I can release this matter into the trusted hands of another?"
3. In recent years leadership studies have reached a Quaker-friendly plateau. They are taking group dynamics into consideration when they describe today's leader. In some cases, they contain a dash of the current "everybody is a leader" trend, two tablespoons of group process, and a fourth of a cup of entitlement mentality. We have to recognize the value but also limitations of each of those. But, there is a real value in recognizing the importance of creating buy-in, and utilizing participative decisions. Implications of this include the recognition that among the most important things a leader does is help shape the ethos in which others participate/contribute. While that is a major adjustment for top down organizations, Friends start with a commitment to wide participation in the affairs of an organization. We have a lot of experience with that type of process. The clerk's role, properly understood, is a brilliant example of that practice. Far more than merely being neutral on decisions, as the clerk listens to God and to the group, and to God through the group, the clerk helps to hold and give shape to the space in which we work together. For Quaker

groups where the structure gives authority to someone other than a clerk, we would be well served by cultivating leaders who carry that commitment as well. Whether the setting is worshipful or not, secular or otherwise, egalitarian or hierarchical, group dynamics are an issue and affect the health and potential success of the group.

4. Good Quaker leadership asks early the question, “For what purpose am I leading?” This question helps to temper the idea of leaders simply looking for any place to land and exert their influence. It recognizes, instead, that Quaker leadership grows from a sense of call, is specific to the context, and that while one may always have the ability to lead, one may not always be expected to lead. It is the first of a series of questions that invites broader consideration of the group’s role and voice. It cultivates a disposition that recognizes one leads while holding in balance the organization’s mission/purpose and seeking the good of those who participate in the group. It positions the leader to think of him or herself as a contributor to those holistic aims rather than a primary beneficiary from the group’s activity.
5. From those nudges of the Spirit and that deep consideration of purpose, Friends leadership is well-positioned to cultivate vision and mission among the appropriate body (entire group, governing board, etc.) It can occur in a combination of casual conversations and formal discussions; of careful listening and strategic planting of seeds. The leader is not responsible for producing the vision alone but will often need to shepherd the process, and will become a champion for the vision as it emerges. I tell my colleagues that I alone am not responsible for our vision, but once we have agreed to it, it is my job to remember it when no one else cares to and to hold the institution accountable to it until such time as it changes.
6. Good Quaker leadership understands the equal importance of relationship to task. Before us stands the task of creating space for individuality with sacrificing accountability. We need efficiency without demanding a sacrifice of the hearts and souls of those who accompany us. If we ask one another to contribute our best selves to the work we set out to do, or the community we intend to build, we must recognize the importance of deriving meaning from those tasks. Quaker leadership rooted in the depths of spiritual practice helps cultivate an open climate, a hospitable climate, a gracious climate that encourages and motivates. It will not sacrifice accountability in the process.
7. Leadership from a Quaker perspective asks often, and publicly, whose decision is this to make, and as a consequence of what process? I learned these questions from former Earlham President Doug Bennett. I do not know if they are original to him, but I have found them to be of the most important questions to ask. This represents a dual commitment to organizational transparency and also clarity about authority within the group. This names the process at the outset rather than defends/justifies it when it comes into question. This in itself acknowledges that not every decision may be a group decision—it varies by organizational type and tradition. In the process, it implicitly identifies at least four elephants in the room:
 - Issue of trust – do we trust the one or ones who have the power to make the decision?
 - Issue of authority – will we accept the decision when it is made as valid?
 - Issue of structure and process– are all in the group operating with a similar understanding of organizational structure and the process by which decisions

occur? (i.e., in meetings, committee vs. monthly meeting as point of decision; in organizations, head vs. department vs. group of whole)

8. Quaker leadership done well has the opportunity to rekindle a communal based culture committed to discernment in whatever context we serve. I take the discernment component, both individually and corporately, to be among the key jewels in Quaker spirituality. I think that the Spirit is the source of all impulse toward good leadership and decision-making. Discernment done well helps us identify those persons with leadership potential, is a practice that helps those who lead keep faith/vocation united, and understands that leadership occurs only within corporate settings (there must be those who are being led) and therefore a discerning individual will want to act with the group in mind, and often to test ideas with the wider group.

Vital leadership of this caliber is one that can function with warmth, firmness, and integrity in a pluralistic, multi-faith, multi-cultural world. My personal hope is that as Friends think constructively about how leadership might occur among us, we will arrive to a point where our leaders have the permission and the ability to lead authoritatively without leading coercively or abusively; and that they will lead toward accomplishment of a corporately discerned vision and objectives rather than the fulfillment of blind ambition. No doubt, we have a lot of work to do in the area of Friends leadership, but there is within us a power beyond measure that can create the vital model of leadership we seek.