

## Signposts to The Future of the Religious Society of Friends

These are invigorating times. We are beginning a journey to find the source of our strength. This will be the heart of our renewal. We can go far back 2,600 years to someone who taught this central truth. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC, Lao Tzu (1) wrote "As rivers have their source in some far off fountain, so the human spirit has its source. To find his fountain of spirit is to learn the secret of heaven and earth." First, however, we must start where we are and identify those forces, energies, influences which obstruct our way. While identifying the obstacles, I have in mind a potentially large group of people in the UK of the next ten years. They are "Quakers without knowing it" Despite the creative efforts of "Quaker Quest", we are not yet reaching them. It is the purpose of this essay to make clearer the Quaker signposts which will help them discover the "fountain of spirit". In the first part, **Where we are now**, I shall try to tease out what I shall call the powers of normality which influence us all, including this group of people. In the second part, **The Quaker Way to the Source**, I shall use a unique aid in seeking the source of our human-ness, the Quakers of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century who, like ourselves, finding themselves in a world of turmoil, sought and found the way to our deepest reality. This will allow us to focus on the Quaker signposts which "Quakers without knowing it" are more likely to respond to. I shall conclude with the portrayal of an imaginary, vivifying **Quaker Meeting of the Future**.

### A. Where we are now

As the banking system returns to its gambling ways, it looks as if we have arrived at the end of our greedy civilisation; we are in the sick convulsions and weakness of a dying era. Our personal energies are daily being used up, swallowed whole by our individualistic, consumerist culture. We have got used to the continuous turmoil in our cities, the endless advertisements, the shrieking headlines in our popular newspapers. Our youngsters follow in our tracks and go through "education" which, instead of encouraging them to wake up, to stand back, to question and ponder what is proposed, does nothing to counterbalance the influences which lead to passive acceptance and blind conformity. The logic of the market, the pressures of competition seem too big to take on. So just what are we up against?

We are up against the world of materialism and, first of all, it is important to feel the *need to see through it*. We need to reduce our dependence on the world of materialism and other world-views that block us from reaching our potential. A word about the importance of our world view. I quote from *The Powers That Be* (2) by an American theologian called Walter Wink:

"Understanding worldviews is key to breaking free from the ways the Powers control people's minds... Worldviews are not philosophies, theologies, or even myths or tales about the origin of things. They are the bare bones structures with which we think. They are the foundations of the house of our minds, on which we erect symbols, myths, and symbols of thought." (p. 14) He adds: "Normally, a worldview functions on an unconscious level. People are normally unaware of its existence. It is just the way things are." (p.15) He adds the warning: "Worldviews determine what we are allowed to believe about the world." (p.22)

Who or what are these Powers? Wink explains:

“All of us deal with the Powers That Be. They staff our hospitals, run City Hall, sit around tables in corporate boardrooms, collect our taxes, and head our families. But the Powers That Be are more than just the people who run things. They are the systems themselves, the institutions and structures that weave society into an intricate fabric of power and relationships. These Powers surround us on every side. They are necessary. They are useful. We could do nothing without them. Who wants to do without delivery of our post or well-maintained roads?” But, he maintains, “The Powers are also the source of unmitigated evils.”

Wink sees one of the main evils in what he calls “the myth of redemptive violence” which he claims “serves as the inner spirituality of the nation state. It provides divine legitimation for the suppression of poor people everywhere, and the extraction of wealth from poorer nations.” (p.57) Two of the assumptions we have been born into are: one finds “Peace through war, security through strength” (p.48) Violence is celebrated in a wide range of TV programmes, in sports, in nationalism, in militarism, in foreign policy and in the general pursuit of power over others. (p.49) In some of the video games played by our grandchildren, there is sadistic violence pure and simple. Wink goes so far to say that we are already dead insofar as we have been socialised into patterns of injustice “We died, bit by bit, as expectations foreign to our essence were forced upon us. We died as we began to become complicit in our own alienation and that of others. We died as we began to love our bondage, to rationalise, justify and even champion it.” (p.94).

On a more hopeful note, Wink claims that we may be the first generation in the history of the world that can make a conscious choice between the different world views of the past.

We are all influenced by the powerful forces which constitute the society in which we live. In a nutshell, these forces cause conflict, poverty and disease for millions of the earth’s people. According to the authors of a recent book, called *The Spirit Level*, (3) we in the UK are at the top of the inequality table (with USA and Portugal). The authors have shown that countries where there is the greatest difference in wealth between the richest and the poorest people – have the worst social problems, - infant mortality, life expectancy, drug-dependence, mental ill health and obesity levels correlate with inequality of income. So we are not in a neutral situation even if we don’t subscribe to this injustice. To be unaware of it means we also contribute by our own way of life.

