

# QUAKER ECO-BULLETIN

*Information and Action Addressing Public Policy  
for an Ecologically Sustainable World*

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## ***Eco-Friendly Persuasion***

***Susan Strong***

*"It was [John] Woolman's special genius that he would draw from his Quaker upbringing an understanding of how he might speak and write in a way that would deeply move both Quakers and non-Quakers. ... [H]e did not attack slave owners. He set out to reach them by focusing on the harmful effects of slavery upon their children."* Michael A. Heller<sup>1</sup>

For some time now all that makes up Friends' concern for the earth has been under unusually serious attack in our country. The Administration's use of executive fiat to diminish or block environmental protection rules about everything from mercury to climate change policy has reached unprecedented levels.<sup>2</sup> Counseled by their high-powered communications guru Frank Luntz, the Right is saturating our public media with claims that ecological facts or statistics they don't like are "junk science," and their own versions, "sound science." But the boldest move of all is deceptive labels and false advertising like "Clear Skies" or "Healthy Forests" for policy proposals that actually damage the environment.

Thanks to increased media scrutiny, more and more people are waking up to the consequences of the Bush administration's attempts to rollback decades of environmental policy. But the scale and speed of the crisis demands new levels of response. We must learn how to communicate more effectively with people inside and outside Quaker circles, including the media and our legislators. A first step is deepening our understanding of the way communication works. As cognitive scientist George Lakoff has shown, the most important factor in being heard is the way we frame the message.<sup>3</sup> How we do this determines whether the facts presented will even be noticed.

Lakoff's standard example of this is one of the Administration's favorite phrases, tax relief—the word "relief" definitively frames the idea "tax" as a burden or pain. It also sounds like the commonly heard phrase "pain relief," tapping into even the most altruistic individual's visceral pain at paying taxes. Taxes become a painful disease, making it very difficult to talk about raising or shifting taxes in the same conversation. Of course, the thinking altruist soon recalls that in an ideal world our taxes will be used for all the public services our communities need to remain healthy and strong, including protecting our environment and leveling the playing field for those less fortunate. But as Lakoff has also shown in his book *Moral Politics*, our nation includes people who believe it is morally wrong for government to put environmental protection before the right of private prop-

erty or even to help others less fortunate.<sup>4</sup> Those citizens will resist taking that second step of recalling what taxes mean for the public good.

However, many Americans are more flexible than these textbook cases, if properly approached. To do this, we need to answer three questions: how can we find common ground from which to speak and write more accessibly, how might the content and process be congruent with our own values, and how do we start?

### ***Finding Common Ground***

When John Woolman wrote about slavery for a broad audience, he was able to assume that all members of his audience shared a common familiarity with and acceptance of the Bible as a moral guide; he set his arguments about the impact of slavery on peoples' children in that context. Today, some right-wing fundamentalists have preempted the Bible as grounds for their own brand of morality. Both the need to uphold separation of church and state and the shared conviction that primary moral authority springs from within the individual have kept many environmentalists from articulating a comparably explicit common moral code. Instead, for general audiences, the ethical commitment to tell the truth is frequently reduced to simply repeating scientific facts, statistics, or history. This practice is based on the faulty assumption that such simple, unframed telling clearly reveals to all what is wrong or what should be done, and that this kind of truth is all the common ground we need.

Instead, before we speak about "the facts," we need to invoke another level of truth, one that appeals to the hearts of a great many citizens, whatever their party designation. This includes traditional American values such as concern for the common good, equal opportunity, fair play, and ensuring a livable future for our children. These and other core American values are essential frames for our environmental messages because they help establish common ground between us and our audience. These values are embedded in familiar American stories, metaphors, images and phrases. Many reflect sentiments that are

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**QEW-NL** promotes government and corporate policies to help restore and protect Earth's biological integrity. It works within and through the Religious Society of Friends for policies that enable human communities to relate in mutually enhancing ways to the ecosystems of which they are a part. This witness seeks to be guided by the Spirit and grounded in reverence for God's creation.

