

“...especially about the future.”

Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future. [Niels Bohr]

No matter what the destination, a wise navigator always seeks to plot the present position as accurately as possible before attempting to lay out a course. Knowing where you are is the first step in deciding the right direction of travel.

In the same way, it is necessary to think deeply about the present position of the Society of Friends as an essential part of any attempt to consider what its future might be. Only then can we choose the direction in which we should seek to move.

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In the coming decades, it is likely that we will see our familiar lifestyle changed by an increasing uncertainty in the supply of oil, the basic commodity on which our prosperity has been based. Transport and food, now extraordinarily and unsustainably cheap, will become relatively more expensive. Those of us who can recall chilblains and ice inside bedroom windows probably have little nostalgia for such aspects of our childhood world, but we may well find that some of the attitudes and practices of those times again become relevant and useful.

Many other things have altered in the last two or three generations. The Society of Friends in those days still had many birthright Friends. Married couples who had grown up in the Society had perhaps met their future life-partners at Quarterly Meeting or in some socially-committed Friendly youth activity. Convinced Friends, many of whom had been attracted to wartime relief work or to service in the Friends Ambulance Unit, formed a significant second group in the membership, a group that had undergone life-changing experiences. Indeed, some did not survive. Pacifists had died in prison, in relief work, as medical experimental volunteers or as members of the Merchant Navy

Together, in a generally respectful and mutually supportive partnership, these two groups joined to make up a membership strongly focussed on the peace testimony, with a common global perspective gained by personal links to service overseas and within this country.

Today we have a different Society, and we face a future that is different again. The very significant success of the Society in attracting and convincing new members over the past decades means that few if any Meetings now have a majority of 'birthright' Friends, and many Meetings have none at all. Whereas in 1859 J.S. Rowntree could plausibly suggest that the Society was being held back by an excessive reverence for tradition, today it is not uncommon to hear Friends bemoan what they feel to be an excessive zeal for novelty and a lack of respect for tested

forms.

Tradition is often, and understandably, felt to give stability, much as the keel of a sailing ship grips the water and allows the ship to steer a steady course even though the wind direction may be far from constant. On the other hand, a ship built with a keel too deep and too heavy will be over-stable, slow and difficult to manoeuvre. It will not even roll comfortably with the waves, but will fight against them. As every sailor knows, that is ultimately dangerous.

Today, just as in Rowntree's time, we face a tension, a dilemma. Is our tradition an understood, accepted and benign element of our Society, supporting and enabling, or is it a drag, wasting our time, our substance and our energy?

This is actually a false antithesis, of course. Neither extreme is correct. Rather, in the words of St Paul, we need to '... test all, and hold fast to that which is good' [*1 Thessalonians 5:12*]. And when we know what is good, we will know how to find the voice we need to express the truth we know.

We are not alone in seeking the right balance for the future. Here is the Archbishop of Canterbury pondering the future of worship in the Anglican Communion:

...a lot of churches that I find myself in, I think, 'Oh for goodness sake just shut up for a moment to let God in'. This is so noisy, so confident and busy that nobody's really going to have space to grow in this, and I think we ought to be working much more carefully about how we structure our prayer around quiet. How the rhythms... bring people to where they are, instead of just pushing them into a hectic pattern of feeling and chattering again. We're not good at it, and I think unless we can somehow imagine afresh our shared worship, well then, ...it won't be surprising if individuals go away feeling they've not really been helped to grow, been helped to move into something deeper, more silent and more real.

[Rowan Williams, BBC Radio 4, 'Something Understood', broadcast 13.09.2009]

It is easy for a Quaker to hear this honest and perceptive passage and to feel a bit smug. I did, anyway, when I first encountered it on the radio. Here was the Archbishop of Canterbury saying that silence is vital to the spiritual life, and grappling with the difficulties of bringing that insight to the benefit of the person in the pew. What can we add, but our (silent) applause? From the heart of the Church of England, here is a prophetic voice calling into question quite fundamental aspects of worship as currently practised in the Church.

But, prophetic voices have a habit of rendering the comfortable listener uncomfortable. It's what they do, and it's what they should do, and the more I thought about this passage, the more I felt that it held a message that we in the Society of Friends should not ignore.

Firstly, it's aimed straight at the most fundamental characteristic of any religious group: its worship. It would be distracting here even to begin to list the matters which crowd for the deep attention of Rowan Williams, but he has been able to put those aside in order to highlight something that he sees as more fundamental, deeper and nearer to God.

Secondly, it is deeply spiritual, and ultimately non-verbal. In a world with a short attention-span, obsessed with the novel, the glittering and the noisy, Rowan Williams points away from all that and seeks the heart of the worshipper. He is asking his church to consider what is really important. As Friends might say, 'seeking the truth in that which is eternal'.

