

Content warning: gun violence, police brutality, racism

The night is August 12, 2022. A 17-year-old girl is attending a graduation party at Ron Regis Park in Renton, Washington. She senses a small voice within her telling her not to go, but she decides to go anyway. The girl takes her friends to this party. It is dark, and there are many people. Something doesn't feel right. She is about to leave the park and then hears dozens of gunshots and sees people running away from the crowd. Her mind kicks into survival mode and runs towards a fence where her friend is struggling to jump it in order to get away from the shooter. She pushes her friend over the fence and as she does so, feels something in her abdomen. The girl looks down and sees a pool of blood spreading on her clothing. She doesn't feel anything at this point and is in shock. The shooter doesn't stop spraying bullets into the crowd. The next day the police will find over one hundred casings on the ground, but for tonight and at this moment, this 17 year old girl is trying to survive.

Her instincts tell her to hide in the dark away from the park lights and play dead. If she lies there and the shooter can't see her, maybe he will not come back to finish what he started. Maybe she can survive and be around to be there for her three younger siblings. As she lays in the dark, she notices the stars in the sky and starts praying. "Please, God, I need to be there for my brothers and sister. Please do not let this be my time." She takes time to pause and notice the lights in the sky.

A group of people come up to her, some friends, and some foes. She hears some of her peers debating whether they should leave her behind or call for help. One person argues with them that they need to help her and picks up her phone. She calls the girl's mother, stating "Your daughter has been shot." This girl, who no one knows, stays with her until the paramedics arrive. She then mysteriously leaves. None of the girl's friends see her. She believes this stranger was an angel. Regardless of whether she was a supernatural entity or a stranger, the light overcame the darkness. Because of this good Samaritan, I still have a 19-year-old niece, one who graduated high school despite almost dying right before her senior year of high school. She is now producing music and is about to celebrate her 20th birthday.

John 1:5 states, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." Life is full of moments of lightness and darkness. There are people who will choose to walk in the light and people who choose to not do so. There will be people in our families and neighborhoods, and leaders in our cities, states, country, and world who will actively and repeatedly choose to do hurtful things to others, as well as people who will choose to do good and just things, who will listen and act upon that still small voice within them. There are people who will call for help and people who will walk away. As Quakers, we believe that everyone can access the light of God at any time. With sound wisdom, we can also know that we cannot force others to access this light. We ourselves do not always lean into the light. As the serenity prayer states, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change what can be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference."

As a therapist I often talk with my clients about radical acceptance. Radical acceptance is the concept that there are things out of our control, and if we do not accept them, we can experience mental and physical anguish. It does not mean that we agree with these things or are complacent; it means we come to terms with what we are powerless over. Pain is inevitable, and when we resist that which is out of our control, we not only experience pain, but we also suffer. Interestingly, one of the more effective therapeutic tools for helping people with chronic pain is learning to accept one's pain rather than resist it.

Why am I writing so melancholy for the first message of 2025?

None of us knows what the days will hold in 2025, or any days of the rest of our lives. Anything could happen. Regardless of our personal beliefs or ideologies, most of us can agree that when we turn on the news and we see current world events, it doesn't feel like a bright spring day. Many are understandably anxious about what might come in the near future as those in power may hold our rights and our fates in their hands. As with any period of time in history, some people, individuals or entire groups of people, will have brighter days than others. As we take things one day at a time and events unfold, help us to reflect on what we can and cannot change. For the things we cannot, let us lean on Psalm 27:1: "The Lord is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life - of whom shall I be afraid?" And for the parts that are not completely out of our control, let us reflect on Jesus' instructions in Matthew 5:14-16 to be a light of the world, putting our light on its stand and not hidden under a bowl. Just like the good Samaritan in my niece's story, we can choose to be a light to this world, even in the darkest of times.

Many of us, including myself, feel helpless and powerless about what is going on locally, nationally and globally. But as Galatians 6:9 tells us, let us not be tired of doing good. Let us not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. As Ruth was, we too were born for such a time as this.

