



Arthur O. Roberts

Arthur O. Roberts (1923-2016) was an influential writer, farmer, woodworker, mayor (Yachats, Oregon, 1997-2000), poet, powerful speaker, mentor to many, and steadfast source of strength and encouragement. He served at George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon, where he began teaching in 1953.

In a preface to a collection of his “Reflections,” written in 2009 and shared in part in this issue of *Fruit of the Vine*, Roberts wrote that “the electronic posting of these ‘Reflections’ to Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends pastors came in response to insistent nudging by Ron Woodward...and encouragement by others. My monthly Internet column continued through 2008.”

“I am grateful to all who responded in some fashion to these ‘Reflections’ during the twelve years they were posted,” Roberts continued. “Words of encouragement from loyal readers such as Earl Tyckson, Ron Woodward, Dick Swartwell, and Steve Fine kept me writing when earlier I thought to quit.”

The collection is available online at digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/arthur_roberts/2/

BIBLE READING: 1 John 4:7-12

Paul K. Moser warns us that “knowledge of God is not a spectator sport.” One kind of knowledge, however, always offers compelling testimony for God’s existence. Moser calls this “reconciling” knowledge, evidenced by loving, filial submission. It is inherently ethical and practical rather than simply reflective. Character transformation among believers is a stronger witness to unbelievers than evidence found in signs, ecstatic experiences, or in philosophical arguments. In Quaker jargon, it’s joining heart with head knowledge, joining the Christ in the heart with the Christ in history.

Jesus’ way of the kingdom of God isn’t easy. In my personal struggles during World War II, I found comfort that although evil can so heap up chaos that social solutions can’t easily be discerned, a person, nonetheless, can find an obedient way to witness God’s redeeming love. Whether as light, or leaven, or as sacrifice, God’s people can and do demonstrate the power of the gospel in dark and difficult times. Does sin abound? The apostle Paul speaks of grace much more abundantly! Is there darkness? Of course. But it can’t put out the Light.

Sometimes the church just has to pick up the pieces of what sin shatters. So if a political solution to global conflict seems impossible, our witness there is not. If violence in schools seems difficult to cope with, perhaps Friends can prayerfully and practically undergird public school teachers struggling against the dark powers of our contemporary culture. We are always ambassadors, reconciling people to God, and to each other. That’s the nature of the gospel.

SONG: More about Jesus

PRAYER SUGGESTION: God of all truth, I want to know you, not just know about you. May your life in me bear the fruit of reconciliation.

—Arthur O. Roberts, May 1999

BIBLE READING: Ephesians 4:1-6

At Christmastime a collegiate granddaughter asked, “Grandpa, I’m puzzled about the Trinity; why is it important?” You can understand that any professorial-type grandfather would enthusiastically engage in a theological dialogue! So how did I answer her? In brief: the doctrine is how mortals acknowledge the limits of understanding; it envisions God as totality, not idolatrously as a unitive object (single thing or thought); and the three “faces” of God show us the activity of God.

First, to use an analogy from cyberspace, our minds contain software that lets us *know* in three ways: sense perception, reason, and intuition. God is revealed through each mode, corresponding roughly to Father (Creator), Son (Logos), and Spirit (the Voice within). Second, viewing the One as [a single] unit is reductionist [subtracts too much to be accurate]. Third, worshipping God in triunity allows us to affirm with reverence and awe the creation (the cosmic journey), the human experience in space/time (the outward journey), and the human psychic experience (the inward journey).

What does affirming the triunity of God mean practically in the life of the church? It means a godly concern for and stewardship of the creation now groaning under a load of sin; a godly concern for kingdom events historically, in your home, community, and the world; and nurturing the personal inward life of the Spirit. Salvation pertains to the whole cosmos, to humanity striding through time/space, to the individual soul.

Oh yes, my granddaughter and I agreed—the shamrock is a pretty good symbol!

SONG: All Creatures of Our God and King

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Father, Son, and Spirit, keep me mindful of your presence in the cosmos, in the world I inhabit, and in my deepest self.

—Arthur O. Roberts, January 1998

BIBLE READING: Matthew 22:37-40

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus' scribes and Pharisees quibbled about how to fulfill the Law in loving one's neighbor. Like Pilate, people also hedge about truth—about loving God with one's mind. "Test me, Lord...examine my heart and my mind" (Psalm 26:2) is an insightful verse. Hear what the apostle Paul says to us on this subject:

"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things....And the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:7-9).

