9.
An Apocalyptic Life

In the Introduction and "Richmond, Indiana" essay of this collection, I wrote a little about my calling to ministry in 1968, my recent years in retirement from active ministry, and the emergence of my interest in the common. "Called into the Common" also reflects, both tacitly and overtly, my experience of following the call. But perhaps something more should be added with this final essay about the overall life experience that gave rise to this book.

In the Religious Society of Friends where my ministry has unfolded, Quakers expect one's convictions to have a basis in personal experience. So I will attempt to supply that here, since so much in this book is far-flung in time and space. My experiential basis is more paradoxical, theological, and historical than the narrowly personal framing with which my contemporaries often describe their experience. In that regard, I find more resonance with early Friends such as George Fox, James, Nayler, and Isaac Penington, who correlated their experience with the dramatic times in which they lived. That's why I spent so many years listening to early Friends, and expended so much effort to make their witness more accessible and compelling to Friends today. But in the head-long era in which I have lived, that has proved to be a fool's errand.

So in this collection of essays and in *Life in Gospel-Space,* I have taken what I learned from early Friends, and from the biblical witness that framed their experience, and have recast it into an understanding of the common, which in this century will prove to be either our common weal or common woe. Perhaps, just as early Friends are too far in the past for most readers, a widespread perception of the common is still somewhere in the future. But both past and future are present in the present to those who listen. What I write here is grounded in this present, and the presents I have lived over the course of my life, in the Presence of the One who keeps calling and drawing me on. Of course, anyone's life is more multidimensional than what follows. But my aim is to describe the aspects of my life that inform this book. Hence, much of what follows is spiritual and intellectual autobiography.

Formation

I suffered an unusual sequence of childhood illnesses around the years four to seven, keeping me out of school and driving me deeper inside myself. It left a decisive imprint on my personality, which could probably be termed schizoid: not schizophrenia but a deep division between the inner and outer worlds, between feeling and expression, thought and action. I experience a distance from the world around me, but with a sympathetic feeling for others. But it often feels like a leap across the void to speak or act on that feeling. Early on, I found I had a sufficient verbal gift, often spontaneous and playful, to appear "normal," even "intelligent."

With my parents and older brother, I grew up a member of a large, mildly liberal pastoral Friends meeting in Indianapolis. The Christian teachings I received offered nothing to rebel against, but not much to arouse serious faith either. But I sensed the Presence sometimes in the quiet parts of our meetings for worship. I also loved walking in the Indiana woods and fields. I was probably more a nature mystic than anything else. I sensed the Presence in that quiet realm, among the other species of life. In my teens, I was drawn to study in the biological sciences, as an intellectual complement to my spiritual sense of the natural world. I had vague ideas of becoming a scientist and entered Indiana University in September 1967 as a zoology major.

But a year later, in September 1968, I experienced a distinct calling to "be a minister," during a quiet evening alone in my dormitory room. I was in distress over the break-up of my first love. I was not in a state of mind to think vocationally, and I had never considered ministry in any case. But the words came so distinctly and *a propos* of nothing, I knew this was something to take seriously. Over the next twenty to thirty minutes, I realized that the words *named* something I already was, and *called* me to grow into that person more fully. That is, I realized I already had the sense of divine Presence in my life and a feeling for that Presence in others. But I needed to learn what it is to "be a minister" and how to minister to others.

I finished my zoology major but began planning to go on to theological seminary after college. My love of the natural world was undiminished and I continued to soak up my scientific training. But I also took elective courses in the large religion department at Indiana University. Biblical courses were especially interesting to me. Historical critical methods of reconstructing the biblical narratives only added to their depth. They complemented the evolutionary science I was also learning. This was my first experience of *transcoding* different worldviews and realms of knowledge. I implicitly understood that it was crucial to let each speak its own language and not reduce one to the other. For example, evolution should not be reduced to, or eliminated by, the biblical story of creation, any more than the latter should be over-ruled by the former. They speak different truths to open minds.

All this was unfolding against the chaotic times of the late 1960s in American culture, most acutely the year of my call. As I've mentioned earlier in this book and in *Life in Gospel-Space*, the world that had formed me up to that point was ending. The Prague Spring, the Chinese cultural revolution, the Tet offensive in Vietnam, the King and Kennedy assassinations, the chaos of the Democratic National Convention, the election of Richard Nixon, and much more that year turned the world upside-down, even for an apolitical moderate Republican like myself at age nineteen. But the first inklings of a new world were also showing. The women's, Latin, and gay rights movements built on the identity politics

pioneered by the civil rights movement. And the first Earth Day in April 1970 marked the early stirrings of the environmental movement. I read Garrett Hardin's article, "The Tragedy of the Commons" for an ecology course that spring.

