

First Friends Church, a Quaker meeting
Elisabeth Graham Elliot
Somewhere Out There
June 28, 2020
Hebrews 10:24-25, Colossians 2:5, Matthew 18:20

Hebrews 10:24-25

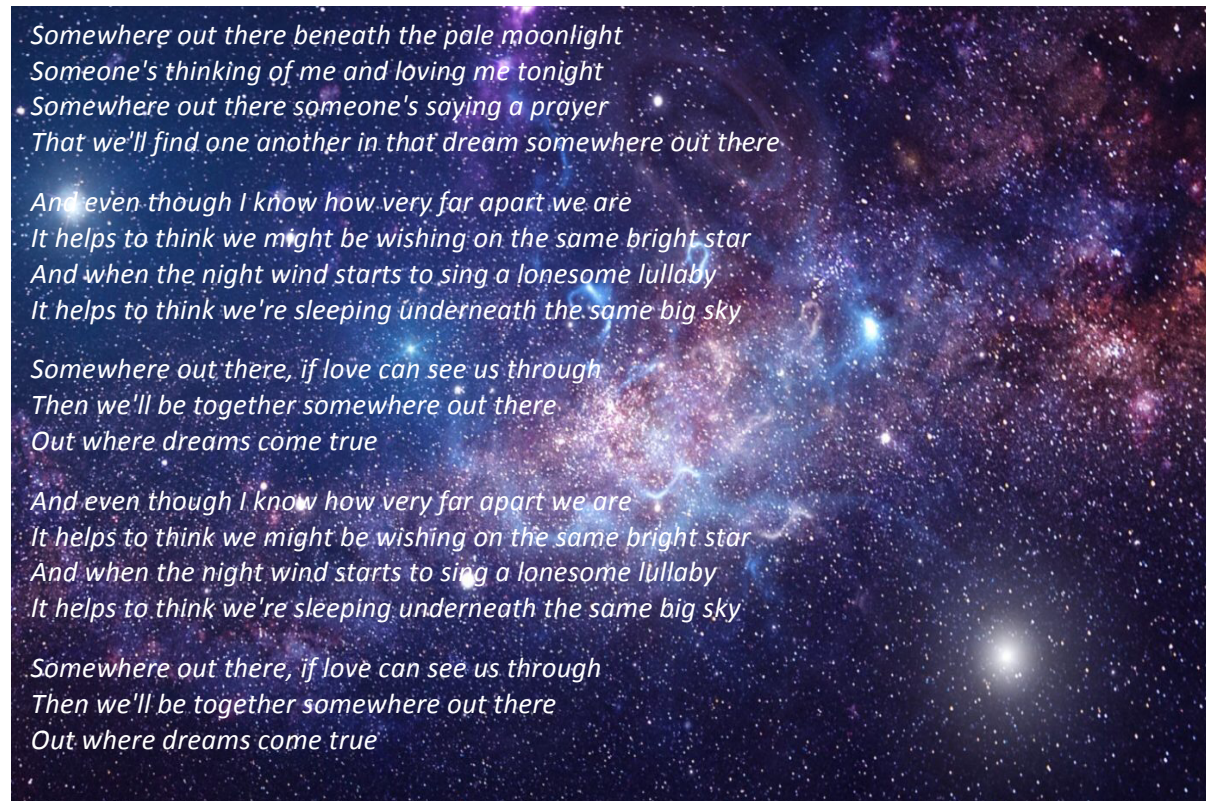
And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Colossians 2:5

For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Matthew 18:20

For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'



There's a funny line going around the internet on some Christian discussion sites at the moment. "Breaking News: God ignores quarantine advice. Decides to be everywhere anyway."

Parker Palmer says, “Friends are most in the Spirit when they stand at the crossing point of the inward and outward life; and that is the intersection at which we find community. Community is a place where the connections felt in the heart make themselves known in bonds between people, and where tuggings and pullings of those bonds keep opening up our hearts.”

My own tuggings and pullings tend to open me to ponder the connection between faith and the arts: film, theatre, visual arts, and music. This particular piece of music, written in the 1980s for a film, has been present with me a lot as we have been tugged and pulled into adjusting to a community structure that is different and ultimately more vast than our preconceived comfort zone could contain. I must admit that the view from out here in cyberspace is something I didn’t think could take the place of being physically together.

It doesn’t but at this time in history, we’ve been sent out looking into places that I think we would have otherwise been hesitant to explore.

The lyric of the song goes: “We’ll find one another in that dream somewhere out there.” There’s no description of where ‘somewhere’ is except that it’s a dream—a fervent wish or a place we’ve made up. Or something more? “It helps to think we’re sleeping underneath the same big sky. Somewhere out there...”

