

"WHAT CANST THOU SAY?"

The image was of a deep, wide ravine spanned by a fragile swaying rope bridge. Damp, slippery wooden steps were held together and supported by a network of ropes that represented the bonds between families, friends and communities; at the sides were two thick, strong ropes to support and guide the travellers as they crossed over. These two ropes symbolised the Inner self that lies beyond personality and ego and the Inward Light of the Spirit, of God. Ahead was a shroud of fog; the destination could not be seen; it was necessary to take one step at a time with forethought and care, waiting, testing and balancing.

I had no vision; anxiety and the fog ahead left me blind to the future. I swayed perilously on the damp wooden plank unable to move. My baggage and my grief weighed me down and the plank wobbled out of balance in the wind. I let go, releasing everything and waited for the rocking to stop.

There is nothing more now to do except be present concentrating on being in balance, on my body, focusing on my breath and holding my mind still, aware of the strong ropes supporting me and watching a calm stillness flow through me, down through the web that holds the bridge together. All is connected. All is One.

I can only wait. Just as I am. Now. No yesterday. No tomorrow, knowing that in this state of oneness and connection I play an infinitesimal part in re-weaving the broken web of life by letting go of the past and trusting in the power of creative love and inner guidance.

I thought about my life, about the learning. And realised that the greatest growth had happened in the darkest moments. The worst times. when I had been led to seek beyond my small self and reach out into the unknown.

The story of Persephone, Demeter and Hades came to me. Of kidnap and loss and of a mother's grief. How the land was laid to waste until a compromise was struck between Hades and Demeter. With rebirth, life flowered once more on the Earth until winter returned and the Earth rested; the seasons were born and balance was restored. The Earth had been disrespected, violated, and robbed. Just as today.

Mankind with ignorant disdain has plundered the secrets of nature, committing what the Greeks called hubris; he has snatched Nature's secrets to gain knowledge without wisdom.

The cat scratches at my door and I stroke her soft fur. Her gently purr of pleasure cools the pain within. No words need be spoken to communicate with a loved one whether a living creature or the Earth itself.

INTRODUCTION

The essay developed from this image and is based upon the principles of Balance, Presence and Interconnectedness that were necessary to travel on the Bridge in safety.

The image represents the passage of humanity into the future. The fog represents possibility, a metaphor for the uncreated. Disconnection from the earth and the Feminine Principle and over emphasis on the mind and ego has resulted in loss of Soul, both in individuals and the collective. Not only humanity but the created world itself has lost its wholeness. As part of humanity, Quakers are on this journey as well. It isn't possible to explore the state of the Religious Society in isolation, out of context.

Nobody knows what the future holds; we live in strange times. "We find ourselves at an extraordinary threshold" (Tarnas, 2007). All that is possible is to reflect on aspects of the Religious Society of Friends as part of our changing world and ask the question, what do we need to consider both personally and within the wider Quaker movement in order to prepare to meet the future? For, if the soil of the Society is fertile and well seeded in the present, new shoots will grow at the right time. Whether at an earthly or spiritual level, life is a circle, a spiral with Spring and new growth following the dormancy of Winter.

In this essay, I consider the deep underlying issues from the past that have shaped today's world. What is the process of change and how can Quakers respond or approach change? How must we be to contribute to regain Balance in a world being shaken to its roots?

Change and the fear of change is being fed by the spectre of climate change, of “Peak Oil”, of economic collapse and the other great issues of today’s world. At a personal and at a collective level fear of change causes reaction and denial. Yet change also offers challenge and the opportunity for personal growth. Aspects of Psychosynthesis – also known as a “Psychology with a Soul” - are described.

How does the Religious Society of Friends approach the idea of engaging with the growth of self awareness consciously and with compassion and what are the blocks to this work? How can we “Be Patterns” at a deeper level than that of role models? How does the texture or quality of our awareness – our energetic pattern – resonate with the patterns of the natural environment that surrounds us – which includes all of nature? What is our relationship with our home, the roots of our being? The quality of connectedness with all of the natural world begins within ourselves, our families and friends, our neighbourhoods and our communities.