More transcoding soon followed. I chose to enroll at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where I began in September 1971. I had lived comfortably in the Midwestern world of Indiana, but when someone suggested Union to me, the thought of living in New York was suddenly compelling. It had the same quality of a blind-side revelation as the calling to ministry had for me. New York and East Coast culture in general offered a stimulating new realm. The city was entering a period of financial collapse, which induced a pervasive edginess. Punk and new wave rock music as well as other new artistic movements generated from that edginess. My schizoid personality could not range very far into those scenes but I observed them with fascination and rocked with the music.

At Union, I was one of very few students coming to theology from a science background. That was a learning curve for me, but my interest in biblical studies continued to grow. Close attention to texts and contexts was something akin to the scientific observation of natural phenomena. In particular, recent scholarship on the rise of apocalyptic literature in the late Old Testament period and the experiential apocalyptic eschatology in Paul's letters resonated with my calling and my experience of the 1960s. I was also reading new Christian eschatological theologies from Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. I was fortunate to have a course on the Book of Revelation with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who was then a visiting professor at Union, just before I graduated in 1975. Apocalyptic eschatology, particularly in the experiential mode, became a key lens for understanding myself and the world around me.[i]

Also during that last year, I had an encounter with the risen Christ (again amid the wreckage of lost love) which I describe in Chapter 11 of *Life in Gospel-Space*. That encounter crystalized my Christian faith within the framework of my engagement with Hebrew and Christian Scripture as a whole. The person of Jesus in his absolute singularity further focused my sense of calling into my own singular path. The teachings of Jesus were couched mainly in the idioms of Jewish folk wisdom. But his message of the in-breaking kingdom of heaven, using the experiential forms of parable and simile, evinced an eschatological outlook that meshed well with Paul's apocalyptic sense.

In all this, I still felt like a Hoosier (Indiana native) and enjoyed balancing nine months of the year in Manhattan with three months in the woods as a state park naturalist back in Indiana. The Hoosier and the New Yorker, the rocker and lover of classical music, the nature mystic and student of the Bible: the life in common was growing, in communion with the One.

As I was graduating from Union, I was called to serve as pastor by a Friends meeting in Noblesville, a little north of Indianapolis. Pastoral ministry was the idiom of ministry I knew. I had gained some experience of liberal, non-pastoral, "unprogrammed" Friends meetings in New York. But what I heard there in spontaneous vocal ministry didn't impress me as ministry. The early post-sixties counterculture still swirled with agitation and garbled messages. I was happy to launch into my first pastorate and assumed that I would settle down there. But I soon felt increasingly unsettled. There were personal issues: small-town life after four years in New York, and not finding a mate to settle down with. But it felt like something more in 1976-77. As in 1968, something larger in the culture was shifting. In New York, London, Manchester, and Cleveland – all cities in financial crisis – punk rock was breaking out as a recognizable phenomenon that seemed to express rage at some impending force. In retrospect, I understand what I sensed was the looming advent of neoconservative politics and neoliberal economics. These didn't come into view until the rise of Margaret Thatcher in Britain in

1979 and Ronald Reagan's election as president in 1980. But I felt the regressive undertow in politics and culture by 1976, notwithstanding the election of Jimmy Carter in the wake of Nixon's Watergate demise. (Some later times of crisis in my life seemed to resonate with wider crises, but I won't complicate this essay with them. I eventually explored the interaction of personal feelings and cultural affects in a study of Friends General Conferences, *A Gathering of Spirits* [2018]).

In 1976, I read George Fox's *Journal* for the first time. Fox was the central, catalyzing figure in the early Quaker movement in mid-seventeenth-century England. Fox had come of age during the chaos of the English Civil War of the 1640s, when many radical ideas in politics and religion burst forth. I recognized it as a time similar to the 1960s in the United States, when I was coming of age. Fox's integration of those radical ideas and experiments in the 1650s produced an apocalyptic message similar to Paul's. And Fox interpreted the Book of Revelation in ways that engaged personal experience of the light of Christ with resistance to the forces of England's state-enforced church and its concomitant church-sanctified state. I realized that my background in apocalyptic theology at Union provided a framework to identify the overall coherence and social power of Fox's writings. This had not been sufficiently identified by historians. I thought it might have catalyzing effects upon modern Friends, who were generally inured to evangelical or universalist reductions of Quaker faith and practice.

