

**The future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain**

**STANDING AT THE OCEAN'S EDGE**

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## TOWARDS OBLIVION

Three and a half centuries later, are we still living off the peak experiences of George Fox?

This is a question we need to ask as we find ourselves, as some are predicting, hurtling downwards to oblivion (or maybe - in Quaker parlance - 'Towards Oblivion'!) Are the ripples from the great stone hurled into those 17<sup>th</sup> century waters now lapping gently, imperceptibly, even inconsequentially, against their muddy boundaries? Or, worse, are those waters now dingy, still and stagnant?

It is hard for us these days to comprehend just what took place during that first intense period of our movement when George Fox met with '*a great people to be gathered*' in the northern counties. <sup>(1)</sup> In a transforming experience akin to Pentecost, a '*fire which the Life kindled in us*' spread among the Seekers of Westmorland. As an overwhelming and life-changing experience of direct awareness of God, many were carried by its energy and power:

*'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.'* <sup>(2)</sup>

That the intensity of this powerful encounter with the Divine did not last in any significant collective way beyond that first generation of Quakers is indicated several decades later by both William Penn and Margaret Fell.

William Penn spoke of his '*great concern*' for the next generation of Friends. He told them he prays fervently that they will '*come to be partakers of the same divine life and power*' as their fathers and mothers and he warns them implicitly not to be content to be merely '*the children of the people of the Lord*' for they must also be born again if they are to inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>(3)</sup>

This was at a time when the Friends of Truth were engaged in the long process of institutionalising that 'fire' of their parents and the insights emanating from it. The developing 'testimony' to simplicity, for example - arising originally from the stand early Quakers made against 'superfluity' in dress and manners <sup>(4)</sup> - was, by the end of the seventeenth century, in danger of becoming merely an obsession with the colour of their clothes or the furnishings in their houses. Acting 'outwardly' was starting to be a compensation for the loss of a 'felt' inner experience.

Margaret Fell, then in her late eighties, spoke of '*poor Friends*' who, '*mangled in their minds*', were behaving '*according to outward prescriptions and orders*' and consequently neglecting the inward work of God in their hearts. Of their growing preoccupation with clothes, colours and furniture, she famously said this was a '*silly poor gospel*'. <sup>(5)</sup>

The process of development of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain does not differ from the process which occurs with every historical movement, religious, political or secular. Consistently there is a falling away from original insights and a new – often watered-down, sometimes even distorted – interpretation by second and third generation followers. The organisations that survive are usually those which are able to re-interpret their *raison-d'être* in the light of present circumstances and this invariably leads to a tension between those followers who long to return to the Original Vision and those who adapt to the changed situation of the present time.

While our Society has shared this same fate over a period of 350 years - and some present-day Friends seem to fear that it has now completely lost its way – my own view is that, despite gloomy predictions, it is well fitted to make the required and continuing adaptation 'to present circumstances'. Throughout the twentieth century (arising especially from the modernist liberal vision of the 1895 Manchester Conference) it has advocated an openness to '*new light from whatever source it may come*'.<sup>(6)</sup> This (relatively) unfettered approach gives it the willingness as well as the capacity to modify, re-interpret and develop in the light of new experience. It suggests our Society has the potential to stay fresh, alive and truly open to perceiving where 'the Spirit' may be operating in the present day - all of which puts it in a positive position not only to adapt and survive but also to thrive.

So, why isn't it?

### **IN DEEP TROUBLE?**

There are many Friends in the Society today who (as in 1859 when the advertisement for the first Quaker essay appeared) think that we too are '*in deep trouble*'.<sup>(7)</sup> We know that our membership is in decline, that we are an ageing faith community, and that there appears to be something of a reluctance among attenders to make the commitment of membership. We learn too from the sociologists among us that, if the present rate of decline continues, we shall be extinct by 2032.<sup>(8)</sup>

That is just over twenty years away!

A number of Friends will say that one of the things that is wrong is our inability to communicate our message effectively. People 'out there' - even if they have heard of us at all – appear to have all sorts of distorted assumptions about who we are and what we believe and therefore, in order to remedy this, a more constructive use of modern media is called for, including blogging, tweeting and the use of social network sites, such as *Facebook*. We learn from *The Friend* of 20<sup>th</sup> November 2009 that we have recently undertaken our first piece of national market research into this very question of how we and our message are viewed. While I don't disagree with this analysis, I am more concerned myself about the *quality* and the *content* of that message, and this will be my focus in this essay.

A Friend in my meeting ministered recently about a period in her life when she lived in Botswana, which is a land-locked country. She recalled her visit one day to a primary school where the children were reading about going for a day to the seaside – an impossibility for them. The theme in Meeting that day had been circling around the centre of ‘true’ religious experience and our Friend concluded her ministry by saying ‘There is all the difference in the world between reading about the seaside and standing at the Ocean’s edge.’

In this essay I too will circle around the nature of ‘true’ religious experience and the difference between ‘reading about it’ and ‘standing at the Ocean’s edge’. I shall link the potential adaptability of the modern Quaker approach with some of the philosophical currents of present-day western society and suggest that Quakerism is in a strong position to be effectively re-interpreted and integrated with all those ‘posts’ we currently hear about: post-liberal, post-Christian, post-conventional, post-modern.

Unlike some Friends, I don’t have the collective vision which sees the broader picture and I only pick up hints of our general ‘condition’ from a variety of arbitrary sources. That picture conveys a mixed bag with many meetings in decline, some of which appear to be in danger of being stuck fast in the negative aspects of what Ben Pink Dandelion calls our ‘behavioural creed’.<sup>(9)</sup> At its worst, this conservative and conformist ‘behavioural creed’ encourages us to cling to the norms, patterns of behaviour and speech of a historic society without the attendant vitality of a living Spirit - a situation entirely reminiscent of the state of affairs William Penn and Margaret Fell sought to address three hundred years ago. A personal example of this is demonstrated by the new attender who, halfway through her first area meeting, whispered to me, ‘I think I’ve lost the will to live!’

