

## **“The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain”**

### **We came to know...**

**“The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net, and his heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land. We came to know a place to stand in and what to wait in” Francis Howgill 1663**

### **Quaker Faith and Practice 11.01**

This submission is divided into two sections:

#### **1. A Place to Stand In**

Reflections on the future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain.

#### **2. What to Wait In (or The Naked Truth)**

Reflections upon seventeenth century corporeal prophesy and sign performances.

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# A Place to Stand In

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses possible influences upon the future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain and looks at where we may choose to stand.

## KEYWORDS

**Love, imagination, paradox, hope, relational, contemplative,  
prophetic, simple, silent.**

Early Friends in their writings and letters addressed each other as members of a strong family, a family that only knew the language of love. In a society with often strong constructs of what a family *should* look like and how it *should* behave, we in the Religious Society of Friends can be a different family. The great environmentalist Joanna Macy in her workshops discusses the imaginative use of ‘future friends’ and encourages participants to receive a letter from a ‘future friend’ and enter into a dialogue with our future world. We can also enter into a dialogue with our early Quaker Friends and we can undoubtedly do more writing and contact our current Friends in different Meetings around the country. However, I often wonder what a future Quaker Friend would write to us and in what place they would encourage us to stand in. As humans we are social, moral and ethical beings. We are so much more as well. We are emotional beings, intellectual beings, sensory and moving beings,

imaginative and conscious /unconscious beings. What we know is that we are complex. What we know is that we have a vast and extensive inner life as well as our outer world. Our contemporary society is in need of the skills of integration and transformation. We are all in need of the skills of perseverance as well as hope.

Our faith is lacking if we do not develop a strong belief in and commitment to the imagination, as essential for spiritual development. For a long while Jesus' understanding of and playfulness with the imagination has been overlooked.

Moreover, the most central part of his ministry, that is the development of and sustaining of a deep personal intimate relationship with God, Our father/mother/lover/friend/other has become muddied by all the words of scriptures, church and theology. Now is the time for us to become more rooted, more surely footed about our faith and our future within the Religious Society of Friends. Now is the time for each of us to speak our truth. We must speak our truth knowing that there is always uncertainty and possibility that may change us but still holding firm to it as we grow through the different spiritual stages of our lives. A possible place to stand in is the imaginative landscape of possibility and change.

For Jesus the Kingdom of Heaven was essentially a place of possibility. It was a perspective, not a future place; it was a radical belief in a just world where peace and love reigned. I am convinced that the healings of Jesus are more dependent upon the

person's perspective and attitude than anything else. Miracles happen when we shift our perspective and suspend knowledge of the outcome and allow possibility to breeze through our window.

Some Friends are divided between those who are comfortable with the notion of a personal relationship with God and those who are not.<sup>i</sup> Unfortunately a lot of time is spent as people join our Society in the working out of where they stand in relation to God and if their position is acceptable. The workings out are as important for people as are the arguments about descriptions of God. But it is time for us to shift our perspective:

“All this seems to add to the argument that we should altogether stop talking about God as a being of some sort, an imaginable entity, whether male or female, personal or impersonal, and bring our language back to the experience and practice where it really belongs. God is part of a story we tell about ourselves in order to convey something of the depth and mystery and creative power that we experience among ourselves and that we are hoping to trust and act upon in the conduct of our lives.”<sup>ii</sup>

The experience and the practice are indeed essential but unlike Ambler I'm much easier about God as an 'imaginable entity'. My catholic heritage means I see God in all things and am relaxed about and enjoy God being expressed through different images. Icons and metaphors, stories and religious art are all great explorations of the faces of God. We can enjoy the images and yet not be attached to a mode of receiving God and yet still know and explore the great stillness and great listening of God. We can

stand still for a while holding paradox; paradox is a strong place to stand. Quakers always seem clear that they are certain about uncertainty.

There is so much wrong with our world that it is easy to feel depressed and disempowered. If we deeply believe that Quakerism has something to offer our contemporary society it will only do so through us being a people of joy and a people of hope. Yet a facile, sugary joy that papers over the cracks is not our way. Our joy must grow out of a deep faith and trust in a better world. In the language of Christianity we are a people committed to belief in a new kingdom, a new landscape – the kingdom of God. Belief in such social change must be supported by an understanding of how the world and humans change and grow. Many people are addicted to a deep pattern of what is wrong with our world and struggle to stay within conversations that work to build hope and positive outcomes. We must try to stand in a place of engaged real hope.

We must develop our skills at envisioning a new world, we must draw from current research and step boldly into new territory of developing a psychology of belief and in addition we must develop our understanding of ourselves and each other in order to commit to personal and social change. We know that the body is changing and changeable.

