

## Friends Quarterly Competition: The Future of the Society of Friends

### Quakers: A Spiritual Community for our Time?

#### Context

It is 150 years since John Stevenson Rowntree wrote the essay that has prompted this competition. In the intervening period, Quakers have had an influence far beyond our small numbers. Yet, to many people in Britain we are invisible and our membership is declining. My starting point, now, is that we have wonderful gifts to bring to the world, but we seem to be short of energy to make them more accessible and visible. How can we find the energy to expand to meet our own needs and those of more and more seekers in a troubled world? How can we affirm, articulate and act upon our faith so that the Quaker way has more meaning for more people?

In my view the Society can only grow more when we give more to it. The Quaker way is not simply an hour of worship once a week; it is about learning, creating, sharing and praying together. It is about faith and practice being interwoven and our whole lives being sacramental. It is about teaching and learning alongside one another, supporting and encouraging one another and loving one another, despite our differences. Do we have the capacity to integrate it more fully into our lives? Or do we have too many other interests and demands on us? If we neglect these things, the likelihood is that our energy will be dissipated and drained away from our Meetings, so that the meaning and purpose of the Quaker way will be diminished.

In order to grow, we also need to be clear about our core identity and at the same time, be open and flexible. Some Friends are asking whether we are a club or a movement (1). I hope we can be both. One of the exciting aspects of the Society is that we embrace a variety of attitudes and interests around a common core of belief and practice. So amongst us, there is a kind of dance between, for example, inward and outward focus, Christocentric and Universalist, mystical and active. Can we continue to hold the core and be open to even more movement and change? Are we able to explore with seekers from other traditions and embrace new ideas and practices? Are we able to go more deeply into our search and return with new treasures? I hope we can find the best of all worlds, in which we remain true to our core beliefs and practice, whilst experimenting and exploring new ways.

In this essay I would like to explore these and other questions about our capacity to grow. I cannot represent all aspects of the rich diversity in the Society, so I will look upon this exercise as a contribution to a conversation, rather than a competition. We all have truths to offer one another and what I plan to do, here, is to share some of my current thinking, drawing upon my own experience, as is the tradition among Quakers. I will use the word 'we', both to refer to Quakers and to people in general, trusting that the meaning will be clear from its context.

As for envisaging the future; ultimately it is unknowable. Quantum physicists describe time passing as being like grains of sands, piling up forever. My interpretation of this is that people build on the past and create the future now in the present. When early Friends spoke about the Kingdom of God, I believe they meant it was available to everyone in present time, if they could only see and live it. The future comes to us, in the shape we are making it. Our visions grow from what we do and think now.

Looking back over our history, one can see how the balance between club and movement

has shifted. Early Quakers grew out of the Seekers movement here in Britain in the mid seventeenth century. They were moved by the Spirit and led by the Light of Christ to experiment and testify. Thanks to the organisational skills of George Fox and Margaret Fell, a way was found to give shape to this new venture, so that its identity and form was recognisable. To begin with, the pioneering energy of the early Quakers kept the movement very much alive. Then there came a time when the 'Pioneer period' slipped into the 'Quietist period' so that by Victorian times Friends were disowned for marrying out or going bankrupt. Numbers were declining and the lives of Quaker communities were confined and controlled. The movement had become rigid; in practice it was a closed club, in which growth and change was difficult. Some Friends questioned the status quo, but they were marginalised. Then, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century John Stevenson Rowntree, his nephew John Willhelm Rowntree, Rufus Jones and others, opened the way for a more Liberal Society.

Friends moved into a more open period, more connected to the world. Returning to the early Quaker emphasis on experience, rather than the primacy of scripture, they were able to open themselves to new ideas and embrace other thinking. Also they took up causes such as the Adult School movement and Conscientious Objection, and started the FAU and the FRS. More recent concerns, such as 'Towards a Quaker View of Sex', Circles of Support and Accountability and the Alternatives to Violence Project have demonstrated how our continuing search for truth and love, has led us forward. In the wider context, all these activities and energy helped create, in Britain, a society where professionally run non-governmental organisations and charities have become part of its fabric, an essential element we now take for granted. (Despite this, the recent poll, commissioned by Quaker Quest, has found that many people in Britain think we are still a sect or that we did indeed die out.)