Alongside all of this are the insistent clues of a deepening ‘hunger’ among us for a more dynamic spirituality. As a result, there has been increasing concern for the spiritual health of our yearly meeting, especially over the last decade. From various central committees we have heard that consultations

*‘have confirmed our consistent impression that what Friends are seeking ... is spiritual renewal’*<sup>(10)</sup>

or that there is a need for *‘an exploration of spiritual learning and nurture within the YM.’*<sup>(11)</sup>

and that the *‘expression of spiritual hunger’* now needs to be brought *‘as a major concern’* to Yearly Meeting.<sup>(12)</sup>

This same theme was the focus of Peggy Heeks’ research that culminated in her 1998 report *Growing in the Spirit*. In this she concluded that it was the *‘... lack of a sense of spiritual fellowship which came out as the greatest need felt by Friends across the country.’*<sup>(13)</sup>

The 'cry of hunger' for greater emphasis on the quality of the spiritual life in our meetings has continued ever since and is (sometimes despairingly) echoed in letters and articles in *The Friend*. The clamour of such voices has recently been heard and expressed in the *Framework for Action* (2008) in which '*strengthening the spiritual roots in our meetings and in ourselves*' is the unequivocal and clearly stated first priority. <sup>(14)</sup>

If indeed the ripples from the peak experiences of George Fox and the 17<sup>th</sup> century Friends of Truth are by now barely visible, is there any way we can re-vitalise ourselves and our Society? Are we able to seize the '*adventurous opportunity*' (that the *Framework* states) <sup>(15)</sup> to become more alive and 'in the Life', continuously growing towards an awareness of the Source, an apprehension of Reality, an experience of the living Spirit? Towards what we used to call God?

### RESISTANCES AND OUR PRESENT 'CONDITION'

Recent sociological research, such as *The Quaker Condition* <sup>(16)</sup> (a collection of papers by a number of Friends) and Derrick Whitehouse's *Towards an Inspired Quaker Meeting* <sup>(17)</sup> attempts to analyse the condition of contemporary Quakerism within Britain. These publications pick up the theme of spiritual hunger and the prediction of general decline as well as other dire warnings - such as those from Alastair Heron that we are rapidly becoming merely a 'society of friends' rather than a Religious Society of Friends. <sup>(18)</sup>

In *The Quaker Condition*, Gay Pilgrim (in *British Quakerism as Heterotopic*) reminds us that the early Quakers' experience of being '*convicted by Christ*' used to be '*an obligatory point of passage*' to '*full participation in the life of the Religious Society of Friends*'. By the mid-twentieth century, however, such experiences of 'conviction' or personal transformation had diminished in power and it was '*no longer necessary for everyone to have participated in a similar experience to be part of the group.*' <sup>(19)</sup>

In another paper in *The Quaker Condition*, we read of the resistances encountered among some Friends to the 'Experiment with Light' initiative. In her chapter '*Experiment with Light: Radical Spiritual Wing of British Quakerism*' <sup>(20)</sup> Helen Meads suggests that the 'Experiment with Light' is not more widespread because '*of the tensions between the nature of the practice and accepted Quaker ways of behaving*' - an example perhaps of the sometimes stultifying impact of the 'behavioural creed'?

The 'Experiment with Light' movement arose from Rex Ambler's study of early Friends' writings and his analysis of the nature of early Quaker experience in worship. He subsequently published, in *Light to Live By*, a six-step guide to meditation which Friends undertake together in small groups. This is followed by an explicit sharing of their experiences with one another. <sup>(21)</sup>

Those Friends who have taken part in the 'Experiment with Light'

*'go through a process of transformation in stages similar to those early Friends went through... Thus, those who persist with the Experiment and are transformed, albeit that it is a gradual dawning rather than a single visible conviction and albeit that they talk about 'Light', not the 'Light of Christ', feel themselves to be different from the rest of the Meetings to which they belong'* <sup>(22)</sup>

Helen Meads describes 'experimenters' as representing 'a radical wing' in British Quakerism because they 'seek religious/spiritual experience as a basis for their being in the world'. 'A wing', she goes on to define, is 'a section of a party holding views deviating in one direction or the other from those generally held' and thus she places its position within Britain Yearly Meeting as 'on the fringes'. <sup>(23)</sup>

I find this shocking.

Helen Meads found frustration among some of the 'experimenters' at what appeared to them to be a 'superficiality' of experience in some meetings for worship, and she also unearthed a certain amount of conflict towards the 'Light' groups, with opposition to the practice coming, in some cases, from certain influential Friends. 'Experimenters' themselves were bemused by this dissension 'because they felt their Experimenting was core Quaker practice.' <sup>(24)</sup>

The results of Helen Meads' research are examples of a kind of 'resistance': resistance to the ongoing, unfolding and enlivening experience of being 'in the Life'. Of course we have to weigh carefully such new initiatives in our meetings but we need also to be alert to the risk that conformity to 'tradition' may have an anaesthetising impact on any attempts to live adventurously. Many of us will have examples of this in our own experience. I recall myself the Friend who 'felt a bit of a freak' in her meeting because she 'took very seriously' the spiritual quest.

There is a very real danger that aspects of our 'behavioural creed' killeth the Spirit every bit as much as the letter does (over which we usually feel vaguely superior). And if it is the case that Friends who 'seek religious/spiritual experience as a basis for their being in the world' feel themselves to be 'on the fringes' or in some way 'deviant' from current British Quakerism, then heaven help us all!

Do such 'resistances' reflect a deeper current of malaise running through Britain Yearly Meeting? Is it that we prefer to cling on to familiar habitual ways of speaking, behaving and organising ourselves rather than risk 'transformation'? Are we too comfortable, too weary, too depressed, too lazy or too afraid to 'be open to new light' from whatever source it may come and in whatever direction it may move us?

## HOW SICK ARE WE?

If we are, as some are predicting, terminally ill with only a couple of decades left to live, is there anything we can do about our failing health? Can we fatten up our delicate constitution to make it more robust? If we genuinely want to help ourselves, our first task would be the need to gain a clear recognition of our 'condition' and we would probably need outside help to ascertain the source of this dis-ease. This is no different from the couple in relationship difficulty who seek counselling or the alcoholic who wants 'to get better' or even the person who doesn't have such obvious problems but who vaguely feels something in his or her life is 'not right'. The long road to recovery or to greater emotional health for such people must always begin with a recognition and an acknowledgment of how things actually are for them at the present moment - and it often requires a lot of courage to face the reality of 'what is'.

If we feel 'something is not quite right for us' as a religious society we would need to do the same, to try and look at ourselves and our meetings in an honest attempt to assess our current situation and measure the extent of our debility. In his paper '*Congregational Culture and Variations in Gospel Order*' (also in *The Quaker Condition*) Derrick Whitehouse reminds us that '*the usual ways of measuring the performance of a congregation are not so easily applied to Quaker Meetings*'.<sup>(25)</sup>

This idea of 'measuring our performance' recalls for me a discussion in our meeting many years ago on how we might tell if the sense of a 'gathered meeting' is a corporate or merely an individual experience? One quirky Friend suggested we could - like the judges of an ice-skating competition - stand up at the end of meeting and hold up our scores (1) for 'performance' and (2) for 'content'!

Derrick Whitehouse's approach to assessing the 'health' of our meetings is slightly less radical. In his recently published *Towards an Inspired Quaker Meeting*<sup>(26)</sup>, based on fieldwork with nineteen meetings within BYM, he proposes a useful methodology for those meetings willing to take the step of recognising and acknowledging 'where they are' and who have the courage to undertake an 'audit' of their own condition.

