

“ Without Fear”

Is it me? Is it me or what, surely to God I cannot be the only one who is picking up this fear. Why on God's earth are we feeling so insecure about our Society of Friends I ask you. Not so I hear you answer.

It is so and in this essay I hope to lay before you the negative and the positive and in-so-doing I hope to get to the plain truth of where we are at.

First I need to start with an apology. I am not an easy read. I bounce from issue to issue so I encourage you to keep an eye on the ball.

Now then ..... hands up all those of us who have thought of leaving the SoF Come on now, be honest, hands up all those who have said to our own selves - do you know what? This Quaker way is driving me nuts! If one Quaker says silence another will say stillness. If one says PM another says AM. And if one says God another will say that depends. It's enough to drive you crazy, if you let it.

Hardly surprising, is it, that other faith groups see our SoF as a bit iffy. Honestly we've become so PC we have backed ourselves into a tight corner where forced niceness and politically correctedness has all of us behaving as silly as a box of bonnets. And there's more.

We are all afraid of hurting each others feelings. All scared out of our wits to speak the truth to each other. Boy O boy are we in need of a good talking to. But what is scaring us most - and frightening us out of writing this essay - is finding the right tone. If I attack, attack, attack - where will that get us. But if I defend and only defend we can draw no conclusion. Boy O boy we are in sore need of a good fatherly ..... sadly we have become so diluted our own fathers wouldn't recognise us.

Okay! enough negative. So we need to fix it. Do you think the SoF is in trouble? Yes. Do you think an essay competition is a way out? Yes. And here's why. It is brilliant because it is like a mass meeting for clearness. Whomsoever dreamed it up deserves a medal. A Quaker medal. Our Society is in deep do - do. If we do not straighten up and fly right - it is goodnight Mr Fox.

Do you know what I'm gonna do? For once in my life I'm gonna live dangerously. I am gonna let my yes mean yes and my no mean no. To hell with all this tiptoeing around each other. What ever happened to speaking truth to power - being scared witless of hitting the wrong tone and upsetting each other - hell! We would rather say nothing at all. That's cowardice. That ain't on. We must be encouraged to come out and say what's on our mind. That's a better way of saying the essay competition is brill. Instead of saying it is like a mass meeting for clearness better I say it gives me a chance to come on out and say what's on my mind.

And the encouragement is there Friends. It is there all along. All along the Quaker trail you will find encouragement. In issue No 3 of Friends Quarterly a dear Friend, interviewed, asks us to speak to the truth that is in our hearts.

Journey back as far as Fox if you like ..... all along, as you go through the Swarthmore lectures, 2009 back to Fox, you will find the wisdom of Woolman, Fry, Kelly, Penn, Dale, Newell and others - no matter how you mix it - no matter how you see the stream of knowledge there is no mistaking the stream for the source. We never will mistake the stream for the source. Ask any Quaker. They know Fox, Fell, Fry and company drew all of their inspiration from the teachings of Jesus.

Live without fear.

What then must we do. What? You heard me - what's to be done. You are brill on the bellyaching - start accentuating the positive - I asked you ..... what must we do and while I'm at it ..... you cannot write an essay. You will not carry Friends with you. Are you saying I'm not educated enough? No, I am saying you are much too direct - too blunt ..... a bit fierce and you will come over as a bully. Gosh! Don't give me the gosh. Don't stop now. Do not wimp out. You started this essay, have the Quaker courage to follow it through. Through to the bitter end. Eh! No, through to a loving, one hopes.

So I'm dim am I? It wasn't always so you know. Okay start there. Begin telling us who you are so that we might go along with you. Stop telling us how blooming useless we are. What use are you my Friend?

I became a Quaker in 1960. I recall the moment it happened. I became fully myself as soon as I rounded off a perfect O. My priest, a Jesuit, said okay boys, I want you now to write today's date on the top of your copybooks. We, us boys, dipped our nibs in the desktop inkwells and I recall writing 196 and I had to visit the inkwell again. I finished with a perfect O. Folding my arms I awaited further instructions.

