Each of Us Inevitable

Some Keynote Addresses,
Given at
Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns and
Friends General Conference Gatherings,
1977–1993,
Revised, Expanded Edition

**Becky Birtha, Thomas Bodine, Elise Boulding,
John Calvi, Stephen Finn, Ellen Hodge,
Janet Hoffman,
Arlene Kelly, William Kreidler, George Lakey,
Ahavia Lavana, Muriel Bishop Summers,
Elizabeth Watson,
David Wertheimer, and Dwight Wilson**

Edited by Robert Leuze

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"Each of us inevitable,
Each of us limitless—each of us with his
or her right upon the earth,
Each of us allow'd the eternal purports
of the earth,
Each of us here as divinely as any is here."

—Walt Whitman: "Salut au Monde," 11, Leaves of Grass

Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns (FLGBTQC), until recently known as Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (FLGC), is a North American Quaker faith community within the Religious Society of Friends that affirms that of God in all persons—lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual, transgender, and transsexual. It gathers twice yearly: Midwinter Gathering is held over the long weekend surrounding U.S. President's Day in February and Summer Gathering is held with the larger Friends General Conference Gathering the first week in July. Once known as Friends Committee for Gay Concerns, the group has met since the early 1970s for worship and play, its members drawing sustenance from each other and from the Spirit for their work and life in the world—in the faith that radical inclusion and radical love bring further light to Quaker testimony and life.

Preface to the Internet Edition

The new, revised and expanded edition of *Each of Us Inevitable*—the printed compilation of keynote addresses given by beloved Friends at prior Gatherings of Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (FLGC) and Friends General Conference (FGC)—includes all the talks in the original edition and eight additional keynotes, bringing the total to 19. The added talks were given between 1979 and 1993.

In February 2003, the community united on changing its name to Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns (FLGBTQC). The talks are available as separate Adobe Acrobat PDF files for each author on the FLGBTQC website, <*http://flgbtqc.quaker.org*>.

It is hoped that keynotes given after 1993 also will be published someday; however, the richness of content in these additional already-edited talks suggested moving ahead in the present when the possibility of publication exists.

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It may be helpful for some readers browsing on the internet if I offer here at least brief hints, however inadequate, of that "richness" that lies in specific talks.

Elizabeth Watson (1977: "Each of Us Inevitable") came to help us accept ourselves. Her message is not "love the sinner, not the sin," but, "I love you, and I love you *for* your givenness, not in spite of it." She offers an account of the life story and the healing words of Walt Whitman.

Arlene Kelly (1979: "Estrangement and Reconciliation") brought answers in the form of difficult questions: How can we remain engaged with people who are different? From what do we feel estranged? What has caused hurt and anger within us? Do we see that we come to Gathering both as oppressor and oppressed? Can we find ways to step into the shoes of the other person? What is involved in being "reconciled"?

Janet Hoffman (1982: "Eros and the Life of the Spirit") spoke on themes of exploring and wrestling with new insights; fiery passion; relinquishing our need; and transformation. Eros, she believes, drives us toward God and gives our life its basic meaning. Love demands a complete inner transformation. Love (not guilt) leads to social change.

Dwight Wilson (1984: "Nurturing Our Relationships within an Often Hostile Community") spoke from his personal experience as a black man. His message was concerned with trusting one's own perceptions and understanding—not society's mainstream view, not scripture, not the internalized hatred that society may try to induce in us. He spoke of the sometimes negative role of the institutional church for blacks, women, pacifism, gays, and lesbians.

Arlene Kelly (1984: "Nurturing Friendship and Lover Relationships") sees "coming out" as a step toward taking responsibility for ourselves as individuals. In our friendship and lover relationships, are we feeling defective, she questions; have we relinquished some of our power? She discusses ten factors essential to building relationships that are whole.

Elizabeth Watson (1985: "On Wholeness") recognizes our patriarchal, hierarchal, and homophobic civilization and religious heritage. She discusses the Christian church and Jesus; the power of the human community; "dwelling in possibility," and her personal odyssey into wholeness. Can we take charge of life and healing by imaging a desired outcome?

Elise Boulding (1986: "The Challenge of Nonconformity") acknowledges the need to bond across differences—because we need others to make us whole—and the fact that it's more difficult for those called to "nonconforming witnesses." For "publicly gay" persons, special strengths are needed; they are the social change activists. The "gay witness," she says, includes equality, nonviolence, community, and simplicity; gays should be viewed not as embattled victims but as co-workers in reweaving the social web for us all.

Thomas R. Bodine (1987: "Caring Matters Most"), drawing on his own experience, began with a description of the wide diversity of Friends throughout the world. How to change people? How to bridge the differences? he wondered. What happens if we seriously try to practice Christian "gifts of the spirit" in those parts of the Quaker world that hate homosexuality?

Janet Hoffman (Friends General Conference, 1987: "To Listen, To Minister, To Witness"). Her wide-ranging talk includes: living "without seatbelts"; following a corporate leading, not censoring it; "dis-illusionment"—a good thing ("Offend me!" she declares); to minister—sometimes just by being oneself; to love someone—to become in some sense the person we love; to witness—to be faithful to the spirit. She touches on personal growth, the true evangelist, continuing revelation, seeking, stages of development in pacifism, and committed unions.

David Wertheimer (1988: "Bias-Related Violence, Gay Marriage, and a Journey Out of the Society of Friends") shares some personal, Quaker-related experiences: seeking marriage with his (male) partner under the care of his meeting; studying and later teaching at Quaker schools; enrolling as a Quaker in divinity school. He asks whether Quakerism works well only when it can function one step removed from the harsh realities that it contemplates. He sees FLGC as a committee on sufferings, a critical group to helping Quakerism discover how to survive. Death threats led him to question his Quaker belief in nonviolence. His talk includes input from those present at Gathering.

