

## **Speaking truth to power**

“Speaking truth to power”. We like that saying, don’t we Friends? And we Quakers seem to have adopted it as our own. I think that’s because those four short words capture the essence of our witness in the world.

“Speaking truth” suggests an external expression of an internally received insight, an outward faithfulness to a spiritually experienced truth. It comes from the heart, from a place of love. Saying it “to power” implies courage to speak that truth to those who may not want to hear it, and are in a position to punish you. Faithfulness and courage: speaking truth to power describes an intention of moving the world towards the Realm of God. And Quakers have a long history of speaking truth to power.

But here’s a question, Friends:

What if Power isn’t listening? What if we knock on the door of Power, speak our truth and have the door shut on us? Or Power tells us how good it is that they’ve allowed us this space to speak but, y’know, in the real world things don’t work that way?

Or, as Noam Chomsky suggests, what if Power already knows the truth? Like knowing that it is destroying the ecosystems that support life on earth, but carries on anyway? What then?

Do we continue to knock on the door? Do we give up? Or do we find other ways?

## **Challenging image**

I’d like to offer an image. It comes with a warning, Friends! It challenges a law-respecting, property-conscious view of life. It goes against our accepted values. In fact, it’s an image that turns everything upside down.

Let’s personalise Power, that top-down dominating, my-will-over-yours, controlling type of power. Let’s imagine it as a Strong Man.

Imagine we are called to break into this Strong Man’s house, tie him up and take away his possessions. Imagine that’s what our witness in the world is about.

Actually, it’s not my image, it comes from Jesus – Mark 3:27-28. Jesus was gaining followers, building his movement in rural Galilee, speaking his truth to regional Power in the synagogue at Capernaum. He was preaching, teaching and healing, knowing that the central Powers from Jerusalem had sent agents to follow him. They confronted Jesus and accused him of having an evil spirit, breaking the law: “by the prince of the demons he casts out the demons”. And here’s the curious thing he said to them: “How can Satan drive out Satan? ... In fact, no one can enter a Strong Man’s house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob his house.”

## **Breaking in**

Let’s think about this idea of breaking in. Could it be that Jesus was suggesting that he was the one breaking into human affairs, tying up the Strong Man (Satan in the language of the day) and releasing all that he had hoarded (power over humanity

perhaps?). What does seem clear is that Jesus, with the crowd listening, was tying up the priests and scribes in their own logic and releasing their power back to the people.

So, the Strong One is the power that divides us and rules us, dehumanises, abuses, and damages in all the ways we see today in our work for justice and peace. The Strong One takes us away from God. We are part of it, it is part of us, and it multiplies through us. Unless we stop it.

Our struggle is to get free, turn the tide and change the power.

Yesterday, we heard from George Lakey about being broken, and how God enters into our brokenness and, with the angelic presence of others, transforms us. I'm sure I'm not the only one who was moved and able to relate to that.

When we sit in Worship, we prepare ourselves, we centre down and try to allow the Spirit to break into us. We metaphorically pull back the curtains and open our doors. We are giving up control, and inviting God in to disable and restrain the Strong One in us, and liberate whatever we possess for God's service.

### **Witness**

If we are serious about following those leadings of love and truth that we receive in worship, we will inevitably find ourselves in conflict with the world as it is – the Strong One.

Friends, restraining a violent person is a nonviolent act of love. Harm is not done. If the Strong One is a symbol for the human domination system of power, greed and violence, shouldn't our work be to do with restraining that?

Speaking truth to power creates an opening for the Spirit to break into the world, but if Power refuses the opportunity, aren't we, as agents of God, required to break in and liberate what is held in that house?

### **Strategy**

So what has all this to do with today's theme: "head"?

I think it's about being smart. We are very good at being "gentle as doves", this is about "being wise as serpents".

If we knock on the door of Power and say "We want to come in, tie you up and nick your stuff" - that's not going to work. We need to do some research and surveillance. We need to analyse where the Strong One's power comes from, and then find ways in which we can be effective in binding it/ neutralising it and taking it away.

There are hundreds of tools out there that can help us. And we can create our own. Let's look at a couple that we use in Turning the Tide workshops.

*[powerpoint: pillars of power – describe for visually-impaired folks]*

Imagine we're a local Quaker Meeting and we've just heard about a planning application to our local authority for test drilling for fracking in our neighbourhood. And we want to do something about that:

Taking away the props from the Strong One might well require help from others. We need to identify our allies. Also, those likely to oppose us. So here's another tool that we can use"

*[powerpoint: social speedo – describe for visually-impaired folks]*

## **Inspiring each other**

Turning the Tide has used tools like these for many years, but those two are consistent favourites with groups we've worked with. And the groups in Kenya really seized upon them.

I want to tell you about Margy, a participant in the first training we did in Kenya. When we moved the training on to another region the following year, she joined the facilitation team, as part of our rolling process of skilling-up. I'm convinced this was the moment that the project took root:

Margy said to the group: "This time last year, I was sitting where you are, not really knowing what was going on, wondering what it was all about. But I completed the training, and here's what I've done since". She then recounted a couple of amazingly successful campaigns that she and her small Turning the Tide group had done in their community:

They heard that many local subsistence farmers were being individually harassed by the bank to repay recent loans, despite agreements to pay back over a period of years/ The farmers were afraid they'd lose their homes and plots of land. Margy's group brought them together to plan collective action. They mobilised, lobbied, and negotiated between the bank and the farmers. The original agreement was restored.

Then they heard of a local bursary allocation committee was handing out education grants to favoured students, and not to those who really needed them. Margy's group brought the students together and supported them to oppose it. They organised a nonviolent sit down outside the council offices. This attracted a heavy police presence, but they refused to move until the chair of the bursary committee came out to them. When he eventually did, they agreed a meeting and the students put their case. The chair promised to investigate. And guess what? Payments were then made to the students that needed the money.

I was sitting next to Margy, as she described how they'd used the tools we'd just shown the group. I could see the effect she was having – it was electric! I saw jaws dripping and eyes widening. She did this in a year? And with a group of only 2 or 3 others? They were inspired and hugely motivated, and that group too went on to achieve some stunning campaign successes in their own neighbourhoods. And so it

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Notes for Steve intro, Monday

went on, each group inspiring, teaching and empowering the next. Binding the Strong One where they found it in their lives.

We can do that, Friends! We can, and do, share our stories, inspire each other. We can be more effective if we're smart enough, if we use our heads as well as our hearts, hands and spirit.

So Friends,  
how ready are we to take on the Strong One?  
How willing are we to be God's burglars?