In the School of the Shipwreck

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Editor’s Note: Noah wrote this piece in spring 2020 and his reflections speak to us still.

These are the only genuine ideas;  
the ideas of the shipwrecked.  
All the rest is rhetoric, posturing, farce.  
—José Ortega y Gasset

JUST OFF THE shore in Gibara, a sun-soaked town on the northeastern coast of Cuba where Quakers from what would become Friends United Meeting first arrived on the island, there is a shipwreck. Rusted and broken, its hulking ruin stands as a testament to the unpredictable power that shatters what once seemed would endure.  
For more than a hundred years, Cuban Quakers have known what it means to cultivate a living faith through seemingly unending crisis, sanctions, persecution, and impoverishment. Since my first encounter with Cuban Friends, I’ve been blessed by the profound humility and witness of these Friends who have so much to share about steadfastness, resilience, and enduring hope.

In these relationships, I’ve been given a glimpse of an expression of Quaker faith grounded in a profoundly different context from my own. I’ve found it instructive to see such different ways of responding as Quaker spiritual communities to the legacies and present impacts of oppression, colonialism, supremacy, and exploitation in which Cubans and North Americans share.

Last year, I was asked to return to Cuba. I spent that time trying to listen, to in some small way encourage those called to ministry there. I was encouraged and challenged. And I was given a
message that has remained with me:

There is no other refuge—only faithfulness.

I’m told that years ago, as a hurricane approached, Friends in Gibara opened their meetinghouse as a refuge for people throughout the community. Communists and people of faith, soldiers and Quakers gathered together, sheltering in one another’s care against the storm.

These last months I’ve been keenly aware of the waves of anxiety, grief, and anger which threaten to overtake the society in which we live.

I hear from many Quakers about their heartbreak at the splintering of communities, the erosion of the social fabric, and the politics of separation, othering, and relational dismemberment that seems to permeate these times.

We’re living in a moment when so many are seeking refuge—both physically and spiritually. The storms, both inward and outward, can leave us desperately searching for protection and safety.

As Friends, whether we ourselves face physical threats to life and safety or not, we’re called to the extent we’re able to accompany and enter into solidarity with those who do. I’m convinced we’re also called to cultivate an inward refuge—a shelter within—that can withstand the tempest of these times. And that shelter is not for us alone.

In recent months, I’ve been reflecting on times in my life when the things I’d relied on for security were ripped away. It happened again this week—some people I love and rely on did something I didn’t expect, and I found myself shaken, questioning where I’d put my trust. Maybe you’ve had a similar experience of having your foundations shaken—with a family member, a partner, a political movement, a trusted leader, a part of your spiritual community. Maybe it was a dream job, a hoped-for career, a sense of accomplishment or recognition or self-image—whatever you had invested your heart and hope in, whatever you’d come to believe would save you.

These shipwrecks don’t just change our circumstances, they can alter our understanding of our own identity and relationship to others. Sometimes they threaten to undermine our sense of sacred connectedness, and shift the underlying story of our life journey.

In the shipwrecks of my life, I’ve felt betrayed, lost, confused, and terrified. Suddenly, I’ve become aware that in some way the world would not—could not, ever again—be the way I had understood it to be, or so longed for.

On so many occasions, I’ve found the ship I’d built as a refuge crashing on the rocks. In each of these losses, something in me has died. I’ve felt angry, resentful, depressed, reactive. At times I’ve lashed out, or wished that I could. I’ve isolated myself. Sometimes it’s felt like grief might overwhelm me—and sometimes it has.

And so it took me a long time to realize that in these moments, if I allow it, something new is waiting to be revealed.

What rises from the depths in those moments, in my experience, is a new and profound freedom to embrace the reality of my life as it is, not as I might have wished it would be. I’ve been liberated from my clinging to what might have been true, what I wish I’d done, or who I wish that I or someone else had been.

Letting go of trying to make it different through the force of my own will unbinds my heart and hands, to welcome, here and now, both what’s present and what’s possible.

Surrendering to reality, I wash up on the shore of Truth.

While it can at first seem strange—with time, as my spiritual senses adjust—I discover that this new ground on which I’m standing can hold more weight, can offer more resilience, more refuge, than the
broken ship to which I’d clung before. And when the storms come again, this sense of what remains, when I’ve let go of what I was clinging to, offers a new kind of shelter.

There’s an ancient—and perhaps off-putting—word for placing our hope in what can’t hold us. For those of us with an oar in the stream of the Abrahamic traditions, that word is idolatry.

In the most important sense, idolatry isn’t about arguing over who’s worshipping the right—or wrong—statue. It’s not about pitting one spiritual tradition against another, or using religion to justify violence or oppression.

At its heart, this spiritual principle is about the harm that is caused to ourselves and others when we allow our profound attention, commitment, and reliance to rest on something that won’t endure—whatever form that may take.

In my experience, the most dangerous idols are within us.

Our tradition as Friends challenges us to be always tearing down the idols we encounter. We’re reminded again and again, through the testimony of generations of Quakers, to be watchful to keep from falling into lifeless forms—in religion and society—that keep us from being open to the Life, that oppress the fundamental belovedness of all. We’re exhort ed to not be bound by the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law, “for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.”

While these are reminders many of us give each other, I know that sometimes I don’t live them—and I imagine I’m not the only one.

As Quakers, we often see ourselves as being free from these kinds of idolatry, because of our flexible theology, or our radical political commitments, or our rejection of the ritual and hierarchy we can criticize so harshly in other traditions.

And yet I need to confess that at times I see us making idols out of the very things we claim make us different. What might happen, I wonder, if each of us—myself surely included—could more fully practice letting go of the idols of our own uniqueness, our own superiority, our own sense of being “on the right side”, our own separateness and purity and perfectionism?

Imagine what it could be like: To behold the fullness of another person for who they are, rather than for who I want or expect them to be? To encounter the tender wholeness of a situation in all its messiness, nuance, and complexity? Could we allow our whole lives to come into right relationship, recognizing the gifts of God we are to one another, rather than being bound in the illusions and fears that separate us?

The Irish poet and theologian Padraig O’ Tuama, from his deep experience of brokenness, reconciliation, and resilience, prays, “Let us pick up the stones over which we stumble, friends, and build altars.” As we release our clinging, we are freed for relationship, for service, for ministry.

From the ground of this freedom, maybe our lives together could grow more fully into the kind of refuge that the world needs—shelters in the storm, built with the gifts of all we are.

When we allow ourselves to practice letting go—when we release our clinging, dying into Life again and again—we can come to rest in a place of resilience and profound joy. Around this Center, Creation turns. Living from that ground is the only refuge: faithfulness.

When we’re freed from clinging to our shipwrecked idols—every time this happens—it’s then that we can love, and serve, and live most deeply. I’ve only glimpsed it, but for me, that glimpse is enough to anchor my faith.

So I wonder:

As Friends, what idols are we clinging to, as individuals, and as communities?
What habits of heart and mind might we need to let go of, to be more free to love, live, and serve?
Where have we placed our deepest hopes in what does not endure?
Is there something in us that might need to die, so that Truth can blossom?
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