

The Beautiful Foolishness of Things
College Meeting for Worship
August 23, 2009

Introduction

Thank you for the introduction. Thank you Kelly and students for the invitation and the honor to speak this afternoon. Let me be one of many to welcome you to Earlham. But specifically, I would like to welcome you to College Meeting For Worship. This meeting, held each Sunday (or, as Quakers refer to it, every First day) is a unique and special part of Earlham and I hope that you will find it to be a place of renewal, community, and reflection throughout your years at Earlham. This is the first year College Meeting has been moved to the 1 o'clock hour which puts me, the speaker, in a rather precarious position. I either have an audience who, having consumed a voluminous brunch, is now in the full throes of a food coma, or I have an audience who slept in, threw on jeans and a t-shirt and is now battling extreme hunger pangs. Either way, I could be in trouble up here. Luckily, I have come prepared...

The theme for this semester for College Meeting is "Faith and Reason." In a recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Richard Wolin wrote that "a cursory glance at the major cultural divide of our day suggests that, in many respects, we haven't gotten much beyond the landmark dispute between faith and reason that [defined the Enlightenment]." Okaaay. So I have 20 minutes to resolve a conflict that has been one of the central defining disputes of the western world for the last three hundred years or so. Yippee! In times like this the only "reasonable" thing to do, and something you first years will learn soon enough at Earlham (much to the faculty's irritation), is to avoid the question by posing a different question instead... one that you like better. Lucky for me, there is no grade for College Meeting for Worship. Or maybe here rather than Pass/Fail it's Pass or Passed Out?

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The question I want to ask this afternoon is this: what explains why people act, in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds? Why do people act when it seems foolish to even try? When it seems unreasonable? I cannot and will not say I have the answer or answers to questions like these. But I would like to share some stories with you, stories of people acting foolishly, perhaps, or at least unreasonably. And I would also like to share some texts with you that have given me comfort and insight along the way in my own spiritual journey. These stories and texts resonate with me because of my convictions as a Quaker but I think they also correspond to values in all faith traditions and spiritual searches as well.

In New Zealand, they have a problem with this invasive brush-tailed possum from Australia. It's no small problem, actually. The possum consume large quantities of forest cover, eat bird eggs, and generally act as a nuisance to any attempts to bring back native bird populations. There are 4 million people in New Zealand and, by some estimates, 70 *million* possum. They will never be eradicated from the islands. But I witnessed with interest while I was there, teams of volunteers, spending their weekends trapping out possum from local forest preserves. These possum reproduce so efficiently that new possum seem to come in just about as fast as they pull them out. Weekend after weekend, year after year, these volunteers trudge through the wet and muddy forest floor, essentially maintaining the status quo, and never really seeing dramatic improvements to the ecosystem. And yet, they persist. I also read a story about workers in France who go into "dead forests"—these are huge closed off tracks of land still covered with unexploded ordinance from WWII. These workers risk life and limb to remove the bombs and shells, making these forests safe again for children to play and, in their own small

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way, restoring the world from a time of bloodshed and violence. Yet, these areas are so large and so covered in ordinance that they will work a lifetime and not see any measurable results from their efforts. And yet, they enthusiastically do this work. Here at Earlham, the Biology department cares for back campus by pulling mustard garlic and cutting down honeysuckle, despite the inevitability that these, too, will come back.

These sorts of acts seem foolish and unreasonable at some level—why would you even bother? But I am interested in stories like these because they speak to me about things I struggle with in my own life. I often feel weighed down by the issues of the world and, in particular, by what we are learning about the environment and climate change. We know that the situation is daunting. To give us a reasonable chance of living in a world relatively similar in climate to what we experience now, we have to cut carbon emissions by 80% in less than 40 years. And yet, all around, even at Earlham, it seems like business as usual. We are losing 36 football fields of forest every minute, which means, by the end of this meeting, over 2,000 football fields of forest will fall. We have lost 90% of the world's large fishes in the last 50 years and 50% of the world's amphibians in the last 30. The world human population is growing at a rate of 11 new, New York Cities every year. We will nearly double the current population by 2050. I could go on, of course. And, I could certainly list other social justice issues that need our attention including hunger and poverty, human rights abuses, genocides, and the specter of global pandemics. How do we act and go about living day to day in the face of all this? What is the reasonable thing to do against so much inequality, ecological destruction, and human misery? Recycle more? Send off another check to the Sierra Club? Change the

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lightbulbs? Sometimes, on the really bad days, I just don't want to care anymore. It just hurts too much.