I also began writing and singing songs, inspired by Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, Bob Marley, and others. The parables of Jesus offered other inspiration. My guitar-playing and singing were very basic, but I was emboldened by punk primitivism. The ironic, paradoxical, often humorous theology of my songs engaged listeners. Song-writing became a playful, left-handed outlet for my ministry, alongside preaching and scholarship. My sense of what it means to "be a minister" was expanding.

But by 1977 I was in rough shape emotionally and spiritually. My hope for a settled life had faltered. Restlessness drove me to return East to pursue this fresh interpretation of Fox and early Friends. I entered doctoral studies at Drew University in New Jersey (1977-82), which led to a dissertation on Fox, which later became my first book, *Apocalypse of the Word: The Life and Message of George Fox* (1986).

I lived again in New York, barely supporting myself with part-time work for the American Friends Service Committee, writing educational materials on hunger and development. I felt more conviction engaging larger, systemic issues than I had experienced with the mostly reactive politics of the anti-war movement during the previous decade. In particular, a critique of the emerging global capitalist regime became compelling to me when I heard Richard Barnet give a lecture on global reach of multinational corporations, and when I heard the pioneering economist Seymour Melman speak of America's permanent war economy. Meanwhile, I was reading books by Marxist historian Christopher Hill on radical religion in the 1640s and -50s, and the emerging capitalist economics in seventeenth-century England. I didn't feel he understood early Quakers very well, but his overall framework of interpretation advanced my work on Fox.

So here emerged another form of transcoding, between apocalyptic Christian theology and Marxist theories of capitalism and revolution. That interaction has been operative in almost all my writings up to this present volume. Neither code attracts many Quaker readers, and the combination of the two is positively repellent. Of course, biblical apocalyptic has been discredited by Christian millenarian misappropriations; and Marxism has been anathematized by the horrors of Stalinism and Maoism. In any case, both codes appear irrelevant amid the deluge of the information age, and as techno-capitalism drives us onward at accelerating speed. But the Christian's dark night of the soul, the

Marxist's dialectical *aporia,* can be a productive place to stand still and receive new revelations, to discern new ways forward.

Most of my years in doctoral studies were spent living low-rent in a part of Flatbush Brooklyn that was almost entirely African- and Latin-American, with a large influx of illegal Haitian immigrants. It offered a much fuller immersion into life among people of color than my years in the academic bubble of Union Seminary and Columbia University in lower Harlem. It was instructive to spend a few years as a minority person, not especially welcome but tolerated, sometimes befriended. I appreciated listening to the conversations around me and soaking up the affective atmosphere. For me, this was more instructive than today's academically arranged dance-steps of interracial awareness. My future ministry was largely in the Quaker world, awash in white normativity. So the Brooklyn years were especially valuable.

I also began attending Brooklyn Friends Meeting, a liberal unprogrammed meeting with a rich cultural life. Writers, actors, artists, and academics were all around. The mystery writer Stanley Ellin and his wife Jean were regulars. F. Murray Abraham was just starting to transition from the New York stage to Hollywood. I remember the novelist Jonathan Lethem as a young teenager there. I gained a greater appreciation for unprogrammed, non-pastoral Quaker worship, with its universalist engagement other faiths and cultural traditions. I already shared the Quaker conviction of "that of God in every one," but it was helpful to hear how these Friends articulated it. So these further transcodings – interracial and intra-Quaker – took shape by the time I finished my PhD studies at age thirty-three.

Mapping

Thus far, I have described a mainly linear, temporal trajectory of personal formation. The metatemporal dimension also has come into view: that is, the apocalyptic revelation that draws one toward the One's ultimate, common future (described in various was in preceding essays). The spatial dimension has also appeared in my oscillation between Indiana and New York, and between natural and urban landscapes, the natural and cultural commons. Of course, none of this was very intentional or conscious in my mind at the time. I was simply following the leadings I received subsequent to my call. In *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) Marxist cultural theorist Fredric Jameson describes the postmodern as the result of modernity's conquest of traditional cultures and societies around the world. The Eurocentric modernity that had triumphed in *time* became a variety of culturally tinged modernities spread across the regularized grid of global *space,* as it was reorganized by capitalist economics. Space began to eclipse time.

The effects were subtle but profound. The modern confidence in *progress* shifted toward a postmodern concern for *processes*: that is, better technologies of communication, production, and circulation; and socially, group techniques to ensure greater equity among peoples of various cultures and identities. This emerging world system was optimistically described by Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History* (1992). But it didn't feel like the promise that had given me hope for myself in common with all creation.

