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“What is the Moral Assignment?” Re-Visioning the Quaker Peace Testimony Keith Helmuth

And here luxury and covetousness, with numerous oppressions and other evils attending them appeared very afflicting to me, and I felt in that which is immutable that the seeds of great calamity and desolation are sown and growing fast on this continent. Nor have I words sufficient to set forth the longing I then felt that we who are placed along the coast, and have tasted the love and goodness of God, might rise in his strength and like faithful messengers labour to check the growth of these seeds, that they may not ripen to the ruin of our posterity.
—John Woolman, *Journal*, 1763

On the afternoon of May 22, 1787, a group of nine Quakers and three Anglicans in a Quaker bookstore and print shop at 2 George Yard, London, started a campaign for economic and social change unprecedented in human history. These men were determined to end British participation in the slave trade and slavery in the Empire. Quakers in both England and America had already been working to arouse the conscience of their nations against the political economy of slavery, but had had little effect because “everyone knew” that slavery was ordained by “natural law” and essential to the economic growth of the Empire and the United States of America. With a printing press, a potent manuscript, and an idea about the power of information the organized campaign of moral suasion launched from that print shop successfully challenged the “natural law” of slavery and its economic status.

Moral Challenge of the High-energy Global Economic System

On the first weekend of June in 2003 thirty Quakers met at Pendle Hill in Wallingford Pennsylvania to consider the moral challenge now posed by another political economy; the high-energy, global economic system that is heedlessly destroying the integrity of Creation and failing to serve the well being of millions people in an equitable way. The gathering was determined to look deeply into this morally regressive regime.

The moral challenge is easy to state: There is a growing incoherence between the human economy and the integrity of Earth’s ecological and social systems.

The depth of this crisis is revealed in the fact that it is now easier to imagine the breakdown of Earth’s life support systems than to imagine a significant alteration of our destructive economic system. Most citizens have been conditioned to accept the operation of our current economic system as an article of faith. Unlimited growth and wealth accumulation are seen as the “natural law” and nothing can be done to alter this fact, even if it means the integrity of Earth’s ecological and social systems are being weakened and severely damaged in the process. This “inconvenient truth” is now a moral challenge.

The participants at the Pendle Hill consultation were not stymied by this inconvenient truth. Even the economists present argued for a larger moral context for economic analysis, and for re-conceptualizing the economy within a paradigm of ecological stewardship, resilient human communities, and the well-being of the whole commonwealth of life. The result was the development of the Friends Testimonies and Economics Project and Quaker Institute for the Future. (See “*What Friends Can Do*” on p. 4 for contact information.)

Humankind has now come to the time when the options are perfectly clear: Either follow the road of unlimited economic growth and increasing energy use until ecological breakdown stops cultural momentum and leads to societal breakdown, or place ecologically coherent adaptation at the center of the economy.

This dilemma bears a striking resemblance to the dilemma of slave holding and its political economy. In both cases the fundamental issues are the same: (1) control and use of energy, (2) economic productivity, (3) convenience, (4) aggrandizement, (5) massive inequities, and (6) the effect on the souls of all those enmeshed in a system of unsustainable exploitation.

The end of slavery in America coincided with the rapid development of the machine-based factory system, the expansion of coal use, and the discovery and utilization of petroleum. The exploitative mind-set and inequitable relationships of the old economy were carried over and preserved in the new. Because the whole political economy was driven by the unquestioned assumption of endless growth and unlimited wealth accumulation, no reflection on ecologically sustainable and resilient adaptation ever gained a significant public hearing. American society has heedlessly neglected to fully consider the fundamental values, attitudes, relationships, technologies, and practices required to achieve a resilient and sustainable pattern of settlement and economic activity within regional ecosystems, and over the continent as a whole.