“Those who work with the body...have established several important facts. One is that the body is more plastic and mobile and reorganizable than we

think, and that the body is capable of regenerating, reshaping and growing. A second is that a person is capable of participating in these changes. The body speaks the language of change and may learn to reorganize for pleasure and survival.<sup>»xiii</sup>

We must learn to experience who we are and how we have shaped our own personal history and therefore also notice how we have shaped the history of the Religious Society of Friends through what we say and what we do. What are the stories we are telling ourselves and others? Our formation is changed by the stories we tell ourselves and in return we can change our stories as we determine to behave in new ways. It has been delightful to hear the number of Friends who recently have said how proud they are to be Quakers after the decision in the summer at Yearly Meeting 2009 to accept gay marriage. This is a time to speak positively of all we can bring as Friends. How are we encouraging each other more to live well, live joyfully and truly flourish? Are we attending to our need to live simple lives? Our spiritual journey inwards and outwards is forever about developing more light in ourselves and believing that through this we can be more of service to the world. Imaginatively we must explore and interrogate our visions of a changed world and how we can 'be the change we want to see in the world'.<sup>iv</sup> It is only through deep commitment to listening can we begin to operate and enhance our commitment to 'the things that are eternal'<sup>v</sup>. Only through strong spirited communities can we be sufficiently robust to act as signposts and sentinels for change.

To live under the orderings of the Spirit must mean that we engage in spirited living, and living fully.

“to live with spirit, spiritually, is to experience our lives, the life process in general and all of its events, phenomena, and personalities in the positive context of connection. To live spiritually is to make choices and decisions in the light of understanding our part in the intimately interconnecting process of Being.”<sup>vi</sup>

To live spiritually and spiritedly means to honour, discuss and understand our part in the communities, groups, society and Society to which we belong, to live an examined life. To live spiritually is to place a new found emphasis upon the process of our group workings and to be reflective and hopeful about the impact we can together make upon our Society and our world. To speak about our activities positively with a deep belief that we are making and can make a difference. It is a relational place in which we stand.

We are being called to know how God’s love grows within us and to deeply understand the ways in which groups and processes enable that love to grow further in each of us. To live under the orderings of the Spirit is undoubtedly to live fully and allow for human flourishing. For many of us this call may well be an initial call to rest awhile and allow ourselves to know and understand what God wants of us.

“St Anselm says to the soul: ‘withdraw a little from the tumult of outward works’. Secondly ‘flee and hide from the storm of inward thoughts, which also perturb the soul’. Thirdly ‘man can indeed offer God nothing more precious than rest’.”<sup>vii</sup>

Our busyness does not promote our growth in love and lightness and in the Religious Society of Friends today this means we need to address a number of issues about our



attitudes within our local meetings to employment of staff, and how we nurture each others spiritual growth. Thomas Kelly saw the failing clearly when he noted

“I wish I might emphasize how a life becomes simplified when dominated by faithfulness to a few concerns. Too many of us have too many irons in the fire. We get distracted by the intellectual claim to our interest in a thousand and one good things, and before we know it we are pulled and hauled breathlessly along by an over-burdened programme of good committees and good undertakings. I am persuaded that this fevered life of church workers is not wholesome... The concern-orientated life is ordered and organised from within. And we learn to say No as well as Yes by attending to the guidance of inner responsibility. Quaker simplicity needs to be expressed...in the structure of a relatively simplified and co-ordinated life programme of social responsibilities”<sup>viii</sup>

Our busyness will not kill us as one Friend recently said but it may leave us lacking in nurture and thin in our spiritual growth.

We should be a contemplative people, able to use words wisely and advisedly. The language of silence has a subtlety that can say most things. But the silence is not only emptiness and void but also a rich landscape where the unconscious and its images can be explored. Our silent worship is a natural meeting place for exploration of images and felt senses and embodied deep responses. This therefore makes it a natural place for healing, and also a space that can be easily abused. As Friends we must be committed to a practice of silence that enables us in all complex situations to bring a high quality of listening power to bear. We must therefore have a discipline of silence at the heart of our daily lives. Through this we will be able to make an impact upon our communities and our society. Our deep silence will be able to create the discipline

and containment required by demanding situations and complex issues. The Merton Institute for Contemplative Living states we are living contemplatively when

“we purposefully engage in activities intended to deepen our relationships, we are not distracted by meaningless activity and our active life does not suffocate our contemplative nature. We take personal responsibility for each of our relationships and are conscious of how our decisions, actions and use of time affect them. Our relationships determine our life’s goals and become the measure of our success.”<sup>ix</sup>

Regular early morning silence and encouraging each other to find five/ten minutes here or there in our day is essential. Though many activities may be done in a spirit of worship, gardening, cooking, walking, and journaling it is also important that we know about the discipline of sitting and listening. It is important that we try to nurture each other in our growth in stillness and that we enable each other to find the places of quiet in our lives. I hope local meetings are prepared to pay for Elders and Overseers to take some time out be it on a course or a retreat. Our contemplation leads us into action. We come to know a simple silent place to stand.

