Bill Cousins
January 25, 1924 – July 31, 2013

Bill Cousins was a Quaker even before he learned about the Religious Society of Friends. He was born with a superbly compassionate heart and an authentic curiosity about people. If Bill did not love you, he liked you, no matter the differences in opinion. To look at Bill was to gaze upon a man with a peaceful presence and a joyful smile.

Bill could talk to anybody – from every persuasion – and get her or him to smile, feel comfortable and enjoy a conversation with him. Bill had a gift for listening deeply and honestly to people. He possessed a talent for making you feel like you were the most important person in the world, especially when he engaged you with sincere eyes and compassion. Bill would often say "Love is the answer – plain and simple." And he meant it.

Bill truly sought the Light in each person. As he spoke to you, you could feel him focusing on your inner Light and making a genuine connection. With Bill you felt seen, heard and known.

Bill had no wrinkles on his 89-year-old face because he didn't hold anger or frown at people. In fact, his face often presented a beatific Buddha-like smile. Bill was a very special person. To be in his presence was to be uplifted by his good humor and peaceful demeanor.

Everyone loved Bill. His compass for love and understanding was so powerful that Friends and others always sought his counsel on very difficult and hard to solve problems. Bill had a talent for seeing things from a different perspective and phrasing a question so the answer could appear. His questions seemed to flow from the authentic core of an issue. Bill would often say, "But what if we look at it this way? Aren't we all like that person we are trying to fix?"

Bill looked like a Buddha. He smiled and acted like a Buddha too, although he was a "true Black man - a race man like Paul Robeson," as he would often say. Bill was born to Black parents in Ansonia, Connecticut and raised in the Black church – his father was a Baptist Minister. He grew up surrounded by the culture and love of the Black community. But to look at the peaceful, handsome face of Bill was to see a person who could have been from India. His beautiful wife of 55 years, Gouri was from Kolkata, India. Together they were a stunning couple as they traveled around the world for Bill's work with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations Children's Fund(UNICEF) and the Peace Corps.

Gouri and Bill produced two very smart, kind and handsome sons – Ananda and Christopher – who are filled with curiosity, intellect and agency like their father. His daughters-in-law, Francia - married to Ananda - and Joelle - married to Chris - were like true daughters to him, holding special places of love in his heart. He adored his granddaughters – Liliana, Krishna Raye and Tara – and they were a true joy in his life. Bill had cousins, nieces, grandnephews and grandnieces who would travel from afar to be with him at his legendary birthday parties where you could meet all of Bill's friends from various parts and times of his life. Young people adored Bill for he talked to them as he would an adult and he encouraged them to speak freely.

Bill had many stories – some that he told his close friends several times. But it was always good to listen when Bill spoke for he often had an extra insight.

Bill loved poetry – reading it, writing it and reciting it. He was a sensitive poet, and his poetry was preserved by Friends and family in a book.

Bill was one of a kind. He spanned continents in his travels and blended in with the local people in the villages while working for the Peace Corps in Iran and the United Nations in India. Bill had a big heart – figuratively and literally. Ironically, it was his physical heart that failed him from time to time but his emotional heart was huge and kept pumping love out to everyone.

However, like every human being, Bill did get upset from time to time. He was adamantly opposed to war and got angry when policies were put in place that hurt, disenfranchised or killed people. Even though Bill was an Obama supporter and was delighted that he was in office, Bill was disheartened by the war policies of the President's office. When Bill heard bad news of injustice or war, he got a look of pain on his face, a look reflecting his disappointment with policy makers. "How can they do that?" he would ask. Bill often spoke of wanting to just talk to President Obama and tell him some things about ending the war and suffering of so many people in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Bill earned a BA and PhD in Sociology from Yale University. He was a very smart and educated man, and his learning came not from books alone, but from all types of people. He was a true sociologist who was always fascinated by human behavior. He often asked, "Why do they do that?" or "How is that possible?" Bill was a professor at several colleges and had many adventures teaching in different states around the country. Bill taught at Knoxville College in Tennessee, Wellesley College in New England, Earlham College in Indiana and Federal City College in Washington D.C. Bill was the first Black professor at Wellesley in 1949 and Earlham in 1966.

Bill came to know the Quakers after he graduated from Yale and spent a summer in an American Friends Service Committee work camp in Nashville. Making history, Bill participated in the first inter-racial work camp in the South. After those initial experiences with the AFSC, Bill maintained an affinity for the organization and was a staunch supporter of their efforts. He worked with AFSC in Pakistan, India and the US.

Bill began attending Meeting at Friends Meeting of Washington in the 1980's and served faithfully on many committees. He was a member of the Board of Trustees, the Peace and Social Concerns Committee and the Healing and Reconciliation Committee. He remained a committed member of that committee until his death. In fact, a meeting was held at his house just 5 days before he died. Bill was also Presiding Co-clerk of FMW for two years.

Bill's faith in Quakers and Quaker process was the subject of many conversations when he served on the ad hoc committee for the issues surrounding the Peace Center. He faithfully wrestled with all the concerns and reminded Friends of the Quaker Testimonies of Justice, Equality and Peace during the arduous meetings. Bill was very disappointed when FMW decided to remove the Peace Center from its property.

Bill was full of stories and never ceased to have one or two revealed during a conversation with friends – no matter what the original topic. Talking with Bill was similar to floating down a stream on an air-filled inner tube on a slow summer day. When talking with Bill ideas bubbled to the top, questions danced in the air and things just flowed easily. Before you knew it you felt better, uplifted and a bit more aware. You had more things to think about after a conversation with Bill.

Bill always sat on the benches near the swinging doors, close to the garden, for that was the only accessible pathway into the Meeting room. On many Sundays, after Meeting for Worship, Friends would gather around the bench where Bill or his wheelchair sat and just wait for a chance to chat or share a few thoughts. Some Friends lovingly said it was like he was holding court – but Bill, being a modest and humble man, didn't like that term. Everyone who knew Bill wanted to talk to him and step into his loving, accepting presence while sharing his aura of Light and Peace.

Bill was a great man who was loved by all who had the pleasure of knowing him. He is missed by many friends around the world and by many Friends at the Friends Meeting of Washington.