Quaker Fundraising in Uncertain Times

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Good evening. And Happy End of the Fiscal Year or End of the First Quarter or Third Quarter. It’s September 30, and I know that means that the people in this room who are professional fundraisers are measuring their progress.

I want to thank Jeff Perkins and Friends Fiduciary for the invitation to address you this evening. The Friends Committee on National Legislation and Friends Fiduciary have a professional relationship in that Friends Fiduciary manages a portion of FCNL’s investment portfolio. Moreover, Jeff and I started our employment with our respective organizations about the same time in 2011, joining the small but elite group of people known as Quaker heads.

I suspect I was asked to speak partly because FCNL just completed a successful and inspiring capital campaign last year that has strengthened our operations in a number of important ways, but also because FCNL lives and works in the cauldron of political, cultural and social upheaval as we lobby for Quaker legislative priorities with the U.S. Congress.

No question, we are living in uncertain times. You may be feeling that uncertainty from the perspective of “where will the money come from to sustain our budget” or “to build our scholarship program” or to “put an elevator in our meetinghouse.” I believe the uncertainty of these times is bigger and deeper than only whether there will be a recession or how the new tax law will affect charitable contributions. There is an uncertainty affecting the heart and soul of our democracy, our civic institutions, our faith communities, sometimes even our relationships.

Quakers have a unique and vital role in this time of uncertainty and anxiety in our world. Our history as the Religious Society of Friends was founded and shaped in a time of turmoil. The rich legacy of Friends, who, through the centuries have confronted injustice and stood for peace inspire us; they are the forbearers of Quakerism alive today.

My theme this evening is that our Quaker meetings and institutions will be stronger when we rely on the rich faith and practice that calls us to community and integrity. I know this is true at FCNL. Our lobbying is informed by Friends in the United States who make up our governing committees who discern FCNL’s legislative priorities for each Congress. Over 50 staff, based in our Capitol Hill office, work
to carry the values of Friends in Washington. Our 94 Advocacy Teams—Quakers and friends from across the country who use their power as constituents to make change—are an important part of our work and impact, lobbying their representatives with love in their hometowns. It is the faith and practice of Quakers that leads us to seek a world free of war and threat of war, a society with equity and justice for all, a community in which every person’s potential may be fulfilled, and an earth restored.

I want to find out who is in the room. We’ll do this so all of us can get a sense of who we are sharing the next couple of days with. If you are a professional fundraiser; that is, more than 25% of your time as a paid employee is raising money, please stand. If you are a volunteer—a member of a meeting, a member of a committee for a Quaker organization or school, please stand. If you are a head of school or head of a Quaker organization, please stand. If you are here representing a Quaker school, please stand. If you are here representing a Quaker monthly meeting, church or yearly meeting please stand. If you are a donor to any charitable entities and you are not yet standing, please stand. If you are not standing, you might want to rethink your vocation or your avocation as a fundraiser.

Let me tell you a bit about myself and the Friends Committee on National Legislation, and then I will turn to 3 big issues that I think create uncertainty and anxiety in our world today. And, then most importantly, what do we as Quakers or as Quaker institutions have to say, what stories of hope and change can we tell about the work that we are doing?

My journey as a Quaker fundraiser began when I joined the nascent Development Committee of New England Yearly Meeting about 20 years ago. NEYM had primarily counted on monthly meetings to make contributions although a few individuals also gave gifts. As the work of the yearly meeting grew and staff were added, there was a need and opportunity to raise funds from individuals. The committee decided we’d reach out to those who had made contributions in the past—to say thank you and to ask why people gave. I vividly remember the conversation with a Friend from Northampton Meeting who said that giving to Quaker causes was important because Quakers do good work that others don’t. And I was reminded of a committee meeting at Hartford Monthly Meeting early in the 1990s when we were considering offering a “no interest loan” to the Northampton Meeting as they fundraised to establish a meetinghouse. Tom Bodine, an elder and Friend in our meeting, who had always seemed a bit curmudgeonly to me, was decisive on the matter: Of course we should give this money to them interest free—we should do everything we can to encourage opportunities for Quaker growth. The abiding commitment of these weighty Friends to the welfare of the Religious Society of Friends and the spirit of generosity I heard from both of them has stayed with me.

It has informed my decisions in how I contribute money and it has given me courage and joy as a Quaker fundraiser.

When I came to FCNL, I knew I would be doing some fundraising, but I must have missed part when they said: we’ll be launching a capital campaign soon. And, so we did. In its 68 year history, FCNL had done
two capital campaigns—both of which were instrumental in strengthening the organization in profound ways, and in 2011, it was time to plan for the next campaign. Despite my lack of knowledge, I gained immediate confidence from the feasibility study that came back overwhelmingly positive. The two standout words that emerged from the study: integrity and lobbying. And, if you are a Quaker lobbying organization—there are no words that are sweeter—our constituency understands our mission and they trust that we are doing it with integrity.