Ahavia Lavana (1988: "Helping and Healing"). When Ahavia's son Hunter had AIDS and later died of it, what helped and what did not help? What was healing and what was not? She speaks on accepting what is beyond our control.

Bill Kreidler's address (1989: "Tending the Fire") is his intensely personal but often humorous account of learning to tend his spiritual flame following an addictive, abusive relationship—by being honest, by being open, by practicing, and by being easy with himself. He talks of the ministry of our community and of how it helped him reach the goal he had envisioned ("old Quaker ladies" tap dancing).

Ellen Hodge (1989: "Tending the Fire") offers differing images of fire: Kristallnacht, persecution of "witches," a 1963 bomb in a Birmingham church, Vietnam and Cambodian napalm; candlelight vigils for the slain Harvey Milk; the Japanese *Bon* festival. She retells, in modern vernacular, the Biblical story of Moses for its relevance to our situation.

Stephen Finn (1990: "Celebrating *All* Our Being") describes a personal journey, illustrating reasons some people have trouble celebrating their being. He asks, does one feel shameful rather than worthy of experiencing "heaven on earth"? Does one adopt compensatory mechanisms to get through a life without heaven? Does FLGC sometimes serve to shield us from the need to be open about our shame?

Muriel Bishop Summers (1990: "On Living in Integrity") spoke of living with integrity—the quality of one's relationship with all of creation—and with oneself: a process. She discusses the balance between integrity and safety; the need of being whole, not fragmented; some essentials for wholeness; and the Divine Presence as ultimate reality, whose nature is love and whose character is truth.

John Calvi (Friends General Conference, 1990: "Laying Down the Weapons 'Round Our Hearts") offers steps to healing: surrendering; inviting one's angels; receiving, with honesty and tenderness, the messages that are sent; entering upon the dance between hope and fear.

Becky Birtha (1991: "'Accept It Gracefully'— Keeping Our Creative Gifts Alive") shares her personal experiences with healing, growing, dealing with pain, and loving herself—often as expressed in her poems.

George Lakey (1991: "Our Bodies, Our Elves") sought a vision of the new creation. He emphasizes, in six general areas, gifts that lesbians, gays, and bi's can give to the Society of Friends and the larger world; the areas are embodiment (in a human body); the erotic (as a bridge to spiritual experience); vulnerability (seen as a doorway); facing pain; reaffirming difference; and love (moving beyond judgmentalism).

Elizabeth Watson (1993: "Night and Day") relates how the titles of some Cole Porter songs evoke reflections from her own life. "Night and Day"—falsely dividing the world (a continuum) into opposites. (Are we the "good guys"?) "Down in the Depths"—unlearning the shame and guilt inspired by our Judeo-Christian tradition. (If there is sin, it is in not caring.) "In the Still of the Night"—embracing the darkness; finding it full of possibility, a time for gestation, for creation, for rest.

—ROBERT LEUZE

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EDITOR ROBERT LEUZE has been involved with gay Quaker groups since 1973, first in New York City where he attended Morningside Meeting and subsequently with the group that evolved to become the present-day Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns. He grew up in rural Northern New York near the eastern end of Lake Ontario, amid the extreme homophobia of the McCarthy period. During his college years at Yale University no one he knew (or knew of) was openly gay. He came out (to himself and two or three others) his senior year and, a year after graduation, moved to New York City. He and his present wife Sarah fell in love in the late 1960s and were married in 1969, believing that psychoanalysis had changed his orientation. He came out for the second time in the mid-1970s, but he and Sarah remain very happily married after 34 years. He pursued a career as an opera singer in the 1970s and 1980s and continues to perform in solo concerts—concerts that usually include songs relevant to the gay experience. He is a longtime member of the Yale Gay and Lesbian Alumni/ae Association (Yale GALA), and of Outmusic, a GLBT organization for singers and songwriters.

Kim Hanson

Robert Leuze

Nurturing Our Relationships within an Often Hostile Community

Dwight Wilson

Keynote Address, Midwinter Gathering,
Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns
February 1984
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

I was asked to give an autobiographical talk. I see myself first as a father and as a husband. To me all the other things that I may have done or may be doing are somewhat irrelevant. These are the things that I intend to do all my life and to put the majority of my energy into.

I'm going to talk about racism, sexism, and several other forms of oppression as I have experienced them rather than as I have read about them in books. I have a tendency to believe that only a fool believes everything he or she reads in a book. I know for sure what I have experienced, and that's where I live.

My mother was about the color of the palm of my hand; my father was about the color of my freckles. I never noticed that there was anything wrong in their skin complexion. I assumed as a little boy that everything was natural, the way God had planned it. In the first grade my teacher was walking around,

monitoring the students, and I decided to tell her a secret. I called her over and whispered in her ear, "Andrea is my girlfriend."

Andrea was the little girl who sat in front of me, who resembled very much Shirley Temple in that she had blond hair with beautiful ringlets, frilly dresses, and of course a white skin. Well, there was less difference between my color and hers than there was between my father's and my mother's. All I knew was that she seemed to fit pretty well the image that had been portrayed to me as being the image of beauty. At that point in my life, I thought that the object of life was to match oneself up with someone who fit society's perfect image. My teacher did not agree.

My teacher surveyed the room and made a pronouncement, not just to me but to the whole class, saying, "Andrea cannot be your girlfriend because Andrea is white and you are a Negro."