Ancient philosophy named human goals the good, the true, and the beautiful. These still define areas of study. Ethics delineates the moral good, logic the tests for truth, and aesthetics the norms of beauty ("whatever is lovely," to use Paul's term). In subtle ways the tempter stirs people perversely to seek out or promote the bad, the false, and the ugly. Ponder Paul's admonition to let God's peace guard our minds and guide them toward *praiseworthy* goals: "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" James 3:17.

SONG: May the Mind of Christ, My Savior

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Loving God, guard my mind with your peace; draw my thinking toward goodness, truth, and beauty.

—Arthur O. Roberts, November 2008

BIBLE READING: Proverbs 4:20-27

I am cautioned to esteem self “not more highly than I ought,” neither wallowing in self-pity nor swaggering in self-adulation. What’s a pitfall for educated minds? *Skillful* self-deception! We’re warned: “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:12). We are called to rise beyond an egoistic self, beyond a social self, *to become a God-filled self*. Ponder the following passages:

“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you” (Romans 12:3).

“Do you see a person wise in their own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for them” (Proverbs 26:12).

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1).

“Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season” (Psalm 1:1-3).

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

SONG: Just as I Am

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Spirit of Truth, show me my true self in you, that I might not err on the side of pride nor on the side of self-hatred. May I love myself in a way that is consistent with your love for me.

—Arthur O. Roberts, November 2008

BIBLE READING: Galatians 6:1-2

How strong are social pressures to treat my group as superior! And equally strong to exercise no moral judgments of any kind—blinding ourselves to offenses against the true, the good, and the beautiful. We need God’s help to make compassionate *and rational* judgments about others, so truth is honored as well as love. Let the Spirit quicken our minds to recognize how much we depend upon the knowledge and skills of others, and how important God-touched minds are for sustaining human community. Let’s be grateful for how much the gospel has leavened and enlightened it.

Ponder these passages:

“Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:11-12).

“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:16-18).

SONG: We Are One in the Spirit

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Spirit, only you can create unity in your body. Only you can reveal truth, interpret Scripture correctly, and empower us to correct one another in love and grace. Make me like you.

—Arthur O. Roberts, November 2008

BIBLE READING: Job 37:1-13

Abiding in God's peace enables us better to see and understand God's creation as it is, and what through God-directed stewardship it may become. Ignorance and sin cause suffering. Christians are called to *rationally* interrogate the material world—its stuff, its creatures, its energy—using sense, reason, and intuition rightly to interpret it and to release its bounty for all humanity and to God's glory. As bearers of the divine image, let's use our minds to understand, plan, adapt, reconfigure, and utilize the material world for the good of all. For Christians, every day is Earth Day. Whether it's planting moringa trees in Africa or installing windmills in America or dispensing health care, may Christians lead the world in appropriate technology. Loving God with the mind also includes intuitive wonder at the world itself. As Walt Whitman wrote in "Song of Myself": "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars....And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."

Ponder these passages:

"The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters" (Psalm 24:1-2).

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Romans 1:20).

SONG: This Is My Father's World

PRAYER SUGGESTION: God of the heavens and of the earth, your beauty is so much more than I can describe in words. Give me the courage and wisdom to care for it in honor of you.

—Arthur O. Roberts, November 2008

BIBLE READING: Romans 5:6-8; 1 John 4:16-19

We love God because he first loved us and demonstrated that love through Jesus Christ. Nestled in God's peace, we're enabled to see and *to rightly understand* divine revelation in history and within the heart. A danger looms in doing theology—in reasoning about God. The danger is idolatry: reducing God to a professional specialty, a resource, or an art or musical genre. But another danger looms in *not* crafting rational constructs for spiritual experience. The danger is idolatry: reducing God to a useful social myth. Ponder the following passages:

“But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).

“After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: ‘Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent’” (John 17:1-3).

“Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23).

Truly, “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). Friends, never lose a sense of awe before the Lord! “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!” (Revelation 4:8). May the peace of God guard your minds!

SONG: I Know Whom I Have Believed

PRAYER SUGGESTION: O God, protect me from mistakes in my own logic, but give me wisdom from above that can only come from truly knowing you.

—Arthur O. Roberts, November 2008

BIBLE READING: Proverbs 12:17-22

According to a proverb, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Proverbs 25:11 NRSV). What does “fitly spoken” mean? Excellent grammar, apt metaphor, logical order, coordinated syntax, and modulated diction? Or truth timely articulated to a hearer’s need? Hopefully it means both, but primarily the latter. Occasionally our words attain artistic beauty, but ordinarily not. However, if they discerningly speak to the needs of others, words meet God’s gold/silver standard for speech. I’m glad. Most conversation doesn’t flow in poetic cadence, but rather chitchat, like, “Sure hope it rains soon,” or “How is it going with you?”