Of course, the other reason that I had confidence for the five-year capital campaign we launched in 2012 was that we hired Barbara Monahan as our Associate Executive Secretary for Development. Barbara’s experience and stellar leadership of a dedicated and effective staff has been essential in the capital campaign and in building an architecture and culture of development at FCNL. Our volunteer Capital Campaign Committee of Friends from across the country guided and grounded our work. While everyone in this room comes from organizations or meetings that are distinctive in our capacity and our networks of donors, every organization must have someone who is either hired to fund raise or who is doggedly determined to raise the money necessary for operations. And every organization needs a community of support—a board, a committee who will be cheerleaders and champions, who will themselves be donors and who will help tell the story of “why.” Why giving makes a difference.

Let me turn back to the idea of these “uncertain times.” We do face challenges that are enormously complex and seemingly intractable, and yet, I know that every one of you could tell me a story of hope alive in the face of these challenges.

The first is climate change—the inexorable warming of our planet. No longer just a potential threat, the reality of climate disruption is upon us. The hurricanes, tornadoes, rising sea levels, wildfires, windstorms all contribute to risks—you’re well aware of this particularly if your Quaker organization owns and manages property. Climate change disrupts community life, causing displaced persons and refugees. The impact on the workforce and those who are part of our communities have physical, tangible needs, but also psycho-social-spiritual needs as we confront loss and our fracture with the natural world. It makes me sad when I hear young adults expressing their decisions to not have children because of environmental degradation and a warming planet.

A second major constellation of issues we face is privilege and power that fuels nationalism, militarism, racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. We see this manifested in our national or local politics. The 2016 election and subsequent partisan divides in our country on race, gender, immigration, refugees, and poverty aren’t only about “us” and “them.” We must hold this mirror up to see our own reflections of how we use privilege and power in our personal and institutional lives in ways that might harm others.

The third is income inequality and the gaping divide between rich and poor. Societies that have massive gaps between the richest and everyone else often have greater polarization, stress and chaos. Seven years ago, the Occupy Movement, which some believe was a clear outgrowth of fissures of the 2008 recession brought awareness to the challenges of having a concentration of wealth in the top 1% of the
population. A recent Chicago Federal Reserve study indicates that the income share of the top 1% rose roughly 22% from 15% between 1995 and 2015.

Now, if your donors are in that top 1% and they love you and what to give their money to you, you may not feel this problem. But if you rely on a broad base of donors to support and sustain your operations, you may be faced by the perceptions of the 99% that they are worse off economically because of this wealth divide. And lest you think that wealthy progressive people will “save us”, a new book, Winners Take All, by Anand Giridharadas says that wealthy elites reinforce the status quo—regardless of their political perspectives.

These three broad areas represent massive problems that touch us every day—sometimes invisibly and sometimes in a blaring, constant confrontation. We can feel personal despair, disassociation and isolation when we see racism and sexism so blatantly displayed by people in power. It’s not only in the political arena of Washington, DC—the Kavanaugh hearing being the most recent— but the use of power and privilege that oppresses “the other” is throughout our society—often in ways that we, who may be in the majority, don’t see. Our Quaker organizations and meetings are not immune.

Each of these issues—climate disruption, income inequality and the abuse of power and privilege—weighs on the work you do as a fundraiser because they weigh on our society. When you are raising money for a Quaker cause, you are not only promoting your program, you are responding to donors’ concerns. Whether it is the meetinghouse that agrees to add solar panels because the meeting is determined to reduce fossil fuel use or the school that convenes a special meeting for worship as a space to respond to high profile news of racial injustice in order help students make meaning, your organization is acting from Quaker values and testimonies. You have a story to tell about how your Quaker community stepped forward.

Stepping forward to create a better world is what Quakers do. And we do it in a variety of ways: educating children; creating quality of life programs as people age; providing hospitality; offering spiritual refreshment; connecting people across the Religious Society of Friends; and witnessing for social justice. We are stepping forward in ways that nourish the soul and help us to live faithfully in the world.

Parker Palmer describes how those of us who work for a better world stand in the tragic gap—the space between corrosive cynicism and irrelevant idealism. Parker says: That’s the gap Martin Luther King Jr. stood in his entire life, the gap Nelson Mandela stands in to this day. That’s the gap where Rosa Parks and Dorothy Day stood. I call it “tragic” because it’s a gap that will never close, an inevitable flaw in the human condition. No one who has stood for high values — love, truth, justice — has died being able to declare victory, once and for all. If we embrace values like those, we need to find ways to stand in the gap for the long haul, and be prepared to die without having achieved our goals.