**QEB's** purpose is to advance Friends' witness on government and corporate policy as it relates to the ecosystems that sustain us. Each issue is an article about timely legislative or corporate policy issues affecting our society's relationship to the earth.

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

- Provide background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Describe the positions of other faith-based and secular environmental groups on the issue.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- List what Friends can do.
- Provide sources for additional information.

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congruent with Friends' values, though not always expressed in Friends' lexicon or in the spiritual context Friends use. This consistency is not surprising, since Friends' ideals and values played a vital part in forming the American idea of a nation of free, equal, tolerant, optimistic, democratic, and just people.<sup>5</sup>

### **Friendly Framing**

Today it is crucial that Friends reclaim this part of our larger American heritage in the service of promoting a livable future for all humanity on our planet. Some contemporary examples of message-framing by activists using these American story elements include the Environmental Health Alliance's carefully designed acronym, "BE SAFE"<sup>6</sup> or the peace movement's 2003 use of phrases like "Patriots for Peace," or the new health care slogans "health care security" and "fair health care."<sup>7</sup> Framing their messages for the public in terms of the best American values and using the familiar American stories, metaphors, and phrases that invoke them has been helping many activists reach people who were completely new to their issues and organization.

To begin the process, it may be helpful to consider which common American ideals and language actually do express the intent of Friends' testimonies. The following examples are drawn from collections of American cultural stories and metaphors put together by the Metaphor Project, which has the goal of giving concrete, practical assistance to activists in making their messages more widely accessible.<sup>8</sup>

For example, the American Story category "Small Town Security," encompasses many ideas that match our testimonies of peace, integrity, unity, simplicity, and community, and can effectively frame messages about the need to protect earth's ecology, both local and global.

*Small Town Security: clean, safe, secure, moral, friendly, consensus, middle, practical, compromise, cooperate, protect, participate, healthy, honest, caring, orderly, common sense, true, fair, tough love, limits, home sweet home, doing right, being just, having a heart, being innocent, community.*

Being clean, safe, secure, healthy, practical, and honest are good ways to frame environmental legislative proposals and messages of all kinds, as are words like protecting, showing common sense, being fair, and being just. Of these, being healthy is becoming one of the most powerful frames as our national health care crisis deepens. Protecting and restoring our shared life-support system—the earth—should be our first priority.

The next American Story category, "The American Dream," contains many elements that are congruent with Friends' values too. These include the hope of finding a better way of doing things, of spiritual pioneering, of finding workable solutions and a virtuous prosperity. Along with not fearing being different while we're doing it, all of these values are vital for environmental policy framing now. It is also important to recall that concepts like "the American dream" have been used in recent times to frame spiritual aims by leaders like Martin Luther King. Even today the American dream is not limited to what the current consumerist media or administration presents it to be.

*The American Dream: pioneer, frontier, the traveler, the new, bright future,;we invent, reinvent, redeem, renew, reform or restore ourselves because we are a "can do" people; we like things bigger, better, higher, up, improved, fresh, more of everything; we do what works; we're successful mavericks, rebels, cowboys.*

Frames from this category fit with any practical and innovative proposals to reduce our collective dependency on oil and other environmentally harmful substances and practices. In the same vein, the American Story category, “The American Nation,” expresses some of our own aspirations for being a virtuous national community that sets a good example for the world, a leadership role that must be extended to ecologically sound policy initiatives.

***The American Nation:*** *nation with a mission, beacon of hope, melting pot, cradle of liberty, democracy’s defender, champion and missionary; home of equal opportunity, choice, and power; conscience of the world, rule of law, human rights, political rights, a classless society.*

The American Story category, “Free to Succeed,” contains some elements of the way we see the power of individual leadings, which might be used to frame measures encouraging individual innovation in the field of environmental protection.