My priest, our teacher, then done what he normally done on a Monday morning, he chalked a problem on the huge blackboard and he invited me out front to explain it. You see ..... the bright children sat in the front row benches and were called up to solve and I was handed the pointer and was given centre stage. Shucks, it was easy peasy I would solve - explain the solution to my peers, sit down again in front of the class and preen.

Today though something got into me and I cared not for things of this world and I froze. Refused ever again to ponder on Pie-R-Squared. 1960 I became dim and was banished to the back benches. But it was I who put the dimmer switch in. Fifty years later I can honestly say I am glad of my boyhood decision. In all that time I've never had to call on Pie-R-Squared but each and every day - since the classroom of my early boyhood - each and every day I've found the need to call on God. God had gotten into me. It was a perfect O and I became convinced. Nothing has shaken me. I've remained faithful. Lucky you - so what!

So what! So I know what I'm talking about when I see a belief under fire. Friends are being shaken to the core and need a steady hand. That is why this essay thing is brill. Okay ..... get on with it.

Recall that time on Pendle Hill. Do you recall that time on Pendle Hill? We climbed that hill and we underwent a mystic moment. Fox, I said, went up confused and came down convinced. Then we lodged with Settle Friends before attempting to cross the bay in the morrow. Crossing Morecambe Bay - in the way - do you recall what we discussed? Remind me! We spoke for 3 hours on our concern for Friends. You had Friends in Brum and across middle England. I knew Friends in Lewes, Watford - below the M4 - and we recognised the fear. We are being swamped you said. No, I said, it feels like we are being over run. Yes, okay! But in those hours we walked in the way of Friends and we reached startling conclusions. We discussed faith, convincement, commitment. We also discussed gay marriage. What do we do with refugees from other faith groups? How do we stop the watering down of our own belief and most importantly how do we discuss Jesus?

You decided to run a Gospel of Thomas group. You engaged that delightful man and Thomas scholar - oh what's his name? No names - it ain't Quakerly. And I decided to welcome strangers. We there and then decided my new title would be Quaker warden. Remember? How can I ever forget crossing the bay. How did you get on? How did you get on with your Quaker wardenship ..... how did you fare? Ah, I've seen what you've done. You've taken all the heat out of this and you've encouraged me to speak in an easier tone. Nice one.

For three whole years I was a Quaker warden in a busy city centre meeting. The High street was out front and out back was the city railroad station. We decided to be excellent to each other. We also decided to be excellent to anyone who came to our door. To my door called vagabonds and thieves, scholars and scoundrels, and all were treated equally. Chancers would knock and demand the rail fare to God knows where and I had to deal with this lie by saying, "listen friend, I may be a Quaker but that don't mean I'm a push over". And in my three years I was asked every question under the sun and we Friends kept each other grounded. I was never ignored and allowed to get above my station. We guarded against vanity. Was I an excellent Quaker warden? No, I was a good enough warden in an excellent meeting. How did you do it? How did you welcome strangers because I recall that one time in the Meeting House lobby, a walk-in for want of a better word, asked about joining and we pointed to the library and showered him with leaflets. You cringed. I recall that cringe - so how did you do it. How exactly were you excellent to new comers?

A women showed me how. Really! Yes, she had been coming, attending for a few weeks and ..... anyway she was shopping and popped into the Meeting House. She came upon me in the garden and in a no nonsense way she said, what is it with you Quakers? Is it all books, books and more books? I put aside my spade and listened to this lively women. I come to your meeting to find out more about you and you Quakers give me books and pamphlets, tea and biscuits - all very nice - but I can do all that at home. I want human contact, I want to know all about you. I am really interested in joining you ..... I really am. Who are you? What's a Quaker? Gulp! Yes, had it not been for Pendle Hill, Settle Friends, Morecambe Bay I would have gulped. Instead I laid it on her.

So you found us then! Good for you. No steeple to guide you. No signs to follow. No vain signs to say look here we are and yet you found us. Come on in and I will give you the tour. You got a minute ain't cha. Come in and allow me to reverse the action. First let me wash my hands of this world. That's better. Coffee! Good.

