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THREE STEPS FORWARD-A HONEST SEARCH FOR TRUTH

Introduction.

In the late 19th Century, the future of Quakerism in Britain depended on separating from the outdated traditions and practices of the past. A new interpretation of Quaker faith and practice was needed, one that could address the emerging ideals of the new century and beyond. It was time to trade in the plain clothes (so to speak, and all they stood for) and adopt a more modern dress that expressed the hopefulness and intellectual curiosity of the age.

This new interpretation brought an essential renaissance to Quakerism in the early twentieth century, carrying with it a flourish of new energy and commitment, especially around University centers. It was a time of great challenge but also of great hope. There was a strong prevailing belief that humanity would be able to solve its problems, no matter how monumental, through the coming age of higher education and scientific discovery. This optimistic faith fueled a new Quaker wave of social consciousness in Britain and America, bringing with it an influx of devoted new members and saving Quakerism from fading into obsolescence.

By the mid to late 20th century this modern Quaker vision was waning. The idealism of the past had been tempered by two world wars and growing fears of the atomic age. With the world rapidly changing around them, Quakers were changing too. They continued their strong witness in the world, holding on to the Peace Testimony as a central tenant of

their faith but essentially letting go of its Christian roots. Quakerism was now seen as transcending any particular religious tradition. As this trend continued the Quaker faith was often no longer described in terms of corporate experience but by each person's individual "spiritual journey." By the end of the 20th century, without a common reference point, modern Quakerism quickly became a patchwork of diverse competing interests and social concerns. Very few remnants of the past remained. The vital faith that birthed Quakerism had all but disappeared.

Today, many Quakers no longer feel a strong connection to our early Christian roots. We are confused about who we are, what we believe, where we have come from, and where we are going. We have been very reluctant to face this openly and address our present condition. With what seem to be so few common threads left, we fear being pulled apart at the seams. Instead of facing this hard and essential challenge, we have continued to try to reinvent ourselves using various catch phrases such as, "Unity in Diversity."

Today, just as was seen at various crucial points in the past, we are clearly being drawn to a deeper search for who we are and where we are going. The question for our time is whether we will heed or hide from this calling.

Modern Quakerism began as a very vital and powerful movement. It had a profound impact on many generations of Friends who worked long and hard for a vision of the Peaceable Kingdom. Just as we have seen in every new century, questions now arise as to whether the remnants of the old can speak to the needs of the new.

Part 1.

Quakerism was clearly in trouble when J.S. Rowntree wrote his prize winning essay published in 1859. This well researched paper pointed to a myriad of contributing factors that aided this decline. Rowntree exposed the pitfalls of traditional Quaker practices and challenged the contemporary role of Quakers as a “peculiar people.” The future, for him relied on opening up to newer ideas and approaches in both Quaker faith and practice, approaches that would be relevant to the world in which they now lived. Instead of trying to remain separate from that world, they needed to find ways to engage that world in an ongoing dialogue of the essential Christian message.

Rowntree questioned the need to continue the long held practices of Quaker peculiarity of outward dress and speech. He lamented the long term negative effects of an over emphasis on strict enforcement of the Book of Discipline. In his conclusion he summarizes his compelling call for change by quoting the words of a Puritan scholar, “We have seen the consequences of a rigid uniformity, and we have seen the emptiness of a “traditional” zeal. Shall we forever tread in the erring footsteps of our forefathers?” (Quakerism, Past and Present, London, 1859. p.186)

This was a time when the century long influence of Quietism was still predominant in Friends Meetings throughout Britain and the United States. J.J. Gurney and his Evangelical approach to Quakerism was highly influential, especially with the young but this would lead to many controversies and divisions based in part on

theological differences, especially in America. By the end of the 19th century both Quietism and Evangelical Quakerism were dismissed as too rigid and confining by a new generation of well educated Quaker youth. New winds were blowing and a new Quakerism was needed that embraced human intellectual curiosity and the new age of scientific discovery. This Quakerism would finally span the chasm of outdated theology that so distinctly separated the human quest for knowledge from the Divine.

