



Beyond 'us' and 'them':

**A broken-ness
in the eye of the beholder**

Address by Thomas Owen
to the World Conference of Friends
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Beyond ‘us’ and ‘them’: A broken-ness in the eye of the beholder

Greetings Friends. Jambo!

My name is Thomas Owen, and I’m going to complete the Asia West Pacific talk by reflecting on the last part of our theme: the “broken world”.

It is a daunting task to speak before such an audience. As I look out, I see so many great people... so many inspiring stories. From this podium and throughout the gathering we have heard so much truth. All I can do today here is to share my truth. And I look forward to the opportunity that as many of you as possible may share your truth with me – in the days we have remaining here at Kabarak, and beyond.

I come from Aotearoa New Zealand. Many people simply call it “New Zealand”, but in Quakers we call it “Aotearoa” in recognition of the indigenous people – the Māori.

It would do me an honour to greet you now in the Māori language.

E oku tuakana, e oku tuahine, kua tae mai nei i tenei ra – nga mihi nui ki a koutou katoa.

Ngā mihi nui ki a Io, nāna te kore, nāna te pō, nāna hoki te ao i whakatinana. E mihi ana, e mihi ana.

Ngā mihi nui ki te mana whenua o te rohe nei. E mihi ana, e mihi ana.

Ko Te Haahi Tuuhauwiri te iwi.

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā tātou katoa.

To translate, I began by giving praise to God the Creator – “from you came potential, the night, and this world you have populated”. I then greeted our hosts, the Kenyans, the peoples who nurture the Spirit of this land.

I also greeted all of us gathered here today as one tribe, what I called Te Haahi Tuuhauwiri. This is the Māori name for Quakers in Aotearoa. It translates literally as “the faith community that stands shaking in the wind of the Spirit.”

On behalf of Te Haahi Tuuhauwiri o Aotearoa, I greet you all, sisters and brothers of the Quaker world.

Aotearoa New Zealand

My country is a small land near the southern tip of the world between Australia and Antarctica. Aotearoa was in fact the last significant inhabitable landmass to be colonised by people. Māori settled there around 800 years ago, followed by Europeans 600 years later. Both colonising groups soon discovered the land was fertile and hospitable, but also geologically unstable, prone to ongoing earthquakes, erosion, and volcanic activity.

Today, our biggest city, Auckland, sits atop a bed of 49 volcanoes.

Our capital city, Wellington – where I live – sits directly upon an earthquake generating collision zone between two massive tectonic plates.

Christchurch, what used to be our second largest city, we never knew was in an earthquake area. However, in the last year and a half Christchurch has suffered an inconceivable 10,000 earthquakes – 40 of these measuring 5.0 or greater on the Richter scale.

During the most destructive quake in February last year, 185 people died. Further tremors, and their aftershocks, continue to rattle the area to this day. Many residents have left the city. Those who stay continue to live with the trauma of broken homes, broken civic infrastructure, and the exhausting mental and emotional strain of living with the insecurity – of never knowing when the next major quake will strike, and more lives be lost.

On the experience of living in Christchurch, a Friend has written:

“Earthquakes are like wars, ongoing in their destruction and from each there is only a slow recovery. The awe-inspiring power of the earth has reminded us that certainties, plans and expectations can all change in a brief period of time, leaving a legacy of dashed hopes, anxieties and physical and financial cares and dependencies. Normality, including leisure time pursuits, is suspended as we attempt to pick our way through a poorly prepared and disorganised bureaucracy, which has created a minefield of ever changing regulations regarding our shattered homes.”

When asked to speak on the topic of a “broken world”, I found it impossible not to think of the experience of my brothers and sisters in Christchurch – or, for that matter, in the Philippines, Australia, China, Peru, Haiti, East Africa, Eastern Europe, or any of the many other places that have suffered horrific natural disasters in recent years. In particular, my thoughts and prayers have never been far from our Japanese Friends across the Pacific.

However, as easy as it is to think of these disasters under the theme “broken world”, natural disaster itself is not necessarily a sign of broken-ness.

As a Friend in Christchurch recently told me: “earthquakes are not broken. This is how the world is!” Geological activity is the lifeblood of our country. It is what created the land we live on. It is what makes this natural world the fascinating and beautiful place that it is.