How resilient is the Society? The development of resilience is highlighted by the Transition Towns movement. This movement is spreading like wildfire with the growth of diverse grassroots initiatives. What new learning and challenges will our new Testimony of Sustainability bring? The likely need for increased focus on local communities and neighbourhoods is explored. How will change affect Quaker work around the world? What personal and practical resources will we need? In this world of spin and illusion, with ever increasing surveillance and the curtailing of liberties, how will we effectively speak truth to power in the future? I include a description from parts of “The Legend of Shambhalla” with this in mind.

How visible are Quakers in their communities and what understanding is there about what Friends represent? I discuss the vital and urgent need for a common language; do we need new words to express our Faith? Should Quakers be seen as a spiritual rather than a religious community? What is known about us in secular communities and by other Faith groups?

Quaker meetings are shrinking. Why? Why have people moved away from churches and religious organisations when there is seemingly a deepening crisis of meaning and purpose, of spiritual hunger? I explore the shift in human consciousness and the concept of “Evolutionary Spirituality”. The essay ends by asking the question, how can we become more resilient – what needs to happen?

A recent article in “The Friend” on 9th October 2009, asked whether Quakers would become “Hospice workers for the world or midwives to a new one?” If the human species is to survive, it will be through a change of heart – a growth of consciousness – a shift in the global energetic patterns towards wholeness that starts by going beyond the level of ego and discovering the centre deep within. From this clear point qualities such as compassion, wisdom, creativity, trust and love may be accessed. The hope is that as this connection grows within individuals and the world, a tipping point may be reached by the collective. Such a shift of the collective consciousness will bring renewal and a transcending of Ego in our relationship with each other and the natural world.

Quakers may well tend the dying of this world, but they may also become teachers and counsellors and healers at one with others as deep inner change begins to restore balance.

When the channels of compassion and healing flow freely Divine Light will nourish the seeds forging new connections for the broken web of creation.

For the world as we know today will be vastly different in the future; it's changing now at an ever increasing rate. Icarus flew too high, puffed up with inflation he reached for the Sun and scorched his wings so he fell to earth. Our bodies are of the Earth, our Spirit of the Universe. Conscious Man symbolizes the bridge between the two realms of Being.

BALANCE

To fully explore the imbalance, even the separation, the world is experiencing we must look to the past. The dawn of the present time has been described as "the extraordinary century and a half" from 1486 until 1637. (Tarnas, 2007, p3). It produced great figures, scientists, discoverers, artists and religious figures who were to radically affect the future. Of these it was Copernicus who radically disturbed the settled consciousness of man.

Copernicus challenged the understanding that the Earth – and thus mankind -was at the centre of the Universe and so triggered the first cracks in how man understood his place on the Earth and in the Cosmos. This was the trigger for a change in consciousness – a new awareness. Swiftly followed new discoveries and developments in both the arts and the sciences that were to rock society to its roots and lead to great change.

Science, intellect, logic, reason, doing and achieving began to replace the dominance of the magical, mystical world perceived throughout earlier centuries and art, imagination, natural growth, being and process took second place. This has caused a separation that threatens not only our earthly existence but also that of the Earth itself.

Tarnas speaks of a deep sense of personal and spiritual alienation that has developed as a result of this imbalance and as he describes it, “the critical need on behalf of both individuals and societies for a deeper insight into unconscious forces and tendencies He also discusses “metaphysical disorientation and feelings of groundlessness” and lack of a “guiding metanarrative” (2006, Tarnas)

For over five hundred years, the deep seated, often unconscious myths, beliefs and stories of mankind became increasingly challenged not least by cultural, social, educational and technological progress. Our understanding of our place in the world had been undermined. Inevitably with structures crumbling and traditions of nations, communities and families disappearing, a sense of rootlessness grew from which sprang a growing inner feeling of alienation. Loss of meaning, religious disorientation, social unrest and mental illness can also be said to have been greatly exacerbated by this loss of inner story, and ritual and the shattering of personal belief.

Without myths, the world became a cold and lonely place. Myths help us make sense of the world and are ways of keeping society integrated and giving individuals meaning and purpose. Hannah Green suggests they are “sharers or our loneliness” (in May, 1991, p 21).