In 1895, another young Rowntree (John Wilhelm) addressed those gathered at Manchester in one of the most compelling speeches of what would later become modern Quakerism. He both challenged and inspired in his words.

“Let us face the facts with confidence and courage. If the age of the faith which comes by tradition and authority is gone, and men can no longer believe without knowing why they believe; if they are expanding those partial views of truth that were inevitable in earlier times, then such a change will bring as its ultimate result, not weakness but new strength.” He goes on to show how this age of inquiry can live in harmony with a new broader age of faith. He balanced this message with a deep spirituality and a remarkable prayer that seemingly awakened a whole new generation and resulted in the transformation of Quakerism in the early twentieth century.

“Is there indifference to the Higher Life? Then, O Christ, convince us by thy Spirit, thrill us with Thy Divine Passion, drown our selfishness in Thy invading love, lay on us the burden of the world’s suffering, drive us forth with the Apostolic fervor of the early Church! So only can our message be delivered:-“Speak to the Children of Israel that

they may go forward” (Jones, R.M., The Latter Periods of Quakerism, London 1921, Vol.II, p.974-975)

In two short decades, this movement rose from an outsider status to mainstream thought so that by the 1920's it held a prominent position in the Society. Both Rowntree and his counterpart Rufus Jones in America, had a profound impact on the future of Quakerism. Without this new movement it is quite likely that British Quakerism would have either faded quietly into history or taken on the predominant new model in America of Evangelical Programmed Worship.

Instead, this new movement flourished and through the influence of Jones and others, had a noticeable impact on the world around it, especially during the upcoming years of world wars and conflicts. As it evolved, it continued to hold up a positive vision of peace and reconciliation that reflected a deep belief in a God of Love. “The Ocean of Light” quotation of George Fox, for this new generation of Quakers, pointed to the greater power of love over the power of war, prejudice, and hatred.

Part 2.

My father caught this vision in the 1940's and became a Quaker Conscientious Objector in America during World War 2. Our Meeting, like so many others during this time, was based on an optimistic religious philosophy of innate human goodness and the power of love over hate. This was a powerful vision of God's community here on Earth. It relied on a deep seated commitment to pacifism and an unshakable belief system based on the central premise that “there is that of God in everyone.” This quote, popularized by

the American Friends Service Committee and Friends General Conference in the United States, later became the standard quote for all Friends that now carried the label of “Liberal” in America. This quote was also predominant among British Friends who held the same vision and were influenced by the same Quaker currents and world events.

From my earliest memories of Quakerism, I could see the profound impact that this hopeful vision had on my father and his generation of Friends. There was clearly something very powerful there. As a young boy I could see my father’s commitment to this faith and how it fed his spirit and enabled him to be the person he was.

Things seemed different for me and my generation. We were not as clear in our hope for the future. The powerful vision of peace and of God’s love upheld by older Friends seemed unattainable to us, covered by multiple layers of human frailty. It did not speak to our insecurities and fears and did not address the anger and hurt that came from an unconscious recognition by our generation that we could not live up to their standards.

Each generation challenges the thoughts and ideas of the past. Rufus Jones clearly felt the limitations of the narrow Evangelical version of Quakerism practiced in his own family Meeting. His response against his past is part of what led him to look for new Quaker language to speak. In his last known paper entitled, “A Call to a New Installment of Heroic Spirit,” he recollects his early boyhood days in his home Meeting as tedious and uneventful. “I should never have dreamed that these men and women were the successors and inheritors of one of the most heroic groups of religious leaders that ever lived” he wrote. “It took no courage, no heroism to go through the religious forms and practices we went through each week. No, it was perhaps the least heroic feature of

our town.” He goes on to joke about how the Yearly Meeting Week was labeled by the young Friends of his time as “Merely Eating Week.” Clearly for his generation, there was lots of food for the body but not much to feed the soul. (1948 pamphlet, New England YM, p.2).

I had this same reticence to accept the Quakerism of my youth. My meeting was not Evangelical- in fact it was far from it. Many of the members of my home Meeting were “convinced Friends” who had come to Quaker Meeting to get away from negative experiences of organized Christian religion. Yet to me, my meeting seemed as tedious and uneventful as the experiences of Jones. My Sunday School consisted of a steady boring diet of arts and crafts and comparative religions. Silent Worship was the biggest puzzle of all. The emphasis seemed to be more on silence and less on worship.