We are a good people and the time, energy and commitment given by Friends to the Religious Society never ceases to amaze me and give me hope. We are in the process of becoming a more prophetic body. This task requires strong leadership so that each community learns to facilitate projects and protests well, and learn to read the signs of the times more. We are well placed in society to speak strongly and clearly about the changes needed. We must not be uneasy if a Friend speaks their mind and we find it to be different to our own but rather uphold the possible significance of their opinion.

To name injustice and lack of peace when we see it, we must be clear about the distinctions between the values, worth and price of all skills, commodities and possessions. We must also be clear about how to hold a strong ethical framework in which painful and complex discussions can be heard, held and understood. We must learn to discern each other's skills more readily and be willing to explore new ways to do this. We must ensure the experience both positive and negative from each office held is garnered and passed onto the next holder of the office. We must become more skilled in our understanding of how each of us operates and how we have learnt to organise our life experience. We must then have strength in leadership brought by our Elders and Overseers so that each community learns to manage its experience and ensure that skills are used well. Our testimonies are witness to our experience of living out the possibilities of the Kingdom. Our leaders may well be holding a great deal but not sufficiently nurtured, so it is key that we attend to their needs so they can attend to the spiritual and practical needs of others. We will be called to bear witness and respond as our beautiful world changes rapidly in the face of shortages of love, oil, money, kindness, justice, water, skills and generosity. We will be called to be sanctuaries and sentinels of stillness and silence; places, meetings and gatherings where people's truths can be heard.

As we become a more prophetic body, the prophetic challenge calls Friends to critique the dominant systems of the day. This may well be from both within and without the

system, but we must be clear in our reflections and our critique. We must be clearer in how we see the Kingdom growing and clearer in how we challenge the systems. Our Religious Society is a covenant community, where we work with the idea of social covenants as opposed to social contracts. A covenant, unlike a contract, reflects more the shared ideals of a relationship and so builds into the agreement a level of belief in the Kingdom.

“What happens for us then is what every major religion has sought to offer – a shift in identification, a shift from the isolated ‘I’ to a new, vaster sense of what we are.”<sup>x</sup>

Covenants create the politics of hope not the politics of despair.<sup>xi</sup> Covenants hold us forever in the hope of relationships.

For us to work well together in the Religious Society of Friends we must have some understanding of how we develop strong relationships with each other. Our communities will not flourish unless we know how to love, hold and honour each other. ‘The other’ in each other, is of course nothing more than ‘a self’ seen from a different perspective: we truly only know ourselves through the other.

“Relationships are the mirror in which your inner being gets reflected. Be aware that you are a link in the chain of being. When you really feel this, the emphasis is no longer upon the individual, and spontaneously you come out of your restriction. You do not live in isolation, in autonomy. In relatedness is the fore-feeling of presence”<sup>xiii</sup>

However, in a developed world culturally moulded by individualism, there seems to have been a quiet acceptance that ‘self’ is all. We are always tempted to define ‘the

other' in relation to 'the self' and to the constructs and values we have developed for our own sense of self and the world. We want others to grant us a freedom in which we can grow and change, and yet often forget to offer this privilege to others.

“How are we to build communities which are living signs of humility’s beauty? How can we show the deep attractiveness of humility in an aggressive world?”<sup>xiii</sup>

Whilst taking part in a recent psychotherapeutic training<sup>xiv</sup>, I sat with a group of friends discussing the personality patterns of one of the people in our group that left her feeling as if she were in a deep dark pit. Someone commented that there is no climbing out of the pits – indeed the more one tries to climb the deeper they become. The first lesson when one is in a black pit however small or big must be – accept it and try to believe, however hard that is, that the pit is there to enable you to receive more light, though one cannot understand how that could possibly be. As we talked I suddenly had this strong image of early Friends in Lancaster prison. The darkness and the rank squalor of the conditions hit me and I suddenly realised that The Light, in their minds and hearts enabled them to transcend the psychological, physical, emotional and moral pits into which they fell. It is light and love that consistently enables the dark pits of our experience to disappear and allows us to bring more Light into our lives.

“So the ministers of the Spirit must minister to the Spirit that is transgressed and in prison, which hath been in captivity in everyone; whereby with the same Spirit people must be led out of captivity up to God, the Father of Spirits, and do service to him and have unity with him.”<sup>xv</sup>

We are not however, a therapeutic community and cannot be held responsible for each others' mental or physical welfare. We are however, a religious community, yet live with the problem that there is a lack of clarity between these two aspects of contemporary life because they undoubtedly overlap. Most religious groups are held together by their belief system, whereas we are held together by our practices. This highlights that we must have a robust approach to self acceptance and understanding the importance of managing our own needs and looking after ourselves as well as others. This must be combined with the support and tender love of our community. We must develop our abilities to work well as loving communities built on friendship and love and highlight the practices that enable us to work well together. But we cannot evade the fact that this will undoubtedly lead us to be challenged and challenge each other. The only way I know to support our growth is through building up our strength. Encouragement for every one of us to discern what nourishes and inspires us. Inviting each and every one of us to take time to nourish and support our spiritual growth, knowing that we are all precious. Support and encouragement of our Elders and Overseers to discern our communities' skills and needs and to nurture their own spiritual practice is essential. Support of and encouragement for Meeting for Sufferings to continue to embody leadership within the Society and to be a discerning voice in this changing world.