Now then, come through into our Meeting room. Lovely isn't it. Purpose built you know. Those high windows. Those high windows were well thought through. Early Quakers took time and a great deal of care before they acted. High windows encourage you to look up and out. Look up and out because a Quaker Meeting for Worship is out of this world. Early Quakers sure loved, like we do, to look at a garden and things on a level but to ease what we are about high windows are us.

Sit down. Sit anywhere you like. Yes, the seats are in a circle but there are no favoured seats. There is no where you can't sit. Nor, let me assure you, is there anything you need to know. You will not be asked to kneel, genuflect, sing, pray, dance or swear to uphold anything. Who is in charge? Ho! Ho! You are in charge. Haven't you always taken responsibility for yourself? Ain't no one here but you. Creed, formal prayers, bells ..... and smells! Not required. Not needed. So what is it all about then? It's about God. It has always been about God. It is exactly what it says on the outside sign; 'A Meeting for Worship'. Come inside and worship God. It don't say come inside and worship being a Quaker. We try hard not to be religious for there is great danger in falling in love with your religion - no, no, we worship God and when we come in we encourage you to keep on going in and in and go inside of yourself in search of God. Hence the high view windows to encourage you to bypass things of this world and go in search of love. Where love is God is. So it follows that when you centre down and journey inside of yourself in search of love you do not find love, you become love. That's why Jesus says 'Be passer by'. Get it?

I see lots of Bibles dotted about. You believe the Bible. You believe in Jesus. Can anyone be a Quaker? Yes, anyone can be a Quaker. You can be anything you want to be.

Why ask me what you can be ..... you gotta be what you gotta be. Earlier you asked me what is a Quaker. See ..... I cannot answer that. I wait and wait for the right question. Do you know the High street is just there. The footfall past our Quaker gate is 400 a day. Over 400 people pass me by - there's me working in the garden, lovely isn't it, and not one asks me the question I can answer. What's that. What's what? Oh come on, what is the question that you can answer? Okay, the question is not, 'What is a Quaker'. There be no answer to that. My question which I crave is 'Why are you a Quaker? And the answer is!

Okay. First let me hold up my hands. We do not have a creed you'll notice but we do, each of us, have a belief system and in holding up this hand you will notice my splayed fingers. If I dance my index finger along the top of my stationary hand it may illustrate my meaning. I, this Quakerman, believe in Truth, Non violence, Equality, Integrity and Love. Watch now. I believe in Truth. See me touch my thumb. I believe in and I finish on the little finger of Love. Watch again.

I believe in Truth: Speaking it, living it, being it.

I believe in Non violence: I will not even entertain a violent thought.

I believe in Equality: All things equal in the eyes of God, mine too.

I believe in Integrity: Ah! Integrity ..... never having to fake anything ever again.  
my yes is yes and my no, no.

I believe in Love: God is love. Where love is God is. Nuff said.

Now watch, watch as I close my fist. It ain't a fist if it ain't got Truth and the thumb locks the fist so without Truth you cannot make a fist of life..... the Truth unlocks all the others and sets us free to love.

But we are getting caught up in it. Back to you the new comer, the new attender - actually how would you like to be called? Silence.

So there are Bibles about but you do not study 'em? Personally no. I liken it to studying an unlit candle. So Quakers do not study the Bible. I never said that ..... I cannot talk for Quakers I can only talk for this Quaker and I read all of the Bible and found only two words worthwhile.

So anyone can be a Quaker. Yes, but being a Quaker is a way of life. It is a culture, a journey not a destination and this Quaker would encourage you to undergo a period of convincement. Like a cooling off period? No ..... let me put it like this. You have a boy friend. He wants to marry you ..... you ain't going to marry the guy if you don't love him ..... you ain't going to make a life long commitment if you ain't convinced. Undergo a period of convincement why don't you. God, Love ain't going to go away. Take your time. Convince me then. Convince yourself ..... take some responsibility ..... stop giving it to the priest. Take charge of yourself. We Quakers have no priest. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. Oh you do have get out clauses on everything, don't you. In a Quaker Meeting for Worship - when you go to meet God you go on your lonesome. You cannot go 50/50. You cannot phone a friend, you must go as you are. Be real to love.