I was very uncomfortable in the silence and often felt embarrassed about not being able to find an inner peace. Ministry was theme based and philosophical; very little seemed to “speak to my condition.” There was very little vocal prayer; it was viewed as an outdated relic of the past. We were seen as having within ourselves all the resources needed to face the challenges of our time. For me, this simply did not ring true. Looking back, I realize that I must have felt like J.S.Rowntree, Jones and others; I was trying to live out the faith of an older generation, a Quakerism that had lost its ability to speak in a language that I could understand.

Part 3.

Clearly we live in a time when there is a great need for rediscovery/recovery of a vital vision of Quakerism for the 21st century. Without it we will likely pass into history and our Meetinghouses will stand as empty reminders of the past.

We need today what Jones so clearly articulated as, “A new Installment of Heroic Spirit.” The question before us is no longer whether we need this new direction but how to find it.

The model that I would like to draw from in this search, is the well known 12 Step Recovery Model. I have chosen this model because it is a powerful life changing model of hope that has been highly effective in personal transformation. Although it is used primarily in the individual struggle against addictions, I believe that it has something to say to Friends as a community.

As Quakers, we may not be a group of alcoholics, but clearly we do have a problem with denial. This is well evidenced by the fact that the decline in Quakerism in Britain has been going on for several decades now. Yet, we have only very recently begun to take it seriously. It is my hope that this essay contest will be an important catalyst for Friends, moving us forward out of the self destructive stage of denial (there is no problem, everything is fine) and towards the very first step to our own recovery.

**The first step to recovery is the recognition that we cannot do it on our own.
We cannot find our way through this in our own strength and power.**

It seems odd to have to say this today. It shows how far we have drifted from our roots. When we look at the early accounts of Friends, they knew this experience first hand. The most pivotal experience in Fox's account of his search for Truth came in 1647 when he realized that there was, "*none among them all* that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that *I had nothing outwardly to help me*, nor could tell what to do, then Oh then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus that can speak to thy condition, and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.'" (Journal of G.F. Nickalls Ed., p.11) It was only when he had completely given up on his own resources and had "nothing left to believe in" that he heard the famous voice.

Three hundred years later, this essential truth is echoed in the introduction to the 1962 version of London Yearly Meeting Advices and Queries. "Many may be disheartened at times because the ideals of Christian Discipleship seem impossibly demanding, but we should all remember that we are to seek after them, not in our own strength, but in the strength of him whom we follow." (London, 1962, p.8)

Many of us within Quakerism today are again searching for a life changing power, greater than ourselves. We want to find this experience together in our Meetings and share this message of hope to the world around us. If there is to be a future of Quakerism in Britain, it depends on coming together into an experience of the transforming power of "him whom we follow." In a sense it relies on our willingness to accept our present limitations and search for an answer beyond our own best efforts. Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord." (Zachariah 4.6)

In the middle of the 17th century, a young man of outstanding education and prominent upbringing walked into a silent Quaker Meeting and his life was changed forever. Robert Barclay records this experience in these words, “It was not,” he says by strength of argument, or by a particular disquisition of each doctrine and convincement of my understanding thereby, that I came to receive and bear witness to the truth, but by being secretly reached by this Life. For when I came into the silent assemblies of God’s people, I felt a secret power amongst them which touched my heart; and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me, and the good raised up; and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might find myself perfectly redeemed.” (Barclay’s Apology)

This experience was a gift to Barclay. He did not acquire it through his own efforts. In the same way, we need Divine Intervention to bring this experience alive among us today. Clearly it is an encounter with this power that birthed Quakerism and sprouted forth the very values and ideals that still define us as Quakers today. This is the starting point for a new vision of Quakerism for the 21st Century.

