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TAPESTRY

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The Spiritual Essence: Seeking and Shoveling

I have been devoted to a spiritual discipline of late whose lessons I believe may help us to bear with some of the difficulties in discussing the important tasks of civil rights and social change. The discipline I'm involved in, of taking the worst from the dark and bringing it out into the light for the miracle of growth, might teach us. I speak, of course, of shoveling out the outside – or, at our house, the bi-level composting toilet. I want to relate this task to the great Quaker tradition of seeking and especially seeking around controversy and conflict.

First Reminder: This Is Life Out of the Ordinary. This shoveling task is not reasonable. I have an image of summertime being spent at a swimming hole, of sipping ice tea, even of bringing in hay on a bright sunny day from open fields of great light. So to take a shovel and go into a cavern never meant for people to stand in is quite out of the ordinary, not regular life.

Thus it is with seeking, especially where there is any pain, or urgency, or intimacy. And because it's out of the ordinary we can expect to bump into things and move without grace at times. This doesn't mean turn back. It means go carefully. And remember how to say, "I don't know what this means" when that is your condition. We can all expect surprises that will make us uncomfortable whether it's seeing what we don't understand or having to say what we don't want to say. Just know we are not in Kansas anymore and that's partly why we are seeking.

Second Reminder: The Task Is Long. I take off the outdoor panel on the low part of our house's slope, and there, filling the doorway and overflowing its way into my heart, and sinuses, and sneakers, is a mix of poop and peat moss. I take a very large shovel, like the one my Uncle John used every milking to clean the barn, and I fill a small garden cart with four shovelfuls. Then I have to push the cart up a little hill, past the vegetable bed whose population of snakes gets more Indiana Jones-like each year. And then a bit more uphill to where Marshall has dug a long trench for the new iris bed. It will take four days and over a hundred trips to do this.

Likewise, to sort out, hear deeply, speak honestly, and accommodate all the discomfort with a difficult topic will take many, many trips back and forth. So let's pace ourselves for the long haul: community is worth the time and care.

Third Reminder: The Task Is Most Specific. I'm moving something that has needed to rest in the dark until it's ready and bring it out into the light and put it in the right place to plant something wonderful whose shape and color will delight us all. Not that this won't piss off some folks in a big way. Simply asking a question is making trouble, good Godly trouble, a fine old

it's just part of the work.

Sixth Reminder: Can we truly welcome honesty and pain?

Honesty and pain are necessary parts of the change of seeking. If you are desirous of change without honesty or pain you're better off sticking with television where trouble has an 18-minute format. In real life all reform – from mental health institutions to a woman's role in the family to the decisions about new weapons – will involve hearing things that are so ignorant or so true as to be frightening. And we cannot do without any of these truths. They have to be brought out, given light and space for us all to see how the problem is stuck, how it is constructed, and what part can be worked with now and what part later. It's vital to ask for all the honesty including the worst possible expressions to come forth. It's in the light of each person's essence that we can see what exactly we have to work with and how it all fits together. As the brave drag queens of Stonewall knew, change is no place for sissies.

Seventh Reminder: Is the Timing and Movement Organic? Some

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Quaker tradition. Can we keep our eyes on the intention and off the we-them/win-lose traps that lay all around us? If we can't, it doesn't spell failure. It probably means there is more pain than we can hold and still move right now.

Fourth Reminder: I Am Not Well Suited to the Task. Though I am less bothered than many by the disgusting parts of shoveling out a composting toilet, it would be better if I had heavy eye brows to direct the sweat away from my eyes. And though I am strong, it would be better if I weren't carrying so much extra weight before lifting the shovel. So too is the question for each of us: what do I bring to this process that may not

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help bring it to clarity? Can I declare this lack of clarity honestly?

Fifth Reminder: All progress comes from unreasonable people. If you are seeking the spiritual nature of a particular situation or clarity as to the how and why a certain thing is, you can expect trouble and delightfully so. Do you think in the 1600's when famous Quaker Margaret Fell said, "We'll have to go into that prison and shine God's love upon them", do you think for one moment every body present said, "Sure Meg, I'll pack the picnic baskets." Hell, no. They were thinking, "How can I get out of here and how did this babe get the keys to everything with her lunatic dreams?"

It reminds me of Quaker educator Bill Kreidler's wonderful speech where he asks us to be grateful in prayer for the conflict in our lives. While I understand Bill's idea, in my imperfection the closest I can get is to say, "Thank you that today didn't hurt as much as it could have."

And so if we are involved in covering new territory, it would be good if we didn't take personally many of the things that might get aimed our way. Anticipate the misunderstandings and the misinterpretations and try not to be insulted by them. In some ways,

work simply has to wait in the dark until it's ripe for change. Then comes the day when it's right to shovel and someone with a shovel shows up and the change begins. If it's not the right time, or there's no shovel or the person is squeamish about what the shovel is touching, a long and difficult work can be made more so.

Eighth Reminder: Be Mindful of Weariness. There is that terrible kind of mid-term fatigue that says, "Whose idea was this anyway? I'm pooped. Let someone else change the world. I'm going home and watching the ballgame with a brew." This is a good honest place to come to in difficult work and anyone who doesn't know this pit stop of doubt and fatigue hasn't been on much of an adventure. It includes blaming the leadership and feeling guilty for not being or doing enough. It's known in every organization that's attempting large work. So let's make space for it and not freak out when it shows up and let's give the person with doubt, fatigue, and pain a hug and a kiss and a break in the pace and see if we can then go on together.

Ninth Reminder: No Love Is Wasted. Every act of compassion finds a home and goes where it's needed whether or not we >>

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