Thirdly, it is creative, asking his whole church to accept the challenge he is posing. He is not only asking for a place for silence within worship, he is asking for each worshipper to be equipped to use that silence.

The confidence to put forward an idea so fundamental, far-reaching and potentially enriching can only have come from one source. And the question that comes to me is this: Where is our equivalent vision? Who shall be our prophet?

Well, we could do worse than consider what is before us. Rowan Williams was speaking about Anglican worship, but are we sure that within our silent groups, we are achieving what he is seeking for his congregations? Far from it, I submit. 'Advices & Queries' exhorts us to come with hearts & minds prepared, but frankly, most of us don't. Nor do our Meetings (with some exceptions) address the matter adequately or systematically. The Society has fallen into error, behaving as if it believed that silence is all that is required. Silence in Meeting, the silence that gives the space for growth, that is there. But there is also a silence on how to use the silence; we have the space for growth, but find the knowledge of how to use it very hard to share.

It has always been true that our worshipful silence is accessible on many levels and to all who wish to share. That means that all sorts and conditions of worshippers can find there a gentle and healing place, a true spiritual home. No one would wish to change that, to imply that one kind of silence is better than another, or that an attendance at Meeting for Worship over many years automatically produces a deep spiritual maturity. We are human beings, fallible, often foolish and only too likely to fall below our own best standards of behaviour.

We are where we are, and in the silence we can be ourselves. But the essence of spirituality includes a yearning, a sense of mystery, an ability to be comfortable with ambiguity and a tolerance for human fallibility, not least our own fallibility. Our worshipping community must be able to nurture the spiritual growth of all of its members at each stage of their lives, in sickness and in health, youth and age, and

this is no light matter. It does not happen if we do not take thought. It will not happen by chance.

I have already noted our success over years in attracting attenders and new members. We advertise and we send out enquirer's packs, but once an enquirer is handed over to the support of their local Meeting, they will encounter an infinite variety of experience. The most common will be an introduction to the Meeting library, a copy of 'Quaker Faith & Practice' and an invitation to whatever attenders or enquirers weekend seems accessible.

Now, as any teacher knows, simply handing out a text book containing the information necessary to pass the examination is not a very fruitful teaching approach. Only a very small fraction of the population learn like that, and as one looks around the Society it would be quite easy to believe that we are selecting very strongly for exactly this capacity.

The Society is not defined by a set of beliefs, so the effects of this lacuna are particularly unfortunate. Lacking a brief list of handy dogma, and in the absence of any great effort to help the newcomer to understand how 'not being defined by a set of beliefs' in no way implies that beliefs themselves are to be avoided, or are unimportant, we create a fertile ground for misunderstanding and confusion.

Yet, saints have striven to master the self-discipline necessary to silent worship, and most did not find it came easily to them.

In one sense, it is not difficult to sit in silence. It can be companionable, and a gentle and healing experience. There are varied ways to pass the time. But to be able to worship in a manner approaching that suggested by Rowan Williams is a much deeper thing, requiring a focused understanding of the meaning of the word 'worship'.

It's not that we don't know. It's more that we feel that each individual must find their own way. Of course, there is a great truth in this, but in shrinking from being too directive it is not difficult to feel that we have been almost unforgivably negligent.

Can we '*imagine afresh our shared worship*' by placing before Friends the varied and fruitful ways in which true worship can be encouraged in the silence? Look at our Meetings: Friends are reading, thinking, day-dreaming, meditating, worrying, snoozing and finding a quiet refuge, all activities which have their place or are indeed unavoidable. But, at best, they only approach worship. They are not, decisively not, worship itself.

Worship is a corporate, shared activity, entailing practice, understanding, self-

discipline and, of course, love. Only if we get this right will Friends be (in the words of Rowan Williams) “*helped to grow, to move into something deeper, more silent and more real.*”

In the face of the rather wonderful fact that Friends and attenders are today coming to the Society from an ever expanding variety of backgrounds, we must review the support that Friends receive in the years after they have begun to attend regularly. Otherwise, the Society of Friends may survive as a kind of spiritual social club, but not as a truly gathered people.

I must hasten to add that in proposing that Friends and attenders need to work in a focused manner to acquire a shared understanding of the true depth of the gathered silence, I am by no means proposing that all Friends should adopt a uniform approach to worship. Many years ago a very telling cartoon appeared on the cover of a book of Quaker humour. It shows the Celestial City at the far end of a long straight highway leading directly away from the viewer. Next to a finger post pointing the obvious way 'To Heaven' is a second one pointing to a narrow track running steeply up a rocky slope out of the picture to one side. An unmistakably Quaker figure is just setting out to scramble enthusiastically up this unpromising-looking route, which is helpfully labelled 'Towards a Quaker View of Heaven'.