For me, standing in the tragic gap is knowing what is mine to do. Those big issues I named—climate change, oppression from privilege and power and income inequality. I can’t fix those; FCNL and Quakers
can’t fix those, but we can each be faithful to our gifts and do our part and encourage others to do the same.

Is Quaker fundraising different than fundraising for any other organization/cause? I believe it is. We have the spiritual resources of a faith community to ground and surround us. We stand on this history and tradition of Quakers and we are called to be part of the rich living movement of Quakers today.

Here’s my first encouragement: connect your fundraising to the living stream of the Religious Society of Friends. What do I mean by that?

**Worship. Create spiritual community.**

Get to know Quakers and those who have built Quaker institutions. Read about them. Learn our history.

Tell stories. Build social community that fosters equality and simplicity.

Practice gratitude. Live in abundance. I don’t mean simply saying thank you for financial contributions and expecting big gifts. Practicing gratitude means we are give thanks in all ways and truly see the people in our lives—colleagues, donors, family—as beloved children of God.

This relates to my second advice: Walk cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in every person you meet. Of course, you know this quote from George Fox.

We train people across the country in effective advocacy which starts by building relationships with the staff of congressional offices and the members of Congress. Our lobbyists do the same on Capitol Hill. They aren’t simply pushing a point of view; they are listening as well talking. This is true in our fundraising as well. We see ourselves in relationship with our donors, asking for their support, and deeply listening to their lives.

I have seen how fundraising can be profoundly pastoral. When we talk directly with a donor who has invited us into her home to talk about money, we are invited into friendship. Having a conversation is a way to make a deeper connection to individuals—to talk to them about what they care about, to learn
their stories, their concerns, their fears, their hopes. When we approach prospective donors to share our stories and to listen to them, we are acting in right relationship.

When FCNL launched our capital campaign: The World We Seek, Now is the Time, it was built from discernment the organization had done in 2007 through a committee called the Futures Working Group. Significantly, this group named engaging young adults as a priority. The 2008 recession and a change in leadership delayed the start of the campaign, but the discernment of that working group that FCNL should prioritize engaging young adults was the central component of the campaign—both to establish an endowment for this work and for current program. We also raised endowment for our lobbying, for our Friend in Washington program, and, yes, there was a building renovation as well—our new Quaker Welcome Center, adjacent to the FCNL office on Capitol Hill. The Quaker Welcome Center gives us a space for events such as bipartisan dialogues on climate change, meetings with faith leaders and members of Congress on race and poverty, and a weekly time for lobby training and for silent worship.

I will close by sharing just a bit about FCNL’s Young Adult work. I feel blessed to be working at this Quaker organization at a time of uncertainty to see the deep commitment that young adults bring to the work for justice and peace.

FCNL has four programs that engage Young Adults in Quaker advocacy. Our annual Spring Lobby Weekend brings young people to Washington, DC for lobby training, workshops, and to meet with their representatives. In March 2018, over 400 young people attended. For many of them, it was their first time lobbying—and as always, I feel certain we saw young adults empowered to become even more engaged in advocacy.

Our summer internship program is an eight-week, paid opportunity for young adults to work in our Capitol Hill office and receive an introduction to federal policy, grassroots organizing, and nonprofit management. And through our Young Fellows program, recent college graduates spend eleven months working alongside lobbyists and FCNL communications staff as Program Assistants, building expertise in advocacy from a public interest perspective. Both our summer interns and our Program Assistants are important members of our staff community and contributors to our work.

In our newest program, the Advocacy Corps, young adults selected through an application process, spend ten days in Washington, DC at FCNL’s Summer Intensive, learning critical organizing skills. After the intensive, they return to their hometowns and receive a stipend from FCNK for work connecting local activists and leaders with their local member of Congress to affect big, long-term change.

These four opportunities for young people to get involved with FCNL, learn what careers in public service look like, and tell their stories to members of Congress, are key to FCNL’s work in Washington. If you ever feel downtrodden in the face of all the work left to do, spend time with our young adult advocates.

Our Young Adult program participants’ passion for action and hunger for justice, FCNL staff’s energy in working towards the World We Seek, and our Quaker governors’ steadfast and faithful commitment to
witnessing for Friends’ values, never fails to give me hope. Through the political maelstrom of this time, our Quaker community helps us walk in the Light. My hope for you is that in your Quaker fundraising you are able to stand in the tragic gap of these uncertain times to do the work you are led to do—and that through building relationships with one another and with donors you are able to see that of God in yourself and in all those you meet.