Our over emphasis upon technology means that some of the skills of learning to read, respond and react with love and wisdom to each other are being lost. Early Quakers challenged all forms of authority and systems and encouraged each other to work with their own experience and build upon it. We must build upon what each of us knows about ourselves and each other but not ever allow the information to limit our perspective:

“Do not imprison people in your memory. Circumstances never repeat; life never repeats. It is only the ego which desires a known security that labels every being and situation. So live in your surroundings as if for the first time.”<sup>xvi</sup>

Our focus must be upon developing and sustaining that radical vision of the Kingdom. Working to uphold a freshness and a newness in all things we do. We are changing, forming beings with a huge capacity for healing, growth and change. There are subtle skills to listening and understanding that are more dependent on an unconscious spacious listening than upon conscious hearing of words. These also need rehearsal as do the more obvious skills of listening, learning, reading, checking, revising, examining and exploring. We find ourselves forever standing on shifting sands.

The attention to the uniqueness and sacredness of each individual enables us to stay true to our relationships. Also, if we are listening to what enhances and encourages a Friends’ vital life force, we will be able to encourage them to live inspired lives, as we are learn to listen more with God’s ears, eyes, heart, face and whole body. George Fox

preached that all people - despite their gender, race, age or social status – were one in Christ. The uniqueness of each individual enabled the flow of this vitality and 'living power' to come to expression through prophesy, preaching, pamphlet writing and early sign performances. All required an active listening to the Spirit; a listening that used the whole body and was not simply focused on the auditory. This quality listening takes place on a number of levels. The listener pays attention to their own internal bodily signals and qualities as well as attending to the world of external and outer movements and occurrences and by splitting the focus, energy is encouraged to flow and move.

“You must understand and cooperate with the body. It is ignorance of the mechanism that creates conflict. Inquiry can only be carried out in daily life. Your mind and body are reflected in your body from morning until night. Your attention must be bi-polar, observing the inner and outer fields.”<sup>xvii</sup>

In Fox’s language ‘awakening the witness, confounding deceit, gathering up out of transgression into the life, the covenant of light and peace with God’<sup>xviii</sup>.

The attentive listening also leads to a different quality of seeing, and with this quality of seeing comes an inner light. Those accustomed today to contemporary new age practices drawn from Hinduism, are aware of the significance of the third eye, the sixth chakra as a place that once open produces a different quality of seeing. 'One Near Eastern teacher linked having a single eye with the enjoyment of one's body as full of light, and with entering into life; and linked having two eyes with entering into



hell.'<sup>xxix</sup> In Rex Ambler's translation of Fox's early words the allusion to a third eye and inner way of seeing is clear.

'So may God Almighty open the minds of every one of you, everywhere, so that you can see yourselves. And if you pay attention to that light in you that activates your conscience, it will enable you to see yourselves. And this eye in you, the light, will enable you to see God.'<sup>xx</sup>

The light in the conscience is light that enables us to see from a different perspective, to see in a way previously prevented, to see from a stance that is not bound or limited by our personality.

'Humility arises when there is no reference to an 'I'. This emptiness is the healing factor in any situation. Heidegger says 'Be open to the openness'. Be open to non-concluding. In this openness the situation offers its own solution, and in openness we receive it.'<sup>xxxi</sup>

Our inner seeing enables us to understand the importance of how we look at each other, the gaze and how we hold our relationships. 'It has been said that 'a person is enlightened', 'not when they get an idea', but 'when someone looks at them'.<sup>xxii</sup> A person is enlightened when another loves them.

'This active paying attention is far more than simple passive observation. The goal is not just to collect more information, but rather to garner a different kind of information, more complex, more profound. The intention is not just to function in life, but to find the clues to living well.'<sup>xxiii</sup>

Or indeed as Tim Radcliffe says 'it is humility that makes for God an empty space in which God may dwell and his glory seen.'<sup>xxiv</sup> This is the gaze of Friendship, as it is through our love that God is grounded in human life. For Bonhoeffer finding firm ground on which to stand was deeply about belief in the resurrection, for many Friends today it is our processes that bind us but also our love.

“Friendship is a practice recognizable from a theological perspective as exemplifying the realization of that reality of divine love.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Our commitment as Friends is to love tenderly and to ensure our gaze of ourselves and each other brings about an atmosphere of love. We are in some ways secular monastics, so Radcliffe’s reflections upon his own Dominican community do seem relevant.