As part of this audit process, he provides a clear terminology. There are, for example, the 'snapshot' categories of *Vibrant Meeting*, *Sanguine Meeting*, *Pedestrian Meeting*, *Restricted Meeting* and *Depressed Meeting*.<sup>(27)</sup> And, if we want to go further, eight separate elements of community life can be explored. These are: *Functional Participation*, *Cultural Architects*, *Management Style*, *Resource Availability*, *Worship and Discernment*, *Covenanted Community*, *Social Witness* and *Transforming Trend*.

If we wish to appraise the state of, say, our 'worship and discernment', the categories suggested are '*exploring*', '*steadfast*' or '*drifting*'.<sup>(28)</sup> To look at how members of the community relate to one another, we have classifications ranging from '*demonstrative*' to '*reserved*'. Similarly, a meeting's 'transforming trend' might be '*energetic*', '*striving*', '*stable*' or '*diffident*'.<sup>(29)</sup>

Derrick Whitehouse analyses fifteen 'culture profiles' of actual meetings using these eight elements of community life. <sup>(30)</sup> So, under 'functional participation' we read that six of the fifteen meetings can be described as '*committed*'. Five of them contain 'cultural architects' who are '*nurturing*' but only two of the fifteen are '*progressive*' in their 'management style' and only two are considered '*energetic*' in their 'transforming trend'. As far as 'worship and discernment' go, two meetings are '*exploring*', seven are '*steadfast*' and six are '*drifting*'.

This direct and robust terminology has a touch of 'letting your yea be yea and your nay be nay' about it and the approach may be more familiar to those Friends and attenders who experience similar managerial programmes of setting and evaluating 'targets' at work. But if, like the couple who need help or the alcoholic who wants to change her life, we are prepared to look at ourselves and our meetings as honestly and openly as we can, then this approach and methodology offers one way to explore and clarify just how sick or well we are.

Given some of these analyses, it is perhaps not surprising that Derrick Whitehouse thinks that one of the obstacles which prevents us from moving forward might be the disappointment of new attenders who, after reading Quaker literature or hearing about Quakerism, find that '*the 'reality' of congregational life in a number of cases does not measure up to the 'ideal' that has been projected. Consequently, they vote with their feet and ..... after a while we have lost them, possibly for ever.*' <sup>(31)</sup>

I don't know whether, by extrapolating from a sample of fifteen meetings, we can assess the health of the entire Religious Society of Friends in Britain today, but there is clearly enough evidence from a number of quarters that all is not well. Can we really claim that our meetings are resonant with abundant life? Have the Friends of Truth become domesticated merely into 'friends'? Are we (to paraphrase Brecht) '*travelling nowhere with incomparable rapidity*'? <sup>(32)</sup> and has our practice of stillness and silence simply become a waste of space?

## **'TRUTH': A PATH AND NOT A POSSESSION**

### **Travelling hopefully**

Alastair Heron would sometimes refer to the Quaker movement as 'our beloved Society' and I make no apology for using this same phrase since it exactly reflects my own feelings towards The Religious Society of Friends. 'Our beloved Society' originated from the visionary experience of the young George Fox, whose tortured seeking and eventual finding followed a profound and prolonged emotional crisis. He and the early Quakers were fired with evangelical certainty, the antithesis of our approach today. The basis of the growing movement in the 1650s was an unmediated, inward encounter with the divine. As in the history of mysticism, where 'God' is experienced directly and



personally, this pre-figured a transformation in their personal lives and formed the basis of our style of worship and structure which in many ways has remained remarkably consistent for over 350 years.

In her Swarthmore Lecture of 1977, Damaris Parker-Rhodes reminds us that 'Truth' is '*a path and not a possession*'.<sup>(33)</sup> If 'Truth' is a path, then it is a way to be followed, a process to be engaged with, an activity to be pursued, an adventure to be undertaken. It is movement, initiative, purpose. It is the opposite of stagnation.

Such movement is reflected most obviously in the metaphors of 'way', 'quest', 'pilgrimage', 'journey' – in fact 'journey' is probably the most dominant motif of all in myth, legend, fairy tale, literature and religion. It is the hero's journey (and traditionally it is male) which denotes a movement *from* somewhere *to* somewhere or from a certain *lack* to a certain *fulfilment*, whether that be symbolised as the treasure to be discovered, the princess to be found, the beast to uncover his beauty or the insignificant person to find out he is - and in fact always has been - in reality a prince.

We now recognise that such vivid and dramatic stories are powerful images, not of literal adventures in the world, but of some kind of psychic movement within us. During the twentieth century, in particular, this mythological 'journey' became more explicitly linked to our interior world, most notably in the psychological quest for 'wholeness'.

C. G. Jung is probably the most well known proponent of the modern version of this struggle for 'wholeness'. The path he describes, called 'individuation', is a process through which a person '*becomes a psychological 'in-dividual', that is a separate, indivisible unity or 'whole'*'.<sup>(34)</sup> Anyone – of whatever religious persuasion or none – may undertake the process of individuation.

Just what is it in these stories of quest that everyone is seeking so busily? What discontent drives such yearning on? What hope entices it from afar? Is there an intuition in most of us, however deeply buried, of something better 'out there' or 'in here' – a sense of what William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* called 'the more'?<sup>(35)</sup> Are we vaguely disturbed by the possibility of another 'place' within ourselves from which to live our lives more fruitfully?

In the 'quest' stories, the dramatic outward adventures symbolise a movement in our perception and the 'goal' to be achieved is an expansion of consciousness, a 'rescuing' of our dim awareness from its castle imprisonment or from the dark tangled forest of the unconscious.

George Fox's experience of union with God was preceded by a similarly intense personal pilgrimage. He did not suddenly wake up one morning enlightened. There is a pattern here that is reflected in the lives of other remarkable figures who seek that deepening (or heightening) of consciousness and subsequently find 'union with God'.

For many of us as Friends, there is a sense of ‘waiting for something’, a spiritual longing for the ‘more’, an apprehension of the possibility of a deepening awareness as our ‘spiritual intelligence’ unfolds. To use the metaphor from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, many of us may see the ‘celestial city’ from afar but not yet have entered its gates. Maybe we are better at ‘waiting’? Perhaps we are practised at seeking but diffident about ‘finding’. John Punshon claims that Quakers ‘*much prefer to travel hopefully than to arrive*’.<sup>(36)</sup> and for Ben Pink Dandelion this is the ‘absolute perhaps’, an attitude of perpetual seeking and uncertainty.<sup>(37)</sup> I am not sure if this is because we genuinely haven’t yet ‘found’ or if we are simply reluctant to communicate our ‘findings’ with each other or the wider world. In her article on ‘Experiment with Light’, Helen Meads concludes we rarely explicitly communicate our spiritual experience, which is ‘... *exactly the reverse of the case when the Society was founded*’<sup>(38)</sup>

For Alastair Heron it reflects ‘*our collective failure to challenge and to help one another to become finders in the spiritual life, instead of perpetual seekers.*’<sup>(39)</sup>

When it comes to questions of seeking and finding, the story of the little fish is, I always find, instructive.