When Friends voluntarily gave up slave holding, and later when slavery was legally abolished, the primary economic activity of farming could still be carried on with draft animal and human energy. John Woolman’s analysis of this economy places its energy use within a cautionary moral context. But with the subsequent shift to an economy powered primarily by coal and oil, and with the industrialization of manufacturing and, eventually, farming, the cautionary moral dimension around energy use disappeared. The new technologies gave rise to a new morality of energy use which said, in effect, “the more the better.” We now understand that this era of unlimited high-energy, carbon-rich fuel use has been a terrible adaptational mistake. Despite the great accumulation of wealth and advances in convenience that this high energy economy has afforded, the damaging impact of the fossil fuel era on Earth’s biotic integrity, and its lethal disruption of climate dynamics, now brings us to a moral dilemma similar to that of the use of slave energy.

When slavery was abolished, it mainly affected only those still exploiting the energy of slaves. Replacing the high-energy political economy today is a considerably more difficult matter. Virtually everyone in our society lives off the pattern of energy production and

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The vision of **Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW)** includes integrating into the beliefs and practices of the Society of Friends the Truths that God's Creation is to be held in reverence in its own right, and that human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the Earth's ecological integrity. As a member organization of Friends Committee on National Legislation, QEW seeks to strengthen Friends' support for FCNL's witness in Washington DC for peace, justice, and an Earth restored.

QEB's purpose is to advance Friends' witness on public and institutional policies that affect the Earth's capacity to support life. QEB articles aim to inform Friends about public and corporate policies that have an impact on society's relationship to Earth, and to provide analysis and critique of societal trends and institutions that threaten the health of the planet.

Friends are invited to contact us about writing an article for **QEB**. Submissions are subject to editing and should:

- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Provide accurate, documented background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- List what Friends can do.
- Provide references and sources for additional information.

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use that is damaging Earth's life support systems. Nothing less than a major re-adaptation of human settlements and economic activity is required to address this situation. Because the magnitude of our dilemma encompasses the whole adaptational stance of our culture, it reaches deeply into our spiritual life; it reaches right into the center of our Quaker identity within Creation. In this centering experience, the peace testimony comes to our spiritual rescue. It reveals that peace on Earth means peace with Earth.

Re-visioning the Quaker Peace Testimony

In 2006 a leading from Center Monthly Meeting on re-visioning the Quaker peace testimony came to Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. In November of that year, a called session of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting was convened at the Arch Street Meeting House in response. The outrage and fear that had erupted after the destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon in September of 2001 had deeply stirred Friends' consideration of the peace testimony. Some Friends and Friends organizations did not hesitate to advance a heightened sense of relevance for the peace testimony and its activist witness. Some Friends, on the other hand, found these expressions ringing hollow in this situation and their sense of moral response was confused. They felt a moral response must be made, but saw no way for the peace testimony to make such a response.

A few Friends argued, the peace testimony notwithstanding, the moral response was to support military action against those who wish to bring America's economic and cultural dominance in the world to a crashing end. Some Friends wondered if, in times this bad, an argument should be made for withdrawing from this level of political conflict altogether, a return to the Quietist period of Quaker history. This can be an attractive resolution, and some people may need to respond in this way. The argument that example is the best contribution Friends can make, can bring personal closure to the troubling and stressful questions linking economics, energy use, war making, ecological destruction and public policy.

While acknowledging this range of responses, the call has now come for a deep, holistic re-visioning and renewal of the peace testimony. Quakerism's historic strengths are still solid ground for dealing with the moral confusions and temptations of our time. Consistent with the heritage that has made Quakerism a significant catalyst for societal betterment and human solidarity for over three hundred and fifty years, this leading keeps the door open to Kenneth Boulding's vision of "the evolutionary potential of Quakerism."

The called meeting at Arch Street was a well-attended and intense event, which helped open this door a little wider. The Committee for Re-visioning the Peace Testimony is now working to follow this leading in a way that responds to the full panorama of the human condition—a panorama that includes present and future conflicts, ranging from the personal to the global. In the light of the holistic, spiritual intuition that has guided Friends in their articulation and practice of the peace testimony, the task is to lift up the full dimensions of the moral context in which we live and work. Economics and ecology are central to the human situation in all its material, spiritual, and moral aspects. The peace testimony, in its vital evolutionary potential, is the channel through which compassionate and cooperative human relationships are sustained by ecologically sound economies. Peace on Earth means peace with Earth.

