

I was down at the farmhouse this past Tuesday with Jim McClung and Larry Hesson, checking on progress. We were in the living room talking with Matt, the drywaller, when Tim, the plumber, came upstairs from the basement and said, “Is this house built on top of an underground spring?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” I answered.

We trooped downstairs to the basement and sure enough, bubbling up from the basement floor was a trickle of water.

It was a beautiful moment. Standing in the basement, water trickling past our feet, talking with three other guys about how best to fix it. It involved everything men love the most—a challenge, problem solving, a little bit of healthy disagreement, ridiculing bad ideas, the chance to share with one another our epic conflicts with water, an opportunity to prove our manhood, a battle against nature, tools. It was a wonderful moment.

I had visions of sump pumps and pipes and drains, an entire network of water removal that could pleasantly occupy my time and attention in the years ahead. Exterior drains, interior drains, floor drains, evacuation pits, sump pumps, back-up sump pumps, check valves, discharge pipes. Oh, the conversations I could have about my basement. I grew excited just thinking about it.

Then Tim, the plumber, ruined everything. He said, “Men, water always takes the path of least resistance. Why don’t we pour four inches of cement on the basement floor, leave a perimeter channel where the floor meets the wall, and the water will flow right into the channel then into the drain? It’s very simple. We’ll let gravity do the work. Because water always takes the path of least resistance.”

We, of course, knew Tim was right. We argued with him, but half-heartedly. We knew it was wise to take advantage of water’s natural properties and behavior to solve the problem of water. It wasn’t exciting, it required few tools, no motor, no gears, no electricity, no ongoing maintenance. But we knew it was the right way to go, because water always takes the path of least resistance. Water is that way, when it meets resistance, it seeks another path, patiently persisting until the way opens. We all could learn something from water.

These past few weeks we’ve been thinking about Quaker sayings—*Let your life speak.*; *Live up to the light you have and more will be given you.*; and *Walk cheerfully over all the world, answering that of God in all persons.* Today, I would like us to consider the Quaker saying—*Proceed as the way opens.*

In Brent Bill's outstanding book, *Sacred Compass*, (Brent told me I could quote him, if I said his book was outstanding) he writes, "To *proceed as way opens* means to wait for guidance, to avoid hasty judgment or action, to wait for future circumstances to help solve a problem. The spiritual guidance may come in a time of seeking or entirely unexpectedly, bringing a suggestion for previously unforeseen action."

So often we try to force our way through life, determined to do this thing or that thing, believing it to be the right path, but uncertain about how best to proceed. In our passion to reach our goal, we sometimes act rashly, giving little thought to the consequences. We don't wait for the way to open, we seek no guidance, we fail to listen to that of God within us, we don't consult our conscience, we don't listen to others, or to our best instincts. Then, because the way doesn't open up soon enough to suit us, we bulldoze our way through, acting hastily, before all the pieces are in place to ensure a good outcome.

This phrase, *Proceed as way opens*, is a reminder that life has a rhythm, a cadence. Proceeding as way opens is not a call to be passive, but to be patient, to let a situation or circumstance do what we Friends call *season*. To let something *season* means to wait, to not take action because we have felt an internal stop or barrier. The way has closed, so we wait until the way opens before proceeding.

Let me give you an example of letting a matter *season*: Not long before Joan and I were married, I quit my job and enrolled in college. We were going to live on her income. Then Joan was laid off. The economy was bad and she didn't get any offers. Finally, a company in northern Indiana offered her a job and because we were desperate—actually I was desperate—I urged her to take it.

But Joan said, “It doesn't feel quite right.”

I urged her not to be so selective, which is, coincidentally, how I got her to date me. Instead, she turned down that job, and not long afterwards was offered a much better job, which she enjoyed for 17 years.

I suspect each of you could tell a story about a time in your life when you were about to do something and something in you said, “Stop. Don't do it. Wait.” You felt a stop. So you were patient, the way eventually opened for you, and you went forward with peace of mind and heart, with conscience clear. *To proceed as ways opens* is to believe God has a hope for our lives, a longing for our lives, that we can know what it is, and be obedient to it. It is to further trust that when we're obedient, it will result in serenity and joy and good things for us, and good things for others. Again, this is not a call to passivity. It is a call to patient discernment, which can be difficult and demanding, requiring much discipline of spirit and strength of mind.

In December of 1938, a month after the Night of Broken Glass, when the Nazis began transporting German Jews to the camps, Rufus Jones, the clerk of the American Friends Service Committee, arranged to meet with Adolph Hitler so he could prevail upon him to stop persecuting the Jews. Hitler agreed to meet with him on the condition their meeting be kept a secret. Unfortunately, the Associated Press learned of Jones's trip and published an article about it. Incensed, Hitler cancelled the meeting. Jones was certain he should still go, so he went, against the advice of many friends, who worried for his safety. When he arrived in Germany, Hitler refused to see him, as did Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda, who publicly mocked Jones in the German press. Still, Jones would not leave Germany. He stayed in his hotel room, alternately praying and bombarding the German government with phone calls and telegrams, meeting with anyone who might listen to him.

He was finally summoned to the Gestapo headquarters to meet with Reinhard Heydrich, the ruthless head of the German secret police and who, along with Hitler and Himmler, was one of the chief architects of the Holocaust. Jones reminded Heydrich that in the aftermath of the First World War, the Quakers had fed 1,200,000 German children each day for several years. He then asked Heydrich's permission to bring medical care and food to the Jewish people of Germany, which Heydrich, surprisingly, granted.

Jones then spoke plainly to Heydrich, informing him that the world's opinion was against him, that history would judge him, that the only way he could redeem himself was to release Germany's Jews to the Quakers, who would then arrange their settlement in other countries. Heydrich agreed to release as many Jews as would be accepted by other nations. Jones then traveled to the capital cities of Europe and America, imploring their leaders to accept the Jews. Because of rampant anti-Semitism, most of them refused. In the end, however, Jones was able to transport 10,000 Jewish children to Britain, where many of them were adopted by British Quakers.

I tell you this not to boast of Friends, for there are virtuous people in every religion. Indeed, even among the non-religious. I tell you this to remind you of the importance of proceeding as way opens, of carefully and prayerfully seeking the priorities, will, and way of God, trusting that even when that way is unclear, it will eventually become clear to you, providing you the opportunity to obey, and in your obedience find peace and life and blessing, not just for you, but for others.