Just where is there?

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews (perhaps Paul) says :“And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day (and the Day is capitalized) approaching.”

I understand that for the clergy—pastors and priests and church leaders—this is sort of what could be called a sacred cow text, one that is near and dear to ministers’ hearts. See, it says right there to not neglect to meet together. Some interpretations are even stronger and use the word the forsake. And all the more as you see the Day approaching. What is the Day? Is it on our calendar? Is it the day of judgement or is it the sabbath? Either way, organized religion’s gotta love that passage, because either way it says you better go to church.

I think it’s really interesting, too, to look at the words consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. That’s the real object of meeting together in community. Considering and provoking.

Then we go to Colossians (and there’s more proof here that Paul actually did write this): “*For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.*”

There is indication that Paul’s in prison as he writes this so it sounds like he’s talking about being together again. Except there’s no mention anywhere that Paul ever went to the city of Colossae. He’s talking about being united as a

community in Christ. And the word rejoicing jumps out at you, rejoicing in your faith in Christ.

Then of course, Matthew—Friends especially like this one. “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

That could be anywhere. The Day? If it’s the day we are gathered in Christ, that’s today. That’s every day.

George Fox had a vision of a great people to be gathered. But Fox went even further into what ‘gathered’ means. He argued that God himself did not want churches. Churches were unnecessary to get to God, even an obstruction—Fox often referred to churches unkindly as “steeple-houses.” Since believers should have a direct relationship with God, no one (clergy, for example) and nothing (like sacraments) should come in between.

Church is not something we go to; it is what we are. All three of these passages are asking us to look for opportunities to meet in joint experience of Christ.

When Isaac Penington said “Our life is love...helping one another up with a tender hand,” he wasn’t being literal and he didn’t specify where.

I think it’s the Intermountain Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice that says, “We try to include in our sense of community not just our families and our faith community but all people, near and far, and the whole Earth community of non-human creatures. Community is shelter, a safe place to grow, an arena for action, caring and love, powered by and united in the Light.”

Mary Coelho is a Quaker, a scientist and an artist. She writes that meeting for worship is “a compelling group adventure that thrives on a bold assumption, congruent with the story available now through science, that there is an ongoing unity, yet a place and space is available for expressions of great diversity and uniqueness.”

Somewhere.

That’s an intriguing word, found all over literature, in the arts. Somewhere has gotta be thrilling. It’s a big part of the feeling we get watching a rocket launch into space.

The song that Russ sang today clutches you by suggesting somewhere is where we are together. Listen to the melody and how similar it is to an earlier tune: “and even though I know how very far apart we are,” to “some day I’ll wish upon a star and wake up where the clouds are far behind me.” Now we’re back to the mystery, the place we can’t see and certainly a place that we can’t get to from here.

In West Side Story, ‘there’s a place for us somewhere’ is a place without injustice.

In the film *Field of Dreams*, a baseball player asks ‘is this heaven?’ and the many people who love that film will be able to complete the line from memory—‘no, it’s Iowa.’

That brings to mind another film that contemplates the idea of somewhere as heaven, the British film *A Matter of Life and Death*. A World War II pilot knows he has to bail out and he doesn’t have a parachute—he’s given it to another crew member. So he figures he’s ‘for it’ and when he wakes up on a British beach, he logically thinks this is heaven. I wonder where I report, he asks. A dog appears barking and running along the beach. This makes him very happy because ‘I always hoped there would be dogs.’

Finally, Carl Sagan, contemplating if there is life somewhere out there proposes that since the universe is a pretty big place, if it's just us, seems like an awful waste of space.

Quakers have no collective view on what happens after death, where somewhere is. We concentrate on this place where we are rather than pondering what happens after leaving it. The Kingdom of Heaven is to be experienced now, not somewhere, not someday, not over the rainbow. Here. In one farmer’s life, Iowa. Because in that case that’s where the people he loves are. And, for another man, dogs. But how does the farmer come to think about this? By talking to his father who is long dead, ‘technically’ in heaven.

That’s more than simple wish fulfillment. That’s where our community is, where the people we love are.

As we look at our own mortality, we speak longingly about those who have passed by saying ‘we’ll see each other again’ (somewhere). And haven’t you in the Meeting, somewhat selfishly, thought ‘oh what are we going to do without that person?’ We’re fine, not because a person is irreplaceable but because they’re here, everywhere, every day we rejoice together in our faith in Christ.

Think about the Davidsons, the Coffins, the Beedes, Fred and Elinore Bewley, Ken Camp, Bill Wright, the Nelsons.

That’s a community!

It helps to think we might be wishing on the same bright star. It helps to think we're sleeping underneath the same big sky.

Otherwise, it’s an awful waste of space.