Right Relationship

Right relationship can be thought of as having two "carrying beams" - ecological coherence and social equity. Ecologically coherent economic adaptation draws on earth science. Social equity draws on the heritage of human ethical-religious development.

While ecological coherence is now self-evident, social equity is often problematic for many people. Real differences occur between abilities at the personal level and endowments at the social and geographic levels. A Darwinian underlay of natural selection that emphasizes competition is now a virtually unconscious assumption in the minds and feelings of most people. We have been conditioned to overlook the reality of cooperation in the dynamic of evolution. In both biological and social contexts cooperation is the governing platform of life's commonwealth. Competition comes into play as a program—as a secondary dynamic—within the overarching reality of cooperation. Competition is a spark plug in the engine of cooperation. Competition can only function in a useful way where there is an underlying platform of cooperation. Total competition, heedless of the social context, destroys both social and ecological integrity. This is a key to our current adaptive failure.

Within this context, cooperation and competition are naturally occurring processes which tend toward very different results. This is always a matter of choice. Choosing to foster and draw out cooperative behavior produces equity. Choosing to exploit competitive behavior produces inequity. The emergence of human social development within Earth's

story is a prime example of the cooperative dynamic at the core of evolution. Without the underlying platform of cooperation our ancestors would not likely have made it very far on the great trek of human development, nor would organic evolution overall have achieved the magnificent interdependence and reciprocity of the Earth's commonwealth of life.

Norway is a good example of cooperative behavior. Through a variety of cooperative means, the people of Norway chose to completely eliminate poverty, even before the advent of North Sea oil revenue when Norway operated on a very modest economic base. Some people in Norway today have greater wealth than others, but nobody lives in poverty or without access to the full range of social and cultural benefits. Equity means access to a fair share, a valued status, and the prospect of a productive and rewarding life.

Economics and ecology are domains of relationship at the level of a whole society. Economics is about access to the means of life. Ecology is about the mutual interdependence of life communities. When we bring these two perspectives together, the lens of human solidarity and the lens of ecological science pivot into a single focus. Through this focus right relationship becomes the central motif in both the social design of human well being, and in ecologically sound economic adaptation. The Quaker tradition teaches us that in right relationship we touch the fullness of human meaning and the presence of the Divine. Quaker practice is about elevating all areas of human policy and practice into this zone of right relationship.

The moral development of social equity and ecological integrity is a decision by persons on how to live, and by communities and societies on how they collectively arrange their economies. The scale and intensity of human activity is now such that the question of right relationship is a survival question. Decisions on public policy for basic equity, and for ecological integrity are ethical choices that will give human communities a coherent and resilient prospect within the commonwealth of life. Working for such decisions is a clear expression of the peace testimony.

Fortunately, humans have a history of moral development, and a long religious heritage of ethical concern, to which can now be added the critical knowledge base of science. Together, these spiritual and intellectual traditions in ethics and science enable the recognition and clear identification of right relationships. That identification process becomes a guidance system, and that guidance system gives the peace testimony the tools it needs to develop its evolutionary potential.

Economic Relationships and Adaptations

Many people are greatly puzzled about why economic "progress" has turned out the way it has. How can it be that economic growth can reach a stage where, even on its own terms, it becomes "uneconomic," a stage where further growth extracts greater costs than it yields in benefits? Is it reasonable to think that continued industrial growth and the expansion of commerce world-wide will ever eliminate poverty? How has it happened that in a globalizing economy of unlimited growth, both social integrity and ecological resilience are now disintegrating on an increasingly expanded scale over much of the world?

While human economies are subsidiaries of Earth's ecosystem, the political economy of unlimited growth has been operating on exactly the opposite assumption: The assumption that Earth's environment is a subset of the human economy, and we must transfer as much of Earth's natural capital as possible into the holdings of human wealth. This is fundamentally incoherent with the dynamics of an ecologically sound human-Earth relationship.