***Free to Succeed:*** *individual effort, right to innovate, to win by hard work and being smart, being prepared as an individual, being Horatio Alger, rags to riches, being good equals being rich, competing successfully.*

### **Some Common American Framing Metaphors**

In addition to using American story elements as frames, it can be helpful to look at some of the same material expressed as common American metaphors in daily speech. Of the American Metaphor categories listed on the Metaphor Project web site, the ones for sports, business, technology and science, religion, health and the family are the most consistent with Quaker values.<sup>8</sup>

Before readers protest the use of any sports metaphors as unQuakerley, let’s recall Signe Wilkinson’s brilliant and witty use of them in the 2003 Haverford College Rufus Jones Lecture.<sup>9</sup> Although she pokes a little fun at Quakers in this piece, she uses some common American sports metaphors to show how Quaker ideas of moderation, tolerance and optimism are actually reflected in American culture now. Her goal is to encourage Friends’ outreach to non-Quakers by means of these common values, and it follows that using the common language of shared American metaphors can open the way.

When it comes to our messages about energy issues for example, framing them with phrases like “leveling the playing field,” and “playing fair” can help to gain the ear of those we contact. From the category of business metaphors, stimulating investment in genuine environmental protection to reduce our growing ecological deficit also makes Quakerly sense, as do honest ecological accounting, true cost pricing, full disclosure, and responsible business practices. A metaphor drawn from painful experience in the tech sector, “climate crash” may be a way to frame the Pentagon’s sudden climate change scenario; that certainly calls for a response from Friends too.<sup>10</sup> Then there are well-known phrases from American history like New Deal or

Fair Deal. These have recently been reframed as “global green deal” or “Real Deal” to suggest comprehensive shifts in policy. They could be adapted again to fit our concerns about the need for systematic change in U.S. environmental policy.

### **The Cost of Being Negative**

Above all, it is vital to avoid negative statements, such as “No to Oil” for example. George Lakoff has demonstrated how negative statements of this type tend to backfire with a vivid example. He challenges people not to think about elephants, which is impossible once they have been mentioned. This shows that the formula “not X” is a frame that positively invokes the very thing you are trying to critique, according to the findings of cognitive science. It also fails to suggest what the alternatives might be.

### **From Jargon to Witness**

Many ecologically concerned Friends are also well educated, highly literate, and very well informed. We often unwittingly speak an abstract and complex language that does not connect with the way many Americans communicate. To successfully persuade a wide range of people, we need to avoid long, abstract, multi-syllabic words, and ecological jargon. That’s why it is particularly important to avoid any scientific-sounding language already employed by opponents of environmental protection. Using the common cultural language of American metaphor and image will connect us naturally with a simpler language that calls up vivid and familiar imagery in the hearts and minds of many Americans.

It is my hope that the simple tools outlined here will help us find the way to new powers of communication as we reach out to those around us. No less than in John Woolman’s day, all of earth’s children are depending on us to make ourselves heard.

### **A Thumbnail American Framing Formula:**

All of this advice may seem like a lot to remember, but the Metaphor Project <[www.metaphorproject.org](http://www.metaphorproject.org)> has developed some quick checklists to help people keep them in mind. Below is one you may find helpful:

- Pick out or think about what core American value(s) your own message expresses.
- Notice which American Story component they match.
- Check the American Metaphor Categories List on the website to get ideas about what language commonly signals these values and American story elements in daily speech.
- Frame your message in terms of this story element and the common American language that signals it.