“Benedict invites us to do something far more liberating, which is to build a community in which we are liberated from rivalry and competition and the struggle for power. ... The monastic life invites us to let go of the centre, and to give in to the gravitational pull of grace. It invites us to be de-centred. Once again we find God disclosed in a void, an emptiness, and this time at the centre of the community, the hollow space which is kept for God. We have to make a home for the Word to come and dwell among us, a space for God to be. As long as we are competing for the centre, then there is no space for God. So then, humility is not me despising myself and thinking that I am awful; it is hollowing out the heart of the community, to make a space where the Word can pitch his tent.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

We must be robust in our abilities to manage and hold difficult conversations within our Society and within our local and national communities. We must learn to challenge and change our own behaviour and to do this we must emphasize the strengths and positives in who we are and how we live well in right ordering with the Spirit. We must grow in humility and be known by our love and joy.

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- <sup>i</sup> Conversation with Ginny Wall Lancaster October 2009
- <sup>ii</sup> Ambler, R *End of Words* ( Quaker Books 2004) pp 28
- <sup>iii</sup> Kelemann S *Somatic Reality* (Center Press 1979) pp 15
- <sup>iv</sup> Gandhi
- <sup>v</sup> Fox G *Quaker Faith and Practice* (Warwick Printing Co Ltd 1995) 2:35
- <sup>vi</sup> Ruth S *Take Back the Light* (Rowman and Littlefield publishers 1994) pp 44
- <sup>vii</sup> Eckhart M *Sermons and Treatises Vol 11* ( Element Books Ltd 1979) pp 14
- <sup>viii</sup> Kelly T *Quaker Faith and Practice* (Warwick Printing Co Ltd 1995) 20:36
- <sup>ix</sup> The Merton Institute for Contemplative Living ([www.mertoninstitute.org](http://www.mertoninstitute.org))
- <sup>x</sup> Macy J *World As Lover, World As Self* (Random House Ltd 1993) p33
- <sup>xi</sup> Tully M *Something Understood* (BBC Radio 4) 16/08/09
- <sup>xii</sup> Klein J *Who Am I?* (Element Books Ltd 1988) pp 3
- <sup>xiii</sup> Radcliffe T *I Call You Friends* (Continuum 2001) pp161
- <sup>xiv</sup> Hakomi ([www.hakomi.co.uk](http://www.hakomi.co.uk))
- <sup>xv</sup> Fox G *Quaker Faith and Practice* Warwick Printing Co Ltd 1995) 19:32
- <sup>xvi</sup> Klein J *Who Am I?* (Element Books Ltd 1988) pp5
- <sup>xvii</sup> Klein J *Who Am I?* (Element Books Ltd 1988) pp 3
- <sup>xviii</sup> Fox G *Quaker Faith and Practice* (Warwick Printing Co Ltd 1995) 19:32
- <sup>xix</sup> Harding D *Head Off Stress* (Arkana Press 1990) pp22
- <sup>xx</sup> Fox G. cited by R. Ambler in *The Truth of the Heart* (Quaker Books 2001)pp 37
- <sup>xxi</sup> Klein J *Who Am I?* (Element Books Ltd 1988) pp4
- <sup>xxii</sup> Matthews I *The Impact of God* (Hodder and Stoughton 1995) pp28
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Ruth S *Take Back the Light* (Rowman and Littlefield 1994) pp 45
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Radcliffe T *I Call You Friends* (Continuum 2001) pp160
- <sup>xxv</sup> Muers R *Keeping God's Silence*(Blackwell Publishing 2004)pp 176
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Radcliffe T *I Call You Friends* (Continuum 2001) pp161



# What to Wait In

(or The Naked Truth)

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses early Quaker practices and highlights the role of the visceral body in determining and defining spiritual intention and will. It looks at the early Quaker signs and re-enactments and attempts to outline the importance of the body in early Quaker practice.

## Keywords

Quaking, Corporeal Prophecy, Sign Performance, Nakedness,  
James Nayler, Martha Simmonds, Feminine.

Early Quakers actually quaked. Their bodies shook and trembled at the experience of the power of the Lord, and as a result of these encounters with God and with the shaking of their visceral<sup>1</sup> bodies, their lives were changed. The visceral body became the site and agency of profound spiritual change in the seventeenth century with the early Quakers embodying this profoundly.

'The act of quaking was an act laden with meaning and purpose: it was the motion of spiritual rebirth and apocalyptic delivery, both literally and metaphorically, in and through the sacralized<sup>2</sup> body'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Visceral (OED relating to the viscera i.e. the main cavities of the body, especially those in the abdomen e.g. the intestines, soft fleshy parts of the body, inner most part, heart of Mid 17<sup>th</sup> cent from Latin viscus.

<sup>2</sup> Sacralised (OED imbue with or treat as having a sacred character or quality)

<sup>3</sup> M. Lise Tarter *Quaking In the Light; A Centre of Wonders* (Cornell University Press, 2001) pp. 147

This early practice of quaking for God was essentially charismatic and ecstatic in nature and resulted for many in a clarification of their spiritual intention. It also resulted in appalling persecution.

