

Joan went to Barnes and Noble this past week to purchase some books for her students and while she was there bought a copy of the movie *Lincoln* for me. I love that movie, because I'm interested in what I call *the concept of progressive enlightenment*. By progressive enlightenment I mean the ability of each generation to build upon, and hopefully exceed, the morality of past generations. That is evident in the movie *Lincoln*, when the people of a nation went to war to end a tradition many of their ancestors thought natural and right.

Today, when we think of slavery, we say to ourselves, "How could anyone have thought it was alright for one person to own another? For one person to pull a child from the arms of their parents and sell them off? Eventually, more and more people found that appalling. So we let go of slavery, because of the concept of progressive enlightenment. Here's another example: It was once common to kill women who were thought to be witches. The historian Brian Levack believes nearly 60,000 women were burned at the stake in Europe and North America. The author Anne Lewellyn Barstow believes the number might have been as high as 100,000. Now we find that horrendous. What were they thinking? Today, the only person I know who worries about witches is Pat Robertson, who accused them of sponsoring the Equal Rights Amendment. Everyone else has let go of witch hunts.

Who were the women killed? Strong women who spoke their minds. “She’s arguing with me. She must be a witch. I will silence her.” Now we find that idea repulsive. Can you imagine if we still did that? There wouldn’t be a woman alive in this meeting. We have an abundance of strong women who speak their minds and it is a blessing to our meeting, a blessing to Quakerism, and a blessing to the world.

Last Sunday, we began thinking about holding on and letting go. How do we know when to hold on to something, and how do we know when it’s time to let go of something? It’s surprising how often this theme appears in the Bible, and how often, in our own lives, letting go and holding on has spiritual implications. When do we let go of past beliefs, traditions, or customs in order to embrace a new way of thinking and being? I received a letter from a woman just this past week, who had read last week’s message and was struggling with that very issue. As a child, she had been taught certain things about God that as an adult no longer made sense to her. She wrote asking how to let go. I suggested she take her time, that she didn’t have to have a new theology in place by noon next Monday. Let it go gradually, as something more lovely and helpful takes its place.

How do we know when the time has come to let go of something we once valued? And not just let go of it, but let go of it well, without undue anger, resentment, or anxiety.

How do we know when the time has come to let go? Here's one way we know: when our holding on to something comes at someone else's expense, when our holding on to something diminishes another person. If someone else is suffering because we are holding on to a belief, custom, or tradition, that means it's time to let go of that belief, custom, or tradition.

In the 23rd chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is tearing into the scribes and Pharisees. There is no other word for it. He is furious. He recalls the traditions, customs, and rules they scribes and Pharisees created, points out how they will travel halfway around the world to make a convert, then make that convert's life a living hell. Don't think for a moment this is a singular attack on Judaism. It is a commentary on religious life in general, of religion's tendency to elevate certain rules and traditions when it is abundantly clear they degrade and diminish people.

For many years, we Friends read out of meeting, or severed relationship, with Friends who violated our religious rules. It caused unspeakable pain to those Friends who married a non-Quaker, violated our dress code, enjoyed music, or went to war. We did that for nearly a hundred years. Then we realized the harm and hurt that did to others, so we let that tradition go. It was no longer appropriate. So we let go of that custom.

Today, our nation is divided over same-gender marriage. When I first heard of it, I thought to myself, “Absolutely not. Call it something else. Don’t call it marriage.” Then I got to remembering the day I was married almost 29 years ago. Happiest day of my life. Even happier than when my sons were born. Absolute finest day of my life. I was so choked up, I couldn’t even say my wedding vows. I still don’t know what I promised Joan. She said I promised to always do the dishes. Maybe I did. I can’t remember.

But what a day it was. All my friends and family were at the Quaker meetinghouse in Paoli. It was a wonderful day. When I think of that day, I tell you, I just don’t have the heart to deny it to someone else. I can’t say to someone, “I had my day, I have my marriage, but you can’t have yours.” It would feel like sitting down at a five-course meal in front of a starving child, and when I reached out to give that child food, someone would say, “Stop, you mustn’t do that. It’s not for him.” I just couldn’t do that. I’d want that little girl, that little boy to sit down at the feast right beside me. So I had to let go of my old understanding of marriage, and take hold of a new understanding of marriage that gave everyone the same chance for joy I’ve had. I’m not the only one who’s changed my mind. It’s happening all over our nation, all over our world. I was in Ohio this past week and a man who looked to be in his mid-70’s came up to me and said, “When my children were growing up, I told them homosexuality was a sin and gay people were evil. But I’ve changed my mind. How do I tell my children?”

I said, “Why don’t you just tell your children you’ve changed your mind. You’re allowed to change your mind.”

I’ve been reading the Bible for 35 years, and I can’t recall one time when Jesus got mad at someone for changing their minds. Hard-heartedness, yes. Stubbornness, yes. Raising yourself up by holding others down, yes. Those things often angered him. But I’ve never read of Jesus being mad at a man or woman who in good conscience changed their minds.

Beliefs, customs, and traditions are wonderful. My life is full of them. Whenever I meet someone who goes through life without a framework of beliefs, customs, and traditions, I wonder how in the world they make it. There isn’t a day that passes that I don’t measure something against my religious beliefs, customs, and traditions. They give great meaning to my life. I couldn’t live without them. But I can’t live with them blindly or thoughtlessly. I have to examine them regularly to make sure they honor God. How do we know if a belief, custom, or tradition honors God? Simple, if it doesn’t diminish or demean another human being. Nothing that degrades people can honor God. Nothing that elevates some people at the expense of other people can honor God.

Sometimes it takes a while for us to realize our beliefs, customs, and traditions have been injurious to others. Sometimes we only come to that realization after difficult and painful struggle. The movie *Lincoln* reminds us of that. But once we become aware that our traditions have become hurtful, not helpful, we have a moral obligation to reassess them.

It's tough. Many of us have friends and family members who will be scandalized. They'll say, "What are you thinking? What's wrong with you?"

You just tell them this, you say, "Well, I was sitting at this table enjoying a feast and along came a hungry man, a hungry woman, so I scooted over and made room for them."