The degree of coherence in human economic adaptation has become the critical factor in determining the future of Earth's ecology. All issues of justice, peace, equity, human betterment, and biosphere resilience must now be refracted in the lens of the human-Earth re-

lationship. Coherence and integrity have become the primary guides for ecologically coherent economic adaptation. The question of how to change the world can no longer be advanced with the naive confidence of recent times. Change will come one way or another. The Quaker peace testimony, and the work it unfolds in the world, should aim above all for a mutually enhancing human-Earth relationship, for ecological coherence and social equity.

A key to achieving this right relationship is through the conduct of the economy. Goods and services are produced and transacted in a domain of relationships and interactions that always take place within a moral context. If this moral context is increasingly structured by cooperative reciprocity, and if ecologically sound economic adaptation becomes ever more widespread, human settlements will be able to move into right relationships. These right relationships are modeled on the interdependence and mutual aid factors that make healthy ecosystems highly resilient and able to persist with integrity through various kinds of changes, even disruptive impacts, over long periods of time. No one who thinks seriously about this scenario can imagine there won't be conflicts. But if cooperation can be achieved on restoring and maintaining global ecological integrity and establishing the economics of basic equity, "the peaceful prevention of deadly conflict," which Friends Committee on National Legislation now advances, will become a high value skill world wide.

Economics of Human Solidarity and Quaker History

Quakerism has a long history of concern with the economics of human solidarity. In the 18th Century John Bellers drafted numerous proposals, appeals and petitions to Parliament on national programs of economic and social reform. John Woolman's analysis of the moral and ecological defects of the colonial political economy translates with amazing cogency into our time.

In 1934 Friends General Conference had an Industrial Relations Committee that prepared and published A Statement of Economic Objectives addressing the disaster of the Great Depression. This document offered a comprehensive strategy for equity-based economic reform.

A number of Quakers were deeply involved in creating The New Deal. In 1969 Friends Committee on National Legislation issued a well-crafted policy statement on Goals for a Just Society: Jobs and Assured Income. This document makes the case for the elimination of poverty through a combination of measures addressing health, education, vocational training, employment and a basic guaranteed income.

In 2004 the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) published the report of its Working Party on Global Economics - Putting Dignity and Rights at the Heart of the Global Economy. With an acute awareness that poverty is a peace issue, this document calls for a Global New Deal, and for the moral leadership of Friends in fostering such a transformation. The authors write: "Just as the charges of 'idealism' have never made the AFSC abandon the commitment to the peace testimony and the power of love, charges that 'the market doesn't work that way' should not distract us from our goal of a world of economic justice for all."

The Legacy of the Cold War

While AFSC and some individual Friends have continued to be concerned with the centrality of economics to the peace testimony, most Quaker organizations and Yearly and Monthly Meetings in recent times seem generally to stay well clear of policy issues in this area. This may be a hangover legacy from the Cold War when the communist ideology purported to claim the moral high ground of social and economic justice and pitted itself against free market capitalism. We all know how badly most of the command and control economies turned out, and how the leadership failed the moral claim with which their movement began.

But we also know how badly, in many respects, things are now going for human solidarity and ecological integrity with the drive for capital accumulation taking the virtually undisputed lead in worldwide economic behavior. Many economists, and political and corporate leaders have been acting as if, having vanquished the economic ideology that claimed the moral high ground, the moral high ground disappeared. Only capital accumulation and competition count in the so-called “new world order.”

But of course the moral dimension does not disappear. The questions around improving equity, advancing social justice, and protecting ecological integrity do not go away. They land squarely in the lap of the victorious free market culture whether it likes it or not. This situation has particular relevance for the Religious Society of Friends and our quest for a renewal of the peace testimony. In addition to having a long history of working for economic equity and social justice, Quakers have a long history of leadership in the scientific, technological, industrial, and commercial development of Western culture. Friends are, therefore, uniquely equipped with a heritage that can rise to the occasion of renewal—the renewal of the peace testimony within the renewal of the moral dimension of economics and public policy.

The time has come to clear out the hangover of the Cold War that put a heavy damper on the public advocacy of the economics of human solidarity and social justice. We need to engage with economics in response to John Woolman’s warning and his hope that the seeds of “great calamity” “may not ripen to the ruin of our posterity.” We need to engage with economics so the peace testimony can help unfold the evolutionary potential of Quakerism for addressing the social and ecological crisis of our time.