‘the quaking body holds a most controversial and complex position in the history of this religious assembly (known formally as the Society of Friends). While Anglican and Puritan pamphleteers insisted that corporeal prophecy held no spiritual veracity at all, they nevertheless published hundreds of tracts ... that reveal their preoccupation, fascination and even obsession with quaking. ... Elders of Second generation Quakerism then erased any trace of enthusiasm or corporeal prophecy, when they rewrote their history in the 1670’s, attempting to “dignify” and save the movement in the midst of severe anti-Quaker persecutions.’<sup>4</sup>

The fascination with corporeal prophecy is no less strong today. Indeed there are many contemporary new age practices that use the body in the defining of and receiving of spiritual will or divine promptings. There is still a great deal of unease with regards to bodily charismatic practices as they can include everything from being ‘slain in the Spirit’, speaking in tongues, to the extreme of the Toronto blessing. It is timely to move corporeal prophesy and our early quaking heritage from the shadows of our history into the light and be clear about it’s implications for spiritual practice.

At Quaker gatherings in the 1650's 'The power of the Lord' could descend at any moment and was an ecstatic response to the belief that through their

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<sup>4</sup> M Lise Tartar *Quaking In the Light A Centre of Wonders* (Cornell University 2001) pp146

bodies, Christ's kingdom was being birthed. Early Quaker gatherings could be held at any time of the day or night and could last for hours. Moore comments that early Quaker meetings were obviously 'rather lively affairs'<sup>5</sup> and certainly places where the body could move and shake in response to the spirit. People spoke out and moved without inhibition, and these practices gave rise to the huge amount of anti-Quaker propaganda and possible exaggeration and misinformation. However, despite the onslaught of persecution, what is apparent is that these experiences gave the early Friends a strong clarity in spiritual intention, an expanded sense of self; that certainly enabled them to undertake unbelievable acts of bravery.

Early Quakers were determining and defining a new spiritual practice, radically breaking with previous tradition and encouraging people to let their own lives speak. A key part of this practice was corporeal prophesy and the ways in which they encouraged God to inhabit their flesh. We must understand this emphasis upon the body within the broader context of a society keenly interested in human anatomy and physicality and the extent to which their bodies were mere flesh and blood or Spirit and soul.

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<sup>5</sup> Moore R *The Light in their Consciences* (Penn State Press 2000) pp 148

In 1656 Edward Burrough and John Bunyan had a public debate concerning the nature of Christ. Bunyan's attack stated that Quakers 'deny Christ to be a real man without them'<sup>6</sup> to which Burrough replied with an attack on Bunyan's understanding of Christ: 'That body which was begotten of the Holy Ghost is not so carnal as thou supposest'<sup>7</sup>. Here we see the significance of the human body within religious expression. Indeed Quakers in the early phase understood the significance the body played in fully being the body of Christ.

'Friends believed themselves to be the *scriptura redivina*, reliving apostolic narratives in and through their "heavenly flesh"...Fox told his followers that the savior was with them, inhabiting every particle of their bodies. It was quaking, above all, which ushered in this revelation and celestial presence on earth...The body then became the site of divine prophecy and agency in the early Quaker movement.'<sup>8</sup>

Quakers believed they were living partly in the world of the spirit<sup>9</sup> and that this brought a heightened attention and clarity to their lives. Friends saw themselves as the embodiment of Christ's will here on earth and their bodies were the vessel through which God found expression. The seeking of silence, the attentive listening and in the early days, an expressive seeking enabled a new inner teacher or inner wisdom to emerge for early Friends.

'In their fluid space of worship, the possibilities of divine embodiment and expression were endless for Quakers, who called themselves "the Children" or "Children of Light"...In effect, Friends constructed what feminist poststructuralist Julia Kristeva terms the

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<sup>6</sup> Moore R *The Light in their Consciences* (Penn State Press 2000) pp 127

<sup>7</sup> Burrough E cited in Moore R *The Light in their Consciences* (Penn State Press 2000) pp 105

<sup>8</sup> Tartar M *Quaking In the Light: A Centre of Wonders* (Cornell University Press, 2001) pp 148

<sup>9</sup> R. Moore *The Light in their Consciences* (Penn State Press 2000) pp127



semiotic realm, a "feminine" space "dominated by the space of the mother's body".<sup>10</sup>

This radical alternative worship of wordless silence was a profound threat to many, and though it enabled a new focusing on spiritual will to take place it also opened people to the powerful landscape of what we would now be called the Unconscious. The danger, but also the possibilities of this space were soon eagerly debated. Fox and Nayler in the early years were intently engaged in a rigorous debate about the nature of the Spirit working and how Quaker worship should reflect that. An understanding of the extent to which the meetings should express through quaking and ministry and hold silence with attentiveness and clear sightedness was seen as crucial.