Whatever our personal faith, there seems to be a psychological need for an inner story that gives an anchor for inner truth and an understanding of the world in which we find ourselves. Indeed do we need a new global story that unites nations, communities and individuals? What global story can Quakers embrace that will accommodate and transcend all creeds and cultures and offend none?

Today in the West it is thought that the loss of ritual in our lives disables many psychological processes such as the passage from childhood to maturity, death perceived as taboo and lack of understanding of the grieving process. Add to these, the intrusion of television, computers and a greater focus on academic learning that intrudes into the imaginative play time of young children and a disabling mix emerges. The early years of life are a time to learn at first hand about physical dimensions of life and in the past has enabled a sense of rootedness and belonging.

Lifestyle in adults in the Western world emphasizes mental activity rather than the importance of being in touch with the Earth and physical awareness. The gulf between mind and body is wide and begs integration by the soul/psyche.

Two World Wars, the development of the car, universal education, the power and influence of the media are just some of the overt factors that have contributed to the present instability. However in the West one development in particular has had a profound effect.

Since the appearance of the contraceptive pill in the sixties women have begun to regain control over their own bodies and lives: this development had the potential to begin to address the Masculine and Feminine imbalance and shock waves are still affecting communities, economic structures, demography and churches. However whether it has so far, reinforced the Feminine Principle or simply increased imbalance, as many women move into territory previously dominated by males, is as yet unclear.

Another result of this has been more women contributing to the family budget which has had an effect socially and possibly increased the growth of consumerism in the west thus contributing to subsequent environmental problems.

Although we have a Testimony of Equality, is the Society still influenced or shaped by past principles of hierarchy and the emphasis on doing rather than being and on outcome rather than process?

These accelerating changes in the world have not only resulted in a separation in our communities and individuals from their roots and their search for meaning and purpose. But also a spiritual hunger that nevertheless rejects the nurturance and protection which in the past organized religion has been seen as providing.

GROWTH OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In "The Death of the Mythic God," (Marion, 2004) discusses evolutionary spirituality, a theory which describes growth in the consciousness of humanity as a process that has speeded up in recent years.

For many centuries the collective consciousness was balanced and society kept relatively stable with an understanding of a “Mythic” God, a patriarchal figure who existed as a separate male being who lived in the sky and was a God of law who must be obeyed. He worked through intermediaries who taught about sin and threatened punishment by eternal damnation and rewarded good behaviour with promises of heaven.

Marion discusses how with the Reformation and Renaissance, this view began to shift towards a rational view of the world dominated by reason and logic leaving little interest in religion, mysticism or indeed connection with the rest of creation. He bases much of his work on the work of Ken Wilber and others.

Since the sixties, The New Age Movement has been speaking of a shift in consciousness which begins with one person at a time and gradually spreads to others. Indeed, though under reported, Laszlo suggests this is happening worldwide now (Laszlo, 2008). It seems that there is a ground roots shift occurring with slowly increasing numbers of individuals coming into the state of “Vision Logic” consciousness.

According to the theories of Marion and Wilber an external “Mythic God” will not come to our rescue and each individual is required to take personal responsibility for how they live their life, relate to others and the environment and the Earth itself. Humanity has created the problems the world faces and it is suggested he is slowly evolving the tools he needs to mature to sort them out. These shifts in consciousness seems to be occurring faster and faster and reaching the state of “Vision Logic” consciousness is certainly not the end of the story.

We are now part of a global community and if we are to be able to focus on environmental issues and move away from the old ways of reaction, violence and attack between nations, there has to be a strengthening within each individual, a reorientation and regaining of a deeper self belief; an awareness of belonging to the Family of Man and indeed of the Earth itself.

The words of the hymn, “and soul by soul and silently, their shining bounds increase,” comes to mind. This is the way that the consciousness of the collective will evolve - at an individual level. New growth starts deep within one person at a time and through a process of resonance others of a similar consciousness are drawn towards them.

Already within communities and nations throughout the world, religious and secular individuals alike are turning within and seeking inner growth. Meditation, the adoption of Eastern traditions such as Yoga and Tai Chi, Counselling and Life Coaching are being sought. There is far greater freedom for women than ever before. For past decades the pace of the search for inner meaning and purpose has gradually gathered in momentum transcending cultural and religious beliefs. Soul by soul a shift towards a new consciousness is growing at grass roots level.