We often hear, growing up, "stop being so foolish." Or, as an adult, "you are being unreasonable." The shout-downs at the town hall meetings on the health care debate this past month are one such example of the degenerative power of unreasonableness. Democracy depends, to a large degree, on people acting reasonably with each other. We certainly count on that here at Earlham. Class discussions, campus-wide debates, and the very workings of the college itself depend, in no small part, on people acting reasonably with one another. But I would like to speak up for the little guy this afternoon, the Fool. I think we actually *need* the Fool. Do you know that "sophomore" quite literally means "wise fool"? What does that make you first years? Just "wise" I guess! Foolishness can have its positive qualities. The court jester can often be counted on to see things differently, to question sacred truths, and to dismiss convention. The passage from Corinthians 3:18 we opened with speaks to this notion of seeing things differently. "Become a fool, that you may be wise." Here, foolishness implies a sense of humility before the truth. Even God-rejecting Neitschke acknowledged the power of foolishness when he wrote that "a Man's maturity consists in having found again the seriousness one had as a child, at play."

Foolishness can be a very serious thing indeed. And sometimes, it takes a child to remind us of the power of a foolish heart... There once was a young man walking on a beach early in the morning. As it was early and the sun was hardly up, a low bank of clouds hung out over the surface of the water and obscured his vision. Still, as he walked, he could just make out what looked to be a small figure dancing amongst the surf further

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up the beach. Curious, he walked closer. The figure turned out to be a young girl and, instead of dancing, it became clear that she was skipping along and then stopping to pick up a starfish on the beach and throwing it back into the surf. It was then the man saw that the beach was covered with starfish as far as the eye could see. There must have been thousands of them all up and down the coast having washed up with the tide. The young man approached the girl and asked her what she was doing. “Well don’t you see?” said the little girl. “All these starfish have washed up on the shore, if I don’t throw them back in the water, they will dry up and die when the sun comes out.” The young man chuckled at the naïvete of the young girl and responded, “yes, but there must be thousands of these starfish all up and down the beach, you could be out here for hours and not possibly make a difference!” The girl looked at the young man, smiled, and bent down in the sand at his feet and picked up another starfish. Then she threw it as far as she could into the surf and looked up and said, “I made a difference for *that* one!” The girl here is celebrated even though what she was doing, by the adult’s eyes, was “unreasonable.” Yet, in her foolish heart there existed great wisdom.

I spent some time at Pendle Hill this summer—a glorious Quaker retreat center outside of Philadelphia. Thumbing through a text at the library one morning, I came across a curious anecdote from World War I. It was a story about Justin Dalencourt, a French Quaker, who was forced to leave her home when the German army invaded France in 1914. But before she evacuated she first planted her garden, saying “I would rather they found something to eat at my house than that they should have to steal from others.” What a profound act. One I am not sure I could repeat in her place. In the face of a war, and hatred, and an enemy responsible for evicting her from her own home, this

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woman chose the simple act of planting a garden as a way to also plant hope, no matter how foolish it seemed at the time. Anna read a passage from a Jewish text at the beginning of worship today: “It is not up to us to complete the task; neither are we free to desist from it.” Justin Dalencourt certainly could not have won the war by planting her garden, but by her beautiful and seemingly foolish act, she chose hope over cynicism, love over hate, and generosity over spite. We rarely know the full consequences of our actions and work, teachers know this well, but that does not excuse us from the responsibility to act anyway, even (and perhaps particularly) when the future seems most bleak.

Elton Trueblood, one of our most celebrated Earlham Quaker faculty members, once said, “Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservation.” Trust without reservation. This, to me, is ultimately a “foolish” way to go through life. To live in the moment, trusting that all is cared for. Yet children do this very well. Just last week as I tried to walk my youngest to school she would constantly stop me along the way and examine something with fresh eyes...“ooh, look at the baby mushroom daddy! That squirrel is talking to us!” I often had to catch myself from pulling her along, from that external tug of needing to get someplace. Why can’t I listen to my teacher, my daughter? Gary Snyder once wrote: “All paths lead nowhere, so choose a path with heart.” Children seem to naturally choose a path with heart don’t they? How is it that we so easily forget? That sense of wonder, of being enraptured by the moment, is at the heart of the Zen Buddhist poem that Marie read at the start of meeting. “Let us linger in the beautiful foolishness of things.” It is the power of the beginners mind, a foolish mind.

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Conclusion

Russell Scott Sanders, an Indiana writer, wrote in his novel *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*, “if only we could be adequate to the given world, we need not dream of paradise.” To be adequate to the given world. What a humble stance to take. And a powerful one. To me, it is this sense of faithfulness, born of a foolish heart, a grounded soul, and a beginners mind that helps me through the difficult times. I cannot say it always leaves me optimistic about the issues of our day, but it keeps me hopeful. So if I can offer one piece of unsolicited advice to the first years here this morning, and to all of us really. Linger awhile. Stick around. Pause. Dig in. Dwell. As Psalm 27 says, “Teach me thy way O Lord and lead me in a plain path.” What a privilege we have to be in college, at this moment, with so much at stake. Honor it. Throw your starfish, plant your garden, and choose a plain path with heart.

I will leave you with the words of Mary Oliver, one of my favorite poets, who captures better than I, what it really means to linger in the beautiful foolishness of things. It is a poem titled, appropriately enough, *The Summer Day*.

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.

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Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Tell me, what do you plan to do with your one, beautiful, foolish life?