*‘Excuse me,’ said an ocean fish. ‘You are older than I, so can you tell me where to find this thing they call the ocean?’*  
*‘The ocean’, said the older fish, ‘is the thing you are in now.’*  
*‘Oh, this? But this is water. What I’m seeking is the ocean,’ said the disappointed fish as he swam away to search elsewhere.’*

The commentary to this story adds:

*Stop searching, little fish. There isn’t anything to look for. All you have to do is look*<sup>(40)</sup>

### **What is this ‘deeper communion’ that we seek?**

The journey to the ‘celestial city’, of course, comes from the Christian tradition but, thanks to global communication today, we now have unrestricted access to the world’s religions, most of which appear at heart in any case to echo the claim made by Jesus that ‘the Kingdom of Heaven is within you’.

And what is this ‘kingdom of heaven’ we can find within? Roger Walsh in *Essential Spirituality* describes it as

*‘the most profound, the most meaningful, and the most important discovery any human being can make. Within ourselves we find our deepest self, our true Self, and recognise that we are not only more than we imagined but more than we can imagine. We see that we are a creation of the sacred, intimately and eternally linked to the sacred ..... This is the aim of all our seeking, the answer to a lifetime of longing, the cause of the mystic’s*

*bliss, the source of overwhelming and enduring joy. This is the central message at the heart of the great religions ....'* <sup>(41)</sup>

George Fox's experience of this 'most important discovery' led him to declare that '*all things were new, and all the creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter*' <sup>(42)</sup>

## **Stages of consciousness**

In this next part of the essay I want to look at the pattern of 'developing consciousness', which leads towards 'the kingdom of heaven'. I would particularly like to explore the 'stages of consciousness', an understanding of which is available to us not only from past wisdom but also from a wide range of contemporary research. An awareness of such 'stages' can, I believe, support, encourage and maybe even inspire our future growth as a religious society.

Much has been written in the last thirty years on 'emotional intelligence' and now, more recently, on 'spiritual intelligence'. These are part of what are sometimes identified as specific 'lines' of human development (along with other 'lines', such as moral, cognitive, aesthetic, interpersonal, sense of self, etc.).

*'Spiritual intelligence is the soul's intelligence. ... So many of us today live lives of wounded fragmentation. We long for what the poet T. S. Eliot called 'a further union, a deeper communion', but we find little resource within our ego-bound selves or within the existing symbols or institutions of our culture. (Spiritual Intelligence) is the intelligence that rests in that deep part of the self that is connected to wisdom from beyond the ego, or conscious mind...'* <sup>(43)</sup>

Evelyn Underhill, was a young Victorian woman who (born in 1875, only sixteen years after the publication of Darwin's '*On the Origin of Species*') linked the growing popular idea of physical 'evolution' with the evolution of human consciousness. Such linkage was not original even then (it had been current amongst philosophers prior to Darwin's actual demonstration of the scientific evidence) but she made an extraordinary contribution to knowledge in this area. While still in her twenties, she set about the task of researching and collating material on what we would now call the 'spiritual line' of human development. Her research resulted in '*Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*' published in 1911, a huge scholarly tome citing over a thousand sources. <sup>(44)</sup>

Underhill spent about fifteen years of her life researching and writing on a wide range of mystical experience and subsequently devoted the remainder of her life to demonstrating how we all had access to this same Reality (invariably written by her with a capital 'R'). It is interesting to observe that she moved from being a scholar of mysticism to become a spiritual director, a conductor of retreats, a teacher of prayer. Her hope was to reclaim in a very practical way the mystical heritage of Christianity, which at the time, she says, was seen as something of a 'by-way' of religion.

This mystical tradition in all major religions represented for her the highest manifestation of evolving human consciousness and she aimed to demonstrate that 'normal' people also possessed this latent capacity for God, that the mystics were not *fundamentally* different from the rest of us.

She defined mysticism as:

*'the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order... (a tendency which) represents the true line of development of the highest form of human consciousness.'* <sup>(45)</sup>

Mystics are the '*pioneers of the spiritual world*', the '*devout lovers of reality*' who have established immediate communication between the spirit of man (*sic*) and that '*only Reality*', the '*immaterial and final Being, which some philosophers call the Absolute, and most theologians call God.*' <sup>(46)</sup>

She cites George Fox as a 'typical example' of one of these pioneers and, in the chapter '*The Awakening of the Self*', describes how his '*gradual and increasing lucidity, of which the beginning has hardly been noticed by the self, intermittently accompanies the pain, misery of mind, and inward struggles ... finally shading off into the serenity of the Illuminated State.*' <sup>(47)</sup>

Throughout *Mysticism*, Underhill includes George Fox, as one example among many others, of people who exhibit the various 'stages' inherent in the spiritual process. These stages are traditionally known in Christianity as *awakening, purification, illumination, recollection, contemplation, ecstasy, and the dark night of the soul*, culminating in the *unitive life* where the human spirit has **come to full consciousness of reality** (*my emphasis*). <sup>(48)</sup>

Evelyn Underhill is always at pains to emphasise the expansion and generosity emanating from such 'full consciousness' which, far from remaining a movement of withdrawal and isolation, returns to 'the world' in very practical ways '*to fertilize those levels of existence from which it sprang*'. Described by her as '*a 'great active' of the first rank*', <sup>(49)</sup> George Fox is one of those whose practical accomplishments reveal '*something of the super-normal vitality of which they partake*'. <sup>(50)</sup>

(I am very conscious in this essay that I make no reference to such practical applications of the Quaker vision - that extraordinary historic, ongoing and often pioneering commitment to work 'in the world'. This is not because I don't value it. In fact I am deeply proud of it. My purpose here, though, is to focus on the *inward* conditions that precede and influence such outward manifestations.)

In her subsequent book, *The Mystic Way: A Psychological Study in Christian Origins*, <sup>(51)</sup> Evelyn Underhill makes more explicit links between the development of human consciousness and the evolutionary thrust of 'Life' in which - through the continuing

struggle between ‘matter’ and ‘spirit’ (from ‘*the emergence of the amoeba to the final flowering of human consciousness*’) - there can be seen an ‘*an unmistakable instinct for transcendence*’.

