

**A Religious Essay by Lloyd Lee Wilson**

## **Encounter with the Taproot**

While I was preparing these remarks, my mother called to let me know that the old home place had burned down: the farmhouse on the New River in the mountains of North Carolina which has been the focus of my experience of family roots and heritage. The farm itself has been in the family for over two hundred years. An even older farmhouse washed away in a flood some decades ago, and this newer house - "Uncle Will's place" - had become the center of life for the Bare family. Now not a wall stands. The only way to get to the main part of the farm, where the house stood, is to pole oneself across the New River in a flatbed boat - there are no roads on that side, and no bridges. So when lightning struck the house, the volunteers from the rural fire department had to park their pump truck on the other side of the river and wade across, dragging their hoses behind them through water up to their armpits. It was futile.

None of us will ever sit on that porch again, on the hillside overlooking the New River, rocking gently to the rhythms of the water, watching the chickens range along the riverbank and watching for signs of weather coming over the mountaintop on the other side. Gone, too, are generations of quilts that were stored in the attic. To appreciate this loss you must have some sense of the culture. Women in Ashe County were expected, well into living memory, to make a quilt for every year of their lives. When my grandmother died at 36 from complications of childbirth, her mother-in-law remarked that she had been somewhat of a slacker, having finished only 23 quilts in her 36 years. These quilts were in all the patterns and stitches one sees in museums today, and many others that I can describe only as "freehand": the design of a quiltmaker with a vision. My mother describes her experience, as a little girl, of taking over 150 quilts out for spring cleaning, hanging them over clotheslines, fence rows, bushes, and whatever was available so they could be beaten clean of the winter's accumulated dust and must. All were made completely by hand - not only was there no sewing machine, there were no electric lights until my mother left the farm in the 1940's to find work and sent money home to have electricity run to the house so lights could be installed.

All this leaves me with a profound sense of loss. My family's story - my story - has been cut off, shortened, diminished. I could sit on that porch and feel my ancestors seep into my bones; I could snuggle under those quilts and feel the loving care of my foremothers who made them, and the presence of generations of Bares who had also slept under them. Now these physical symbols of who I am and what it means to be me are gone forever.

Each of us seeks for meaning in our life, either in our personal accomplishments and accumulations or in some outside cause, or group, or story. Being a member of the Bare family has been an important part of my understanding of the meaning of my life - to be part of the ongoing story of the Bares. This fire is a clear reminder that nothing lasts forever - everything in this world passes away, whether farmhouse or quilts or jobs or beauty, power or prestige. If my

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identity, the meaning of my life, is based on these physical talismans my life has a very fleeting meaning, indeed - because I will die and everything I have touched will eventually pass away, whether done in by moth or rust or flood or stroke of lightning. The Bare family story is larger than my individual story, but it is still not large enough to last more than a few hundred years. Our national story is larger, and will survive any number of floods and fires and tornadoes, but history warns us it too, will eventually come to an end.

You and I are part of a still larger and longer story - we have an identity and our lives have a meaning far beyond our family history or national heritage. We are inseparably caught up in the grandest story of all: the Cosmic Story of the eternally developing relationship between the Creator and creation. All the other stories of which we may be a part: as individuals, as members of a family or citizens of a nation, as residents of a region or members of a religious community, take their meaning from the part they play in this Cosmic Story. I have a fresh awareness that no smaller story will ultimately be enough or can give our lives the meaning we want and need so much.

My experience is that there is a single Root of our faith and life as a religious society - a Taproot much older and runs much deeper than Quakerism. The taproot of a tree runs straight down from the trunk into the deepest soil, anchoring the tree against storms and providing nurture from the very deepest of sources. There may be hundreds of secondary roots, but only the taproot is necessary for the tree to survive and thrive. The Big Story - the Cosmic Story - is the story of creation's eternally repeated encounters with its Taproot.