Paul defined boundaries for conversation: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths...so that your words may give grace to those who hear (Ephesians 4:29 NRSV). Can chitchat pass this grace test? Yes, so long as it isn’t slanderous and our “pleasantries” bless rather than curse.

I understand and appreciate Puritan and Quaker traditions of “sober and uplifting” speech. Although it may not be sober, chitchat can be uplifting. Why? Because pleasantries affirm the worth of others. Words function differently. Chitchat words are short on substance but long on relationships. They’re a form of friendly touch, verbal smiles. They reinforce eye contact. Like all forms of love, casual conversations may serve as God’s messengers, nudging the hearer toward the Spirit of Truth and opening the door to more substantive words about God’s kingdom.

SONG: Make Me a Blessing

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer (Psalm 19:14 ESV).

—Arthur O. Roberts, September 2003

BIBLE READING: Ephesians 6:10-18

Difficile is French for “arduous.” The word aptly identifies a particularly vicious variety of *Clostridium* bacteria that assailed my dear wife, Fern. It seems if one’s guardian bacteria get compromised (as in Fern’s case by a routine application of antibiotics in dental surgery) this *difficile* monster roars from its den, tramples down the older antibiotic, and wreaks havoc on the body.

Maybe there’s a parable here: We live in an environment not only inhabited by good and bad bacteria in the gut, but also good and bad influences, persons, ideas, and spirits. As Peter said, “Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8 NRSV).

What spiritual disciplines keep the “roaring lion” from wreaking havoc upon you, upon your loved ones, and upon your community of faith? What powerful combination of truth and love enables you to fend off the “destroyer”? I’ll let you educe implications from this parable; I’m too tired. As you know, battling lions that prey upon a loved one is also *difficile*—arduous; but love makes it not only bearable but spiritually fulfilling. In bearing one another’s burdens—whether burdens of the body, mind, or spirit—we fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

SONG: Leaning on the Everlasting Arms

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, show me how to do my part to stay strong against any form of evil that would try to trip me up. Thank you for your constant and loving protection!

—Arthur O. Roberts, June 2003

BIBLE READING: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

In the library of my childhood home was a book titled *Adventures in Contentment*. I've forgotten its contents but not the title, probably because it hasn't been as easy for me as [it was] for the apostle Paul to be content in uncertain or shifting circumstance. I like things orderly and under my control, and get fussy when they're not. Somewhere along the line a Spirit-shafted prod from Philippians (4:11b) stuck in my mind. In the King James Version it reads: "I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content."

The secret of contentment is clear—living for Christ in the power of his Holy Spirit, the Strengthener. So I reflect upon Paul's list of adversities: Over the years I've received few insults and suffered minimal economic hardship, no persecutions, and minor calamities. How about weaknesses? Sometimes, wandering from my Guide, Satan conned me into doing stupid or wrong things. But now a different weakness clouds the sky. It's what I see in the mirror: an old man. Can I find adventures in contentment here, or will I fuss at being shoved aside? Paul didn't face this particular challenge; Nero beheaded him before he got really old.

I don't anticipate such an event; so I pray that in body, mind, and spirit I will be preserved in holiness; that through the alchemy of the Spirit, in the weakness of old age I'll be strong. Not a crotchety old geezer, but a soldier of the cross marching triumphantly to Zion. With Christ before me, beside me, within me, behind me, I'll be content! And now I think I'll take a nap.

SONG: Jesus, I am Resting, Resting

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, deliver me from the myth that I can be fulfilled by anything or anyone besides you.

—Arthur O. Roberts, July 2003

BIBLE READING: 1 Peter 5:6-7; Philippians 4:4-7

Some nights I worry. Not often, but occasionally. I should drift off to sleep, but I don't. Did I lock the car? Why don't they return my call? Do I hear a faucet dripping, or is it rain pattering the windowpane? This pain in my left shoulder, is it angina, arthritis, or acid reflux?

So I flip-flop from side to side, seeking to get comfortable. Then the Lord calls me to account. Quit worrying! Redeem the time: hum hymns, recite Scripture; pray! So I pray for family members by name. This sure beats worrying; it calms the body and focuses the spirit. Such prayer unclutters the mind and renews trust in God. It recovers the "single eye full of light" that Jesus talked about. It restores hope.

Lord, sometimes it's hard to distinguish
legitimate concern from faithless anxiety,
to disentangle my agenda from yours.

During the day many tasks and tools
rightly occupy mind and body.

Nightly they often overburden me.

What I really hope for is unfailing love,
satisfying tasks, friendships, peace,

reassurance of atoning grace—

forgiveness, holiness, joy—
for myself, for my loved ones,
day by day, night after night.

