

Us and Them
Address to Baltimore Yearly Meeting's Annual Session
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Good evening, Friends.

I believe that the business of all of our lives is to put our faith into practice. This evening I will be speaking on one small aspect of this that we all can do. The title of this presentation is "Us and Them?".

About five years ago I was at St Louis Friends Meeting (unprogrammed). Early in the Meeting, an elderly woman gave a message in which she indicated that "Whites" were "us" and "Blacks" were "them." Uhgh! I couldn't let this pass, but then Quaker Meeting is not a debating society and one needs to respect what people say, even when it shows racism. So after thinking deeply on the proper approach, I shared the message about the uselessness of racial classifications and the need to see everyone as a human being.

After the Meeting, a half European/half Asian member of the meeting thanked me for my comments as she felt that some response needed to be made. The really discouraging aspect of this interaction was that a young, White man was listening to us and he commented, "I didn't hear any racial slurs". So I had to explain to him that when you call "Whites" as "us" and "Blacks" as "them," you are excluding Blacks as a separate, alien group.

Then, recently a few years ago, there was a Quaker conference in Washington, DC and one of the main Quaker leaders working with the African Great Lakes Initiative in Rwanda was going to be in the United States at that time. I arranged for him to be a presenter at the conference. About two months later, the invitation was withdrawn because the organizers of the conference said that this particular African was homophobic. Really—I didn't know that! I complained but he was not put back on the agenda, although he was allowed to attend like anyone else. It then occurred to me that the organizers were confusing this Rwandan Quaker leader with a Kenyan Quaker leader who at that time was publicly quoted as opposing the elevation of the gay Episcopal bishop in New Hampshire. Are all Africans the same? Were they confusing two black men without investigating?

So I talked with the Rwandan and found that he was not homophobic. To really test this issue, I arranged for him stay with a lesbian couple in DC during the Quaker conference. The organizers of the conference had seen themselves as "us" and Africans as "them." One aspect of this labeling is that all of "them" are given stereotypes.

There are so many variations of this. White versus Black, rich/poor, male/female, educated/illiterate, pro-gay/homophobic, pro-choice/anti-abortion, blue states/red states, Friends General Conference (FGC)/Friends United Meeting (FUM). The list can be endless.

My understanding is that we all do this “us/them” dichotomy too frequently. When we do, it becomes a hindrance to understanding an issue and more importantly a block towards a resolution. As peacemakers fondly say all the time, “Conflict among humans is inevitable. It is how people deal with this conflict that is important”. My small bit of wisdom that I am adding to this is that when a conflict is defined between “us” and “them”, it becomes almost impossible to resolve. Think of the major, long-standing conflicts in the world—Israel/Palestine, Hindu/Muslim in India and Pakistan, the Christian/Muslim conflict now called the “War on Terror”. All are based on an “us-them” mindset. An important attribute of these dichotomies is that no one is allowed to be in the middle. People are not allowed to be “half and half”, to be mediators, to be neutral, to stand outside the fray. This is why us-them conflicts are so hard to resolve.

Friends have for decades realized ways to address this issue. I knew a Quaker woman in the Pittsburgh Meeting named Marian Hahn who traveled to the Soviet Union during the 1950’s to establish person to person contact between Americans and Russians. Others have done this with Cuba and most recently Mary Ellen McNish of the AFSC and Joe Volk of FCNL went with other religious leaders to establish dialogue with Iranians.

I learned my lesson early. When I was about ten years old, my Mom was driving me and some of my friends home from an activity. I was sitting in the back seat and I asked my friend, Lewis Levy, “Are you Jewish”? When we dropped off my friends and reached home, my Mom was irate. She said, “You never ask anyone that again”. Of course when you are ten you are just learning what is proper and improper in the world so I took this as a lesson. But what was the lesson? That you don’t ask people if they are Jewish? That you don’t ask people their religion? Their ethnicity? Any grouping whatsoever? I decided at that time that you were not supposed to judge people on group stereotypes, but look at each person as an individual and make any judgments on that person’s individual characteristics. As I have learned over life, this is a much harder, more involved rule to follow than just assigning stereotypes to people.

