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Taking up the Cross

by Margery Post Abbott

One of my long-time F/friends confessed to me last spring that she had been happily reading my new book until she came to the section “Taking Up the Cross.” At which point she set the book down and couldn’t bear to pick it up for several weeks.

In the past year, as I have travelled widely leading workshops on this topic among unprogrammed Friends, liberal and Conservative, I have encountered both extreme reluctance to even consider the topic of the cross and also the longing to engage more fully with the meaning of this, the ultimate Christian paradox. Margaret Fell expressed this succinctly when she said “the cross of Christ, which is the power of God.” This is the essential paradox, that the symbol of Roman might and an instrument of torture has become the symbol of the power of God and unconditional, redeeming love.



Image courtesy of www.freefoto.com.

To engage with the cross, I have spent much time with the writings of early Friends to see what meanings they might open for me. The cross was integral to their writings where they often spoke of taking up the cross daily, so that their lives were in service to God rather than self-serving gain. They advised also to “stand in the cross” as a call to obedience which gives the strength to walk gently side by side with others as they face the anguish and misery that life presents, as well as to walk with hope through the hardships we are given.

Among unprogrammed Friends, one of the best known passages of Isaac Pennington comes from *Some Directions to the Panting Soul* where he writes, “Give over thine own willing; give over

thine own reasoning; give over thine own desiring to know or to be any thing, and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee, and be in thee, and breath in thee . . .” What we rarely note is that this passage continues on to say “And as thou takest up the cross to thyself, and sufferest that to overspread and become a yoke over thee, thou shalt become renewed, and enjoy life, and the everlasting inheritance in that.”

The call to pay attention to the way God calls us – “Take up the cross and follow me” – is not a call to seek out suffering, but to live faithfully what Jesus preached in the Gospel of John: to love God with all one’s heart mind and soul, and to love one another as we are loved. In this path lies the sometimes difficult and painful transformation of the self and the world. This path simultaneously relieves the pain of the world and may lead to individual suffering when it threatens our conventional expectations and behaviors.

Some of these same Friends who initially found it difficult to talk about the cross have also come to see the opening offered by Penington and Fell’s words. This gives a new language to speak about the profound understanding of turning from materialism, greed, self-aggrandizement and other similar impulses in order to live more fully in accord with the Inward Teacher. In these words of early Friends we are also finding unexpected bridges between the Gospel message and the Buddhist practices of a number of unprogrammed Friends.

At the same time, these Friends recognize the reality behind the uncomfortable language: that by standing in the cross – by turning to and relying on the Infinite – we are given the power to face whatever comes with grace and courage. This deep connection with the reality many others have experienced offers an opening for dropping reflexive rejection of Christian language and a space for finding a fresh appreciation for our mutual heritage.



Margery Post Abbott has been released by Multnomah Monthly Meeting for a ministry of teaching and writing about Friends. She has published several books, most *recently* *To Be Broken and Tender: A Quaker Theology for Today* (Western Friend, 2010). A revised and expanded second edition of the *Historical Dictionary of the Friends* will be released in fall 2011 (Scarecrow Press, 2003).

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