I find it helpful to see Quakers today within this broad picture because it is important to mark and indeed celebrate who we are. We can also see how the balance between club and movement, open and closed has shifted over time. We know it can change again.

I hope we can now move into a period of spiritual renewal. Over the last 100 years, we have raised our profile by witnessing to our concerns for the world, but I don't think we have given the same level of attention to the spiritual side of life. I am pleased that in the Framework for Action, Friends have agreed to give priority to strengthening our spiritual roots. I believe that renewing our spiritual life together will open the gate to new growth and movement. However, we need to approach this, not in haste, but in innovative ways with discernment. Energy for change will come when we start with our centre and move out as we are led.

There are at least two reasons why I think we need to give more attention to spiritual exploration. First of all, we live in a time and place, where many people are unsettled by events and trends. As always, fear and distrust thread their way through the wider political and social context. Climate change, the Asian challenge to the old order of Western mastery, rampant capitalism and our adherence to weapons and war etc. are all big issues that arise from a culture of competition and fear, of disconnection with the earth and one another. In his book, *The Spirit Level*, (2) Richard Wilkinson has shown there is a strong link between economic disparity and mental and physical ill health, both amongst individuals and societies. Big problems like these do not get solved by tweaking the system but by going to a 'higher' or 'deeper' level. It is the capacity of human beings to disconnect from one another that lies at the root of this malaise. Can Quaker faith and practice help people to reconnect?

Secondly, it seems to me that just now Quakers, as a Society, do not have enough energy and enthusiasm to respond to this situation. The puzzle is there is a lot going on. In my own Area, we have Quaker Quest, Kindlers and Living Witness to name just three. Friends have so much to offer and plenty of projects and programmes that give us hope of growth. But somehow there is not too much to show for it. Overall it seems to me that we dissipate much of our energy away from our core. I think this is partly because more of our actual weekly or monthly time is given to keeping things going and sustaining our club, rather than to growing new things. Also we give many of our gifts and services to many organisations outside Friends; and why not? And then what is left is all the basic maintenance business, that many of us do reluctantly. Where I live the practicalities of buildings, law and money draw many of us into questions such as how to raise the finances to maintain all our Meeting Houses, how to comply with the legal demands of the Charitable Commission and how to make sure we 'Safeguard our Children'. With declining and, in many places, an ageing membership there are fewer people able to take on the basic jobs. Many hearts sink at the mere thought of all that paper work. And yet we do it.

My hope is that spiritual renewal can give us more energy for the Quaker way. This is not to say that we will turn inwards, but rather, as I have already implied, we will renew our core beliefs and allow us to go outwards to engage with others. When George Fox discovered that there was one, even Christ Jesus, who could speak to his condition, he saw how faith can help us in our daily lives, just as we are. Many people who apply for membership speak about 'coming home'. They may find a sense of belonging, clarity of meaning and purpose. They may feel that here they can find joy and fulfilment in the use of their gifts. They may feel they have found a safe place and a connection with the divine. In each case the Quaker way, has spoken to their condition and met a need. Today in Britain, most of us find our physical needs are met, and it is for our 'spiritual needs' that we seek a home. I believe that Quakers can offer such a home to many more people. In the coming years, as climate change creates more instability and conflict, I don't think reform of policies, and money diverted to sustainable projects will be enough. What we have to offer could meet the needs of people looking for alternatives to the current pattern of consumerism and violence – if we choose to make ourselves more accessible and visible.

As I write this, I feel a little uncomfortable; Quakers produce mountains of words and now I think we need to move on to more experience and experiment. So I intend to explore how we might actually embed spiritual practice and discernment more fully into our lives. We have many wonderful gifts and resources, to be freshly explored, rediscovered, shared and practised. What if we could create amongst all our disparate efforts, enough energy to match that of the pioneering Quakers? An energy that grows from all our accumulated wisdom and learning since then, that spreads out into new places and new understanding? An energy that helps us go into the world with new insights and clarity?