Counselling, mentoring and life coaching has developed as individuals seek further self understanding. Bookshelves are filled with self help books and accounts of spiritual exploration. Yet Jim Marion says, “Mankind is growing spiritually but is not necessarily interested in organized religion”... .and “God grows us from within into higher and higher levels of consciousness” (Marion, 2004, xviii) It is a quiet revolution and one of which many Quakers are already a part.

Yet growth, the movement of one form to another means change and change is challenging. Change requires letting go, loss and mourning and grieving that loss; Elizabeth Kubler Ross described the process of grief and identified the five stages as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and finally acceptance (Kubler Ross, "On Death and Dying" quoted in Marion, 2004).

The other side of loss is acceptance, re-investment and of coming back into balance so that we can see clearly once again and our energetic processes at all levels may again flow freely.

So how do Quakers respond to change? We could use this time to examine ourselves and release that which no longer serves us, and keep what might be adapted to serve best the future. The pain, anxiety, and fear that can accompany change bring the words, "a tender hand" to mind and require us to be gentle and sensitive to each other.

Quakers experience a rebalancing, a strength through connecting with their inner world in Meetings for Worship; many people do not have this resource.

PRESENCE

After the process of letting go of the past, it is necessary to wait in trust. Past structures and certainties are gone and the new has not yet emerged. It is a precarious time when fear may step in and balance be lost. Awareness is required – watching, waiting and staying alert to possibilities. It is a reflective time which requires self nurturance and preparation for a new seeding and preparing.

It can be compared to the time at the beginning of the natural year when the earth appears dormant before the spring. It requires patience and staying very present. A part of the process at this time is to maintain health and wholeness and ease with oneself. It is about staying in flow and resting. This is a not time of growth but a time of constantly “trimming the sails” and adjustment.

George Fox said: “Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people” In order to “be patterns” for the future, there needs to be consideration about what we understand by this term. Does this mean to be good role models? How are these models created? What influences such patterns? Are our patterns developed by past conditioning or at personality level? How are they kept alive and appropriate for the times? Where do such patterns spring from if not from the ground of our being?

How do we nurture our inner garden? The future growth of Quakers may depend on our attitude towards deepening our self understanding and becoming conscious of that which, at the level of personality and our unconscious may influence the roles we act out in the world and also filter the Inward Light and God’s Leadings. Jesus taught the importance of inner growth and Paul reinforced this by teaching about a major growth in consciousness. (Marion, 2004, p 59).

Inner learning never ends and has been likened in psychological terms to “peeling the layers of an onion!” Given the change confronting each one of us and our response or reaction to the future, can we ignore the importance of such work?. Carl Jung believed that the shadow (unconscious patterns from the past) held enormous creative potential to benefit mankind if released into conscious awareness (Jung, 1998).

Unconscious reactions get projected out into the world – on to others and cause untold misery and pain.

Jack H Wallis in *Quaker Faith and Practice*, (2.11 Quaker Faith & Practice, “Personal Journey”, 21.11,1988) said that “Those who have difficulty in accepting the idea of a personal shadow as far as they themselves are concerned, whose knowledge of human nature is two-dimensional (that is without depth), all too easily think that morality attaches to feelings, that hateful, hostile, cruel or greedy feelings are immoral. They do not, perhaps, realise that the feelings that arise in us are neither moral or immoral, but neutral. The supreme importance of morality is the way we choose to act on our feelings. And we shall not be free to choose if we do not know what they are.”

Jung was wary of those who began the spiritual journey before they had dealt with some of the early issues and problems of personal development.” He suggested that spirituality can be a refuge from reality. (Crowley, 1998, p53). Certainly over the past 40 years or so, there has been a proliferation of cults and guru figures who attract a following of those who look for answers outside themselves rather than facing and understanding outdated patterns that usually developed in childhood as a result of need.

Roberto Assagioli developed the model of Psychosynthesis also known as a “Psychology with a Soul” and describes life as a journey of potential growth from inner learning. One of the features of this model he called “subpersonalities”. These are old patterns that originate in response to demands in childhood and are no longer appropriate in the present.