Lord, hear my prayer.

Wrap your arms around me
and rock me to sleep. Amen

SONG: He Knows My Name

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, hear my prayer. Wrap your arms around me and rock me to sleep.

—Arthur O. Roberts, April 2008

BIBLE READING: Zechariah 10:1; James 5:17-18

The governor of Georgia made headlines last November [2007] for convening a meeting at which he led citizens in praying for rain. Some rain fell the next day, then an inch or more fell the following week. Was it divine intervention? Believers opined it might have been; in any case they praised God for it.

In 1654, England suffered an even more severe drought. Oliver Cromwell, then ruler of England, issued a proclamation for a day of fasting. This moved a plucky but harassed Quaker leader to send a colorful rejoinder titled, “A warning from the Lord to all such as hang down the head for the day.” If Cromwell would own God’s truth and practice justice instead of calling for a ritual fast, wrote George Fox, rain would come. “The drought was a sign unto them of their barrenness of the water of life,” he admonished.

Well, that year some two to three thousand Friends held a “General Meeting” at Shrewsbury, during which rain fell in such torrents they had to slosh about in mud! Word got out that whenever Fox and his evangelists moved into drought-stricken areas, rain fell. It reminds one of the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who “prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops” (James 5:18).

Persons in our scientific culture find it harder to accept divine intervention of this sort than do persons of less secularized cultures. We do well to ponder Fox’s words to Cromwell, not just about rain or lack of it, but about whatever in nature upsets our rationalistic consumer culture and symbolizes “a barrenness of the water of life.”

SONG: Showers of Blessing

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Lord, how we need the rain of your Spirit in our dry and thirsty land. May you be our center, from whom all blessings come.

—Arthur O. Roberts, January 2008

BIBLE READING: John 15:12-15

Reflect with me about friends, small *f*. Family members form bonds of friendship as well as love, of course; but today we focus on unrelated people who, for one reason or another, find special affinity. These persons may be schoolmates, workplace associates, neighbors, fellow worshipers, or folks we share bakery scones with on Saturday mornings.

I'm talking about people who don't exploit but simply enjoy each other. Each enhances the dignity of the other. These are true friends. As an ancient sage observed: "Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin" (Proverbs 18:24 NRSV).

Some true friendships are formed in childhood, which over a lifetime bring both joy and sadness. From memory's rich soil, shared experiences flower as new opportunities arise or are arranged. Such friendships don't require psychological sparring to get in sync, whether interludes of absence are measured in days or decades.

Friendships emerge at each stage and circumstance of life, not just in childhood. However and whenever bonds are formed, true friends sustain each other during good times and bad. One becomes God's angel to celebrate the homecoming when the other strays. Talking and doing things together re-centers them spiritually. By being loyal, friends effectively say to each other, "God loves you." Intercessory prayer becomes their instrument of God's healing grace.

SONG: What a Friend We Have in Jesus

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Jesus, you have demonstrated true friendship in your sacrificial, unconditional love for us. May our friendships bring each of us closer to you.

—Arthur O. Roberts, September 2001

BIBLE READING: Colossians 3:12-14

Reflect upon your friendships, long and short term. What claims do your friends have upon you? One claim is for us to stand by them in time of need. Through his servant Job, God warned, “Those who withhold kindness from a friend forsake the fear of the Almighty” (Job 6:14 NRSV). In our busy lives it takes commitment to spend time with friends who need our presence.

A second claim friends have upon us is to keep in touch. Friendships are uneven in many ways, including communication skills. So Paul’s admonition is apt: “The strong ought to bear the infirmity of the weak.” In this respect many of the readers of this column are “the strong.” So let the Lord guide you. Should you arrange to visit an old friend? Go out to lunch? Phone? Write other than at Christmas? Maybe a serendipitous gift is in order. Perhaps you could collaborate on a common task. You can always recall good times you had together, and, on arranged occasions, reminisce about them together.

A third claim is forgiveness. Friends can hurt each other because they care deeply. They often hold differing opinions. If you’ve been hurt, heed this proverb: “One who forgives an affront fosters friendship, but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend” (Proverbs 17:9 NRSV).

Finally, friendship is reciprocal. At one time you may be the giving friend; another time you may be the receiving friend. Good friends receive from as well as give to the other, with no need for a ledger logging debits and credits. “A friend loves at all times” (Proverbs 17:17 NRSV).

SONG: The Servant Song

PRAYER SUGGESTION: Thank you, Jesus, for giving us friendships. Show me how to be a good steward of the friendships I share.

—Arthur O. Roberts, September 2001