Wink draws it all together : “The System is characterised by unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations and the use of violence to maintain them all.” (2. p.39)

Wink is American. I now draw on a Frenchman.

In “A Taste For Things That Are True”, (4) Henri Tracol provides us with two powerful images. The first image concerns our introduction to the consumer banquet, - “we are amazed, we thought – this is marvellous” but “under the sauces too clever to be honest, there is spoiled meat, the veg is not fresh, the fruit mostly rotten. There is a smell of adulteration, artifice, chemicals.” The cooks are – the politicians, economists, sportspeople, celebrities, philosophers, writers, journalists. Their aim is to make us

accept the false. So, we seek change. We kick out the government – a new set of cooks arrive – they appear to ponder, bustle about and offer us “new food”. The menu is just the same! We then become deceivers ourselves. A lethargy, a progressive numbness takes us over. People need to go back for more, and there is always more to be had, because in our customer-led society, there are always objects or images to be had if people say they want them and are prepared to pay for them. We are then dependent on, addicted to, the various objects and people we have invested our hopes in. We look for a solution outside. We start to blame.

Before we look at the task ahead, the second image of Tracol is about what happens if we come to rely on external influences. The Canadian Air force set about building an airbase in the far north. They used the local Eskimo population. They were good employers, providing modern flats with central heating, high salaries to buy food and drink and all the accoutrements of modern urban life. Unfortunately they decided that they had made a mistake: 5 years later they decided to pull out. As good employers they explained everything clearly and gave the workforce three months free salary. A year later, a small group of officers called by to find their former employees, still in the same apartments, but stone cold, dead. A group of people had forgotten or come to dislike their cultural adaptation to their hostile environment and were unable to cope with withdrawal. Tracol is saying that our dependence on the material and the technical has perhaps already gone too far.

Depending on technology is certainly not the way. Recently I had this odd picture of the near future. I wake up in the morning and put on my vision helmet. Everything is there! 24 hours entertainment, news as it happens and a little animal I have already chosen which guides me through the day. “Call in at Tesco. They have a wine sale!”, “Careful! There is a group of students having a demo in the centre of Reading. Take the ring road!” I no longer have any need to talk with others, not even with my grandchildren. Already in 2009, on a long car journey, they are totally immersed in their DVD’s. “Look at that sunset over the waterfall!” I am just about to say. I don’t. It’s too much trouble to make the effort!

The media are one of the most powerful causes of the hypnosis we experience. We have to be very vigilant. There is a shocking book *Guardians of Power – the Myth of the Liberal Media* by Edwards and Cromwell. (5) The authors shake our confidence in those sections of the media, like *The Guardian* and the *BBC*, which many of us believe do their best to be impartial and objective.

Now is the time to take heed of the eloquent warning from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas: (6) (For “lion” read the “consumer society”.)

“Happy is the lion which the man will eat,  
and the lion will become man;  
And abominated is the man whom the  
lion will eat,  
and the lion will become man.” (p.13)

Once we become aware of these dangers, we are not clear of the forest. Kirkpatrick (7) quotes John Macmurray – “Watch the return of the old assumptions which are pervasive and unformulated.” We often forget that the forces of normality are active.

We inevitably fall again under their influence if we are not aware of them. Rene Daumal (8) uses the seizing image of the dangers which confront the mountaineer: "Never halt on a shifting slope. Even if you think you have a firm foothold, as you take time to catch your breath and have a look at the sky, the ground will settle little by little under your weight, the gravel will begin to slip imperceptibly, and suddenly it will drop away under you and launch you like a ship. The mountain is always watching for a chance to give you a spill." (p.142).

## **B. The Quaker Way to the Source.**

Let us try to identify the Quaker way to take on these powers of normality. They can be characterised by the following emphases:

1. Appreciation of receiving energy rather than addiction to spending energy.
2. Life in the spirit rather than cerebral secularity.
3. Personhood rather than individualism.
4. Experiment rather than conformity.
5. Balance rather than imbalance.

### **1. Appreciation of receiving energy rather than addiction to spending energy.**

It means no less than changing the way we experience life. Instead of expending energy the whole time, we try to remember occasionally to be open to receive. The problem has been with us for a long time. In the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, Meister Eckhart observed, "The soul is scattered abroad in these powers, and dissipated in the action of each."