This internal ‘push’, this ‘*persistent and creative effort towards the discovery ... of something else*’ echoes, she says, the declaration in the Gospel of John: ‘*it is not yet made manifest what we shall be*’.<sup>(52)</sup> And, in a rather startling comparison, if human beings ‘tend’ to adapt themselves to that ‘*something else*’, then ‘*the spiritual evolution of humanity ... becomes as much a part of biology as the evolution of its stomach or its sense.*’

The logic of this is that, just as ‘man’ the tool-making animal marked a significant stage in the history of life, so ‘*the appearance of man the consciously spiritual animal must mark a genuine advance in the race, and must rank as its most significant achievement.*’<sup>(53)</sup>

Despite Underhill’s elevated Victorian-influenced prose, with its sweeping vistas of metaphor and imagery, she posits a down to earth approach to the ongoing evolution of human consciousness – that it is as much a part of biology as the evolution of the stomach. This brings us down from the mystical heights to recognition of the whole evolutionary thrust of humanity as one continuous and ongoing movement. We find ourselves simply a part of this ‘*incomplete poem*’.<sup>(54)</sup>

As the twentieth century began to absorb the significance of evolution, many influential thinkers integrated it with human developmental processes. To name only three, we have William James early in the century with his Gifford Lectures (subsequently published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*)<sup>(55)</sup>, Aldous Huxley, who popularised the term ‘perennial philosophy’ in his 1946 book of the same name<sup>(56)</sup>, and also Teilhard de Chardin.<sup>(57)</sup> Teilhard described the same process from his standpoint as both scientist and priest and, in the ‘ascent’ toward consciousness, he believed the evolutionary process was not only unfolding but was also being pulled along by a ‘higher’ pole of consciousness which he called the ‘Omega Point’.

Almost a century after the publication of *Mysticism*, the American philosopher Ken Wilber produced *Integral Spirituality*<sup>(58)</sup> in which he too explores the ‘stages of consciousness’ but by this time (2006) he is able to bring together evidence from across many disciplines, including material obviously not available to Evelyn Underhill in 1911.

Ken Wilber is recognised as a leading theorist in the study of human consciousness and over the past three decades he has - in a supreme intellectual feat - drawn together strands from the world’s wisdom traditions, east and west, past and present, discovering at their heart the same vital experience. Adding to these the work of (among others!) philosophers, theologians, mystics, psychologists, poets, anthropologists, sociologists, neuro-scientists and physicists, he has sought to form an ‘integral vision’. This is an attempt to find, extract and emphasise the common elements in global knowledge.

The aspect of Wilber's approach that is most relevant here is his model of the different stages of human growth (or levels of consciousness) from birth to enlightenment, which he discusses in terms of both individual and societal development. It is generally now agreed by major proponents in this area that human development proceeds through (to simplify it) three major stages of 'pre-conventional', 'conventional' and 'post conventional' – sometimes, depending on the discipline, also referred to as 'pre-personal', 'personal' and 'transpersonal'.

The later stages of these - what we might call the higher (or deeper) reaches of consciousness - enter the parallel levels of traditional mystical development. While Evelyn Underhill's definitions come from Western mystical traditions ('*awakening*', '*purification*', '*illumination*', '*unity*' etc.) Wilber classifies them predominantly through the language of Eastern traditions, notably those of Hinduism and Theosophy, describing '*psychic*', '*subtle*', '*causal*' and '*non-dual*' religious states.

And if, incidentally, we find ourselves bemused by the four or five 'categories' of potential 'higher consciousness', then let us remember that the Tibetans, apparently, have eighty-five words for different states of consciousness! <sup>(59)</sup>

### **The great heresy?**

While the extension of consciousness is no longer simply the prerogative of traditional religion, writers like Evelyn Underhill and Ken Wilber not only clarify its development but also validate - and foster confidence in - our sense of direction, the sense of process, which encourages us to 'be open to new light'. Both also make a great point of stressing the importance of 'practice', which sustains, nourishes and enhances our 'spiritual intelligence'. Practice requires active commitment and commitment involves choice.

In his posthumously published book, *The Phenomenon of Man* <sup>(60)</sup>, Teilhard de Chardin includes warnings that we are at a stage of human consciousness where, for the first time, we are encountering elements of choice. New patterns of co-operative social organisation appearing in the evolutionary process may be interrupted or inhibited, he believes, by certain societal problems (e.g. isolation and marginalisation).

While not approaching evolution from the perspective of a scientist, Evelyn Underhill also warns of the paralysis, the hypnosis or the distractions of '*contrary forces*'.

*'Our freedom, in the very movements in which it asserts itself, creates budding habits, which will stifle it, if it does not renew itself by a constant effort. Automatism dogs it. The most vital thought may freeze itself into the formula, which expresses it. The word turns against the idea. The letter kills the spirit.'* <sup>(61)</sup> (my emphasis)

This warning is a timely one to present-day Quakers. We may not be tempted to reduce our insights and experience to 'the letter' but we are not free of the 'budding habits',

which stifle our unfolding – and how far can we claim that we renew ourselves ‘by constant effort’?

While there may be many paths towards the ‘Real’, says Underhill, there is only one way of attaining any stage or state - we must *grow* to it, for the history of the spirit is the history of a growth.

Like a sword, the ‘*élan vital*’ cuts fresh paths through on which ‘life’ can move and in so doing it finds ‘*a thoroughfare*’. We are led towards this ‘thoroughfare’ by those who have already experienced its ‘*new, free path*’. Such people represent a ‘*fortunate variation of the race*’ who see ‘*other aspects of the many-levelled, many-coloured world of Reality*’ and to whom ‘*deeper and deeper layers of existence are revealed . . . .*’<sup>(62)</sup>

For Evelyn Underhill, this spiritual ‘sword’ found its ‘*perfect thoroughfare*’ in Jesus of Nazareth. The rare human type he represents

*‘is in essence a genuinely biological rather than a merely credal or intellectual development of the race. In it, we see life exercising her sovereign power of spontaneous creation: breaking out on new paths.’*<sup>(63)</sup>

**It is less a faith, she says, than a life-process.**<sup>(64)</sup> (*my emphasis*)

William James also implied a kind of choice when he wrote that, passing into the ‘*mystical states from out of ordinary consciousness, as from a less into a more*’ appeals to ‘*the yes-function more than to the no-function in us.*’<sup>(65)</sup>

The ‘yes-function’ by its nature is responsive and active. This is reminiscent of our 19th century American Friend Lucretia Mott’s warning that we should not be passive in our seeking of the Light.

Lucretia was concerned, according to her biographer, that the old Quaker ‘Quietism’ ‘*in which one did nothing but allow the Spirit to use one as it would*’ was a kind of perversion and an excuse for inaction<sup>(66)</sup> and Lucretia cautioned Friends actively to *seek* the Light, stressing that ‘*The great heresy is to wait in a kind of indifference for the Light to come to us.*’<sup>(67)</sup>

Evelyn Underhill says much the same, that in Quietism the principle of passivity (divorced from and opposed to all spiritual action) *was pressed to its logical conclusion*’ and that this resulted in a doctrine which was ‘*fatal not only to all organised religion but to the healthy development of the inner life.*’<sup>(68)</sup>

This underlines her point about renewing ourselves through ‘constant effort’.