Yet they live on and dominate adult behaviour inappropriately. Until personal inner work is undertaken to discover and enable these old patterns to change, they trigger reactive behaviour rather than responsiveness to situations, words and ideas.

Inner personal work leads to the ability to detach and observe those controlling voices of the past that nag us into planning for tomorrow, or replaying the past. There is only this moment. On the “Bridge” it was necessary to stay focused on the wooden plank that supported my body and hold tightly to the strong ropes for guidance. Worry, fear and haste was not an option. I had to stay alert and present. What are Quaker thoughts about the vital need for personal inner work at this moment in our history? Do we regard it as narcissistic, self centred and indulgent?

My own childhood teaching was that it was selfish to take time to study my own needs and that “good” people always put others first. It has taken a lifetime for me to understand that unless I take care of myself, at all levels – body, mind, spirit and feelings – I cannot nourish my soul. (“Soul” or “Psyche” being my understanding of that which binds me together in wholeness). Eventually this old and inappropriate pattern was to lead to burnout and illness so that I could no longer help anyone else.

The prevalence of such conditioning especially amongst women of the pre and early post war generations suggest that this needs to be explored more deeply. How focused are we on giving to others and neglect the importance of receiving for ourselves and so staying in balance, in flow?

Children when absorbed in play can be an example of being present and fully aware and conscious of each moment. Adults who are battered by the daily stresses and worries of the world all too easily live in their mind, planning for the future or reliving the past. When we stay clear and fully present in our bodies, we are in a state of awareness that is beyond the limited ego.

Eckhart Tolle refers to the state of consciousness that he considers vital if mankind is to survive. He suggests that “at the heart of the new consciousness lies the transcendence of thought” .. and .. “realizing a dimension within yourself that is infinitely more vast than thought.” (Tolle, 2005, p. 21). The practice of mindfulness is learning to be present every moment with all of our senses and our body interacting with the world around us . Noticing and really seeing, grounded physically, we bridge the gap that has arisen between mind and body. We are fully “switched on” and nourishing our soul and energetically that of our environment.

Quaker Practice is one of stillness and being present and has much to offer to a world where the ego’s fearful external searching for that which is missing is destroying the ground of being. The Religious Society of Friends has a gift for which many in the world search.

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Sticking to the status quo may feel safe in the face of change but if everyone bends in the same direction, collectively we will lose our balance and fall off the “Bridge”. It also means that we react from a place of fear and ego and are not present, inner connection is severed, inner promptings fall silent and self confidence and courage is lost.

It isn't easy to be different, put one's head above the parapet and speak out but it is these so called "mavericks" that ultimately change the future; Ghandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King are but a few of many.

Jesus was a rebel as was George Fox. The present world is in desperate need of those people who will "speak truth to power", who see beyond the illusion and sound bites and above all have the inner strength as well as the communication skills and the knowledge to communicate their unique view coherently to the world.

Corporate power, unscrupulous government practices not to mention invasive psychologically oriented advertising as well as negative TV and Media output is influencing minds – young minds especially - and disempowering millions throughout the world. Such influences support global economic growth and consumerism. Continual growth is unsustainable, unnatural and destructive.

We are the most highly surveilled country in Europe and our actions closely monitored. Our freedoms and power of independent thought and action have been slowly but persistently eroded. The behaviour of the police at the G20 event this year speaks for itself and Quaker freedom of speech may well be tested in the future.

Joanna Macy tells about a prophecy made twelve centuries ago about the coming of the "Shambhalla Warriors" at a time when the Earth is in great peril. (1998, Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown). This is when "Barbarian Powers" seek to annihilate each other with weapons of "unfathomable power" and technologies beyond comprehension. At this time, great courage will be needed by these warriors as they go about dismantling these weapons. Many think that time is now.

She continues, the dangers that threaten the Earth are “mind made” and have come about because of the decisions, lifestyles and relationships of ordinary people in the world.

She tells that because “they have been made by the human mind, they can be unmade by human mind”. The Shambhalla Warriors have two weapons: compassion and insight. Compassion gives passion and energy; while insight gives an understanding of interrelatedness with all that is, These two qualities help and sustain agents of “wholesome change”.

