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Prophetic Ministry

by Margery Post Abbott

Who are the prophets among us? They are individuals formed by God. They have experienced God breaking into their lives and setting forth a clear call to speak against injustice, to speak to the wonder of divine Love coursing through each of us, to otherwise name aloud the words the Spirit offers.

Many thus called resist the possibility. "Who me?" is a common response. "I am not adequate." "I am not worthy." There are many variations. The prophet is one who is transformed in God as they come into taking up this gift. The process of transformation has often been likened to that of the refiner's fire that heats the raw ore, then drains away the dross to leave the pure metal. The image of fire expresses the intense agony which sometimes is part of this transformation as the entire orientation of the individual shifts and he or she comes into their authentic self.

The late Bill Taber, a Conservative Friend, has named the prophetic task as beginning with discovering and interpreting the law (the new covenant), work that was also Jesus' task. As his Friends we are to carry on that work. In so doing, we are to show the way to live out the New Creation. We offer the example of how to walk with God even when we are conflicted. We help make the Inward Guide and Monitor available through prayer and intercession, and by living truly our passion. As we help others make themselves available to the Spirit, we are called to lead people to the foot of the Cross. Taber's understanding of prophetic ministry encompasses much of what we do when we speak, act or pray in accord with God working through us.

In contrast, the Hebrew Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes of the prophet as one who offers a critique of society, who mourns the ways it falls short and energizes those who would change, providing an alternative vision of the way we might live. He contrasts the oppression of the pharaohs' rule and the expansiveness and justice of God's way.

One piece of my own work at the moment is to find ways to sit with how we might understand and recognize the prophets among us within the Quaker community. Some see prophetic ministry as a process whereby the individual is simply a vessel for the divine word to flow through. At times the query is posed "Does the water taste too much of the pipes?" That is, has the message been changed excessively by individual concerns and ego-driven demands. Yet, Abraham Heshel has said that the prophet is a person, not a microphone: the prophetic message as given is a combination of Grace with individual temperament and personality.



Many pitfalls arise as we take on the risks of ministry. Conservative Friend Lloyd Lee Wilson has identified some of them:

- Fear of success
- Fear of failure
- Complacency
- Being a “tall poppy” which tends to get cut off
- Outrunning the Guide or lagging behind the Guide
- False humility
- Scorn
- Embarrassment
- Comparing ourselves with others
- Falling in love with the sound of our own voice
- Being the lone voice in the crowd/not being supported by the Meeting
- Ripples of changing life circumstances/ effect on family/ cost to all involved

Wilson advises above all that a prophet shouldn't go it alone. Whether it be a companion to travel with us in the ministry, a supportive family, a Spiritual Accountability Group or any of a number of other ways, it is crucial to be in the midst of a community that offers both support, perspective and occasional correction.

Being Prophets

Friend's understanding that each of us can hear and respond to God's call in our lives is a belief that the prophetic tradition continues among us today and is visible in our ministries. When I participated in The Way of Ministry program, talking about prophecy and the idea of being prophets over the course of a full year made it start to sound normal to me even though it was not part of my vocabulary at the onset. We were taught that prophets aren't just lonely voices crying in the desert about a disastrous future, they are representative voices. At times they seek to throw down evil systems but they are also people who build and plant a vision of a more just life.

Who then is a prophet? An individual formed by God. God breaks in and calls us, meets our resistance; then fills each heart with trust, love, passion and sympathy.

What is the task of the prophet? To impassion the people with an understanding of the Holy. The prophet is not asked to say “everything's ok” but to note what is awry and to voice the grief and pain of that disjuncture. At the same time, the prophet is called to voice the hunger and thirst for a better world and to offer a glimpse of what wholeness looks and feels like, asking others to join in making this possible.

How is the prophet formed? Through deepening levels of faithfulness, trust and surrender through which the individual comes to her or his authentic self. This formation occurs in a context of accountability and corporate care that align with the divine way.

Feeling different or even marginalized within a basically supportive community is not unusual. This may prompt us to ask whether what we are expecting from the community is an unattainable ideal, whether God is working us in some way that leads to new insights or strength, or whether there is a way we might help the community to grow.



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) and a revised and expanded second edition of the *Historical Dictionary of the Friends* in fall 2011 (Scarecrow Press, 2003).

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