We understand God, and the life that God yearns for us to live, primarily through these encounters. It is a blessing to each of us that we have, in the Bible, a record of over 3,000 years of these encounters, accumulated and passed down from generation to generation to guide us in our understandings and warn us away from mistakes others have made before us. One truth that stands clear in this anthology is that God is unchanging from age to age - but our understanding of God waxes and wanes, as we discover and forget basic truths over and over again. Some important truths we have yet to understand fully, or to accept and act upon consistently.

Bible study reminds us that our story, yours and mine, did not begin with our birth and will not end with our death. Our story did not begin with George Fox's birth; it did not begin with Jesus Christ's birth. Our story begins with God. Just as there is one God, eternal and unchanging, there is one Story about the relationship between God and God's creation: the Big Story, of which Moses and George Fox and you and I are little sub-stories. For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, each of these sub-stories proclaims the Truth of the Big Story of creation's repeated encounters with its Taproot.

Let us go back now over three thousand years, to the oldest story in the Bible. Let us retell a Taproot story: the story of the encounter which Moses had with the burning bush on Mount Horeb, the mountain of God.

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A long, long time ago, in a place very far away, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob fled to Egypt as refugees from a devastating drought and the resulting famine. They were well-received there, and protected from starvation. The drought eventually ended, but the Israelites stayed on in Egypt. Gradually, however, their life there worsened, until they became virtual slaves in the land, forced to the harshest labor and the worst living conditions, so that the Egyptians could live lives of relative ease. This went on for a long time, and there seemed no hope for the Israelites.

During this long period the king of Egypt died. The Israelites, groaning in their slavery, cried out for help and from the depths of their slavery their cry came up to God. God heard their groaning, God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God saw the Israelites and took note.

Moses was looking after the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led it to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame blazing from the middle of a bush. Moses looked; there was the bush blazing, but the bush was not being burnt up. Moses said, "I must go across and see this strange sight, and why the bush is not being burnt up." When Yahweh saw him going across to look, God called to him from the middle of the bush. "Moses, Moses!" he said. "Here I am," he answered. "Come no nearer," he said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your ancestors," he said, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this Moses covered his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Yahweh then said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying for help on account of their taskmasters. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. And I have come down to rescue them from the clutches of the Egyptians and bring them up out of that country, to a country rich and broad, to a country flowing with milk and honey, to the home of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. Yes, indeed, the Israelites' call for help has reached me, and I have also seen the cruel way in which the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now I am sending you to Pharaoh, for you to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

Moses said to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" "I shall be with you," God said, "and this is the sign by which you will know that I was the one who sent you. After you have led the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

This is the Taproot, the solid foundation of our faith, that the God of all creation has chosen to love us and care about our circumstances and to intervene in ways that liberate us from our suffering. The Israelites were not crying to Yahweh for help - the writers of Exodus are careful to make that clear in their narrative. Yahweh heard them anyway, and chose to care that they were suffering, and chose to take up their cause, to intervene in history to end their suffering, to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey. Yahweh did that for the Israelites because Yahweh chose to be in this special, covenant, relationship with them. We know now, as Christ has revealed to us, that God has chosen to be in this same relationship with every human being who