The choices we make in our encounter with 'the way', the priorities we give to it in our lives, will impact positively or negatively on our beloved Society, as will the choices we make as meetings to engage in supporting and encouraging each other to do so. Underhill's warning that too much 'passivity' is *'fatal ... to healthy development'* is an uncomfortable reminder of our earlier questions around sickness and health.

Patricia Loring writes:

*'I think we've never come close to realising the possibilities inherent in the unique Quaker gestalt we've been bequeathed by generations of faithful Friends.'* <sup>(69)</sup>

To paraphrase William Penn, are we content to be merely the children 'of the children of the people of the Lord'?

The question for us all, both as individuals and as a community is: do we stay where we are, clinging to habits and to comforting familiar usages, or do we co-operate with what appears to be a natural tendency within the human spirit to unfold? Do we stay stuck or do we move? Is it possible for us to come closer to 'realising the possibilities' inherent in our legacy and, if so, to what extent might we allow ourselves to be a 'thoroughfare' for the unfolding Spirit?

Our unusual structure encourages (demands even) movement and fresh new growth. Of course, some of us are old, some of us are tired, some of us depressed. We must embrace each other where we are and accept the reality of our different experiences. But where there is energy and 'life', there is not just opportunity but responsibility to engage with that 'life'.

### **A possible task**

Just like Lucretia Mott who counsels against passivity, Ken Wilber says

*'There is no room for timidity. The fact that you might be wrong is simply no excuse ... What does matter, as Kierkegaard so rudely reminded us, is that only by investing and speaking your vision with passion, can the truth, one way or another, finally penetrate the reluctance of the world. If you are right, or if you are wrong, it is only your passion that will force either to be discovered.'* <sup>(70)</sup>

Isn't this precisely what George Fox and the early Quakers did?

In this 'postmodern' age we appear to be entering, where old 'certainties' are questioned, where 'truth' is provisional and different perspectives hold validity, Ken Wilber posits a specific role for 'religion' (by which he means the great world faiths). Because so much of the practice and belief systems in the world's religions still represent the *'infancy, childhood and adolescence'* of humanity, it is a task *'of primary urgency'*, he says, for followers of religious faiths to be helped to move towards the 'world-centric', 'post-



conventional' stages of human development which are now beginning to emerge in some quarters (i.e. from, say, 'ethnocentric' or 'pre-rational' or 'egocentric' or 'conformist' stages, to name but a few). Spiritual intelligence has too often become 'frozen' at the childhood stage and he calls for world-centric, post-conventional versions of religion's *own messages* <sup>(71)</sup> *(my emphasis)*

How might this be institutionalised for people of faith, he asks?

*'Will there be a conveyor belt that individuals can safely ride from pre-rational to rational to trans-rational floors, or will religion remain merely the repository of humanity's childhood?'* <sup>(72)</sup>

### **Our head start?**

I hope I am not being too fanciful or over optimistic if I say that, in this context, I believe we have something of a head start. With our structure, our history, our attitude towards credal statements and our already embedded approach of openness, it is possible we have less to 'unlearn'.

When P. W. Martin explored personal development in his book *Experiment in Depth* <sup>(73)</sup>, published in 1955, he focussed on twentieth century depth psychology, concentrating particularly on the work of C. G. Jung (who was also one of the earliest thinkers of the last century to gather together evidence of the 'perennial philosophy' from a wide range of societies). Jung describes in psychological terms the commonality he discovered among different cultures - the journey of 'individuation' leading towards the archetype of the 'Self' (always with a capital 'S' to distinguish it from the 'smaller' self of the ego). Through the 'experiment in depth', we come across 'the deep centre' and encounter the 'numinous' which leads to a new centre of gravity within the personality.

In his book, P. W. Martin explicitly links Jungian psychology with the older tradition of Quakerism and claims that, over the last three hundred years, the Society of Friends '*have been consistently practising their own version of the experiment in depth.*' Making a comparison between Jung's language and traditional Quaker language, he argues that Quakers came upon most of the '*principal discoveries*' of the 'experiment in depth':

*'... the 'transforming symbols' (openings, leadings, concerns); 'the deep centre' (the inward light, the seed, 'that of God in every man'); the 'individuation process' (the 'inward transforming experience of God'); the 'fellowship-in-depth' (meeting one another in the things that are eternal); and 'the return' – action in the outer world conceived as an integral part of the spiritual journey. ... Broadly speaking ... these ten generations of Quaker experience do furnish certain indicia of how responsible men and women, in good psychological health, can effectively make the experiment in depth without the help of a professional analyst.'* <sup>(74)</sup>

When I first read Martin's book many years ago, I felt some embarrassment over what seemed to me perilous idealisation of Quakerism. Even so, I recognised his claim that the potential is there. As an organisation, we are composed of very human members who constantly fail to live up to our aspirations and to the vision embodied in our Society, but deep within the structure and philosophy of Quakerism there does indeed lie the constant and ever-renewing possibility of making that journey which is not only the essence of Jungian psychology but the same spiritual process at the heart of all the great world religions.

Incidentally, little is recorded of Jung's own view of Quakerism but he is reported as saying that if he had had an early choice of Christian communities, he probably would have picked Quakerism.<sup>(75)</sup> In many ways this is not surprising. Jung too regarded religion not as theory or doctrine but as experience. For him also, statements of belief were inadequate substitutes for inner experience and, in this regard, *'self-realisation is not a fashionable experiment but the highest task that an individual can undertake.'*<sup>(76)</sup>

David Hodgkin in his address to Australia Yearly Meeting in the early seventies described Quakerism as a *'mature religion for today'* - an interesting claim in light of Ken Wilber's views on the infantile aspects of much of institutionalised religion.<sup>(77)</sup>

*'I have been overwhelmed with the sense that we just do not recognise sufficiently what clarity and truth is enshrined in the experience of the Society of Friends over the past three hundred years. If we did, and if we built properly on this, the Society would be infinitely more alive and effective for more people. Not that we want growth for its own sake, but because countless more people are looking for the sort of approach which Friends can offer. We are failing them if they cannot find us, or if, having found us, they see only a pallid reflection of what our Society ought to be.'*

While David Hodgkin thinks we can be inspired by earlier generations of Friends *'our vision and our expression of it must not be limited by theirs. We do not want what has been called 'Quakerwasm' instead of 'Quakerism.'*

He goes on to say that his belief in the potential of the Society of Friends is not founded on conceit or complacency because *'much of the treasure is indeed potential, not actual'*. This 'potential treasure' represents a constant challenge to us *'to make the most of our opportunities, both so that we may become more complete persons ourselves and so that our Society may prove powerfully attractive to those drawn to it.'*

