

It is good to be here in Urbana. My mother grew up just down the road, in Danville, where we used to travel on weekends when I was a child to visit my Uncle Fritz, a very kind man who caused me to think well of people from Illinois. He loved *The Lawrence Welk Show* and when Myron Floren, the Happy Norweigan, would play *Lady of Spain* on his accordion, which he did just about every Saturday night, Uncle Fritz would turn to me and say, “Maybe someday you’ll play an accordion on television and be famous like Myron Floren.”

So that became my plan, to play the accordion on television like Myron Floren, but then I met my wife, whose family didn’t believe in television, so I became a Quaker minister instead. But that mystified me at first. How could you not believe in television? I mean, there it was, right there—Television. It wasn’t like God, who you couldn’t see. You could see the television, that was the point of it. But I was in love, and I eventually came around to their way of thinking. In fact, my wife and I, being true Christians, still don’t have television. Though we do have several sinners for friends, so we can watch TV at their homes.

One of my friends phoned me not long ago to tell me they had purchased a 3-D television and wanted to know if I wanted to come over and watch a 3-D movie. I had never seen a 3-D movie before, having grown up watching the silent movies while the lady in the balcony played the organ. But my friend's four-year-old showed me how it worked. If you've seen a 3-D movie, you know it's quite fascinating. You watch it through special glasses.

It reminded me of when I was a kid and would go to the library in my hometown and look at pictures through a stereoscope. The pictures had the same images side by side, differing just slightly in perspective and angle, which gave the two-dimensional picture a three-dimensional appearance. Stereoscopes were typically made of wood, with a little tin hood that fit around the eyes, and a wooden handle that came down, with a bracket that would hold the picture. Because stereoscopes were most popular in the late 1800's and early 1900's, most of the pictures dated to that era. I would go to the library and look at pictures of our town and county from long ago, and wonder about those people.

Sometimes an elderly person would be there, looking at those images from their childhood, and would reminisce aloud about those perfect days of long ago, which, of course, were only perfect in their memory.

Then moving pictures were invented, and the stereoscope companies went out of business. The new replaced the old, that unchanging principle. The new replaces the old. It is an inviolate rule, no matter how much we resist it, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us. The new replaces the old.

A month before he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln sent a letter to Congress in which he wrote, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.”

There are times when the dogmas of the quiet past are adequate for our present. And, as Lincoln said, there are times when we must think anew and act anew. It is sometimes difficult to know when we can rely upon the dogmas of the past and when the time has come to think anew. This is especially true in religion, when our fondness for a fabled past sometimes compromises our ability to live in the future. We resist new light and fresh insights.

Collectively, societally, spiritually, we seem to only move ahead at a pace determined by the least progressive and the most fearful among us. The reins upon us are always being pulled tight, lest we move forward.

Early Quakers, when they suspected another Quaker was running too far ahead of them, would say to that person, “You are running ahead of your Guide.” Or “You have gone beyond your Light.” It was intended to give one pause, to check the impulse of moving beyond the majority’s sense of divine leading. If someone, for instance, was teaching or saying something inconsistent with doctrine or the custom of the day, they would say to that Friend, “You are running ahead of your Guide.” They would put the brakes on that person, you see. It was intended to be a powerful corrective, because you risked losing the support of your religious community.

Here’s the interesting thing about it. In nearly every instance someone was told they had gone beyond their Light, or ran ahead of their Guide, in nearly every instance, time and history proved that person correct. They had not gone beyond their Light; the majority had lagged behind their Guide. They should not have said *Slow down!* to that person. They should have said *Hurry up!* to themselves.

Remember this: Every moral, spiritual, ethical, and intellectual advancement was made by someone the rest of us were telling to slow down. They were thinking anew when we did not want them to think anew, when we were content to stick with the dogmas of our quiet past, even when those quiet dogmas did damage to people.

In April of 1963, when Martin Luther King, Jr. was imprisoned in the Birmingham jail, eight religious leaders of the city wrote an open letter to King entitled “A Call to Unity,” and published it in the newspaper. Friends, we commit more sin in the name of unity, we let more evil go unchallenged for the sake of unity than for any other reason. We will permit injustice after injustice to accrue simply to prevent any tension or disagreement from troubling our ranks. So these religious leaders of Birmingham, Alabama wrote a letter and named it “A Call to Unity.” In the letter they scolded King for his “untimely” demonstration. It was a polite way of telling King he had gone beyond his Light, that he had outrun God’s leading.

King responded with a beautiful letter—if you’re never read his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” you need to—in which he wrote, “Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was ‘well timed’ in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’ It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see...that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’”

The church's problem isn't that we have gone beyond our Guide. The problem is that we have lagged far too far behind our Guide. Think of that for a moment, the preposterous notion that we can outrun God.

This unthinking commitment to the past, and the entrenched mindset it represents, has surely caused more harm than good. It has demanded that men and women of good will make a butchery of their conscience, it has silenced prophets, it has kept us stuck in the yesteryear of a fabled goodness, preserving the sepia tones of a long-ago morality that excluded so many.

The idea that we can outrun God should be recognized for the lie it is, for it implies it is possible to run ahead of the very God who is constantly before us, always ahead of us, beckoning us toward a land and life we have only reluctantly entered. Not once, not once, has God ever said *Slow down* to someone pioneering the moral landscape. Not once. It is only the case, when we have finally dared enter the land of justice and freedom and pitched our tents, that God has said, "What took you so long?"

Remember that when God led the Israelites by a pillar of fire, God was well in front of them, not behind them. God does not push us from behind, God pulls us from the front, beckons us from the future.

Think of the Unitarian, Emily Balch, the pacifist and humanitarian, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946. When she was advocating on behalf of Japanese-Americans who had been forcibly interned in WWII, do you think God was saying to her, “Slow down, Emily Balch, you are running ahead of me. You must wait.” Of course not. Of course not. God pulls us from the front.

Now let us be relevant. We can not let our generation off the hook. Today, too many in the church are telling gays and lesbians to wait, that we are not ready for them to enjoy the same rights we enjoy, the right to have as their life partner the person they cherish. When the matter is raised by those who can not keep silent while others are discriminated against, they are scolded for running ahead of their Guide, as if God is somehow honored by the relentless persecution of those whose sexual orientation differs from the majority. Some day, one day, we will cross that river and enter that land of liberty and justice for all and God will rightly say, “What took you so long?”

People say, “Oh, let us be patient. Let us wait. It will change for the better. Young people don’t believe in discriminating against gays and lesbians. They will not continue our prejudices. Change will eventually come.” People say that. And I say, “Why should our generation dismiss our responsibilities, putting upon the younger generation work that is rightly ours?”

We in the Church ought to be leading the charge for freedom. For we have borne witness, many of us firsthand, to the evils that occur when a minority is singled out for discrimination, when some people are denied a right the rest of us enjoy. Justice should not have to wait until some people die. The dogmas of our quiet past are inadequate. It is time to think anew, it is time to act anew, lest God say to us what God said to our ancestors, "What took you so long?"

I called the library this week. I said to the librarian, "When I was little, I would go there and look through this contraption at pictures. It was made of wood and tin. What was it called?"

The librarian said, "Oh, that was a stereoscope. We have one in our historical collection. We don't use it anymore."

That is as it should be. Some things belong in our historical collections, in our past. Other things belong to our future. We do not run ahead of God, we can not run ahead of God. For God is the pillar of fire in front of us, not the cloud of dust behind.