Over the summer I had the chance to walk two labyrinths. The first was with a two year old wearing a flared white dress with glorious red roses on it. Needless to say she danced in and out and roundabout, taking glorious energy back to our tea party. The second was at a birthday celebration, where I walked the labyrinth on my own. It helped me to feel nurtured by the earth and with tradition, slowed me to stillness and reminded me that when we have love and peace in the core of our being, we can more easily bring love and peace to the world. The physical act of quietly moving returned me to myself. We can, metaphorically, return again and again, wherever we are, to walk the labyrinth, to find the stillness in the movement, which for me is to enter the presence of the living God. It is in that presence where I long to live, with love and truth as my guides. What if we could enhance and spread that spiritual energy wherever we go?

## Renewing our Spirit

Our first advice invites us to *take heed... to the promptings of love and truth in our hearts*. I would like to take this as the starting point for what I shall say about spiritual renewal and look at the Quaker way as a journey along the path of love and truth. I will begin with our core beliefs and our search for ever more understanding through worship. Then I shall come to discernment and the leadings and witness that grow out from this. I see each of these as part of a process of continuing reflection and witness, a cycle or a spiral perhaps, with no end. I will look at each step in turn: belief, worship, discernment and leadings, and ask how can we bring more energy and exploration into them, not in a controlling way, but in an expanding, opening way? What might happen if we did this?

*Our core beliefs:*

In my experience, spiritual energy and direction come to us when our beliefs and actions are aligned in love.

Since JSR was only 25 years old when he wrote his essay, I am led back to think about myself as a Young Friend, when I first had an experience of the divine. I joined an interest group called Towards Community, which explored lots of ideas about community, from networks to living together in common. I saw how sharing and worshipping together on a daily basis echoed the community spirit of the early Christians and Quakers. I read New Foundation pamphlets on George Fox and the Light Within, and discovered the vibrant energy and immediacy of his faith and experience. I had just studied 17<sup>th</sup> Century English history and was spellbound by all that belief in turning the world upside down, which the Quakers and others were moved to live and work for. I had my first understanding of a fundamental aspect of the human condition, that our actions are shaped by our beliefs. We are led by what we believe and what we tell ourselves every day. Our beliefs direct our energy and our responses.

My own journey confirms for me over and over again that George Fox had a message for all time. In these two passages he talks about the power of belief in a loving God to direct and support us.

*'in the presence of the living God be patterns... that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people... then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone'*  
(QF&P 19.32)

and:

*the Lord showed me ... that I should have a sense of all conditions and in this I saw the infinite love of God. I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. And in that I saw the infinite love of God and I had great opening.*  
(QF&P 19.03)

As we let go of 17<sup>th</sup> century language, we can see that these ideas are not unique to Quakers. **As** we articulate and share **them**, we awaken them and give them more life. When Fox spoke about patterns, he knew that our energy ripples out and creates more of the same. Just as fear and violence breed more fear and violence, so love and truth encourage more love and truth. War does not usually lead to peace, whereas kindness and respect may well open doors to new understanding. When he spoke about the ocean of light flowing over the ocean of darkness, he knew that belief in the power of love can overcome belief in the power of fear.

Fox spoke constantly of God being in each person and each person being in God, so that

we are all able to participate in ongoing creation, all precious and unique, all able to transform the world through the power of love. Today, I think, most Friends would see God as presence and power, a loving, life force or transforming energy, all of which chimes with modern scientific understanding of energy being everywhere, whether free and fluid or locked up in things. I see the different qualities, ascribed to God, be they judge, father, mother, creator, destroyer, as energies within and between us. When we perceive God as a judge we become overcritical, or even frightened of ourselves and others. When we choose to perceive God as the ultimate life-giving, life-affirming power of creation, then we are giving our support to life and love in the world. From this perspective, we are relatively free of the arguments about the existence of God generated by Richard Dawkins and others. We are able to meet people at a deeper place where, despite all our differences, understanding may emerge. I am unclear whether God is the energy that created the universe. I don't see why not, but at present I am content for it to be a mystery.