Ecological Collapse and Societal Breakdown

In the year before his assassination Martin Luther King began to speak publicly about the relationships between the economy, war making, American foreign policy, and the increasing poverty in the U. S. and around the world. In a famous speech at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4th, 1967, he said: “The war in Vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the American spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality [the] words of the late John F. Kennedy come back to haunt us. Five years ago he said, ‘Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.’”

With a broader and deeper understanding of the human-Earth relationship, we can now paraphrase John F. Kennedy and say, “Those who make the rapid and peaceful change to an ecologically coherent and socially equitable economy impossible will make ecological collapse and societal breakdown inevitable.” War and violence among and between peoples is a subset of this reality. Wars are, and increasingly will be, situated within the trajectory of a deteriorating human-Earth relationship. Resource wars, the war-making economy, and the Quaker peace testimony are now enclosed in the great question of whether the human species can shift its economic activities to an ecologically coherent and socially equitable adaptation. This brings us to a deeper and more fully rounded understanding of Martin Luther King’s signature question from the last days of his life: “What is the moral assignment?”

The Moral Assignment

Friends Committee on National Legislation clearly understands this situation. They have placed their work on energy policy and ecologically sound economic adaptation (“an Earth restored”) within “the peaceful prevention of deadly conflict.” The Quaker peace testimony now has the whole panorama of the human-Earth relationship in which to unfurl its moral assignment.

The study of the economy, as originally conceived by its founders in the 18th century, was a moral discipline. In light of ecological understanding, a fully developed study of the economy can now return

to this foundation and become the arena where the ethics of human solidarity and the science of ecological integrity enter most fully into the service of the world. A certain fearlessness may be required. Those who benefit from human exploitation, resource domination, and structural violence do not want the present financial architecture and economic arrangements brought into a moral perspective—the perspective of right relationship.

Quakerism began when a small group of like-minded people decided they could not leave spiritual life to the established church. A century later a small group of Quakers decided they could not leave the slave trade and slavery to the political economy of the Empire. In our time, all who aspire to human solidarity and ecological integrity should be no more inclined to leave an economy of structural violence and global predation to the political-financial establishment and their supporting cast of economists and policy makers.

Inspired by this heritage, many Friends are linking minds, hearts, and hands with all those who are rising up in search of ecological integrity, economic equity, and governance for the common good. If the Religious Society of Friends can systematically put its shoulder to the wheel of the great historical turning before us, the peace testimony will be renewed in the fullness of its promise.

Keith Helmuth is member of New Brunswick Monthly Meeting (Canada) and a member of the Board of Trustees of Quaker Institute for the Future. He is a research associate of the Institute and the coordinator of the its Circles of Discernment Program.

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What Can Friends Do?

1) Study and Discernment

Research and master a basic understanding of the relationship between Earth’s ecosystems and human economic activity. Get to the point in your thinking about the future of the human-Earth relationship that you see it through the lens of ecologically coherent, economic adaptation. The study guide *Seeds of Violence, Seeds of Hope* was developed by the Friends Testimonies and Economics for this purpose. It can be downloaded (*see References*) or contact Ed Dreby <drebymans@igc.org> for print copies.

2) Personal and Household Action

Re-adapt practices of life and livelihood to your understanding of ecologically coherent living. There are many helpful books available.

3) Community Action

Work on a community system of ecologically coherent re-adaptation, i.e. community gardening and local food system development, community-based environmental education, etc.

4) Public Policy

Start or join a group effort to help craft ecologically coherent and socially equitable economic policies and programs at the municipal, state, national, and global levels. Become fully engaged with Friends Committee on National Legislation <fcnl.org>. Read “Who Owns the Sky?” and “Capitalism 3.0” by Peter Barnes. Contact Keith Helmuth <keithhelmuth@gmail.com> about starting or joining a Circle of Discernment under the auspices of Quaker Institute for the Future <quakerinstitute.org>.