Well, I assumed I had some kind of disease. Prior to her statement, I had been taught that *Negro* was a good word. As a matter of fact, we had a little ditty—

> I'm not a nigger,
> I'm a Negro;
> when I become a nigger,
> I'll let you know.

[Laughter] I inferred from that that *Negro* was a pretty cool word. But it was clear from the way she used it, there was something wrong with me. I had been taught not to challenge adults, so I went back and I told my mother what had happened. My mother said to me, "Your teacher is right; you should not try to go with little white girls. But what you need to know is that you are a Negro and to get anyplace in this world you are going to have to work two times harder and you are going to have to be at least two times smarter." And then she told one of her infrequent lies and said, "You are already two times smarter; it is up to you to work two times harder." I appreciated my mother giving me a positive image of myself, to counterbalance what the teacher had done her best to teach me.

A short while later, my mother sent me to a grocery store, and I stood in line for 45 minutes. We were living in what was at that point the edge of an integrated area. (I'm sure some of you know the definition of integration: the time between when the first black moves in and the last white moves out.) So I went to this grocery store and waited about 45 minutes while several whites came in and were served before me. And I was just standing there waiting on the man to recognize that I existed. When I came back late my mother assumed at first that I had been playing around (I had that reputation already). But this time I had been diligent, and I was hurt, having to stand in line like that. It was clear I was seen; it was also clear that I was like an invisible little boy. My mother explained to me that I was not waited on because, once more, I was this thing called a Negro.

In the second grade I used to read as much as I could while the other students were trying to complete the lesson, because my mother had seen to it that I could read before I was four. So I was usually pretty far ahead of them. Once my teacher caught me reading a book about George Washington. She probably wouldn't have said anything, but when she came around, I tried to hide it in my desk. She said, "Go ahead, I don't mind; you're finished with your lesson." I will always remember that book because we had been taught, up to this point, that George Washington was the father of our country. However, the author mentioned the fact that George Washington owned slaves. It seemed quite clear to me that no father of my country would hold me in slavery. I was beginning to get a very thorough introduction to the racism in our culture.

I had to deal with some discrimination that went beyond racism, because I had these doggone freckles. And no blacks other than my sister had freckles in my home town. I'm from a little place called Middletown, Ohio. So I remember walking down the street once and a little boy looked at my face and he said, "What is that!" I said, "Hey, you know, somebody threw paint in my face." And I kept walking; it wasn't worth the effort to try to explain. Another time—I was maybe 12 or 13 years old—the fullback on the varsity football team dove into the pool, and when he came up he was about three feet from my face and screamed.

I had a thorough inferiority complex because of these freckles. I used to call my sister "Ugmo" and kick her in the knee, make her walk on the other side of the street, because she had the freckles like I did, and it seemed much more fun to punish her rather than punish myself.

I think the brand of oppression that affected me more than any other was the sexism I experienced in my house. One of the first memories I have is of my father pulling a gun on my mother. I used to sleep in their bedroom. When I was maybe three and a half or four years old, right in the middle of the night there was an argument about God knows what. I woke up and I saw my father with a gun pointed at my mother's head. She was not afraid. My mother was four eleven and a half and weighed 108 pounds when she got married; weighed 108 pounds after she had had eight children and had been married to him for 25 years. But she was never afraid of him.

Somehow she persuaded him to allow her to call her mother, and my grandmother talked to him on the telephone and got him to put the gun down. But it was pretty clear then who held the power position in that family.

You don't know what a double standard is until you see the way my father treats his women—this is his word, his "women." He would go off sometimes, to go to work—he might come home the next night; he might come home two nights later; he might come home a week later, two weeks later—no explanation at all. And often she would cry herself to sleep. Sometimes she would come and

get me, as the oldest child, and put me in the bed with her while she cried herself to sleep. She didn't know until I was maybe 24 that I remember the way he treated her.

She did everything she could to try to prevent us from hating him. But it wasn't easy.

During the infrequent times he was home, my father dominated all decisions. That really bothered us because any fool could tell that she was the wiser of the two. He sometimes would make totally asinine decisions. She would sit back and let him have his way. It got to the point where we resented seeing him pull up in his car. I can remember every time he would come into the house when I was maybe 14 to 18, I would go upstairs to my room to study or to pretend to be studying, just to get away from him. I can remember him beating her just to show how macho he was, taking her over his knee in front of the children and spanking her like a child.

I have never been able to forgive myself for one incident, even though I am a Quaker and don't even believe in self-protection. I heard my father beating my mother downstairs, and my brother, who was about 10 years younger than I, jumped in and tried to protect my mother. My father, needless to say, turned on my brother; my brother called for me to come help, but I was too frightened. He beat my brother, I won't say halfway to death, but close enough to it. I can still hear my brother calling me, and how I felt for refusing to go and help him.

My mother was a domestic. She cleaned houses for "Miss Ann" on the other side of town. My mother kept her house immaculate. She would clean her house before she'd go to work, make sure we had our bedrooms clean as well. She'd come back home; she'd cook dinner; and then, as she would say it, after six o'clock, her time was her own. She wouldn't do work for anybody. She'd generally sit and read, and we kids could make as much noise as we wanted to. She wouldn't say anything as long as she could read her book and nothing was breaking. *[Laughter]*

One day my father came home about six-thirty or seven o'clock and said to her, "What's for dinner?" She told him, and he said, "Well, I don't want that; get up and make me something else." And she said, "What's wrong with your hands?" And he said, "Woman, I own you."