Quakers will indeed need great courage, insight and compassion to continue to “speak truth to power” as they have always done.

INTERCONNECTEDNESS

The wooden steps of the imaginary Rope Bridge were held together by a fine network of intertwining souls: family, friends and my neighbourhood and community with whom I lived on a day to day basis. How do we as Quaker relate to our locality? Our Peace Testimony has taken us far and wide across the world, but will the challenges of “peak oil” and the effects on our carbon footprint of flying permit the same levels of travel? In addition will the future present situations on our doorsteps that require us to focus close to home?

The word, “Friend” has resonance whether in connection with Quakers or as a “friend” in the general sense of the word. Because if the top heavy hierarchical structures of the world crumble, as they may well do – witness the sudden recent collapse of great economic and powerful banks in the US and Britain – it may not always be possible to shore them up as happened last year. Combined with climate change and the effects of Peak Oil, there could be a desperate need locally.

If such collapse happens, the development of flat, local, grassroots systems would need to be in place and operating albeit in a small way for local communities to be able to support themselves in crisis. Individuals and communities could be required to suddenly take complete charge of their own lives rather than depending on large organisations and governments. Unless secondary systems are already in place there could be a very real threat of street violence and local battles within communities.

Fear triggers reactions that can manifest either as attack or by erecting barriers to keep the world out. Like a rabbit caught in the glare of the headlight, fear can also freeze action and drain confidence and hope. The media in recent years has thrived on fear which has driven up growth and dumbed down society; there has been little to engender personal independence and community confidence, creative inspiration, hope for the new life. Fear diminishes our freedom to respond and there is a lot of fear around at this time.

Behind this is the absolute need for individuals and small groups to help strengthen neighbourhoods and community. This requires people now to become flexible, empowered and self motivated rather than remaining reliant on powerful external organisations operating miles away.

The Transition Towns Initiative emphasises the importance of personal and community resilience by developing local systems such as; Barter Schemes, Grow Your Own Food groups, creating local monetary systems. discovering and developing land for more allotments and also exploring home made entertainment which will further bind the communities together.

The development of centres where people in the community could come and be heard that were neutral - not linked to religion or politics - and aimed at promoting creative health and healing, self empowerment, creativity and resourcefulness could also help restore confidence and balance. There may well be an urgent need for reskilling, training and teaching locally as well as many other social enterprises.

At present there is an urgent local need for work with young people. Years ago, Baden Powell saw such a need and started the Scouting Movement.

Although Scouting had its roots in the deprivation exposed by the Boer War, there is a case for considering how to tackle the emotional and spiritual needs of young people today. The breakdown of marriage prevalent in modern society has left some youngsters, especially in inner cities, shamefully deprived of emotional support and guidance, a sense of meaning and purpose and indeed friendship other than that of their peers. How can they be helped to look to the future with hope and courage? It is little wonder that some young people fall prey to the drugs and alcohol that help to dull their senses.

Restoring independence, inner strength, meaning and purpose and hope as well as a sense of interconnection to communities will be paramount and could be supported by Quaker action. The wide experience of Friends could be of great value integrating and strengthening communities through enabling self reliance, network development and inspiring and initiating the growth of opportunities for individuals. So this is a potential way forward but how visible are we, what is the public understanding about Quakers, and how do we communicate with our communities?

COMMUNICATION

Quakers are respected yet how much do local people understand about Friends? How clearly visible are we in our local community and what does a secular society or people with different spiritual beliefs know about the Religious Society of Friends?

I was delighted to read in a recent issue of "The Friend" that this question of how we are seen by others is currently being explored. In fact for the purposes of this essay, I had asked friends and relatives what they knew about Quakers.

The results were an eye opener with such phrases as “very quiet, kind and do good works” were expected but several hadn’t a clue and one person even said the Quakers were a secret society. In a changing world it is very important to consider how we wish to be properly seen and heard.

How easy is for new Attenders to understand Friends? Is there an issue about traditional terminology? For example, the words “Meetings for Sufferings” sounds quite fearful while “Overseers” definitely has the ring of patriarchy to the uninitiated! Familiar language is comfortable to Quakers, but how about everybody else?