For me, the central message of Friends is to be found in the "Experiment with Light". Rex Ambler (9) has looked closely at how early Friends held their long, mostly silent meetings. He studied George Fox's first writings and discerned a clear process. "His initial message was always the same: give up your dependence on doctrines, rituals, preachers and everything else that is external to you, and find the light within you because that will teach you all you want to know." (p.7). Ambler has distilled the process to give us the quintessence of Quaker spirituality. The process he discerned (10) is both simple and difficult.

1. Mind the light. That is, pay attention to the kind of awareness that arises when you are still and silent.  
'Mind the pure light of God in you, which shows you sin and evil, and how you have spent your time, and how your minds go forth' (George Fox, a paper of 1654, in *The Doctrinals*).
2. Open your heart to the truth. Be open to whatever is shown to you of the truth of your life, however unfamiliar or uncomfortable it may be.  
'Let the light of Jesus Christ, that shines in every one of your consciences, search you thoroughly, and it will let you clearly see' (George Fox, a paper of 1656, quoted in Fox's *Journal*).
3. Wait in the light. If the truth is uncomfortable, wait till you see the whole picture and you will then be free of the issue.  
'The first step to peace is to stand still in the light' (Fox, *To All that would know the Way to the Kingdom*, 1653).
4. Submit to the truth. Say 'yes' to the reality that has been shown you, and you will then find peace, and the strength to act rightly.

‘After thou seest thy thoughts and the temptations, do not think, but submit; and then power comes’ (Fox, Epistle 10).

By placing “The Experiment with Light” central, I see Meeting for Worship as a means of receiving rather than spending energy. It is a way of applying no.7 of our Advices & Queries: “Be aware of the Spirit of God at work in the ordinary activities and experience of your daily life.” The way is simple and difficult; to pause occasionally throughout a busy day, perhaps to ask “What’s going on?” but not to answer, simply to trust what Quakers so often talk about. In the Holy Koran, Moses asks God how often people should think of Him. God replies “All the time!” Moses believes that to be impossible so God suggests something more achievable. “How about 5 times a day?” Can we do the same?

For further ideas on our relationship to energy I want to look back to another early Quaker, Isaac Pennington. (11)

A word of care: Pennington uses “God” language. If you wish you can substitute your own word or words, like “spirit”, “vitality” “depth”. His language is dated but his insights about living in the here and now closely remind me of the Zen way. Pennington, who, despite being unjustly imprisoned, remained positive, encouraging Friends to recognise the source of life within us. He characterised two states of consciousness, one “in the life” the other “out of the life”, (which we call normality). As he uses the word “life” in a variety of meanings, I would interpret these two states as “in the life of the spirit” and “out of the life of the spirit”. I make a further interpretation. “In the life of the spirit” for me means “receiving energy” “Out of the life of the spirit” means “giving or losing energy”. Habitually, we spend most of our conscious and a good deal of our sleeping life losing energy. That’s why we are so often tired. We need to identify, to feel, to sense this power of normality on and in us, like an invasion, always ready to take us over. Pennington’s way is even more difficult but possible. Being open to the power of God is gained “by putting off all his knowledge, wisdom, understanding, abilities, all that he is, hath done or can do.” This very appropriately takes us on to the next signpost.

## **2. Life in the spirit rather than cerebral secularity.**

It is important not to dismiss the power of thinking. Each part of us has its right use. We all know, however, that we are living in a period of “over-information”. We are not only captive of our thoughts but of the way thinking dominates our lives. We all recognise how too much living in the head drains us. This development has been very strong for centuries. George Fox has a very direct approach, one which is even shocking to us; “But all you that be in your own wisdom and in your own reason, you tell that silent waiting upon God is famine to you; it is a strange life to you to come to be silent, you must come into a new world. Now you must die in the silence, die from the wisdom, die from the knowledge, die from the reason, and die from the understanding.” Rex Ambler’s modern English version is helpful (12. p.24-6); “But all you who rely on your own wisdom and your own reason, you make out that silent waiting on God would leave you famished. It would indeed be a strange life to you to learn to be silent; you would have to enter a new world. Now you have to die in the silence, you with your wisdom, your knowledge, your reason and your understanding.” And even if you attempt, you will invariably fall back into captivity. Fox reminds us, “And all Friend live in the power of the Lord God and keep down the wise part, which will judge truth to be simple and come to despise it, and cry up their

own words of wisdom in its place.” (12. p. 44). His simple but difficult exhortation is, “Your strength is to stand still, after ye see yourselves.” (12. p.34).