A perceptive Friend has recently pointed out, in a letter to *The Friend* (18th September 2009), that the labels we choose to describe ourselves are not rigid but mutable. Depending on the context, and the meaning that particular words have in that context, it is quite possible for the outlook of any one Friend to be at different times Christocentric, universalist, humanist, agnostic and atheistic. We can be all of these things, and at the same time none of them, for they can each feel too small and restrictive to accommodate all our experience.

At his trial for heresy, Socrates famously contended that the unexamined life is not worth living. The Socratic dialogue is designed to push participants out of their zone of comfort, questioning assumptions, seeking the unstated truth. Socrates chose death in preference to surrendering this principle of enquiry. Quakers seek truth, and we are at our best when grappling with received wisdom, struggling to break free from our own preconception and prejudice. Against this background, the Socratic questioning of ourselves and our beliefs is, or should be, an unending process.

So it is not surprising that individual Friends distrust direction, and do not want to be told what to believe. We want to move at our own pace and plot our own course. We have a rich tradition, we know the terrain, we are not without guides. And it really is possible to draw on our tradition, and on the traditions of others, in ways that will support and enrich the worship of almost every single Friend and attender. Much is already available, or in hand.

But, and that is a very important 'but', two additional things are necessary before we in our silent worship can aspire to the sort of enriching process that Rowan Williams wants for his flock. Firstly, Friends must desire this end most earnestly, and secondly Friends must individually accept the self-discipline necessary to achieve it.

'Discipline' is a word that occurs very frequently in Quaker history, but it could by no stretch of the imagination be described as one that is popular today. *Self-discipline* is, if anything, even less fashionable. Is it reasonable to ask Friends to consider that self-discipline might be necessary for spiritual growth? How can that be achieved?

In the days when every organisation of any size had a telegraphic address, telegrams intended for Friends House were addressed simply to "Enhearten, London". It was an inspired choice. The Friends who chose that name were quite simply describing in one word the function of the Society of Friends. What is the Society if it does not enhearten us?

It isn't at all easy to undertake any task without the right tools. What is needed, I would contend, is a sort of spiritual toolkit, designed by Friends using our collective experience. We have that already to an extent, of course, in 'Quaker Faith and Practice' and 'Advices & Queries'. But neither of these valuable sources is focussed on worship, and indeed their very richness tends to draw attention away from the central position of worship. We know it's vitally important, but we don't act as if we know it.

Worship can produce a sense of unity deep enough to submerge all contention. Let me note one small aspect of this. Science has discovered a unity in all creation; many fundamental biological pathways are shared by organisms which seem on the surface irreconcilably different. The carbon atoms in my body as I write have also been part of literally millions of people, living and dead, and part of the bodies of myriads of plants and animals. These same atoms will continue to circulate within the biosphere long after I have relinquished my last breath. And, like all creation, I am formed from elements that can only have been created within stars, themselves now long dead. The life and death of these stars was essential to mine, part of a cosmic dance that we can only glimpse, and at which we can only wonder. In worship, I have very occasionally experienced a sense of this unity within myself. I can't begin to describe this, except by borrowing the beautiful words of Mother Julian of Norwich "...All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well", It is six hundred years since those words were written, but I know of no description of the experience of worship which goes deeper or is more simply phrased.

We implicitly assume that attenders and Friends will each automatically know how to deal with silence, how to draw from it what they need, and how to contribute to

it. But we don't have a toolkit to help, we don't have a support system focussed on enriching our worship experience, and we don't work at keeping Friends aware of the central importance of worship. In a word, we are not adequately enheartening Friends in this matter.

But we could. Collectively, we know how to build that toolkit, and we know how useful and enriching it could be. It would be the future of the Society of Friends.

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As Niels Bohr noted, no one can predict the future with any degree of certainty. However, in the face of global shortages of food and fuel the temptation for the affluent world will be to buy material security at the expense of the poorest of our fellow human beings. Resource wars and the forced movement of whole populations are quite likely to occur.

That is a world in which morality will require sacrifices no less demanding than those experienced in the first half of the 20th century. Will we be ready? To face the hard moral dilemmas and difficult decisions of such a world will be no light matter. A deep and certain spiritual foundation is absolutely essential for anyone who would aspire to live truly, fully and deeply in such a world, and I wish to contend that such a foundation can only be gained in worship.

I do not believe that any one individual is competent to teach Friends how that foundation is to be constructed, but I do believe that the wisdom and experience of the Society, taken as a whole, is more than capable of that task.

Rowan Williams is right to believe that the ability to worship comfortably in silence is fundamental to spiritual growth. Friends will each be aware, however that this is a necessary precondition that permits (but does not guarantee) further progress. To believe that silence itself is enough is to linger without entering. The Society of Friends stands before a door that is ajar, and the Light shines across the threshold. Can we now equip ourselves for the next step?

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