Okay I'm new to all this ..... okay so, just for example, suppose I buy all that you say, what do you say about marriage. What do you say about Adam & Eve, what do you say about Darwin?

Cor! What a list! Let's complete your list. What do Quakers say about Jesus. In answer I, this Quaker, would say figure out what Jesus means to you and you go a long way to unravelling his teachings.

This Jesus guy. Lots of people need him on a cross. Personally I don't. I do not need some poor wretched fellow nailed to a cross to pay for some sin I never committed. So I do not need Adam & Eve. I, this Quaker, do not need original sin. The world was not created 6,000 years ago or 10,000 years ago. There is evidence for that. There is no evidence for my friend Jesus being nailed to a tree. No evidence what-so-

ever of any resurrection and the two words worth while are 'Jesus wept'. Not surprising is it. Wouldn't you weep if you watched the words you spoke turned round and used in evidence against you. Oops! I am in danger of going into a Quaker rant ..... let me tell you what I believe in.

I believe in you and me. I believe that we were in the Light. I listen to Jesus the teacher when he says he knows us before we were in our mother's womb. I believe together we were in the Light and into this world we were born. A spirit on a human journey. I believe the trick of it is to stay in the Light throughout this journey. I therefore believe that early Friends, Quakers had it spot on. Friends of the Light they called themselves. I believe totally in the man Jesus. I do not need him on a cross. If you do, good for you. I believe that what he had I have. He made the divine in him huge. Jesus was not the only son of God. I am. I am also a son of God. You too. In God, in Love in Spirit there is no He She. God is Spirit and as we mature in Spirit we do away with all this nonsense of She He. It is worldly - it is of this world. Quakers say you gotta be in this world but you ain't gotta be of it. Give to Caesar etc etc etc.

And talking of Spirit ..... I love the story about the Spirit on its way earthwards. I love this story because it makes me smile. The Christmas story is fun too. Harmless fun. So let me let you go with a story I can buy into.

The soul on its way from heaven is given a glance of where it is at. It is spirit and before it begins its human journey it is shown exactly where it is headed. It is shown its era, its nation, its body, its mum and dad, its life with all of its pain and its triumph..... it is shown its achievements - its children, it is shown its tears, its joys, its duration and it is shown its end. The soul cannot wait to get started. The soul agrees to all of what it is shown. Its will is the same thy will. Thy will be done. But ..... but just before the sperm pierces the egg - just before life on earth begins - an angel kisses the soul and in order to make life more interesting the soul forgets all that it is shown.

Now I told you that so you can get a clearer picture of me. I believe in the silence of a Quaker meeting we can, if love permits, go back to just before the angel's kiss. We can catch a glimpse of what Jesus meant when he says he knew us before we were in our mother's womb.

A day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day. In the year of our Lord 1960 I became convinced that there was someone someday who would want to hear how I had done. I believed with all the divine power of a child that one day I would go back to where I'd come from and the great Spirit would ask me about my journey and in the wink of an eye I would show it all to those waiting in line. Waiting in line to be kissed by the angel. I make no apology for that eight year old boy. I loved him for his conviction. I loved how brave he was to forsake Pie-R-Squared and I note that he had never read a Bible let alone entered a steeple house but he, like all children, knew that this was only a dream dreaming us.

Jesus Christ I could go on and on. I could talk of 2020 vision - next year is 2010 where, I wonder, will we be in 2020. Still full of fear? I hope not. The late Quaker John MacMurray says the opposite to fear is love. Friends, do the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain. Visit the teachings of the man Jesus. 'Love one another as I have loved ye'.

Friends who encouraged me to write know I sacrificed my education for a grounding in Spirit. I own I am a spirit on a human journey. Am I better in the flesh. A better talker than a writer! Maybe. I only know I must close before my passion for my Quaker way to God upsets my delicate companions. I would never want that. Go gentle. Go easy. Go with God.