That was the wrong thing to say to her. She jumped up and she bit him in the leg *[laughter]*, and he fell over the coffee table and he sprained his back. He said, to me, in explaining what had happened after that, that he had "to touch her up." He hit her in the mouth with his fist. But she told him, "Don't bring your black (blank) upstairs to the bed tonight." So he stayed up until maybe four, five o'clock in the morning. Finally he decided he was going to try to get into the bed because she should be asleep by now. My mother was not a Quaker, and when he came upstairs, my mother had her arms over the pillow so that he couldn't see what was under it. He thought she had a knife and was going to stab him in his sleep, and he said he didn't get any sleep at all that night.

He told the story about three or four days later, and he was laughing about it at the time because he thought it was funny how she had reacted. We didn't tell him that we were quite proud of the way she had put some fear in him, perhaps for the first time in his life, and that she had proven to him that indeed he did not own her. It was something that all of his children had the opportunity to prove to him as well, but maybe we didn't have the courage that Mamma had.

Another part of my introduction to sexism came when I was asked by one of my aunts to come to her church for Women's Sunday. In my home town, despite the fact that 90 percent of the regular parishioners are women, the Baptist churches generally give the women only one Sunday a year to speak. A woman came to speak who was married to this big-time Cleveland preacher. She was delivering what to me sounded like a sermon: She had a text; they even permitted her to stand in the pulpit. This was the first time I had *ever* seen a woman standing in the pulpit in a Baptist church. There was a guy in the church who kept saying, "Preach, Sister, preach!" Sometimes she would stop in the middle of what she was speaking and say, "I am not preaching. I am merely speaking." He continued: "Preach, Sister, preach! Amen!" People were getting uneasy because of this man. All of a sudden, two deacons came, grabbed him, took him to the back door, and threw him out of the church. Never had I seen that before. And I heard all these people whispering, "That man is crazy." At that moment the Holy Spirit spoke to me and said, "This may be the only sane person in this church." I thought about that. Why couldn't a woman preach? Why were men supposedly closer to God than a woman could be? But this was how the black Baptist church where I grew up taught us things were supposed to be, according to Christianity.

My introduction to gay and lesbian oppression came from my father, who introduced me to a number of things that I wish I could have avoided. I was sitting in the bathtub, reading. I used to be a football player. In fact, if I had had my way, I would have been a professional football player; that was all I wanted to do. But, thank God, I got my knee messed up, so I had to quit football. I was soaking these bad knees in some very hot water, and reading something for school. The old man knocked on the door and he said, "What'ya doing in there, boy!" I replied, "I'm reading." He said, "Boy, if you playing with yourself, I'll kill you. I would rather you kill more people than Hitler than be a homosexual."

Now, I never had respect for my father's mind in the first place. *[Laughter]* But when I heard this absurd statement, I said to myself, Here is something that I need to check out. [*Laughter, applause*] Nobody in my community ever said a positive word about gays or lesbians. But when he made a statement that he would rather a child of his kill more people than Hitler than be a homosexual? . . . When someone makes a statement that your basic humanity tells you is

absurd, that means that you have the responsibility to question that statement even if someone who generally is wise makes the statement.

About a year or so later, a girlfriend of mine and I went to visit one of my aunt's churches in Cincinnati. See, I have over 300 relatives in my hometown. And within 50 miles, I have over 500 relatives. They don't move. *[Laughter]* All they do is propagate. So we go to her Sunday school class, and we hear the teacher say to us that homosexuality is the "Unforgivable Sin." I said, "You must be crazy. Where do you see that?" When I made that statement (we were guests) I thought I was going to be lynched. The whole Sunday school turned on us. I was maybe 18, 19 years old. Probably some of you have heard the same thing, that homosexuality is the only unforgivable sin. I tried to show them—and I've never been changed on this—that in the New Testament the unforgivable sin is for someone to know what the truth is and deliberately to go against their leading. Period. That's what the unforgivable sin is. Now, if you are going to be intellectually honest—and any fool can read it as plain as day—then no matter what your political stance, you cannot say that somebody who is unlike you is committing that unforgivable sin. It does not work that way.

> I said, "Why, why isn't Mommy pretty, [son]?" He said, "Mommy can't be pretty because she's not white." He could have stuck a dagger in my heart. . . . Later on [he said], "I don't like myself, because I'm black."

How many of you have been to the state of Maine? Raise your hands. Do me a favor. Close your eyes, put yourself in touch with your favorite hand, whether it's your right hand or your left hand, and count how many black people you saw when you were in the state of Maine. *[Laughter]*

I became a minister just before I became 18 years old. I went to two years of undergraduate school at Miami of Ohio, which is older than Miami in Florida. Don't forget that. I didn't like what was happening in college. I knew I was going to graduate school sometime, and there was only one accredited theological school that you can go to before you finish your bachelor's, and it happens to be in Bangor, Maine. Roger Miller used to sing a song called "King of the Road," and in it was a particular line, "Destination Bangor, Maine," which is a euphemism for Destination Nowhere. Okay. I went to Bangor, Maine.

The way I got there was somewhat roundabout because I applied to the Seminary. I'm very fond of the Seminary now. But the first time I applied they said nothing. I applied like, January. May, I heard nothing. June, still hadn't heard anything. So finally I wrote a letter; I said: "Some of my more militant friends"

(meaning me, myself, and I) "are wondering if the Seminary is discriminatory, because I haven't heard anything."

Three days later I get an airmail special delivery letter *[laughter]* saying that they are going to be considering my candidacy as a student. The next day I get another airmail special delivery letter saying I have been accepted to the school. Okay.

This black boy had never been anywhere. I thought there would be as many blacks in Maine as there were in Middletown, Ohio.