Sound resonates within. Certain words cause dissonance. Religious words may provoke reaction. The theist/non theist discussion has potential to become destructive and hurtful and must be tackled. Those who use religious words where it could cause offence need to consider what is driving insensitive communication. Conversely those who react and feel threatened or distressed by the use of religious words need to explore why this is so

What words can we use between ourselves that do not create dissent or offence? What language can we all be comfortable with? If Quakers have no shared acceptable language that transcends religious division, how can we hope to communicate with secular communities effectively? It feels like dark fear lurks around this issue and needs to be brought into the light.

My first introduction to Healing was in a Spiritualist Church. Religion of any description had no place at home when I was young and this certainly included spiritualism.

However I was desperate for help with a health problem and open to try anything. As I limped down the path of the little grey Unitarian church door used by the healing group, I was truly terrified. Visions of some sort of Faustian deal floated about in my over heated imagination and I nearly turned back.

Eventually I opened the door. The atmosphere enfolded me and my fears disappeared. Flowers and candles alone stood on the table at the front and soft classical music was playing. I was quietly welcomed and helped. My point is that no religious icons and no religious language were used.

Later I was to ask about this and it was explained that if a non religious person came into the church and saw, for example, a Cross on the altar, it could cause offence or even prevent them receiving the benefit of healing. They also applied this principle to the use of religious language.

One view could be that it is rather inhospitable to say we are open to other creeds and faiths and then continue to use Christian language in the presence of someone from another faith? This sounds harsh but the Quaker Movement is too important and has too much to offer to founder on the man made words we choose to use to describe our beliefs. If we can take the courageous step in leading the way to accept same sex partnerships then surely we are capable of understanding, pondering and responding to the need for a new language? A great strength of Quakers is their openness, acceptance and creativity.

Music, Art and Story are pre-verbal and universally understood. Early church fathers understood this well and religions still make full use of this awareness.

What other creative forms could be used to transcend boundaries and communicate meaning to faith and secular groups alike? When we go beyond words, we discover our shared humanity.

The Religious Society of Friends began in the very different culture of Seventeenth Century England. George Fox was a visionary and described his inner experiences of an intense and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. His work and belief is focused on the relationship between himself and Jesus rather than on the religion of Christianity; indeed he had problems from the Christian authorities of his time.

However Christianity was the state religion and the word, “religion” embedded in contemporary culture. What language would George Fox be using in the Britain of today? What inner resources do we need to reconsider the words by which we describe ourselves? Today we live in a multicultural society and the use of specific religious language creates barriers and excludes other faiths as well as secular members of our community

Words define and labels give us a face, a pigeon hole. We are living in a society where increasingly people are exploring spirituality. Interest in Buddhism is growing in the West, Yoga has now almost become mainstream in towns, and communities throughout the UK show wide interest in meditation practices. People today are seeking inner connection with God, Jesus, Creator, the Source, the Higher Self, amongst other names.

How can we uphold our belief in the freedom of worship and find a way to avoid causing offence to others? How could we invent a new language? Do we need to become part of a new global “story”?

There are many pressing reasons to work to transcend the barriers caused by individual Faiths. We are part of the Whole and usually it is the ritual, symbolism and cultural differences that create tensions and wars and often in the name of religion. How do we communicate and connect with our community?

OLD STRUCTURES AND NEW SYSTEMS

We need to look with fresh eyes at our structures. How appropriate are our communication structures at a time when our carbon footprint needs to be reduced? How much energy do we use travelling to meetings of whatever kind? Is too much time spent on too many meetings?

Does organisation and reporting back replace time better spent on spiritual matters and personal growth? How vigilant are we in this? It is very easy for aspiration and intention to slip back into habit and unexamined form. Are we, as a Society too wedded to structures of the past rather than to developing systems for the future?

As a recent member I became very confused with the various meetings, sub meetings, groups, reports, minutes and structures and if I'm honest, still find it difficult to see a coherent picture. The phrase, "wood for the trees" comes to mind and I wonder if others find the same difficulty. Everyone is very helpful in explaining one structure yet before I fully understand one, another appears!