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is on earth - or who has been, or who will be. We all share in God's love and protection, not because of anything we have done or said, or our genetic makeup or geography of birth, but because God has chosen to love and care for all of us. Every human being is equal in the sight of God, because God loves and cares for us all equally - and that love and care set the standard for our relationships with God and one another. Friends have been proud of their testimony of equality. We are all equal, Friends often say, because we each have a bit of God within us. We speak reverently and thankfully of our experience of the Inner Light, the Inner Christ, which guides us and heals us in daily life. Here in Exodus we find a different twist on the basis for our equality: we are equal because God cares for each of us equally. To jump forward about 14 centuries, we are equal because Christ died as much for you as for me, and as much for Adolph Hitler and Timothy McVeigh as for either one of us. It is not wrong to say that we are equal because there is that of God within each of us, but it is dangerous. It is spiritually dangerous because we live in such an individualistic culture. We talk about the "Me Generation" but the phenomena is much larger than any one generation. In all of North American culture - religious, political, economic, and social - the individual is supreme. The focus is on whether I will get into heaven, whether my rights have been recognized or violated, whether I am financially secure into my retirement, and whether I am fulfilled as an individual. These concerns are not wrong in themselves, but they tempt us to substitute the good for the gospel - the most dangerous of substitutions. All of these cultural forces encourage us to put ourselves at the center of our story rather than God. When we add to that an emphasis on the God within, we must struggle fiercely against the temptation to become little gods in our own little universes, where the meaning of anything is decided by how it affects my own welfare and happiness. We have no responsibility for anyone or anything else because we did not create them and do not sustain them from moment to moment - forgetting that God created and sustains us always. At the center of our little story, the only meaning is "more for me", which ultimately is meaningless since ultimately "me" dies. Yahweh revealed in the burning bush is not God within Moses, or God within the Israelites, but God the profoundly "other" - the mighty creator and sustainer of all creation. I can not be at the center of any story that includes Yahweh as revealed in Exodus - only God can be at the center of that story. Paradoxically, it is only when I am no longer at the center of my story, and Yahweh is, that my life assumes its deepest, truest, and eternal meaning. Please don't misunderstand me. God is both immanent and transcendent - within and without - and has been since the beginning of creation. George Fox's realization of and emphasis on the direct communion with Christ, and the expression of that realization by Friends as God within, were an important manifestation of Truth. In a time and culture that debated whether women had souls, that countenanced slavery and economic oppression, that denied the value of the individual human being in so many ways, early Friends' emphasis on the immanent nature of God was a blessing and sweet savour to many souls. God has not changed; the God within is still there, as much as ever. Time and culture do change. In the present day and in the North American culture, we do not need to emphasize the worth or rights of the individual - the secular culture is doing that to excess, and much of the so-called religious culture is also. Our challenge is to re-attach the individual to the source of meaning beyond the personal pronoun, beyond "I" and "me" and "mine". Our call is to tell the Old, Old Story in new and fresh ways, to re-acquaint souls with the Author and Perfecter of their very being - to help them hear the story with new ears and to see

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the world and their place in it with new eyes. Those who do will realize that the only story that is ultimately satisfying has God at the center - not them. Every time we do this - every time we tell the Big Story from the heart - the one person we know will be changed is ourselves. As we say at Norfolk Quaker House, our work is to be spiritual midwives in a process of spiritual conversion in our clients - and the one person we know will be converted is the counselor. Considering the Exodus story, hearing and telling of this first encounter between Moses and Yahweh, I am transported by the transcendent God - Creator and Sustainer of the universe, profoundly Other - not human at all - yet filled with such love and care for suffering human beings. I am inseparably caught up in the Cosmic Story, with God at the center. The meaning of my life is expressed in God's infinite love for me: God created me, and God sustains me from moment to moment by continuing to will my existence; and the same is true for you and for all of creation. I have meaning because God's love affirms that I am indeed, for all my warts and flaws, very good. That is the beginning of a new understanding of how you and I are called to be in the world. When I understand the transcendent God to be at the center of the Cosmic Story, then God's affirming and sustaining love for me calls me to act on behalf of my fellow human beings with new strength and courage and commitment. God's love and care for those who suffer calls each of us and all of us to care equally deeply - and like God, to take up the cause of the suffering and oppressed and to intervene on their behalf.

God cares about the Israelites because they are God's chosen people and they are suffering. Whether they have an Inner Light is never mentioned; whether or not they are living righteous, holy lives is not discussed; there is no intrinsic quality in the Israelites that makes them worthy or deserving of God's care and intervention. God cares about the Israelites because God chooses to care, God chooses to love. God loves without regard to the worthiness of the individual, and intervenes to end their suffering and oppression because of God's love. So should we.