The shift from paid ministers and ritual to a new priesthood in which every life could speak and perform its own truth; gave rise to a fashion for sign performances and re-enactments.

“In an age saturated with verbal religious discourse, striking nonverbal enactments represented a ready means of attracting attention to the Quaker message, highlighting at the same time the Quaker challenge to conventional communicative norms. These sign behaviours were especially adapted to the public spaces – markets, fairs, streets, churches ... Early Quakers distrust of speaking as susceptible to wordly corruption made them ready to rely on other codes and channels, including physical action, for communicative purposes.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Tartar M *Quaking In the Light: A Centre of Wonders* (Cornell University Press, 2001) pp 150

<sup>11</sup> Bauman R *Let Your Words Be Few* (Cambridge University Press 1983) pp84

Friends were making their own rituals and liturgies, creating and actively making new lives that were defined by a new spiritual attentiveness and understanding. We know that a number of Early Friends throughout Britain walked naked as a sign, others scattered money or sat turning a pot or echoed biblical moments. Martha Simmonds was said by Richard Hubberthorne to have enacted a Eucharist in which bread and wine were broken and distributed.<sup>12</sup> The context of these actions developed from an apocalyptic mood coupled with a deep influence from the biblical prophecies being read as well as from each Friend's relationship with God and their experience of the Light in Meetings for Worship.

The early Quakers used signs to significant effect, both as strong public statements and as publicity for their beliefs with women taking a prominent role. These signs often made reference in some way to the bible and were performed in outdoor public spaces, whereby making reference to the external and public in worship as well as Quaker internal space and silence.

'Some Quaker women sought to bear witness to the Lord by re-enacting 'signs' in public places. Given the conventional view of the good, religious woman as private and secret in her religious duties, their actions were a bold challenge to gender norms'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Smith B *Martha Simmonds 1624 – 1665* (Sessions of York 2009) pp23

<sup>13</sup> Crawford P *Women and Religion in England 1500 - 1720* (Routledge 1993) pp164

Elizabeth Fletcher, who 'contrary to her owne will or inclination, in obedience to the Lord, went naked through the streets' of Oxford in 1654<sup>14</sup> as did Martha Simmonds the following year in Colchester, where she walked 'in sackcloth and barefoote with her hayr spread and ashes upon her head, in the towne, in the frosty weather, to the astonishment of many'.<sup>15</sup> The naked bodies were statements that all could now be seen by God, there was no more pretence and no more show possible. The feminization of spiritual imagery and language through birthing metaphors, combined with clear meditative techniques created a strong liminal<sup>16</sup> space in which the imagination and the unconscious could function.

This was a reflection of the human need to explore our inner territory and use it within our spiritual practice.

“In this, (sign performances) represented especially striking instances of the Quaker tendency, noted by Cope (1956:726) to ‘break down the boundary between literalness and metaphor, between conceptions and things’... indeed the physical acting out of the metaphor was intended as a means of enhancing their rhetorical power.”<sup>17</sup>

Misogyny and scepticism of the performative nature of the signs and re-enactments have for years shrouded the James Nayler incident. Phyllis Mack

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<sup>14</sup> Penney N cited in Crawford P *Women and Religion in England 1500 - 1720* (Routledge 1993) pp164

<sup>15</sup> Cadbury cited in Crawford P *Women and Religion in England 1500 - 1720* (Routledge 1993) pp164

<sup>16</sup> liminal (OED 2. occupying a position at or on both sides of a boundary or threshold).

<sup>17</sup> Baumann *Let Your Words Be Few* (Cambridge University Press 1983) pp86

rightly highlights the misogyny in early Quaker men that has left a heritage that still needs challenging.<sup>18</sup> Women were often the key writers, organisers and indeed performers of the signs. They were also I believe the essential holders and witnesses of each other's actions and movements. Women were maybe more confident in knowing in their bones how to hold the paradox of being moved by the Spirit and suppressing your own will. James Nayler however died cruelly for living out the ambiguity of this space.

“This space between representation and reality, text and context, expression and experience, language and being is the necessary and indispensable space of judgement and critique, creativity and value, resistance and change... As such, it is *the* ethical space – the space of specifically ethical relation with others.”<sup>19</sup>

Nayler's upholding of this ethical space led to his death. This scepticism of the 'Entry into Jerusalem' and the other sign performances has also through the years affected Quaker opinion of performance and acting. Actors often experience a dual attention or holding in their performance that undoubtedly enhances their performance, and Brechtian performances rely heavily upon the way in which rhetoric can be developed through a performance style as well as the content of the play. Some Quakers see the carrying of another's persona or character as to have potentially damaging effects upon their understanding of and integrity with their own personality. Nayler however, never specifically

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<sup>18</sup> Mack P cited in D.Gwyn *The Covenant Crucified* (Pendle Hill Publications 1995) pp172

repudiated his ride into Bristol<sup>20</sup> indeed throughout the interrogations at Bristol and before Parliament:

