Fossil Fuel Divestment and Quaker Witness

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Fossil fuel divestment is an important new strand in the movement to combat climate change and move our society to a more sustainable and reverent way of life. Whoever is drawn to it should get into it, as soon as they can. Having said that, one might ask: Can it be a part of a Quaker Earthcare witness? What could that mean? Does fossil fuel divestment matter, and if so, to whom? Here are some brief reflections.

The Beginnings of a Leading

Elias Hicks, on his deathbed, was taken with cold, and his family spread a cotton quilt over him. He showed signs of agitation and plucked repeatedly at the blanket until someone, remembering his long discipline of not using slave-produced cloth, replaced the quilt with a wool blanket, free of that taint. He then relaxed into its warmth.

It is very common for a conscientious person—of whatever creed or none—to realize that a particular practice or material or food has become a trouble or distraction, and that he or she could not feel inward peace without abstaining from it. Friends are familiar with this sense of inward requirement and also are familiar with the consequences that often follow: the pain of being different, the arousing of discomfort or even outrage in others—not to mention physical or financial costs. The costs and disruption may be desirable, if they stir up the Witness of God's spirit in those not yet sensitive to the concern. The growth required to be faithful to the insight may arouse strong inhibitions, whether of pride or fear or conflicting commitments. If the pointings of the Spirit are persistent, the barriers must be dissolved and overcome by a focus on the love and truth we feel will be more fully available if only we can be faithful. Such challenges and dilemmas constitute the shape that the Cross takes for us, until we grow into a greater freedom and integrity, through the faithfulness required of us now, under these conditions. So the concern gains strength and form in the person feeling the stirring, and it becomes part of his or her way forward.

From Leading to Testimony

A testimony, in Quaker parlance, is a statement by the spiritual body. How does an individual leading become a testimony? Emerson, speaking of the movements of history, wrote, "Every reform was once a private opinion, and when it shall be a private opinion again, it will solve the problem of the age." This describes very well what has to happen if the concern of an individual is to become a testimony.

First comes the individual sensitivity to a concern, and then comes the slow growth of understanding as implications of the insight are worked (or discovered). At some point the person begins to feel towards a response in action. The first response may be a withdrawal from something unacceptable. What’s more, the person may not be joined in this concern by others, and it is a gift and a challenge for a community to remember in concrete terms that there are many gifts, but one Spirit, and that one may need to abstain or do something that is not required of others (see Romans 14). Each one must get busy with what they’re called to (and no more, yet).

It is very useful to recognize what changes or growth in personal capacity are demanded to maintain our sense of inward peace or balance as we live into the concern. We gain peace, safety, and power by staying close to our Guide, and doing so will have a cost in effort, courage, persistence, patience. In order to be faithful, while being constrained by the Gospel law of love and integrity, we must (to some degree at least) become different people – stronger, sweeter, more truthful.

This inward work must be borne in mind because at some point we may feel it important to "go public," or seek company: to invite, call, or challenge others with the possibility that this concern
may be theirs as well as ours. If we bear in mind that this requires of them (as it required of us) not only a change of opinion but also a change of self, we will understand sympathetically that, even if our message arouses the Witness in them, they will need to grow into it, just as we did (and continue to do). For them, as for us, faithfulness will have a cost, and it may be more than first appears.

If the concern is answered by the Witness in others and grows lively and fruitful in them, then the community life can work to support its spread and growth until it becomes a stable, reliable feature of Quakerism as practiced in that community. Once it becomes a typical feature of Quaker culture—without losing its living roots, or becoming ritualized—then it has become a testimony, a statement about what we have discovered about the divine life as humans can embody it. Emerson’s cycle has been completed, from an individual to and through community, received and fruitful in its component hearts.

Is It Quaker Enough?

The anxiety of some Friends to wait to find a way to make a distinctively “Quaker” witness on an issue like fossil fuel divestment seems to me mistaken. Our persistent aim should be to keep pace with the Guide (“Was thee faithful? Did thee yield?”). On the other hand, Friends have a very distinct way of nurturing a concern, which will give it all the Quakerishness it needs. A social witness is not, as we understand it, a bolt out of the blue, unconnected to all prior experience. It is, rather, a further insight into what the divine life requires of us, if we are to continue fresh and clear in that life. The new concern, if it takes root in soil deeply enriched with Quakerism (“the Gospel as traditionally held by Friends”), will be interwoven with other insights about peace, truth, worship, and the rest. In the part of the growth of the concern is the gradual discovery of the harmony and interconnections it has with other “testimonies,” so that one’s understanding and faithfulness is enriched and renewed as a whole. Indeed, our seeking to be true in other matters is very likely to make us more “vulnerable” to new concerns and new service.

The most fully worked-out portrayal of this sometimes astonishing process is seen in John Woolman’s growth. It is never a waste of time for someone seized by an opening concern to revisit his journal and essays with this question in mind.

Purity and Joy

When we feel a fresh concern arising, a sense of renewed engagement and commitment comes with it. It is tempting to imagine using this concern as an instrument for some other purpose: Maybe we should do this to get the young people more involved! Maybe we should do it to enrich our worship! Nowadays, many meetings that are anxious to seek new members publicize Quakerism more effectively. If we get on the divestment bandwagon, maybe it will attract new members! To employ a concern this way, or to argue for it because of its collateral effects, is something to be resisted, as a little thought will make clear. We have to be careful that we don’t move from being an instrument of the Spirit in the concern to making the concern a tool for unrelated ends.

Outreach and meeting growth are great things to pay attention to, and even to carry as a spiritual concern. But a leading to be held in integrity should be received as a gift, like any spiritual gift. It is to be attended to with purity and for its own sake and extended only as the Holy Spirit leads, from within the concern, as you might say. But we shouldn’t fear: part of the winsomeness of an authentic spiritual path is integrity.

Acts of love and truth will attract people as these acts reach the Witness in them, if the concern includes public action and public advocacy. If in living out a concern we stay with the gift as it’s given, our words and deeds “may preach among all sorts of people, and to them, “as Fox says. Then we may indeed get attention because of our witness, but the curious will follow that trail to discover a people whose witness is one fruit of a challenging and dynamic spiritual life.

Finally, if the concern is truly “in the Life,” one of its rewards will be joy, in and around our growing understanding of the wounds of the world: “We write these things so that your joy may be complete”
(1 John: 1). With such a lifecycle, with its individual and community waiting, struggle, love, and joy, a concern like divestment from fossil fuel investments—a cause already taken up in many groups outside our Quaker enclave—could become one of our newest testimonies. And like the many testimonies Friends have made over the centuries, it will turn out to be a new form of our oldest, most basic testimony: the surprising and reliable work among us of the Inward Teacher.

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