In October 1982, I defended my dissertation at Drew, married Dorian Petri under the care of Brooklyn Friends Meeting, and we started our move to Berkeley, California – all in the course of six days. That intensified temporal moment marked the end of my formative period and the beginning of an enlarged mapping of space over the next four decades. The move to California kept the Indiana-

New York oscillation from becoming a rigid binary, even a cultural and political dualism, as it has become for many. The occasion of the move was a call from the Berkeley Friends Church to serve as their pastoral minister. I didn't see a teaching opportunity and I had ambivalence about academia in any case. Dorian was a modern dancer and the Bay Area was a promising place for her to continue that work. My work as pastor there was rewarding, and I was able to further my intra-Quaker transcoding by helping one of the two liberal unprogrammed meetings in Berkeley to begin sharing our meetinghouse. The interface was stimulating to a few of us in both meetings, but mildly off-putting to most, who strongly preferred one theological universe over the other.

Berkeley and the wider Bay Area was a beautiful environment and a stimulating cultural space. Silicon Valley was exploding and California's westward face toward Asia countered New York's cultural orientation toward Europe. I bought my first computer in late 1983, shortly before IBM's PC came out. I had begun jogging earlier that year. Personal computers and joggers were everywhere and I soaked up the cultural affects. Meanwhile, I worked my dissertation on Fox into my first book, *Apocalypse of the Word*, which came out in 1986 – and was already scheming new writing projects. But the unsettledness I had experienced during my first pastorate in Indiana soon recurred in Berkeley, even though I dearly wished to settle into my new life there with Dorian. We were able to buy a small cottage in a mostly African American neighborhood in West Berkeley. We enjoyed improving the house together, but even that ballast didn't help. I began to experience my calling as something like the "daemonic possession" Ernst Bloch describes (see the preceding essay) when one lives into radical hope.

My theological analysis of Fox's writings had barely explored the social radicalism, even revolutionary impetus of the early Quaker movement. I needed to build a larger theological and theoretical framework for that. *Apocalypse of the Word* is largely a synchronic treatment of Fox's writings as a static coherence. The next project needed to be more diachronic, following the development of early Quaker revolutionary activity amid the mercurial changes of the English Commonwealth/Protectorate and subsequent Restoration period. This required a deeper dive into seventeenth-century history. But I balanced that with readings in current Latin American, feminist, and other liberation theologies. A major help was Norman Gottwald's monumental *Tribes of Yahweh* (1979), which radically rereads Israel's ancient history in liberationist terms, using Marxist and other social theories. (Readers will have heard his reconstructions summarized variously in these essays.) Gottwald's work helped me wrest the early Quaker movement out of denominational beginnings and into the nonviolent revolutionary struggle early Friends clearly intended. Once I began rereading early Friends from that perspective, the biblical theology of covenant loomed forth in their writings. Covenant constituted the principle of coherence in their revolutionary faith and practices, complementing the principle of discontinuity in their world-ending apocalyptic spirituality and their prophetic confrontations with English religious and social norms.

Finally, Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious* (1981) put further framing around the new work, correlating early Quaker writings and revolutionary activity with the larger historic shift from late feudal to early capitalist modes of production. This would be the story of a brilliant defeat: early Friends suffered severe persecution in their witness for a more just and peaceful English society. But as Jameson epitomizes in his book, "History is what hurts." It felt important to help contemporary Friends feel that hurt, to know that revolutionary defeat, the failed messianic vocation that lurks below the middle-class good causes that our beloved Religious Society of Friends pursues.

Here I will stop narrating temporal developments and shift emphasis (as promised earlier) to the spatial. I recall a quip from *The Village Voice* sometime in the 1980s (I continued to subscribe for a

decade after I left New York). A writer commented, "New York follows where Europe has been; California is where America is going." One could quibble with either or both assertions, but there's some overall sense to them. In my case, I had been drawn to the seeking subculture of the Bay Area, knowing that the early Quaker movement emerged from such an environment in the 1650s. But I didn't know how to engage with its swirling, chaotic energies. And a second project on early Friends required research facilities I could find only in the East (i.e., where Europe has been).

I resigned from pastoral ministry with Berkeley Friends at the beginning of 1987. After a year and a half of traveling around the US and Canada promoting *Apocalypse of the Word*, I came to Pendle Hill, the Quaker study and retreat center outside Philadelphia, to teach and work on my research project. The nearby Haverford and Swarthmore College libraries hold the largest collections of early Quaker materials outside the Friends House Library in London.