God's love and care for those who suffer makes clear why I should care about my neighbor's plight: I should care because God cares. Realizing that God is the true center of my story and every story, and experiencing God's infinite and unmerited love for all of creation, will result in a change of the central faith question for most North Americans. The central faith question for Christians in North American is usually some variation of "How can I be saved" or "How can I be righteous enough to earn God's favor?"

That question comes from a number of sources, including our individualism, the richness of our society which gives us what the rest of the world would experience as limitless options to do or not do works of faith and religious discipline, and the desire of individuals at the center of their own story to control an uncontrollable God. "How do I get into Heaven?" is the question most of us are asking, and it also translates into "What is the minimum necessary for me to do that will force God to accept me?"

When God is at the center of the story, when my relationship to God is bound up in God's love and concern for me and my plight, and I experience that God loves and cares for every person and all of creation with the same intensity, then the central faith question is no longer "Am I

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saved?" or "How can I get saved?" I am justified not by my works, and not by my faith, but by God's unmerited grace. I am already saved, by God's initiative. I have only to respond to God's invitation. The central faith question then becomes "Why is the world this way, and what can I do about it?" Surely it is not God's will that there be so much suffering and oppression and grinding poverty in the world that God created and sustains from moment to moment and loves so much. What causes the suffering? Not generic suffering, but the suffering of this individual person, and that individual person: why do they suffer?

And what can I do about it? God's example in Exodus is clear - God not only hears the groans of the Israelites, God cares, God takes sides, and God intervenes in history on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, and the powerless. We are called to do the same in the present day.

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus makes the one unequivocal promise of when we will meet him in our daily life: when we give food and drink to the hungry, hospitality to the homeless, clothing to the naked, when we visit the sick and the prisoner . When we do this to the least of persons, we do it to Christ. The concern of the church - particularly the church in North America - has been for the nonbeliever: who has been saved so far and how do we reach the rest. From Moses to Jesus to John Woolman to Dom Helder Camara, God has been telling us that the more important concern is for the nonperson - those whom we discount and treat as being of no value in our society.

My wife Susan and I help out on the breakfast line with the Norfolk Catholic Worker folks one morning each week, on a side street not too far from the center of downtown. Salter Street runs between a parking lot and a cemetery. After forcing the breakfast line to move from several other locations more convenient to the people we serve, city officials have tolerated our presence on Salter Street - after all, our homeless friends observe, "No one lives there to complain!" Working from three coffee tables in good weather or out of the back and side of a van when it rains, we give grits, coffee and a sandwich to as many as 125 homeless men, women and children. I realize that I can be present in that activity in many different ways that really center on me, not them: out of a sense of guilt and obligation, or a desire to record another good work on my spiritual ledger, or to enhance my reputation in the religious community, or other reasons you can name. And the hungry will get fed, and the institutions of power, prestige and possessions will applaud the work - see, we care about the poor - they get their meals at that breakfast line.

However, when I am feeding the hungry out of participation in God's love for them, when God is at the center of the activity, then simply feeding them soon becomes insufficient. If God loves these homeless people so much, then it can not be God's will that they experience such poverty and pain. One has to ask the question, "Why is the world this way? Why do these people suffer?"

Asking that question "problematizes" the situation, and brings the wrath of the same institutions of power, prestige and possessions that applauded the simple act of feeding the poor. If God does not will that some people be homeless, have no job or access to health care, who does? If we agree not to blame the victim, then why is the world this way? Who put the structures together so

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that these people suffer? Who benefits from their being kept where they are, where they suffer so much? These are not questions that those at the top of society like to hear. As Dom Helder Camara, former Archbishop of Recife, observed, "When I give food to the poor they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist."