'Nayler made it clear that he did not confuse the indwelling Christ with his own creaturely person. He explained that he had performed the sign by God's leading, which he could not refuse. As for the exalted language applied to him in the procession, he stated, " I do abhor that any honours due God should be given to me as I am a creature, but it pleased the Lord to set me up as a sign of the coming of the righteous one.... I was commanded by the power of the Lord to suffer it to be done to the outward man as a sign, but I abhor any honor as a creature."<sup>21</sup>

This new spiritual practice of early Friends encouraged them to create sufficient space within themselves that they had ability to respond to God's promptings and hollow out a space where God's Word could pitch his tent.<sup>22</sup> This corporeal prophesy produced a great deal of anti-Quaker propaganda.

"Most striking of these propaganda tracts, however, is the nearly desperate warning that if a person views Quaker prophesying, he or she will uncontrollably follow in kind. Casting Friends' worship as spiritual theatre, pamphleteers employ arguments of the Puritans' anti-theatrical campaign, noting how these performances had the potential to change people merely by the act of spectatorship."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Finn G *The politics of spirituality: the spirituality of politics in Shadow of Spirit* (Routledge 1992) pp113

<sup>20</sup> Ingle L H *First Among Friends* (Oxford 1994) pp 149

<sup>21</sup> Bittle James *Nayler* cited in D.Gwyn *The Covenant Crucified* (Pendle Hill Publications 1995) pp167

<sup>22</sup> Radcliffe T *I Call You Friends* (Continuum 2001) pp161

<sup>23</sup> Tartar M *Quaking In the Light: A Centre of Wonders* (Cornell University Press, 2001) pp 151

The focus upon sign performances and re-enactments came directly from the prophetic challenge, Quakers sought to bring their entire bodily will and action for God's design. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Ezekiel had eaten the scroll and cut off his beard, Jeremiah had broken the potter's jug, and Hosea married a prostitute. These were calls to repentance and also ways of putting people in touch with their own creative spirit. With the benefit of more recent feminist and liberation theology scholarship, we can clearly see the extent to which early Quakers were responding to this radical biblical message. Rosemary Moore has noted

' a reader of early Quaker tracts is left with certain impressions. Quakers interpreted the whole sweep of the Old and New Testament story, from Genesis by way of the prophets through to Christ and the Book of Revelation, in such a way as to show that the story rightly ended with the mid-seventeenth-century gift of the Spirit to the Quakers, the same spirit that had inspired the prophets and apostles.<sup>24</sup>

The prophetic challenge and call highlighted for Quakers the need to critique the dominant systems, and keep defining the vision of the New Kingdom. A new age indeed, in which the covenant between God and Humanity would be fully enacted. Quakers saw through their reading of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and filtered through Paul's writings, the calling to a new covenant written upon their hearts as opposed to formal contractual penned agreements. The new

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<sup>24</sup> Moore R *The Light in their Consciences* (Penn State Press 2000) pp53

covenant was defined by inwardness, individual commitment and a strong sense of God's forgiveness. It was a visceral call

'I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall each man teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.'<sup>25</sup>

This new law written upon their hearts brought about the enactment and re-enactment of signs. These were essentially ways of grounding and making real a spiritual embodiment of the New Kingdom of heaven and the Second Coming. Like the Old Testament prophets challenging the people through the times of pre-exilic and exilic experience when they were likely to fall away from God, these were dramatic announcements and performative actions heralding that the times were a changing.

The spirit was quickening and people's patterns and behaviours were changing, the Kingdom of God was coming. These signs were symbolic re-enactments designed to communicate to the people the prophetic judgement that as sinners they should repent. The repentance required an honesty and nakedness that shook their bodies and souls and called them to wait in the searching light of God's love. The Quakers in their readings of the scriptures had followed the

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<sup>25</sup> Jeremiah 31:31 – 35 *NRSV* (2008)

theological line through the exilic prophets with their writings upon their hearts through to Paul's allusion to the 'inner self' and the importance of living in your hearts

'I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.<sup>126</sup>

This was a visceral faith where people were called to wait and stand in love. There was maybe truth to the anti-Quaker propaganda that the mere acts of seeing these performances could change one. As our seeing of the kingdom in each others' lives and ways enables that new world to grow and be nourished. Moreover early Quakers seemed to have had a strong sense that part of this Christian message was indeed about an embodiment of a practice. It was about listening, living fully and understanding the power of Christ in their bodies and lives, through all interactions with others. God's seed was growing and birthing in them. The acting out of sign performances would not be so strange today in a world more accustomed to performance art and lay people designing liturgies.

Early Friends believed they were being called to wait in the light of God's love, to step out from the wings onto the main stage of life. They were being called

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<sup>26</sup> St Paul Ephesians 3:16 *NRSV* (2008)



to deeply listen to how the Spirit inhabited their flesh and make space for God to dwell within them.