- <sup>1</sup> Michael A. Heller, "John Woolman's Soft Persuasion," in John Woolman's Spirituality and Our Contemporary Witness, edited by Shirley Dodson, and published by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Religious Education Committee and Pendle Hill, 1995).
- <sup>2</sup> Bruce Barcott, "Changing the Rules," *New York Times Magazine*, April 4th, 2004, and "Dirty Secrets," *Mother Jones*, September/October 2003 issue, p. 2010 and Natural Resources Defense Council "Rewriting the Rules" <nrdc.org>.
- <sup>3</sup> George Lakoff's tutorial <www.rockridgeinstitute.org/perspectives/simple\_framing>.
- <sup>4</sup> George Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, Second Edition, 2002.
- <sup>5</sup> Jacob Needleman, *The American Soul*, pp. 41-50, and David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, Oxford University Press: London.
- <sup>6</sup> BE SAFE, *Befriending Creation* January-February 2004.
- <sup>7</sup> These slogans were created to support California's SB 921 Health Care for All legislation by the Mainstreaming Group at Strawberry Creek Monthly Meeting, Berkeley.
- <sup>8</sup> Metaphor Project <www.metaphorproject.org>. Although the Metaphor Project resources cited in this article have been validated as representative American cultural elements by independent research, neither one contains all the possibilities for that category. They are designed to provide just enough examples to jog your memory and creativity as you move into the task of considering how to best frame your concerns when speaking with outsiders.

- <sup>9</sup> Signe Wilkinson, "An Iconoclast's View of Quaker Outreach," *Friends Journal*, March 2004.
- <sup>10</sup> David Stipp, "The Pentagon's Weather Nightmare," *Fortune*, Feb.9, 2004 <www.fortune.com>.

### **For Further Information**

- George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, 1980, 242 pp. The classic scientific exploration of how we use metaphors in daily speech and thinking.
- "Metaphors and Morality," *Whole Earth Review*, special section in the Fall 1999 issue.
- Deborah E. and Frank J. Popper, "The Buffalo Commons, Using Regional Metaphor to Envision the Future", *Wild Earth*, Winter 99-00, pp. 30-37.
- Union of International Associations <www.uia.org> Look on this site for the section on metaphor, governance and social change.
- Elyse Sommer and Dorrie Weiss, ed. *The Metaphors Dictionary*, Visible Ink 1996. See the list of everyday metaphors.

**Susan C. Strong, Ph.D.**, first created the Metaphor Project <www.metaphorproject.org> in 1997. Since then the Metaphor Project has assisted many nonprofit organizations, church groups, or educators nationwide by means of resources available on its website, a free online e-list, workshops, coaching, talks, and panel presentations. She is an attendee at Strawberry Creek Monthly Meeting in Berkeley, California.

### **What Can Friends Do? Form a Friendly Framing Working Group**

Working together in small groups of 5 to 7 people, Friends can brainstorm the best American frames for your messages. Here is a stepwise process:

1. Be clear about who your audience is.
2. Think about how your audience sees reality now.
3. Consider how your audience is feeling and reacting now.
4. Decide to speak American by using simple language and familiar images and avoiding:
  - long words
  - complex arguments and explanations
  - historical analysis
  - lots of reasons, facts, and statistics
  - attacking America or Americans or the flag.
5. Recognize that mainstream Americans want answers to the following practical questions:
  - What's the problem?
  - What will work to solve it?
  - What should we do now?
  - What should we do next?
  - Who is "we"?
6. Start developing your own message as answers to these questions, following the simple language rules given above.

7. Review the elements of the American story and American metaphors found at <www.metaphorproject.org>. Pick out images and metaphors that fit your message in an empowering way.
8. Reframe the message elements you have created in terms of these images, sayings, and metaphors.
9. Check your mainstreamed message against the "criteria for success" at <www.metaphorproject.org> and revise as needed.

#### **Tips for Using Your Creations:**

1. Start by asking your audience how they see the issue now, or introduce a question about a current topic that can lead to your subject: what do they think of a current book, movie, news item and so on?
2. Explain your position with the reframed message elements you have created in advance.
3. If your conversation partner does not respond well, try a leading question that appears to be a tangent from the initial topic, but leads to new ground. For example: if the topic is climate change, ask "What is your vision of a healthy global community?"