I came up there. I wanted to get together with all the soul brothers and soul sisters; I looked around—there weren't any there. Finally a black guy from the West Indies showed up. He was in a cab when he arrived. Everybody rushed to him. This was back in 1968. One of the female white students came up to him and kissed him. Where I come from, you don't have any contact like that unless it's after hours. And I thought, you know, this is interesting.

So I went up to shake his hand, make his acquaintance. You know, he got there a week late and I had not seen any black person on campus: I was really glad to see him. The guy gave me a "dead fish" handshake, and he said, "You are a Negro from America? I don't like Negroes from America."

I don't remember what I said. *[Laughter]* I'll tell you, he and I never did get along. But there I was, stuck up in Maine, and I was going to see it through. Sometimes, I went a whole week, working downtown, in the public library, walking downtown every single day as well as going to school, and the only black face I saw was myself in the mirror. Sometimes I would walk down the street and the traffic would slow. You know what I'm talking about. People, little children, point over there and say, "Mamma, what's that?" After a while, I thought, if I was going to draw attention like that, I was going to be as black as I can get. So I would dress in all black: I'd wear black shoes, black pants, black socks, black underwear. I'd get some black leather bracelets: You want to see black, baby? And the only white I would wear at that point in history was the soles in my shoes so I could walk white. Okay? This was where it was at.

While I was supposed to be putting books up on the stacks, I decided that I should get in touch with my black history. In public school I had never read anything written by a black author. I thought I was the first black person ever to learn how to write. One of the first books I read was Malcolm X. One of the reasons I read Malcolm X was because when I was home in Middletown I was told *not* to read Malcolm X. *[Laughter]* And so you couldn't even get it; it wasn't even in the public library—and they have a good public library there.

So I was reading Malcolm X, and I learned that I had been taught to hate myself. I started sifting through my life, and every single girlfriend I had ever had, had been light. There had been a dark-skinned girl who chased me for so long, but I wouldn't give her the time of day even though she was one of the top

students in the school, extremely friendly, and even athletic. She was everything that I wanted, but she was too dark.

I came to realize that an enemy had taught me this. What does it mean when you hate your own people? What does it mean when you hate yourself? I became so militant that I wouldn't let anything go past without challenging it.

I remember sitting in the one class taught by the president of the school, church history. It was one of the "jivest" topics anyone could ever study. But he always taught that class so if there might be someone who would make a name for her- or himself in the future, he could say that he played a role in it. This is my interpretation; he never admitted that. So one of the students stood up in front of the class, giving a report. In the introduction he said, "Our forefathers from England." I said, "Hey, brother, I'm sorry; my forefathers didn't come from England." So the president became upset because I interrupted him. He said, "He was speaking generally." I said, "Generally to whom? *Generally* didn't include me, so he'd better rephrase what he has to say." Right then I got on the (blank) list of the president. He and I went around in circles many, many times while I was in school, because there was no respect given to the black experience.

I learned a valuable lesson when I sold myself out one day. Some of you have probably learned the same lesson in various ways. I wanted to get an A in the church music course. We had a teacher who wasn't a regular faculty member; all he did was teach church music. He referred to black music as being "jungle rot." Now, I said to myself, the teacher says it's jungle rot; I want an A; when I write my paper, I ought to say it's jungle rot too.

I have learned to forgive myself; I was 19 years old. I got a C minus on his paper. I said to myself, I sold myself out for a C minus? Never again. Never again.

I found that when I was in Maine, it was in some ways worse than the South. I have been in the South many times. I have never been refused service in the South. I have been refused service five times at various places in the North, four of those times were in Maine. Sitting in restaurants where people don't want to serve you—you don't have any black political caucus for the most part in Maine, so you can't go to your brothers and say, "This is what's happening." You sit there and people don't want to serve you. So sometimes I'd get up and serve myself. I'd get myself some water, get a pitcher, tap a waitress or a waiter on the shoulder and say, "I've been here forty-five minutes, and sooner or later I'm going to get served." And they would say, "Oh, yeah, I didn't see you." Okay.

The time that hurt me the most in Maine, being discriminated against as a black person, was when I needed a loan to stay in school, and I'm sure many of you can relate to this too. One of my classmates who happened to be white had gotten a loan from the local Catholic diocese. He told me where the office was.

First I went to the bank. I walked in the door, and the president or vice president, whoever was there, said, "What do *you* want?" I said, "I want to make an application for an academic loan." He said, "I'm sorry; we don't make academic loans."

I turned around; I went over to the Bishop's representative across town, and I said, "You know, I'm interested in getting an academic loan." He said, "Do you live here?" I replied, "Yes, I live in Durham." He said, "Well, you go to such-and-such a bank." I said, "I just came from such-and-such a bank." He said, "Well, what happened?" I told him. He said, "Well, why don't you try another of our banks, which is over in . . ." (I think he said Lisbon Falls, Maine). It was clear to me that the only reason I had been denied was because I was a black person. I can't prove it in a court of law. The man didn't ask me where I was from when he told me he didn't make academic loans; he just simply said, "No, we don't make them."

Well, in the midst of my blackness, in the midst of turning away from anyone who was white including my professors, and one of my professors telling me that I was bitter and filled with hatred, and me discounting that totally because she was white and what did she know about it?—in the midst of all of that, one day some Quakers came up and said they were looking for a pastor for a semiprogrammed meeting. And throughout most of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, if there's anything that I am allegedly guilty of, it's that I once pastored a Friends meeting. *[Laughter]* Well, they told me that they had been looking for a pastor for six months and they had heard that I was a great preacher. And at that time in history, all you needed to do was just rub me on the back and tell me that I was a great anything, and I'd eat that up.