Penington stresses that one should “feel his own Spirit and life.” (11. Observations. p.277). He reaches depth through sensing, feeling, tasting rather than “striving to know”. He urges a profound simplicity of thought – to speak only what one experiences within. “Religion, true religion, is not a matter of opinion (as men, who have not tasted of the power, are apt to imagine), but a new creation..., (11. The Consideration...p. 222).

Anxiety, also, is a useless loss of energy. Penington writes: “You will find it easy to transgress, easy to set up self, easy to run into sudden apprehensions about things...if any thing should arise from the wrong wisdom in any, ye may be sensible of it, not defiled or entangled with it, but may abide in that which sees through it and judge it.” (11. To Women Friends at Armscot. p.108)

### **3. Personhood rather than individualism.**

I have been looking at Martin Buber, who had a seminal influence on John Macmurray. In the following quote from *The Knowledge of Man*, (13), I have replaced the word “conscience” by “consciousness”:

“A greater consciousness is needed; one that has become wholly personal, one that does not shy away from the glance into the depths and that already in admonishing envisages the way that leads across it. This consciousness is possessed by every simple man who gathers himself into himself in order to venture the breakthrough out of the entanglement... And it is a great task of education to elevate the consciousness from its lower common form to consciousness-vision and consciousness-courage. For it is innate to the consciousness of man that it can elevate itself.” (p.135). The language is a bit heavy but essentially so positive!

David Bryant in a “*Face to Faith*” article on Buber (*Guardian* 01/03/08) shows how today’s prevalent world-view of “I-It” could be giving way to the much more hopeful one of “I-Thou”: “Besides the “I-It”, there is a second primary relational word “I-Thou”, an encounter at the deepest level with humanity, nature, art and existence, an awareness of our one-ness with all that is. This has the potential to transform humanity.” “It’s a tall order!” you might respond, but we have to start with our own lives.

In her Pendle Hill Pamphlet (14), Janet Schroeder shows how we can apply this in our day to day encounters. “What characterises the I-Thou, as Buber explains, is a readiness to meet the other, and accept him just as he is. You cannot really care for the other person until you can see him from his side.”

Let’s see what Penington has to say. In a brief account concerning silent meetings, (11. p.210) he likens individual Friends gathered in meeting as “vessels”. He writes: “And then also there is the life of the whole felt in every vessel that is turned to its measure: insomuch as the warmth of life in each vessel doth not only warm the particular, but they are like a heap of fresh and living coals, warming one another, insomuch as a great strength, freshness and vigour of life flows into all.” Growing through meeting!

#### **4. Experiment rather than conformity.**

We all tend to be creatures of habit. The commercial and the entertainment networks exploit it to the full. We also know, however, that life begins afresh for us each new day. Our vitality and our level of awareness require us to live “experimentally”. Penington implies that we waste our life in our habitual state. He writes: “Man must be wrought out of himself, out of his own thoughts, expectations, gathered apprehensions concerning the kingdom and way to life, and led in a path he doth not know (nor ever can know any longer than he is in it); and in ways he hath not been acquainted with.” (11. To All Such as Complain. p. 277). He reminds us that the feeling of aliveness, the receiving of energy comes from living in the present moment; “But he that knows God comes into the immediate presence; and he that daily lives in God, lives in the immediate life.” (11. The Axe Laid to the Root. p. 188). This is what Eckhart Tolle calls “The Power of Now”. (15).

#### **5. Balance rather than imbalance.**

We have let slip the old wisdom of finding balance in our daily life. Our civilisation has got lost in the head. Words are wonderful things but they have a habit of taking us over, lock stock and barrel! We all still know the feeling of living too much in the head. George Fox has some harsh words about our addiction to “notions”, “that brain-beaten-heady stuff”. (12. p.44). Our “minds are in bondage. And they are brittle and changeable, and tossed up and down with windy doctrines and thoughts.” (12. p.8) and in a startlingly modern turn of phrase – “There are too many talkers, and few walkers in Christ”. (12. p.82)

