



Praying for Others the Quaker Way

Bringing people's needs before God by "holding them in the Light"

From the syndicated column "The Prayerful Heart"

By Julie McCarty

When it comes to praying for others, I sometimes find myself at a loss for words. If a person with an incurable illness is suffering tremendously, do I pray for a long life or a gentle, peaceful death? In the case of a troubled marriage involving repeated physical abuse, do I pray for the couple to remain together, knowing that someone will likely get hurt? If someone is facing a tough decision, do I pray for the outcome that *I* think is best?

Mary, the mother of Jesus, recognized that there is no need to dictate predetermined solutions to God. At the wedding feast in Cana, when she realizes the wine is gone, she does not micromanage Jesus. Mary simply brings the problem to his attention. "They have no wine," is all she says, perhaps with a loving, trusting look in her eye. She shows her complete confidence in his ability to remedy the situation when she turns to the servants, saying, "Do whatever he tells you."

The Religious Society of Friends, commonly called the Quakers, have a similar way of bringing other people's needs before God, a way they call "holding someone in the Light."

In Quaker spirituality, the image of light represents the mysterious presence of God. Friends might describe the Light as the Holy Spirit, the Inward Light, "Christ in You," or "that of God in everyone."

To hold someone in the Light is to seek, through prayer, to bring that person into deeper contact with the Divine Presence. Some Quakers imagine the person for whom they are praying actually bathed in a beautiful, gentle light, or picture them surrounded with a halo-like quality.

Noted Quaker writer Douglas V. Steere describes it this way: "I hold up persons before God in intercession, loving them and seeing them with God, longing for a healing and redeeming power to course through their lives. I hold up certain social situations, certain projects. At such a time I often see things that I may do in company with or that are related to this person or this situation. I hold up the persons in the meeting and their needs, as I know them, to God."

In talking with members of the Twin Cities Friends Meeting in St. Paul, Minnesota, I discovered that holding someone in the Light means different things to different people. Not all use their imaginative faculties; some use a few words, and others do not. There is nothing formulaic about holding someone in the Light, noted Joseph Landsberger, a website developer for the University of St. Thomas. He added that when he holds someone in the Light, he focuses on how he can best support that person in their time of need.

Eighty-three-year-old Friend Dorothy Ackerman told me that holding a person in the Light means focusing on "that of God in each person." For example, when someone is ill, it is as

if their inner energy is running very low, like embers in a fire that are nearly out. When we hold this person in the Light, it is like fanning the flame of God within him or her.

When asked how to hold someone in the Light, Mary Beth Young replied that she just couldn't describe it, but that she knew one thing: it really works! Years ago, on the day of her husband's cancer surgery, she felt the power of so many people holding them in the Light. "It felt like I had wings on my heels!" she proclaimed enthusiastically.

Praying for each other bonds us together with cords of love. As Douglas Steere writes, "For when we hold up the life of another before God, when we expose it to God's love, when we pray for its release from drowsiness, for the quickening of its inner health . . . only then do we sense what it means to share in God's work, in His concern; only then do the walls that separate us from others go down and we sense that we are at bottom all knit together in a great and intimate family. There is no greater intimacy with another than that which is built up through holding him or her up in prayer."



For more information:

"Prayer and Worship" by Douglas V. Steere (Friends United Press).

To read what other Quakers have to say about "holding someone in the Light," visit the Ann Arbor Friends Meeting online at www.annarborfriends.org (select "Readings for Reflection" and click on August and September of 2003).