When my then future wife, Gladys Kamonya, came to the US in May 1995 she was taking care of children, one of whom attended Sidwell Friends School in Bethesda. Gladys’s grandmother was one of the first thousand or so Kenyans to convert to Quakerism around 1920. So on Sunday morning she got up bright and early, dressed in her Kenyan best, and went to Bethesda Meeting at 7:00 AM as they do in Kenya. She sat for two hours and no one showed up. She put \$5 into an envelope and slipped it under the door as an offering, another Kenyan Quaker custom.

When she returned home, her hosts told her she had to call to find out the time of the Meeting. It was 11:00 a.m. and so the next Sunday she attended her first unprogrammed Meeting for Worship. After Meeting she met Mary Holmes who told me this story. Mary

and her husband, Ed, had been with the US State Department in Kenya in the early 1960's so Mary was familiar with Kenya and Kenyans. She asked Gladys if she had any children in the United States. Gladys said, "No". Did she have any family in the US? Gladys said, "No". Mary was sad to see that Gladys had no one around to relate to, but Gladys responded, "But I have you", meaning the Quaker community. Mary says that she was so touched by this response.

So the question is, can you go to Kenya and go to a programmed Meeting for Worship and feel that you are at home? In other words, do you see Kenyan Quakers as "us" or as "them"?

In English we have two words, "guest" who is one of us and "stranger" who is one of them. In Swahili there is only one word, *mgeni*, which means both guest and stranger. In other words strangers are treated like guests. Americans who do go to visit Kenyans are often overwhelmed by how warm and friendly the Kenyans are.

These are rather benign examples. Let me give you a much more serious one. In the conflicts in Rwanda and Burundi, the "us" and "them" was Hutu versus Tutsi. Since everyone speaks the same language, has the same culture, lives side-by-side, and frequently inter-married, this Tutsi/Hutu divide had to be manufactured. Again there could be no one in the middle as everyone was the group of their father regardless of the group of their mother. So when the Tutsi soldiers in Burundi in 1993 ordered the students to go on one side if they were Hutu and the other if they were Tutsi, the sister-in-law of David Niyonzima, the former General Secretary of Burundi Yearly Meeting, stayed in the center because she was half Tutsi and half Hutu. The soldiers killed her.

Adrien Niyongabo is the Coordinator of the Healing and Rebuilding Our Community program in Burundi, sponsored by the African Great Lakes Initiative. The initials are H-R-O-C and this is pronounced "He-Rock". He was born and raised in Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi. When he was 7 his father left his mother and returned up-country. His mother was a Tutsi so Adrien thought he was a Tutsi – as with race no one ever tells you what ethnicity you are and you have to figure it out yourself. Then when he was a teenager he decided to find his "roots" and searched for his father upcountry. He met his father and found out that his father was a Hutu so Adrien, who thought he was a Tutsi, was now a Hutu. This led to ironic consequences:

In October 1993, the death of the first Hutu elected president gave rise to a new round of massacres between Hutu and Tutsi. The night of the 23rd, the governmental military, attacked my suburb. The Hutu were forced to leave the area or to hide themselves. As many others did, I followed the queue toward the hills surrounding Bujumbura. Unfortunately, after just one mile, I was stopped by two men with guns; stopped and forbidden to follow the others. Before I could even ask why, they added that I was a Tutsi who followed the Hutu so that I could investigate how things were settled and maybe go back to tell the governmental [Tutsi] army. "So, we are going to kill you," they said. I kept quiet waiting, expecting to see God in few seconds.

In a short time, a man came up to where we were and asked them what I was doing there. They answered him the same way they had told me before. And the man said, "Please, I know who is his Father, who is his Mum. He is a Hutu as we are. Let him join the others." One of the two men asked him: "Do you know him really"? The man responded by saying, "Yes, yes!!!" Turning to me, the two men with guns said, "You are saved, guy. You can keep on following others"! Could I believe it? Like a new morning, the dark night looked to me. My life was given back to me again. Praise the Lord! This entire incident came from the stereotypes, which we use in Burundi to say that this person is a Hutu or Tutsi. In some cases, one can be totally wrong, mostly with our patriarchal system, where one relies on his father's ethnic group independently from the mother's ethnic group. This event encouraged me to have an inward look. Many other innocent Burundians – men, women, girls, boys – like me I thought, would have been murdered in similar circumstances. I felt great bitterness and wished that I would get an opportunity to participate in reconciling the two groups.