So I decided I'd go down there. I was amazed at what happened! I went up to the facing bench and there, a man and a woman are sitting. A woman sitting in the front? There was silence in the meeting. Durham is a "semiprogrammed" meeting because there is about a half hour of programmed and a half-hour of unprogrammed time. Anyone can speak from the silence. After worship was over, we have First Day school. Two old ladies—85 years old maybe—were talking about what they had carried in the peace march the day before.

Although I had filed for conscientious objector status, and I had never met another CO before I came to this meeting. I knew I was home. Here was silence. Anybody could speak. Even the elderly were concerned with peace.

You know, I was a freak because I was a pacifist. Where I grew up, you could not be a human being and be nonviolent. It's totally impossible. If you weren't willing to shoot somebody, clearly, there was something wrong with you.

After I became a professional, I had a great many glimpses into the oppression that gays and lesbians have to face in our society, and in some of the strangest places in the world.

When I was at Oberlin College I was on the faculty, administration, and in four different departments simultaneously. One day, one of our black students showed a slide presentation, and he called that slide presentation "The Mothers." To an unsuspecting audience he showed pictures of all of the gay men on campus, and these were "the mothers." And while he showed these slides, the room rocked with laughter at these people who were held up to ridicule. I wasn't there, but I found out about it, maybe before it was even over, because members of the gay community came to me, several of them in tears, telling me of what had happened to them.

They also went to one of the deans, and the dean was very concerned. At that time the dean of students was openly gay. (I think he's still there.) They asked me if I would mediate between the gay community and those who were being critical. I felt honored that both sides would have enough trust in me to let me attempt to mediate that particular situation.

When I went to Marshall University about a year and a half after I had been at Oberlin, I went as associate dean of students and director of the Human Relations Center. It's in West Virginia. If you've ever been in West Virginia, you know that *time passed* West Virginia. They had no women's center, so I gave some money from my discretionary account to start a women's center. I had to do it on the humble—anonymously—because many of the Appalachian women there could not relate to blacks. Finally, we hired a female assistant dean, and she was able to direct the center after we'd gotten it underway.

One day, three gay students walked in to see me. They explained their situation: They wanted to meet on campus, but they couldn't because they couldn't get any faculty member or administrator to sign as their sponsor. They added that there were two or three gay faculty members or administrators on campus who were afraid to come out, and there was no way that one of them would sign to be the sponsor. So the students asked me. I said, "Sure." I sponsored them; they held a conference; and Frank Kameny came and spoke.

I was called in by the vice president as soon as he found out that I had signed my name. He said, "Dwight, I understand that you signed to sponsor the gay community." I said, "Yeah, it's true." He said, "Do you realize that in the state of West Virginia, it's a crime? You are aiding and abetting a homosexual?" I said, "Well, you'd better call the police, because I'm going to jail." So he said, "Ah, I don't think that's necessary." Now this was a man who was trained with a doctorate from either Harvard or Yale. But he was also very conscious of wanting to move upwardly, and in West Virginia, if you are a vice president who wants to be president of a university, you don't come out and support *anybody* that is on the bottom.

I felt very good about being able to offer my support. And I was amazed at the number of liberals who were upset because I had done that. I have never been able to understand how somebody can know that they are being

hypocritical; how someone can say, "I demand my rights," but not let somebody else have her rights or his rights. I'm not talking about out-and-out rednecks; I'm talking about allegedly intelligent, well-trained people, who nonetheless will tell jokes about the gay and lesbian community and not have a second thought about it, because it's open season on gays and lesbians in our country. That was one of the major things that forced me—even if I had not wanted to—to be as supportive as I could. It was clear to me that people who would never attack "a nigger" would have no qualms whatsoever about attacking someone who was gay or lesbian.

Those of you who [attended Friends General Conference] in Berea [Kentucky] in 1980 know that we had a controversy. One of the vocabulary words for my English students recently was *bogus*; we had a bogus controversy where we were threatened by some Baptist ministers. They said there was nothing they could do to hold back these rednecks who were going to come in and attack FGC because we had gays and lesbians on campus. So as FGC general secretary, I was called to speak with these fellows on the telephone.

Having grown up as a Baptist; having grown up maybe sixty or seventy miles as the crow flies from Berea, I had a good idea of how they thought, what language to use, and how to diffuse a situation like this. I was very pleased to be the one who was in the middle of it. I share all these things with you not because I see myself as a hero, because I know better than that; I know intimately too many times when the Cyclops has peered into my cage and I have cowered in the corner. But I also know that if there is one thing that I have never been taught how to do, it is to be intellectually dishonest. And some of the things that happened in Berea were worse than a joke. I could say honestly that I did not see what was alleged to have happened, by anybody in the gay community at Berea. Now, I spoke to some of my staff members and asked them if they saw the things that the Baptist minister told me had happened. And I was ashamed to hear that what they had actually seen was inappropriate sexual behavior by heterosexuals on campus.

I don't have an artist's eyes; I don't see everything that goes on. I can drive past the same place for two years and not notice a particular store there. I don't know why that is. I don't like prying into other people's business. Especially when I was general secretary at an FGC conference, the last thing I wanted to do was see someone else's eyes. I didn't have time for anything anyway, so I would walk as fast as I could wherever I was going. I wasn't just walking around, trying to see what was going on; I had to ask other people for details. Probably if you are looking for something, you can see virtually anything.