Susan tells a story of discovering a baby in the midst of a river, about to drown. Naturally, you jump in and save the baby. Before too long, you see another baby, and jump in and save that one, too. Before too long, you have organized a rescue squad to watch the river and pull the babies out, built an orphanage to take care of them once they are safe and a school for the older children who have been at the orphanage for a number of years. You develop a network of supporters whose donations help finance better rescue equipment, buy food and clothing for the babies, and so on. You've gotten really good at pulling babies out of the river. When are you going to send someone upstream to find out how and why the babies are getting into the river to begin with?

Yahweh is not content to start a soup kitchen for hungry Israelites, or to arrange for better medical care, or supply better tools to ease their workload. Yahweh goes upstream, to change the structure of Egyptian society to liberate the Israelites from their oppression. Yahweh's word to Pharaoh is not "Pay my people better" or "Overtime for more than 40 hours per week" or "Free straw for brick-makers"; Yahweh's word is "Let My People GO!"

If we really experience the direct communion with God proclaimed by George Fox and multitudes of other Friends for 350 years, then we can't help but share God's concern for the poor and oppressed, God's preferred location among them, and God's commitment to intervention in human history on their behalf. We're going to have to live in solidarity with the poor - not just throw money over the wall at them - and work to establish an entirely new Great Economy that reflects God's values and God's love for all people and all of creation. We're going to have to build an Economy of Grace to replace the Economy of Debt that encircles and enslaves us all.

The story of the Burning Bush calls us to live in community, tells us who is in that community, and shows how it is to be done. Our basis for being able to be in community with one another is our covenant relationship with God. In the Exodus story God demonstrates the nature of that covenant: God initiates, and we respond. God heard the groans of the Israelites, even though they were not calling to Yahweh; God cared about their plight, and intervened radically on their behalf. We are called to emulate that relationship with one another by hearing, and caring, and taking radical action.

We can be in community with God only when our community includes those people for whom God has shown a loving preference: the poor, the powerless, the oppressed people who are at the periphery of society, at the bottom of the pyramid of power, wealth, and prestige. They are not the only members of God's community, but if they are not fully part of it, God is not fully present.

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To include these folks in our community forces us to step outside the social, political, religious, and economic structures that serve you and me so well. We will have to see these institutions from the perspective of the bottom, of the margins, and understand their flaws as well as their strengths. And because these structures in fact do not work for all the members of our community, we will have to re-structure ourselves in ways that more truly reflect the value God places on each human life.

I do not mean that we should dedicate our lives to opposing the structures and institutions of social and economic injustice, or political oppression. Our struggle is not against the oppressors, or the powerful, or the rich, or the institutions which serve their purposes. That struggle is just another form of domination, and our victory would only perpetuate the old injustices, with different actors in the various roles. You become what you fight against, and if we fight against the structures of oppression hard enough we will succeed in placing ourselves at the top of the pyramid instead of who is there now - another failure. Our struggle is for the oppressed, for the suffering, for the poor and powerless, to relieve their pain and create a world free of all forms of domination.

To do this we must learn to create new social and economic relationships, new circles of community that embody God's Great Economy, God's divine plan for all of creation. It will not be easy, and those who benefit from the present system will not come flocking to join us. The parable of Luke Chapter 19 warns us, as it warned the disciples, just how hard and painful this effort will be. It also will not be quick. Jesus said that if we exorcise one demon, seven more will come to confront us. If we exorcise those, 49 more will come, and so on - you do the math. It will be the work of a lifetime just to start the journey toward the Great Economy.

This is, however, the work to which we are called, the commission arising from our encounter with the Taproot of all creation. This is the point of the Cosmic Story, foreshadowed in the Garden of Eden and modeled among the creatures on the Ark in the midst of the Flood. This is the Promised Land of the Exodus story, and this is the holy city foreseen in the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride dressed for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, "Look, here God lives among human beings. He will make his home among them, they will be his people, and he will be their God, God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness or pain. The world of the past has gone."

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