But even in such dire situations people can transform their faith into practice. Here is my now favorite testimony from our HROC program in Africa. A Tutsi participant in a HROC workshop in Burundi made the following comments:

"During the crisis, Hutus took me from home and brought me down here to hang me on that big tree you see outside. I thank so much those Hutus for when we got here, they told me to run away. And then they started to shout loudly as if I am shouting for being killed. They told their friends that they killed me already and that the screaming they heard was from me. I am thankful to them so much. They saved my life. One of them is here." They hugged each other. It was a great time.

Laura Shipler Chico worked for AGLI in Rwanda for twenty months and wrote a number of excellent reports. Below is an email I once wrote her, followed by her response.

From Dave to Laura:

Since I am in a theoretical mood, before I have to go back to doing the mundane details of AGLI work, in your Nyamata report you have the comment:

Some see genocide as an extreme result of psychological projection: when one group projects all that is hated about itself onto another group, the target group comes to represent all that is bad and shameful and evil about ourselves. Then it becomes not only possible but necessary to exterminate.

I have found this to be extremely thought provoking. Can you add more to this idea so that I can understand (and think) about it more? I am wondering if this is not what the US is doing with "radical Islamic fundamentalists," i.e., when we are talking about them we are really talking about ourselves.

From Laura to Dave:

To put it simply, someone once told me that every time I criticize someone, I should just add three little words to the end of my sentence: "just like me." It is eerie how

consistently it works! This is psychodynamic theory – beginning with Sigmund Freud, continuing with Anna Freud (his daughter) and others. The theory talks about the defense mechanisms the mind or psyche sets up to protect the ego – or sense of self. Among these defense mechanisms are things we have all heard of – denial, acting out, intellectualization, etc. One of the most basic ones is “projection” – projecting that which we don’t like about ourselves onto someone else or a group of people, in order to preserve our own positive self-image. Absolutely, when folks in the US talk about radical Islamic fundamentalists, we are really talking about ourselves – I absolutely agree that this is part of the complex swirl of why it has been possible to sucker the American public into this war between civilizations. When we listen to how Bush characterizes the “enemy” and we add the three little words, “just like us” to the end, frighteningly, it almost always works.

As I listen to people discuss the personnel policy issue with FUM which defines marriage as between one man and one woman, I hear a lot of this projection--defining FUM as “them” even though as an FUM member “we”, Baltimore Yearly Meeting, are part of “them”.

One aspect of the mindset of “us-them” is that the customs of “them” are not even considered. For example, when FUM’s personnel policy statement was developed I don’t think FUM realized that at Friends Theological College – where Ann Riggs from Baltimore Yearly Meeting soon is going to take up the position of Principal – there was a Muslim who wanted to be married to a second wife as allowed by his religion. He was told that if he did so, due to this policy, he would be fired from his position at Friends Theological College.

In Africa, all countries except South Africa are legally homophobic. In Uganda there is a newspaper that “outs” supposedly gay men and asks the Government to arrest them under the anti-sodomy laws. In Kenya, when the former Attorney General, Charles Njonjo, wrote a pro-gay editorial, another columnist responded that this was equivalent to Charles Njonjo supporting cannibalism.

The African Great Lakes Initiative once did an *Alternatives to Violence Project* workshop in Lumakanda where Gladys and I live and I asked some of the participants later what effect did this have on them. One young man responded that a friend came to him with a great burden; he had strong homosexual feelings. He said that before the workshop he would have considered his friend “sinful” and would have avoided him. Instead, the young man talked and discussed this with him, although I doubt that he realized that those “homosexual feelings” weren’t just going to go away. This is a small step forward. Are Baltimore Yearly Meeting Friends going to continue to participate in such ongoing developments in Kenya by staying a part of FUM?