When I was at Marshall University I also saw a great deal of racism, because integration in West Virginia means that you have one black person in a department or one black person in a company. It's only three percent black in the state of West Virginia. At the end of 1975 I was filled with hatred and bitterness

because we had the Bicentennial coming up, and I knew that niggers were not going to get their due. I couldn't sleep sometimes because my stomach was all a knot. One day the Spirit spoke to me and said, Why don't you do something positive instead of being so negative? Why don't you write plays so that the black contribution can be shown? So I wrote a suite of plays, tracing black history from 1619 to 1976, and they were performed on public television and on several campuses in the Midwest. When they were performed at Marshall, the same vice president who told me I could be put in jail for aiding and abetting a homosexual called me into his office and asked me, "Dwight, did you really write those plays?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "You know, you are really talented for a black man. You can go a long way." *[Laughter]* I said, "Hey, I'm talented for anybody *[laughter]*, and I can go a long way anywhere." This really, really offended me. But in his ignorance I doubt that he realized how I was affected. Other people would have thought the same thing but would have been more subtle about their racism.

> America sings that we are a diverse community. But the only people who have true respect . . . are those who fit that mainstream image. If your race is different, if your sexual lifestyle is different, you're a freak. And you are outside . . .

Recently, I've had a hard time in Poughkeepsie, dealing with what I see as racist activity. I can't prove it. But I've been stopped three times while driving my car, on routine checks. People I know have not been stopped three times in their life. I like to wear caps of the sort that nobody wears but black people. One night my third son, who will be four next month, and I were driving down the road. A policeman followed me for about a mile or two, pulled me over to the side of the road, came up. I said, "Officer, is there something wrong?" He said, "I see that you don't have an inspection sticker on your front window." I don't think Superman's vision is good enough to see that no inspection sticker is on the front window, in the middle of the night from the rear. I don't think so. I didn't know I was supposed to have an inspection sticker, because the sticker I had was for a new car. And I was wearing this hat; and driving a Buick. He said, "You'd better get a sticker tomorrow."

Ten days later I was driving down the road, going to midweek meeting for worship. I passed a cop who was parked on the median strip. He turned around and followed me. I was not breaking the speed limit. He pulled me over into a service area, said, "Let me see your registration." I showed him my registration. I couldn't find my license. He was looking at the registration and he said, "That's wrong. This registration has Gwendolyn Spann-Wilson's name on it." That's my wife's name. "That's not your name, is it?", he said. I said, "No, it's my wife's

name." He said, "What's her name doing there?" I said, "Well, when we signed the papers, she signed her name first; and apparently in the state of New Jersey they feel that whoever signs their name first is the person whose name should be there. It's her car and it's my car." He had me sit there 40 minutes while he said he could not find my license in the computer. Meanwhile, everybody in the service station, all the employees, were looking at me like, you know, This guy must be running some kind of drugs. And I felt totally humiliated, violated.

At last he said, "You've got to walk back." I replied, "I've got to teach a class in about five minutes." He said, "Can you have your wife come and get you?" I said, "How many cars do you think we have?" He said, "Okay, I'll give you a ride back up there."

So he gave me a ride. I was supposed to thank him, I suppose. Two days later I went for a duplicate license. I told the woman, "I need a duplicate license; apparently I've lost my other one; I know the number." She said, "I don't need the number." In one second she got my duplicate from the computer. I said, "How come the policeman couldn't get it?" She had no idea. "I've been stopped three times in this town in the past seven months on routine checks." She asked, "Do you have a new car?" It was only two years old. She said, "Is it a big car?" I said, "It's a Buick." She said, "That's why you've been stopped."

Now I wonder how many white people with a relatively new car that is also big (it gets 30 miles to a gallon—which is more than my Toyota got by the time I traded it in) get stopped. She instantly knew what my problem was. Now, am I going to have to stop wearing that blue cap of mine? Am I going to have to get a Volkswagen? Am I going to have to start melding into the mainstream? Before people will let me alone? Is that what the gay community—is that what the lesbian community—is going to have to do, before people will stop harassing us? Are we going to have to forget that we are human beings and nobody has a right to confirm or deny our existence? Is that what we're going to have to do?

I'm getting to where I live right now, because everything else I've said was the preparation for this. I see myself basically as a father, as I said before. I've been having a helluva time with my baby boy in the past five or six months. My wife is a strong, intelligent, extremely poised, talented, beautiful black woman. That's who my wife is. This is unbiased. *[Laughter]* Our son said to his mother, "You're not pretty." I said, "Why, why isn't Mommy pretty, Tai?" He said, "Mommy can't be pretty because she's not white."

He could have stuck a dagger in my heart. I grew up thinking that we did not feel proud of who we were because we didn't have any strong role models. He has a beautiful mother that's black. I'd like to think that his father is a good role model.

Tai says to us, later on, "I don't like myself, because I'm black."

What have you got to do, to help your children love and accept themselves? I don't think there is anything sadder in the world than somebody who is ashamed of himself or herself, who has been taught to be that way because he or she didn't fit into the mainstream of society.

I think Tai learned this from images on television, even on Sesame Street and Electric Company. Those images that are supposed to be beautiful are, 99 percent of the time, white images. There is nothing that his mother can do to fit that image, and there is nothing that he can do to fit that image. America sings that we are a diverse community. But the only people who have true respect in the community are those who fit that mainstream image. If your race is different, if your sexual lifestyle is different, you're a freak. And you are outside, even if people are not openly berating you. Get the picture?

I am sad to say that the institutional church has played a very big role in the oppression of those who are not in the mainstream.

I am sad to say that the institutional church has played a very big role in the oppression of those who are not in the mainstream. When I was studying theology I came back and preached a sermon in my own church; I suggested that God might be black. Boy, they had a fit. *[Laughter]* Despite the fact everyone in the church was black, they went crazy. I got white-listed.