Some of us are feeling the effects of endless winter days with near constant cloudiness, little sunlight and insignificant amounts of glistening snow to appreciate, literally and symbolically. It is okay to get yourself a happy light to fight off seasonal affective blues and spend more time basking in the light (also literally and symbolically) before having the energy to help others. Let us lean on God by holding others, and ourselves, in the light.

As I was looking at the church bulletin and preparing for this message, I noticed the song "This Little Light of Mine" and remembered this song as being commonly sung during the civil rights movement. As I researched more into this, I discovered a powerful civil rights activist, Fannie Lou Hamer. If you do not know her story, I encourage you to do so, as she was a living example of someone who held others in the light and found ways to lean into the light of God for herself. In 1963 she recorded "This Little Light of Mine". In this version of the song, she adds, "All in the jailhouse, I'm going to let it shine..." This song was commonly sung by activists and became a freedom song, with singers usually starting the song by naming the geographic location they were at. Some also added their oppressors in the lyrics, such as saying "Tell the KKK, I'm going to let it shine." Fannie Lou Hamer once said, "Singing is one of the main things that can keep us going. When you're in a brick cell, locked up, and haven't done anything to anybody but still you're locked up there and sometimes words just begin to come to you, and you begin to sing. Like one of my favorite songs, 'This Little Light of

Mine, I'm Going to Let it Shine.' This same song goes back to the fifth chapter of Matthew, which is the Beatitudes of the Bible, when he says a city that sits on a hill cannot be hid. Let your light shine so that men would see your good works and glorify the father which is in heaven. I think singing is very important. It brings out the soul."

Fannie Lou Hamer found a way to cope through difficult times by singing, engaging in activism and fighting hard to improve the lives of others. She was 46 at the time this song was recorded. Prior to this, she wanted to be a mother but was given a hysterectomy without her consent by a white doctor, a common practice at the time. She did not know that black people could register and vote until she was 45 years old, and when she did, she faced several obstacles before being able to do so. Hamer was fired by her boss for attempting to vote, and had to go into hiding for protection, yet still was shot at 15 times in a drive-by shooting fueled by racism. She was imprisoned for sitting in a white-only area and was beaten so badly in jail that she almost died. It was around this time, and after enduring years of trauma, that she recorded "This Little Light of Mine". A year later, she testified live on television. Lyndon B Johnson was so afraid of her testimony that he cut her off. Thankfully, the news replayed her testimony for days afterwards. She did many impactful things in her life to help others, including fighting for voting rights, helping with head-start programs, and created a rural economic development program called the "Freedom Farm Cooperative", among many, many other things. She did this despite having no more than a 6th grade education.

Fannie Lou Hamer shone her light despite being tired. In fact, she coined the popular term "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."

I don't think it is necessarily helpful to compare our experiences with the lives of others in order to minimize or elevate our own experiences. I share Fannie Lou Hamer's story to show that even in the darkest of times and even being sick and tired of being sick and tired, one can still choose to be a light. Hamer and many others found ways to cope through singing and other means. May we reflect on ways to lean on God and nurture ourselves in all seasons and in all years and in all climates. Let us be honest with ourselves that even though progress has been made since Fannie Lou Hamer's time, a lot of her speeches about injustices are still relevant in 2025. May we humbly listen to others on ways to support them, especially in a time when some are understandably anxious about what this new climate will mean for them and their loved ones.

2025 may feel like a bright spring day to you, or a January of endless grey clouds and dark nights, with small glimpses of bright sunlight. If it is, help us to radically accept this and find ways to notice the moon and stars, the moments when the sun peeks through the clouds, or the remaining Christmas lights on our neighbor's homes. If we can't find any light, let us sing in the darkness and light a candle. Let us notice the beautiful snowflakes that come with freezing temperatures and let us also not deny that there are freezing temperatures. You may not be freezing, but someone in another climate may be.

As with all years, there are going to be joys and concerns, challenges and celebrations. It likely won't be all winter or all summer, but rather all of the seasons. But in each season we are currently in, let us see the light and goodness of God and demonstrate this light to the best of our imperfect abilities.

What does it mean to be a Quaker in 2025?