So while I researched that project, I continued mapping the space of American culture and its Quaker subcultures. The Society of Friends has its greatest institutional thickness in the Philadelphia area, with colleges, denominational headquarters, the central offices of the American Friends Service Committee, and more. That institutional weight is often a millstone around the Holy Spirit's neck. Nevertheless, the dove still finds ways to take wing. (The Quaker-related merits and dysfunctions of the Philadelphia metropolis are provocatively suggested by sociologist Digby Balzell in *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia* [1979]).

Pendle Hill itself was a beautiful revelation to me. It revealed the heightened dynamics of *place* amid the capitalist grid of spaces. I was enthralled by the interactive dynamics of its twenty-three-acre arboretum, its Pennsylvania farm-house buildings, and its community devoted to the Benedictine discipline of work, study, and worship. I found my spirit refreshed and my scholarly work sustained by that community like no other place on earth. Yet I could not settle even there. I left and returned to Pendle Hill several times, according to research and writing projects. I did the substantial work from 1988 to 1991 for *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (1995); from 1994 to 1999 for *Seekers Found: Atonement in Early Quaker Experience* (2000); from 2010 to 2014 for *Personality and Place: The Life and Times of Pendle Hill* (2014) and for *A Sustainable Life: Quaker Faith and Practice in the Renewal of Creation* (2014); and in 2017 for *A Gathering of Spirits: The Friends General Conferences, 1896 – 1950* (2018).

My peregrinations were too much for Dorian and we parted ways on friendly terms when I left Pendle Hill in 1991. I later met Caroline Jones at Pendle Hill and we have been married since 1999. My brief mention of them here does no justice to their importance in my life. Dorian shifted from modern dance to teaching yoga and mindfulness. Caroline's depth as a dharma teacher in the Insight stream of modern Buddhism has offered many opportunities to transcode with my Christian-Quaker orientation.

Interspersed with these Pendle Hill sojourns, I returned for a second pastorate with Berkeley Friends 1991 to 1994; taught at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, England 2000 to 2003; served as pastoral minister with the First Friends Meeting in Richmond, Indiana 2003 to 2010; and as pastoral minister with the Durham, Maine Friends Meeting 2014 to 2016. So while I continued mapping North American and British space, I also continued transcoding between the pastoral Christian and liberal unprogrammed streams of Quaker faith and practice. I was drawn to pastoral Friends, where I could speak the Christian language that is primary for me, and which articulates the deepest resonances of historic Quaker witness. And I was drawn to liberal

unprogrammed Friends for their expansive social vision, which also resonates with historic Quaker witness.

The problem consisted in the extreme positions within those two streams: those most alienated and scandalized by one another. On the one hand, evangelical particularism excludes those outside its belief system; on the other, a humanistic universalism seems ready to explore anything but Christian belief. But there are sectors in both streams ready to communicate across these differences, to converge in some common experience of the Spirit. These were the pastoral meetings where I was able to minister effectively and the unprogrammed meetings where I felt most at peace.

Eventually, the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, particularly their *Commonwealth* (2009) and *Assembly* (2017), provided me with the language and conceptual clarity of the common. In retrospect, perhaps it is not surprising that I had to retire from active ministry among Friends before that clarity took hold with me.

I look back on the past half-century of restless movement with gratitude for God's leadings and faithful providence through so many changes. I still don't understand it fully. In human terms, I recognize some neurotic tendencies that have unsettled me. But the human is never the last word. Some greater purpose drew me on. I sometimes think of the radio telescope, where receivers are positioned across a wide geographical area to detect radio waves from deep space. A computer factors all that data into a coherent image, offering wider vistas of the universe. My various sojourns were by no means an adequate sampling even of the United States, let alone the world. But they have mapped a few different places of the common, in the transcendent perspective of the One.

So this is the arc of more than seventy years of experience culminating in *Life in Gospel-Space* and this book. I tell the story rather sheepishly, but with conviction. To paraphrase Luther, there I went, I could do no other: the Lord helped me. I don't offer this story as a model for others. It's just how the Lord tried to work with a somewhat damaged and melancholy soul.

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[i] The most important influences for me at this time were Moltmann's *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Pannenberg's *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969); Schüssler Fiorenza's *Invitation to the Book of Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1981); and Käsemann's *Perspectives on Paul*, cited earlier.