Can we make better use of information technology to communicate with each other? Recently I trained as a Life Coach. This organisation drew extensively and very successfully on resources such as telephone conferencing, personal tutoring, the use of emails, virtual groups and forums etc. How can we make wider use of technology while continuing to enjoy the personal presence of each other?

Another example of this was as a student on an e-course where I met people from all over the world; somehow the world became much smaller as we made friends from such diverse places as the US, Australia, China and Europe.

While physically Friends may be more restricted locally for many reasons, for example avoiding travel by air with all the environmental implications, there is no reason that work, such as teaching and enabling, support and other activities cannot still be accomplished world wide via the web. We have Friends who may need help and support with gaining the necessary IT skills and equipment, but this could be overcome.

The gathered Meeting is one of unified greater awareness and connectedness. Jesus said: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there shall I be." Through the power of our inward focus the Gathered Quaker Meeting can contribute to community and world healing; seeking out those dry parched areas that may be just around the corner and in dire need or those beyond our shores. Such healing reaches more than humanity, it is also about place, the soil that has often been covered by concrete roads and pavements.

Our seeking ever more deeply within for connection with God is matched by seeking for ever growing interconnectedness with the whole environment: the microorganisms, insects, plants and all sentient beings as well as the soil, the waters and the air as all struggle to survive in our poisoned earth and seas. Surely as creatures of the Earth, through ever deeper connection with the Inward Light and the power of compassionate intention we may transmit our collective healing through body, senses and soul and so connect with the great soul of the earth itself.

For it is this soul that can bring matter and mind together and heal the great separation that is starving the earth.

CONCLUSIONS

Reflections from the image of the rope bridge suggested the journey of our times and three main areas were highlighted. Those were Balance, Presence and Interconnectedness.

The essay discussed the necessity of releasing the baggage of the past. Whether Quakers would widely engage in the personal work of self awareness was explored, as was dealing with the process of change and taking care of ourselves. The need to let go of outdated language and terminology, streamline systems of communication and make full use of Information Technology was also explored.

The loss of myth and how this caused a search for meaning and purpose born of spiritual hunger and feelings of fragmentation and isolation within people and communities was discussed.

This related to the shift of consciousness from the loss of the Mythic image of God to a Rational state of consciousness that developed from the Renaissance with the great damage and separation that ensued from the gain of great knowledge without the wisdom to handle it. In recent decades Vision Logic consciousness has begun to grow . Discussed also was the need to stay in balance, being present with all our senses and intuition and taking one considered step at a time.

Local action springing from future need within our local communities was emphasized as well as discovering new ways for Quakers to continue their work in the wider world.

The latter may shift from physical help to more virtual, mental and spiritual ways of working. What is our image locally? How do neighbours in our community understand the Quaker Way? What are the words we need to use in the world of today which will create response rather than reaction?

Although this essay has emphasized the waiting stage of change. it is here that a specific “seed” project by Quakers could be developed and implemented now. The idea of a local “market” with a system of barter and local “money” where local people had the opportunity to trade the very local produce of essentials such as food and clothing is not new but this idea urgently needs to be expanded, grounded and put into action in collaboration with other initiatives such as the Transition Towns movement, for example. This would offer all sorts of opportunities in many areas already discussed such as building community cohesion and individual help and support.

How we grow in response to the challenge of change was considered and how in our darkest moments we reach for a greater Light and so go beyond old boundaries and limitation. We seek that of God in every person and also in all of Creation so we nurture the great soul of the Earth herself.

The future of Quakers depends on the ability of the Society to be resilient, adapt and move forward at the right time.

We have no dogma or creed to bind us to the past; by our understanding of that of God in everyone and everything in nature, we have the facility to transcend boundaries and embrace the global community.

Our Testimonies such as Sustainability, Simplicity and Equality will be especially appropriate for the future, as will our organisational skills and our unique business method be particularly required to help our local communities. Yet beyond all this, the Quaker practice of silence and that of waiting for the Inward Light will continue to inspire and nurture Friends and the wider world as we move towards the unknown future.

As we strengthen our inner being, so we affect our becoming.

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** I have used the words, "God" and "Jesus" throughout to reflect the Christian roots of Quakers and because I find these concepts beyond words.

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