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**The Angel of Your Meeting/Church:
Moving from Passive Aggression to Using Conflict as a Transformational Tool**
by Jonathan Vogel-Borne

When I first began traveling among local Quaker meeting/churches in my staff role with New England Yearly Meeting, I was given the metaphor from the Book of Revelations that when visiting, I am consulting with the meeting/church's angel. Later on I encountered Walter Wink's insightful writings in his *Powers Trilogy** where he uses the angel-of-the-church imagery to describe the collective identity of individual congregations. The angel at once embodies the church's present reality, its shadow side, as well as its Spirit-fulfilled potential. Using this metaphor, I have developed an exercise where I ask people to draw a picture of their meeting or church's angel and then write a letter, from God's perspective, "to the angel of [fill in name] meeting/church say... [fill in the blank]." This exercise is intended to open deeper reflection on aspects of the meeting/church that are often hidden, especially around the meeting's shadow side as well as its potential.



"The Angel of My Meeting" by Jonathan Vogel-Borne

Much of the wider culture, and especially our Quaker culture, is conflict averse. Anger is violence and violence is wrong. In order to avoid discord at any cost, many of us have refined the use of passive aggressive behavior to a fine art. We conceal our real feelings of disagreement over decisions or our disapproval of someone else's actions and seek ways to undermine that decision or person through procrastination, carrying out tasks half-heartedly, and/or setting up situations where that decision or person is bound to fail.

The classic Quaker response to a problematic nomination, "that name would not have occurred to me," can mask the more hurtful meaning, "not over my dead body." In community, when these underlying, hidden feelings emerge, the pain of the original conflict is compounded by a further sense of betrayal, a violation of trust—"how can you have held on to these feelings

without telling me sooner?” This is where we come face-to-face with our angel’s shadow side.

Additionally, when people join our communities from cultures where conflict is used more openly and aggressively, we are frequently not equipped to respond. Without directly countering inappropriate aggressive behavior, we allow our communities to be stepped on and abused. We are at the mercy of every unpredictable angry outburst. Rather than deal directly with such persons, many of us will just walk away, even leaving the meeting/church. Avoiding direct confrontation, we sacrifice the greater good of the community for the care of a dysfunctional individual, and thereby plunge our meetings/churches into even deeper dysfunction.

So what does healthy conflict look like? In Matthew 18, Jesus gives us a simple personal model for addressing conflict—you have a problem with someone, go to that person directly. If unsatisfied, bring a couple of elders to listen to the both of you. If still unsatisfied, bring the concern to the gathered meeting/church community. How many times should we forgive one another? Jesus answers seventy times seven times!

On another level, the extreme polarization of our public discourse—around controversial social issues, in our political system, and among the range of religious expression—is evidence that our world has lost sight of our ‘common unity,’ our ‘community.’ We have become a society fragmented into smaller and smaller circles, surrounding ourselves with only like-minded people. Even the internet colludes. Google’s search engine is designed to tag each individual user, carefully watching our search result choices, and then continually refining those results so that we are only seeing what we want to see and only hearing what we want to hear. Scary!

So how do we counter this culture of polarization? Let’s start with the basic concept that we need to engage with people with whom we disagree. It’s not only a good idea; I believe it is essential for the salvation of souls, even our planet. To unleash the spiritual power of our meeting/church communities, we need to nurture a culture where conflict, even painful conflict, is seen as an important tool for change, not just something to be avoided. We cannot allow unresolved discord to fester. We need to reach out beyond our comfort zones. We need to let our truest feelings be known. We need to engage in dialogue across differences at deeper and more direct levels. And in community we will inevitably hurt one another. When we do, we need to openly confess our transgressions, genuinely forgive one another, and truly live into our common life as a people reconciled to each other and to God. I am humbled by the question, “how does this state of un-forgiveness serve anybody?”

The potential of a Spirit-fulfilled angel of our meeting/church is found in lives transformed by the love of God. Dealing more directly and forthrightly with one another in our local meeting/church communities, we deepen our witness to the world: “See how they love one another.”

* Wink, Walter, *The Powers Trilogy*:

- *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984. ISBN 0-8006-1786-X
- *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986. ISBN 0-8006-1902-1
- *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992. ISBN 0-8006-2646-X



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