The minimal structure of our meetings for worship allows our focus to be on a process rather than on a ritualistic or repeating pattern. This fact, in my view, is highly supportive of our development, whether we refer to that as 'individuation', 'spiritual intelligence', the 'perennial philosophy', travelling towards the Omega Point, discovering the 'Self', 'a genuine life process' or, in Quaker parlance, 'God's continuing creation'.<sup>(78)</sup>

George Fox's great challenge of 'What canst thou say?' has resonated down the centuries to every Quaker. It demands both individual response and individual responsibility. In whichever ways we as Friends respond to this in our lives, we know that the inward light

is central to Quakerism and this implies we are at least open to the *idea* of self-realisation however we may express it. We are exhorted to

*'Take heed ... to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life.'*<sup>(79)</sup>

and (in the 1964 version of *Advices and Queries*) to

*'resist not his strivings within you.'*<sup>(80)</sup>

For the first time in history, we now have global insights and experiences available to us from which 'maps' may be drawn to help orientate us. How different from the days of George Fox who claimed that someone who shared '*the same spirit*' as the prophets and apostles would be able to '*shake all the country*' for ten miles about them.<sup>(81)</sup>

Our own possibilities for communication reach far wider now than 'ten miles about' us. This poses new risks but also new opportunities to include other approaches in our exploring, ways from other traditions that may 'speak' to us. It seems that, whether we like it or not, the human race is unfolding - perhaps with '*groanings which cannot be uttered*'<sup>(82)</sup> - into a postmodern era and it is imperative that we find a spirituality appropriate to that era, not divorced from the wisdom of our history but not cramped by it either.

The awareness of other ways and other methods has been advancing incrementally among Quakers, certainly since the 1960s if not before. In the Swarthmore Lecture of 1977, Damaris Parker Rhodes wrote:

*'There are an increasing number of ways, including yoga, turning up to help the spirit to penetrate our unconscious selves and release energies which are normally locked up in self-restraint.'*<sup>(83)</sup>

She is optimistic about the nature of this and encourages us not to be fearful or timid.

*'Mystical experience and knowledge of guidance are becoming commoner in these times and perhaps this is because the great Unseen is building up power to help us in these dark days.'*<sup>(84)</sup>

This way is open to everyone:

*'... the seed of divine consciousness of which Christ's incarnation is the herald is not out in space but here, right under our hands, to be experienced in fullness of life as we learn to look for it ... None is totally deprived though the Seed may be deeply buried.'*<sup>(85)</sup>

Damaris Parker-Rhodes ends her Swarthmore lecture by saying it is certainly not the end of her journey.

*'As new experience comes, change is still probable. Truth for me is a path rather than a possession and above all I desire to be teachable, and open to the spirit 'which bloweth where it listeth'. '(86)*

In our fragmented, bombarding and noisy world, in which it sometimes feels hard to discern where the spirit 'listeth', we need all the help we can get. We do have access these days to practices and spiritual disciplines from a variety of wisdom traditions (our own and others), practices such as prayer, yoga, meditation, T'ai Chi, mantras, chanting, meditative walking, journaling, drumming, retreats, sacred dance - many of which have appeared as Woodbrooke short courses in recent years. There are choices, as well, to be made by each of us about the priority we give to such practices in our own lives. I am certainly not advocating dilettantism but rather an honest search for the kind of practice that is beneficial to us personally and helps us to become more still and receptive inside, more aware of our connection to the sacred. These are disciplines that can support our faith, enabling it to become a living daily reality - something more than just a pleasing Sunday jaunt or even a responsible ethical stance.

Maybe, too, we are in a timely position to act as a kind of hub or epicentre with other faith traditions? Many meetings are already active in their local Interfaith groups where different traditions try to listen to and understand each other's experience and insights. I believe Quakers may have a particular role here as a kind of connective tissue between the world's faiths. Freed from doctrinal or credal imperatives and the need to impose our own version of the 'truth' on others, we can offer a kind of creative neutrality which seeks to let go the clamour of own voice in order to hear 'where the words come from' in the other. Such 'neutrality' is not a negation of 'what we believe in' nor is it a lukewarm sitting on the fence for we are practised as a religious body both in 'mediation' and 'peace building' at many levels from the local to the international. This is a highly constructive aspect of our Quaker (and now 'postmodern'!) capacity to 'contain uncertainty', to reach out and connect with other versions of what we recognise as the common heart of the global spiritual vision.

Roger Walsh in *Essential Spirituality* demonstrates that common heart, that central message, with examples from the world's major religions. <sup>(87)</sup>

*The kingdom of heaven is within you (Jesus, Christianity)*

*Those who know themselves know their Lord (Mohammed, Islam)*

*He is in all, and all is in Him (Judaism)*

*Those who know completely their own nature, know heaven (Mencius, Confucianism)*

*In the depths of the soul one sees the Divine, the One (The Chinese Book of Changes)*

*Atman (individual consciousness) and Brahman (universal consciousness) are one (Hinduism)*

*Look within; you are the Buddha (Buddhism).*

## FINDINGS

It will be obvious by now that I think our traditional Quaker openness offers us a creative starting point to take forward Ken Wilber's vision of the role of religion for today; to find a spirituality appropriate for a 'post-conventional' and 'postmodern' world in which a dominant feature seems to be the ability to hold together a number of perspectives at once. This is the antithesis of the 'fundamentalist' attitude of there being only 'one truth' (ours) and it is a way of seeing that chimes with the positive element in our 'absolute perhaps'. We have the opportunity to continue re-interpreting our original spiritual vision, to adapt it to the changing perceptions of our present world and maybe even to encourage others to do likewise. As David Hodgkin says, this is not founded on conceit or complacency but on a recognition that the treasure is already potentially there in our inheritance.

However, our certainty about uncertainty maybe also needs to loosen its absoluteness in order to extend its tentacles into occasional 'certainties' without cramping its exploration. What a tightrope this is. In our admirable capacity to hold uncertainty as a principle, we must also be aware of the 'paralysis' that Evelyn Underhill warns us about.

We are *allowed* to having 'findings'!

Realistically most of us will locate ourselves on some kind of spectrum of spiritual awareness (why else would we bother to attend Meeting?). Among us will be Friends who may be able to let go sufficiently of their 'smaller' selves in order - sometimes at least - to approach 'the divine centre'.

The French mathematician, Blaise Pascal, inarticulately attempted to describe the 'certainty' of his own sudden uprush of heightened spiritual awareness and (for someone whose prose has been described as 'one of the great glories of France') revealed the limitations of language to express this ecstatic illumination.