No, my Friend told me, the broken-ness is not in the earth – it is in us. It is in our greed. It is in our wars. It is in the fact that we have the skills and knowledge to avoid destroying our world, but we are not using them. It is in the fact we have the empathy and compassion to avoid destroying each other, but we are not using them.

In the week before this conference began I met with many Kenyans who had been affected by the post-election violence of 2007-2008. The broken-ness was clear – lives lost, homes destroyed, relationships shattered. With new elections looming, we pray for Kenya that history will not repeat itself. Just as we pray for a permanent end to violence in the Congo, Rwanda, Burundi... and the many, many other fires of conflict still burning across our planet right now.

I have been blessed with the opportunity to travel to different countries – the vast majority of people on this planet have not – and it breaks my heart to enter communities afflicted by violent conflict. This sadness is only balanced by the hopeful blessing that right now, in many of our nations and communities, a beautiful peace does indeed reign. No matter how dark the trauma, we must believe that peace will always come.

On the other hand, I have never travelled to a single place on this planet where one tragic factor is not present – the destructive exploitation of our planet’s resources for private human gain. Even in peaceful countries, even in wealthy countries, this broken relation persists.

And it leaves us to ask: Why have we broken so much? Why can we not coexist in harmony with the world, and with each other?

For some, the fact we keep destroying our habitats, the fact we keep destroying each other, is enough to conclude that we can’t help but do this... that we are essentially disposed to conflict, rivalry, and exploitation. It is enough to conclude that there is something deep inside us that drives us to organise into competing factions of “us” against “them”. As if we cannot define a situation without identifying goodies and baddies; or regard a problem without dividing into those who perpetrate it, and those who seek the solution.

Like the cells that make up our bodies, we seem destined to divide, and once divided, to convince ourselves of “our” own rightness, and “their” wrongness.

This is the broken human relation. And I feel it is this that underpins all of our conflicts and self-destructions – corrupting our equality; corrupting our community; corrupting our efforts to see that of God in everyone. This broken relation is the seed that spawns all other broken-ness in the world.

The inner Light

Our own society – Quakers – is not immune to the pull to distinguish into us/them categories. We have split into factions since the first days of George Fox, James Nayler and John Perrot, and continue to split to this day, as meetings decide they are irreconcilably drawn in different directions. As a result, there are many branches to our family tree – many of which have been drawn together here at this grand “family reunion”.

While we cherish our differences – and so we should - it also must be noted that it is never so sad as to see a community you love divided. When our “we” turns into an “us” and “them”.

However, despite our own Quaker breakages, I believe that in Friends’ philosophy is the key to overcoming the splits and ruptures that characterise human social experience.

For me, Quakerism is based on the principle of that of God in everyone – the radical testimony that the Divine Light exists in us all, and can be connected with through compassionate reflection.

For me, Quakerism is also a movement against the human-made trappings of the world. When George Fox rallied against the ‘hirelings’ of the 17th century British church – against their rituals and hierarchies – he encouraged his followers to distinguish between the true calling of the Holy Spirit (the authentic spiritual experience), and the false machinery of the society of priests who claimed to be gatekeepers for it.

I find his message truly inspirational: both defiantly rebellious against the flawed social structures of humankind; and reverently humble before the universal glory of God that so vastly transcends these structures.

If Fox’s message is an attempt to liberate the human experience of the Universal Spirit from worldly trappings, then I see in it also the attempt to liberate us from the “us/them” divisions that plague our thinking and practice.

Our tendency to divide into ‘us and them’ is a false worldly trapping. The brokenness of our social world is not a natural certainty. Our lack of agreement is not an inescapable fact of life. It is something we create and construct and nurture. Broken-ness is in the eye of the beholder. And as such, we have the choice to reproduce it, or to overcome it.

While the history of humanity can be seen as a succession of divisions and conflict, it can also be seen as a history of ongoing attempts to overcome our divisions and attain unity. The work of the United Nations, Friends’ international peace work, the inter-governmental panel on Climate Change, to name just a few, are recent international examples of this.