Here is a letter to the editor, published in the [Sunday Nation](#), a newspaper with a circulation of more than a million, from Sunday, December 28, 2008. It was written by a student identified only as “J. M. (Miss)” in response to an article on “vice” in boarding secondary school. I have no idea how this ever even got into the newspaper.

Vices rampant in boarding schools.

Your lead story in last week's Sunday Nation headlined "Boarding school nights of vice" is a drop of water in the ocean compared to the real vices going on in boarding schools.

Your team should come to the estates [residential sub-divisions of Nairobi] during the holidays and sample students from different boarding schools. The revelations will make parents know the truth.

I am a Form Three student in a private school in Kirinyaga. The majority of the school mates are from Eastlands, Nairobi. We have no pornography material in our school—security is good and girls do not run away.

Our life looks alright to an outsider. Lesbianism is popular among the students. This is a top secret known only to the students and a few teachers.

Girls are threatened with severe consequences by their school mates during school holidays if they dared to reveal the practice to authority.

The practice is confined to girls in the same dormitory to avoid movement at night. Activities take place between 1 am and 3 am on Saturdays. This is the best day to prevent dozing in class since students are free on Sundays.

Before, it was easy to know a "husband" girl. They kept short hair, wore boots and spoke in base to appear manly.

Most female student share sex with working men during school holidays for money [that is, they are prostitutes] but for enjoyment, lesbianism is the real thing. Times have changed. What was good for our parents is not what the girls deem to be good for them.

I invite research clubs in the country to get the real story of what goes on in schools from students in the estates. It appears our world and that of our parents are two separate entities.

The issue of homosexuality is going to develop in Kenya and Africa. Are we going to be present when this occurs?

If Baltimore Yearly Meeting withdraws from FUM over the personnel policy, then BYM is also withdrawing from Kenya and the Kenyan Quakers, as they are beginning to address this issue. Quakers are supposed to be consistent in their testimonies. If BYM were to withdraw from FUM because of the homophobic nature of their personnel policy, then BYM members cannot visit any part of Africa except South Africa: not to visit the Kenya Quakers – the largest body of Quakers in the world – not to go to conferences in Africa, not to see the wildlife or any other presence because in doing so we are entering

into and supporting a very homophobic world. I doubt BYM Quakers will do this because we compromise with that which we oppose when we have to.

Our impasse is due to the fact that we have defined the issue as the “pro-gay us” versus the “homophobic them”. I must add that we hardly know them and depend mostly on stereotypes which the Baltimore Yearly Meeting’s Intervisitation Committee – which I would hope would include the Kenyan Quakers – is trying to break down.

AGLI organizes workcamps each summer in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and Kenya, open to everyone. A few years ago we had an Evangelical Friend from Oregon come on a workcamp. If FUM Friends are stereotyped as “homophobic”, then Evangelical Friends are even more so. I picked up this middle-aged woman from Dulles Airport. We had not driven fifteen minutes before she told me that one of her gay friends would not contribute to her workcamp because Kenyans were known to be homophobic. Moreover she described how she had been working against the anti-gay initiative which was on the Oregon ballot at that time. In short she was the complete opposite of the stereotype.

George Fox advised us “to walk cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in every person”. If Baltimore Yearly Meeting withdraws from Friends United Meeting, then we are not following this advice. While not as famous as George Fox, my advice would be to stay engaged and “see what love can do”. Unlike God, we humans cannot see the future and we need to be present when that unforeseen future arrives.

If we are real peacemakers, we need to be aware of dividing the world into “us” and “them”. We need to be aware when others do this. We then need to confront these divisions. Only then can we be called “the children of God”.

To illustrate this, I would like to end with a five-minute video from one of our HROC workshops in Rwanda. It is called “Icyizere: Hope.” It was filmed by Patrick Mureithi, a Kenyan videographer, living now in Springfield, MO. I met him at St. Louis Friends Meeting about four years ago. He is finishing an hour-long documentary on HROC which I hope we will soon be able to show. This was the “teaser” that he used to help raise funds for the project. It illustrates attempts to overcome the “us-them”, the Hutu-Tutsi dichotomy of the tragic Rwandan genocide.

[The show “Icyizere” can be found at www.aglinonline.org]