The way forward is radical. George Fox, again: “Now you must die in the silence, die from the wisdom, die from the knowledge, die from the reason, and die from the understanding.” (12. p.26) and we don’t know what to do. Maurice Nicoll (16) says we have to undergo “metanoia” with reference to our own picture of ourselves. It is a long process: “The freeing of the mind from its old habitual ways of thinking... the freeing of oneself from one’s habitual emotions, takes place by stages – often at long intervals.” (p.959) He suggests the means “You have to realize contradictions in yourself by direct, uncritical self-observation.” (p.964) It is only when we see ourselves, that “we can take life as this interesting exercise, that life can become our teacher.” (p.972) Eckhart Tolle (18) puts it neatly: “Whenever you are able to observe your mind, you are no longer trapped in it.” (p.45)

There is also a proper use of feelings. Sometimes, our feelings of insecurity confuse our thinking and anxieties take over. In their study of Isaac Penington, Keiser & Moore place the role of feeling in the centre of our search: “The conception of the self as knowing through sensing and feeling rather than through believing is central to Quakerism, not only in the seventeenth century but throughout its history”. (11. p.178) In his letter to “S.W” in 1670 he writes: “Do not thou matter the notion, but feel the thing”. (17. Day Three).

There are few references to the body in modern Quakerism. No.9 of our Advices & Queries bids us: “Come to meeting for worship with heart and mind prepared.” (18). Perhaps we should leave our bodies in the vestibule. In the 1950’s Howard Collier’s booklet on the Meeting for Worship (19) included a detailed appendix on sitting in meeting, with particular attention to the muscles of the face. More recently in John

Lampen's collection of essays "Seeing, Hearing Knowing, reflections on Experiment with Light", (20) there is a description of "focusing": "Focusing is finding an inner place, a silent place of deep bodily knowing that precedes thought and symbolic expression and constitutes a person's most basic experience of their situation." (p.37)

We need to engage, in their proper use, our thinking, our feelings and our bodies. It's a question of balance.

### **C. The Quaker Meeting of the Future?**

Let us imagine, in conclusion, a Quaker Community taking on these five emphases and attracting all those "Quakers without knowing it" in their area. The imaginary town is called Folkingham. In the little industrial estate a Quaker resident community has established itself in some warehousing built just before the recession of 2008 - ? and mostly left vacant. These Friends are putting their faith into action, with communal sharing of kitchen and garden shed facilities. They are also able to maintain a regular peace witness in the local large town. Their example of "personhood rather than individualism" is infectious and spreads into the activities of their local Meeting. Lots of small groups are available for Friends and Attenders to share and work together. There is a quilting group, a baking group and an allotment group. Participants, by concentrating on the job in hand, can also, without being self-conscious, share personal concerns at a deep level. When the weather is better, they organise walks which include babies in push-chairs. Throughout the year in the choir group there is comradeship, discipline, heightened attention and the beauty of the music.

On a Sunday morning, 25 minutes before meeting for worship is deemed to begin, there is an open session called *Hearts, Minds and Bodies Prepared*. This is a silent session of conscious movement, borrowing from the Pendle Hill Pamphlet by Carol Murphy. (21).

Area meetings have undergone a profound change. All possible business is circulated beforehand. The silence at the beginning of the meeting upholds the recommendations, or questions them (but that is rare!). Then the main item is of lively interest to those present. Participation has increased dramatically.

The meeting is running a series of Saturday and weekday evening sessions on *Experimental Quakerism*. Each session begins with an introduction taking the group into the essence of a teaching which one of the group has found helpful in her/his search. There is then an exercise or two in order for all to participate. The group presenter, different each time, tries to discern links with Quakerism as it is today with perhaps a question whether any thing is needed in our own preparation. The group makes time and space for questions in sharing time. There is then a short reading and a simple focus phrase which one will easily be able to recall afterwards and which will help to bring back the "taste" of the session. The session ends with a Meeting for Worship. The pattern of the sessions is something like this:

1. The Hindu Tradition - participation with the body
1. Buddhism via Thich Naht Hanh, The Here and Now
2. Hasidism via Martin Buber, Positive Hallowing



3. Jesus via The Gospel of Thomas, Self Observation
4. Mantra Quieting Quieting the chatterbox mind.
5. Surrender and Islam Distancing and Living in question
6. Meister Eckhart and the theme of detachment Back to the stable!
7. Worship through the senses. Enjoy what is!

#### **D. Conclusion**

What I am describing is not a future of quietism. Far from it! It can be summed up in one of *Some Friendly Beatitudes* by Jill Segger. (22)

Blessed are those who know how to be still  
They will always be ready for action.

#### **Acknowledgements**

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