Previously, when I first became a minister, my career really had taken off. (My grandmother just broke down and cried. "Why would you become a minister?" she asked me. "Only people who can't do anything become ministers.") *[Laughter]*

However, my early career seemed promising. They had me preach at the district convention for one-third of the Baptist churches in Ohio when I was nineteen years old. I was preaching all over the state; any time I wanted to, I could preach. Okay. Well, I said that God might be black, and do you know that I could not preach even in my own home church for the next two years? There was only one church in the state that I could preach in, and that was my mother's church. They had a black minister who didn't suggest, he simply *stated* that God was black. And the other churches wouldn't have anything to do with him. He'd let me preach whenever I wanted to.

It is also the church that has led the way in refusing to give women the respect that they deserve. I believe that usually this has been done with knowledge that it is a lie. Anybody who reads through the New Testament just once or twice can see that most of Jesus' disciples were women. They can see that the only ones who did not desert him were the women. They can see that the first sermon given after he was resurrected was by a woman. Why is it that you never read anything about this in today's world, or hear anything about it, from a

minister's mouth? Why is it such a battle whenever one of the mainstream Christian churches tries to allow women to be ministers? Why do we have that battle? The church is doing it deliberately, for power.

Another way the church has played a major role in the oppression of people is when it comes to pacifism. Did you ever notice how often those who are leading the cry for war and nuclear buildup are people who are leaders in the Christian church? When Martin Luther King, Jr., came out against the Vietnamese War, I had never, and still have never, seen any person more vilified in the black Baptist church. That's why I was afraid, little me, I was afraid to admit in the black Baptist church that I was a pacifist. I filed for conscientious objector status, but I didn't tell anybody about it. Hey, I thought, if they can do King like this, you know, they'll eat me for lunch.

It is also the church that has led the way in refusing to give women the respect that they deserve. . . . The church is doing it deliberately, for power.

The vicious attacks on gays and lesbians have often come from the church. Some of you have had a hard time because of things that Paul has said about gays and lesbians. I say that you have made a very, very big mistake and have shown tunnel vision in being concerned with Paul. Paul plays a very precious role in my life because Paul was the one who liberated me; when I read that Paul said that slaves should obey their masters, I was able to set him aside totally. That was the first time that I realized that I did not have to accept everything that was in the Bible, because I own no master but God. Now, I look at Paul, I say, Who is this guy? He never met Jesus, right? Correct me if I'm wrong. I know, experientially, he was not closer to God than I am. How come God didn't tell me something is wrong with being a gay or a lesbian person? Where does it say that Paul is the root of all truth? When the man wrote his letters, whom was he writing them for? Was he writing them to be Scripture? He wrote letters to a group of people, and somebody later on, said, "Hey, let's make this Scripture." They took a vote, said, "Yeah, now it's Scripture." I bet if he had known his words could carry such weight he would have disciplined himself. So many times he was talking out his rear end. I'm sure he knew that!

But let's be fair. Think about our letters to friends. When you wrote your letters, sometimes you just said anything that came into your head; you didn't think they were going to be Scripture.

When Niyonu and I were courting, I had a great idea: My letters were not saying what I wanted to say, so I sent a tape. We got into an argument a couple of months later. She said "Excuse me," went out, came back with a tape recorder and the tape. Put it on a certain number and played it back. It refuted what I

had just said. *[Laughter]* I honestly believe that's the dirtiest thing my wife ever did to me. You see, when I said it, I didn't think it was Scripture.

I tried to fall back on my Quakerese, and I said, "You know, Baby—Continuing Revelation!" *[Laughter and applause]*. At this point in history Ni was not a Quaker; she didn't know anything about continuing revelation. All she knew was that the tape said *A* and the kid was saying *B*.

Now, it may seem that I'm being light, but I'm being deathly serious. Paul did not write what he thought would be Scripture. And I take the same position as Elias Hicks: Even if the person meant what he said and it is out of the Light, don't accept it. In the final analysis, I look at the words of Jesus, as recorded. If Jesus didn't say something that I don't agree with anyway, then I'm all right. Also, I know Jesus didn't write those words; somebody else wrote them, decades later, from memory, and how many conversations can I remember verbatim, decades later? I hold those words up to the Light. If, inside me, I find that the Spirit says something that is contradictory, I follow the Spirit as I understand it.

So I am suggesting to you that if others are saying to you that you are worthless, if others say you are not like they are—so you are condemned for whatever, to whatever—*what does it matter?*

When I was working at Armco Steel Corporation at 19, a boy came to me and showed me in the Bible, *his* Bible, where it called me a nigger. It said, "Niggers come from Ham." I had had ham before, but I couldn't figure out how a nigger could come out of ham. I also knew that the Bible he had was a bogus Bible. If somebody says to you, I am God, you don't believe it. If somebody says to you that you are inferior because you are not like they are, why should you believe that, either?

I had trouble with the topic that Geoff [Kaiser] gave me, because the topic concerned nurturing our relationships when the church is hostile. To me, the church is as the church does. If the church is not filled with love, it is not the church. If somebody calls herself or himself a Christian and has no love, he or she is not Christian. They may be trying to practice it or think that they are practicing it. But my foundation is a rock, and that rock is the Spirit. Jesus always lived his life according to Psalm 103, Verse 6: "God always does what is right and is on the side of the oppressed." Hey, that's clear. Jesus said, "Suffer unto me those who are weary and oppressed, and I will give you rest." If this is the position that Jesus took, how can anyone who calls herself or himself a Christian take a lesser position?

As Elias Hicks said, "Jesus . . . is my pattern." Amen.

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Dwight Wilson with a pupil
(from a newspaper photo, 2002)