*'In the year of grace 1654. Monday 23 November, the day of St. Clement, Pope and Martyr .... From about half-past ten in the evening till about half an hour after midnight. FIRE. Certitude. Certitude. Emotion. Joy. Peace. ... Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of Joy.'*<sup>(88)</sup>

It is Pascal's use of the word 'certitude' which led me to choose this particular example of a 'finding' – perhaps not entirely disconnected from the experience referred to recently in *The Friend* by a writer who described a 'disturbing, life-giving and indescribable transcendence'.<sup>(89)</sup>

This example is not the only current evidence that Quaker 'findings' are not simply historical events. In 1993, Quaker Home Service published a small booklet called *Findings: an enquiry into Quaker religious experience*.<sup>(90)</sup> Edited by Jack H. Wallis, a whole spectrum of religious experience is revealed in this collection and the following extracts are taken from longer passages written by a number of Friends. I have for the

purposes of clarity listed these examples in a way that reflects a natural unfolding of awareness but it is important to stress that the developmental themes we have been following are rarely so linear in character. My selection begins with the crucially necessary starting point of recognising our present condition and then moves outward into relationship and landscape.

*'I suddenly felt quite, quite broken'* <sup>(91)</sup>

*'the truth of religion as a relationship'* <sup>(92)</sup>

*'the landscape was transfigured'* <sup>(93)</sup>

*'an experience permeated by bliss'* <sup>(94)</sup>

Then there are those experiences where the sense of one's own self begins to melt away:

*'I was at one with it'* <sup>(95)</sup>

*'a virtual loss of self'* <sup>(96)</sup>

*'no longer ... any distinction between 'inward' and outward'* <sup>(97)</sup>

to the final recognition that

*'the separateness was illusory'* <sup>(98)</sup>

This range of experience among present-day Friends reveals the very heart of a transformational and living spirituality, one that chimes with the truths central to all major religious traditions.

Some of us in the Society today will be more like the little fish – endlessly seeking something that, in the end, is all around us, is where we already are, if we could but turn and recognise it. For those of us like this, the metaphor of the journey, the process, the pilgrimage is helpful. 'Truth' is indeed not a possession, not an object to be had, but a way to engage with.

For others of us, the concept of 'journey' may be less relevant and our experience more akin to Eckhart's famous dictum that there is no such thing as a spiritual journey, or if there were it would be only a quarter of an inch long though many miles deep. <sup>(99)</sup>

Whatever image speaks best to our condition, ‘a process’ is involved which may either be experienced as a long and faithful journey of seeking or that of a ‘letting-go’, a letting-go of the way in which we normally view the world which is through the lens of ego separateness. The consequence of such letting-go involves a re-cognition of who we truly are.

## STANDING AT THE OCEAN’S EDGE

The simple yet profound story of the little fish comes from a collection of stories and parables gathered together from a variety of ancient and modern traditions and retold by Anthony de Mello, a priest in the Roman Catholic church. In his dedication of the book, he writes:

*‘This book has been written for people of every persuasion, religious and non-religious. I cannot, however hide from my readers that I am a priest of the Catholic Church. I have wandered freely in mystical traditions that are not Christian and are not religious and I have been profoundly influenced by them. It is to my Church, however, that I keep returning, for she is my spiritual home; and while I am acutely, sometimes embarrassingly, conscious of her limitations and narrowness, I also know that it is she who has formed me and made me what I am today.’* <sup>(100)</sup>

This was surely the case for Damaris Parker-Rhodes. Writing of her after her death, Ruth Fawell said:

*‘She was a Friend who went down some startling and unusual by-paths in the course of her passionate and continuous search for truth. She saw the Society as providing her with the security to follow the truth as it came to her and said that she always expected to be led into further truth, to be taught, rebuked and shepherded by life’s experience.’* <sup>(101)</sup>

In the penultimate extract of *Quaker Faith and Practice*, written in 1992, we read

*‘And now at this critical point in time, when our outdated world view no longer satisfies, comes this breakthrough: science and mysticism speaking with one voice, the rediscovery of our own (Christian) creation-centred and mystical tradition, and the recognition of the spiritual wisdoms of the native traditions. All uniting and all challenging in a profound way our narrowly drawn boundaries’* <sup>(102)</sup>

We can indeed extend our ‘narrowly drawn boundaries’. We can ‘wander freely’ in other traditions and allow ourselves to be ‘profoundly influenced’ by them. Maybe too, like Anthony de Mello, we will keep coming home to the beloved Society which has formed us, and which continues to form us, to hold us, to encourage us, to entice us even, in the continual unfolding towards that awareness which knows itself at one with the divine.

And it is clear from *Findings* that it is possible for us to glimpse that ‘certitude and joy’ of being at the Ocean’s edge which our faithful ‘waiting in the Light’ pre-figures.<sup>(103)</sup>

It was during a meeting for worship that the following experience came to a Friend who began to have the sensation of a number of ‘waves’ which

*‘came over me with such force that at times I thought, ‘If I go with one of these waves – if I step off the edge of the abyss – the impact will be so strong that I will cry out aloud or make some sort of scene’. But perhaps the reassurance of the group helped me to go further than ever before.*

*The waves came as I allowed myself to be flooded by the wonder of my life at that time, so rich and full – although certainly not without difficulties. To be alive, I felt, was an immense joy and privilege. I saw myself as an instrument of perception, taking in the world around me, and able, in a way that was quite overwhelming when I thought of it, to discern the divine in so much of life.*

*And then, as in a flash, it came to me: the Source and Perception are one. The miracle that I, a sentient being, could perceive the greater whole was founded in the Source itself. The Source was, somehow, mirroring itself, or extending itself, through the agency of perception. The enigmatic, profound Hindu words ‘That thou art’ or ‘Thou art That’ came to mind. The separateness was illusory; in the act of perceiving we were inextricably bound up with the fount and origin of all that was.’<sup>(104)</sup>*

Maybe, after all, it is possible for us to stand at the Ocean’s edge – and not just read about it?



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28. *ibid* p30
29. *ibid* Appendices
30. *ibid* p46

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75. Kotschnig, Elined: quoted in *Inward Light*, Vol. XLVI, No. 100, Spring 1984, Friends Conference on Religion and Psychology, p9. The story is told by Elined Kotschnig, an American Friend who founded The Friends' Conference on Religion and Psychology. As a young woman living in Geneva (probably in the 1920s) she was part of a group of Quakers who were studying mysticism, and her own paper was on the mystical element in Jungian psychology. There was much enthusiasm for this and eventually, through a third party, the group was invited to go to Zurich and to meet Jung in his own home. 'Three cars full of us drove over. We had tea in the Jungs' garden with strawberries from the garden and for three or four hours he discussed with us the relationship of Quakerism and Jungian psychology. Jung agreed that the Quaker idea of the Inner Light was real. I remember his saying that, if he had had an early choice of Christian communities, he probably would have picked Quakerism.'
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