The second step is to ask God for help. Modern Friends are not used to having to ask for help. We consider ourselves very independent, self sufficient, and capable, and we are! In a sense we see ourselves as the complete package, already having within us the inward spiritual resources to manage on our own. Early Friends clearly had a different perception and experience. They certainly did not prescribe to the negative Calvinistic view of human depravity but they did not think we were all good either. For them (and for us) this endless theological debate was framed by the wrong assumptions.

The crucial question is not how bad or good humans are. It focuses instead on whether we are willing to respond to God's voice within. Early Friends saw themselves as incomplete and clearly limited in their ability to do good, without this inward response. It was this ongoing inward encounter and response to God's voice and Light that made them whole. This listening and following together led to a new and living faith no longer based on outward belief systems but based instead on inward experience. The center of this faith was a new way of worship that centered on listening to God's voice. This worship became the centerpiece for a powerful ongoing individual and group experience of transformation..

After many years of struggling to understand silent Quaker worship I finally came to see that silent worship is not based on silence at all. It is based on expectant waiting. We are waiting for someone. We gather in expectation that Christ will be "present in our midst." We expect him to come and be with us, to speak to our hearts and to lead us in our worship and in our lives. The term "gathered meeting" indicates that God is doing the gathering. It comes from the quote from Francis Howgill, "The Kingdom of God did catch us and gather us up as into a net." It is a deep and unifying experience of coming together and being held together by the bond of God's love. All of this is possible when we approach our worship with honest and open hearts, recognizing our need for God's help, and waiting to be visited by a Presence and strength greater than our own. Recovering this deep spiritual experience of Quaker worship is an essential part of finding a new vision for Quakerism in the 21st Century.

The third step is a true search for who we are and where we are going.

Our present search for identity does not have to pull us apart if we approach it with humility. It is my sincere hope that we will be able to move forward in this process. It is essential however that in our urgency to move and make things happen, we do not try to skip the first two steps and embark on this journey alone.

For early Friends, this search for identity was not an easy straight forward task. It often came through harrowing experiences of the Light of Christ within. This encounter (known as “being convinced”) was so powerful it often caused them to completely re evaluate their faith and their lives. We may be in for a similar ride.

The convincing power of Christ within was felt throughout the entire household of Judge Fell, after a visit by George Fox in 1652. This family, through their own transformation had a profound impact on others. Anthony Pearson, a Justice of the Peace in three counties, was never the same again after his visit to the Fells at Swarthmore Hall.

He writes, DEAR FRIEND,

I have long professed to serve and worship the true God, and as I thought (above many sects) attained to a high pitch in religion; but now, alas! I find my work will not abide the fire. My notions were swelling vanities without power or life: what it was to love enemies, to bless them that curse, to render good for evil, to use the world as using it not, to lay down life for the brethren, I never understood; what purity and perfection meant, I never tasted: all my religion was but the hearing of the ear, the believing and talking of a God and Christ in heaven or a place at a distance, I knew not where..... What it means to wait upon God, I cannot apprehend ; and the confusions in my own spirit, together with the continual temptations from without, are so great, I cannot understand or perceive the small still voice of the Lord. (Letters of Early Friends, London 1841, A.R. Barclay, p.10-11. Googlebooks.com)

After going through this powerful conviction experience and finding a new and living faith within, Pearson completely changed. He recognized the genuine nature of this inward experience. Pearson no longer persecuted Friends and instead became an active part of this new movement.

The message of these Friends is clear. When we allow God to search our hearts and lives with his Light, we may see much that needs change. If we wait in his Light and Love, we will be given a power through and over and these things into a new and living experience of Christ. *If we are to heed this call to rediscover our identity and find a way forward it needs to be through an inward faithfulness and not through a process of continued self definition.*

The original name, "Friends" came from the verse in John where Jesus says, "You are my Friends, if you do what I command you." As Friends, we believe that he continues to speak to us today. Our ability to speak to our present time and the times ahead depends on our response to that voice within.

God has spoken powerfully to Friends at each crucial point in our history. This is one of those times. Our prayers, hopes, and dreams are built on the many powerful voices and experiences that have gone before us, but they must essentially be our own! As we begin this journey forward with humble and open hearts, may we be given new Words of Life to speak to our generation and beyond:—"Speak to the Children of Israel that they may go forward."