The Africa Great Lakes Initiative’s reconciliation and mediation work happening right now here in Kenya, Rwanda and Burundi is another – which, to my mind, is some of the most important work Friends are doing right now. It is a privilege to be here to witness it.

In Aotearoa our great attempt to find unity between Māori and European colonisers is an agreement called the Treaty of Waitangi. It is a treaty, signed 172 years ago, identifying both races as protected subjects of the British Queen, while ensuring the right to self-governance and cultural preservation for Māori and European alike.

Over the last 170 years, and, indeed, in many contemporary affairs, it is easy to see where this agreement has been broken and Māori rights denied. However, optimistically, the Treaty is an attempt to overcome the us/them division and to find a common path – not one that disregards difference, but respects it, and respects the right to be different while still being accepted and protected within one peaceful civil society.

For Quakers in Aotearoa, the Treaty is affirmed as a faith in practice effort to answer that of God in everyone.

If one believes in that of God in each other, then to disrespect the “other” is to disrespect God. To exclude the “other” is to exclude God. To kill the “other” is to kill that of God in them – not only in the present, but also in any future movement of the Spirit within.

This radical belief in each other’s precious Divinity is the seed that guides our actions. This is why in Aotearoa New Zealand Friends, we uphold the rights of Māori and other minorities, why we advocate the rights of prisoners, and why we condemn all wars and the taking of lives. This is also why we affirm the rights of same sex relationships.

Love and faith

I wasn’t born into the Quaker family. I’ve chosen to be a Quaker because I believe that of all human-made systems for honouring the Spirit that I have found, Quakerism provides me the best framework to nurture a personal connection with the Holy Spirit, and a compassionate connection with my community.

But as much as I love Quakerism, I know it is just a system made by people to reach God. And like all systems made by people, it is flawed, partial, and incomplete.

I don’t believe that God invented religion to reach humankind. I believe that humankind invented religion to reach God. Indeed, it truly is our greatest invention – and we have done it in so many beautiful different ways.

But I don’t know if we will ever be able to complete this invention and fully articulate the majesty of God’s glory. We can feel God’s love. We can feel it so deeply our eyes water and our bodies quake... our souls sing! We can even hear and heed God’s call. But we cannot construct an absolute narrative that fully explains God’s role in our lives and the mystery of life all around us. I don’t think this is anything to be lamented or ashamed of. Not knowing everything is an important part of being human – for it inspires us to have true faith in that which is beyond us.

But this also means that we create different ways to understand the world, and that our different – and differently flawed – concepts will often come into conflict with each other. And this presents us with a great choice.

We could choose to focus on the broken-ness between us, to glorify the “us” and exclude and condemn the “them”. We could choose to see the separations between us as more important than the solutions to unite us.

We could choose to ignore our broken relations – to sweep them under the carpet and deny they exist. Though I fear they would only return to haunt us in unpredictable ways.

Or – what I think is right - we could confront the broken-ness and address our differences. We could compassionately listen to our “others” and to seek that of God even in those with whom we disagree and don’t understand. We could acknowledge that broken-ness is in the eye of the beholder, and see through this scratched lens to the purity of the Universal Spirit beyond.

If we can do this, then we can transcend the trappings of our human made systems and truly live the Kingdom of God. For the Kingdom of God knows no exclusions. The kingdom of men does – the kingdom of broken relations – the kingdom of “us” and “them”. But in the Kingdom of God there is only one – there is only “we”.

And how may we reach this?

I think the answer is the same as it’s always been. Only love will get us through: our love for God; our love for that of God in each other; our love for the faith that none of us may be right, but all of us are righteous.

While human relations may be broken, the human spirit is not. The human spirit is truly transcendental. It is not bound by the colour of our skin; the amount of money in our pocket; the name above our church doors; or the names of our ancestors.

Quakers, Christians, Muslims, Pagans, Atheists, criminals, offenders, victims, oppressors, and the oppressed...

God’s Light shines in all of us. No one is forgotten.

We are all brothers and sisters of the faith community that stands shaking in the wind of Spirit. We are all Te Haahi Tuuhauwiri.



The view from the Christchurch Quaker Meeting House,
following the earthquake of February 22, 2011. Photo by Adam Coole.



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