

# The Best of Friends, vol. 1

ANTHOLOGY OF NEW QUAKER WRITING  
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FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

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*An Excerpt from*

## On Speaking Truth

Bonnie Zimmer

I am a Quaker - a Friend by conviction. And I am a whistle-blower. The two are inextricably bound together in that they are both about the power of truth in my life.

For me, the hardest part in embracing Quakerism has always had to do with truth telling. I grew up in a home and tradition where truth telling was given lip service, but where the rewards were dire and abusive. I learned at an early age to conceal my true self and to filter everything I said through my perceptions of what was acceptable to others. My spiritual journey has revolved around learning - slowly and often painfully - to be truthful with myself and with those around me.

As Quakers we don't speak often or effectively of the difficulty of speaking truth. We seem to assume that it is a good thing in itself, without need of explanation or embellishment. I think that we may do ourselves and our children a grave disservice when we ignore the real dilemmas associated with speaking truth. Except in trivial cases, it is usually not an easy "of course I will do that" decision. On the contrary there can be grave consequences - even death - when an individual elects to state uncomfortable truths.

As Friends, we should acknowledge and support the path that each person must follow to come to the place that is right for him or her. For example, my decision might well have been different if I had not known that my child would be safe and protected regardless of the path I chose to follow. I am not convinced that I would have been able to follow the path I chose if it would have been likely to directly or indirectly cause him harm.

The decision to blow the whistle on my employer - a government agency - was in some ways an easy decision, an extension of who I had become in my spiritual life. In other ways it was a decision fraught with fear of the consequences and overtones of childhood ogres, where speaking truth was frequently punished. In an effort to protect myself from some of the potential legal fallout, the actions that I took were always in strict accordance with the applicable laws.

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This was not an easy decision. Perhaps speaking truth is never an easy decision. I weighed various alternatives, from simply quitting my job to going along and being a "team player". I had faced a similar issue once before in my professional life. I was employed in the private sector and my employer directed me to falsify data on an analytical report. I chose to resign rather than compromise my professional reputation.

However, although the underlying issue was truth, the potential consequences were different. It was a situation with no apparent implications affecting public health or welfare. There was nothing to be gained by making a stronger statement. Simply quitting and working elsewhere was as effective as any other possible action.

In this case, there were broad implications for public health and safety. Participation in the required activities would involve at least tacit approval of policy decisions that were likely to result in serious environmental and health problems. It would also require participating in an unethical process.

In the end I knew that I would not respect myself if I did not speak. In retrospect, I would have suffered less if I had chosen to quit my job prior to taking the steps of opening the decision making process of a messy, political agency to public purview. Most professionals who take the step of actually confronting illegalities in the workplace resign their position and then hold a press conference. I, however, am usually an advocate of working on change from within an organization rather than casting stones from the outside.

I did not resign. I did not hold a press conference. At the outset I naively believed that the agency was acting illegally through a lack of understanding of the complex and confusing set of laws, rather than as a matter of public policy suborning the laws the agency was formed to implement and enforce.

I initially decided on a course of action in July 1995. At that time, I was acting as a conscientious employee with technical and scientific understanding of a complex regulatory system designed to protect human health and the environment. As I came closer to the time when I would have to take action on my decision by writing a formal memorandum detailing the actions in which I refused to participate as directed by my supervisor, I consulted an attorney. In the course of these legal discussions, the extent of what I was risking became clear - my professional reputation, at least in the near future, my personal safety, my career, professional friendships, and in all likelihood my family.

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The pattern of retaliation against whistle blowers, especially whistle-blowers employed by the government, was clear. My reputation as a careful and thorough scientist would be questioned and attacked. It was likely that I would lose my job or, at a minimum, be demoted with a concomitant loss in salary. It was likely that there would be threats and potentially property loss or personal harm. I was advised to change my telephone number to an unlisted number and to never travel alone. I was also warned that few marriages survive the stress and pressure of taking such an action....

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