Recently we had in our Meeting, several gatherings with local Sufis and when asked to explain their faith, the first thing they said was '*We are here on earth to manifest God's love to all*'. It is time, I think, to meet up with fellow seekers whenever we can, and open ourselves to receive from one another. I don't know where that will lead, but that does not matter. Belief is the beginning; the source of our energy and our direction. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God. In my vision of the future, I see us being more in touch with this belief in the transforming power of the love of God; more able to bring it into the world. Can we help ourselves and one another to have that greater trust in the power and presence of the loving, healing life force of God that is within and all around us? Can we share these truths about love with others?

### *The gift of Meeting for Worship*

This week in Meeting, we had ministry about the love of God that passes all understanding and then about allowing ourselves to be channels of that love. We wondered how we can get out of the way, so that God can work in us. A Friend spoke about a concert of modern music and the follow-up discussion in which someone said he did not understand the music. 'Neither do we', the musicians said, 'we just try to get out of the way so the music can play itself'. How to let go to God; to do and yet not to do?

I think it is the most special aspect of Meeting for Worship, that we can come into the stillness and in silent prayer, allow **ourselves** to be empty in the presence of the divine. Amongst all the busyness, it is a great gift for our time. On the surface it is simple. In the stillness and silence and the waiting we find the space to just be as fully present as we can. Then we are open to receive the love and light of God and we find the gifts we need in that moment. As we wait in emptiness and openness, thoughts will come and go; perhaps we will see them in a new light. If I have a particular concern or wish, I will hold it lightly, hoping that new understanding will come to me. It is here in all its simplicity that we can dwell together in the life-giving, creative, loving energy of God. It is here that we can receive the promptings of love and truth in our hearts and allow ourselves to be led.

I believe we need to teach ourselves and others about Quaker worship, to make it more visible and accessible. Finding the deep stillness is not always so easy and yet many people long for it. Some Friends come to this place naturally; others find it occasionally. Visitors may feel at home instantly; others may go away perplexed. So let's take a layer or two of the mystery away and, in place of the Culture of Silence that Ben Pink Dandelion has identified (3), let's explore together. I am sure there are plenty of people who would be drawn to Friends if they could be shown; it is too important to hide.

My own exploration began because I was feeling disconnected and longing for something

more. I needed to get beyond words and sense the presence of the love of God with all my being, body as well mind. I tried some meditation practices and found that they were too busy; the practices themselves seemed to be the purpose in themselves, whereas what I was looking for, was a way into stillness. Early Quakers were well aware that stillness involves the whole of oneself. As Isaac Pennington taught in this letters, (4) *breathe low and connect with the seed within... so that you can make your life a garden where God walks*. Or, elsewhere, he suggests, think of yourselves as a fountain of living water, receiving from the well of life. Studies of geniuses such as Einstein and Mozart tell us that engaging their bodies and all their senses was an integral part of opening to creativity. And so it is with all of us. Our bodies are an essential part of spiritual practice; when we are centred and breathing easily, we can connect with the divine within and all around us. We see life anew, to paraphrase George Fox.

To help us deepen and share the wonder of our worship, I would like to see us preparing hearts and minds by teaching such practices. They can be very simple and amazingly effective. To become present, I sit in a balanced way so that my body is open to the flow of living energy. I think about my spine, right up to the crown of my head, being a channel, receiving and giving. The middle of the circle, where I am sitting, is the still place in our moving world; I allow my breath to flow within and around us, to flow out so it seems to touch my fellow worshippers and to flow in so that I feel the life force within. So I come to feel fully present and connected to the divine. And then miraculously, my thoughts become softer and more fleeting. I feel the space between us, warm and living. I let my gaze soften, so that I am not focusing or concentrating on anything particular. I just allow myself to see the people and objects in the room, to look at the windows and through to the world beyond. In the waiting, my perspective becomes wider and gentler. My thoughts come and go. Insights new ideas, understanding or openings just arrive!

### *Daily practice*

I feel the same about daily practice of prayer in stillness. Through the day, I can go into the stillness that I have practised in Sunday worship, at specific times such as before meals or journeys and at lots of other times too. It is a very special resource. Being still, grounds me and connects me to my faith and values. It is a moment of prayer, where prayer is a thought that is energised in the presence of God. I wish I had always done this practice spontaneously, but I at least I am learning. Now I wonder why I have taken me so many years to start! As Thomas Kelly says in Testament to Devotion, (5) we can just decide to do it and return to it again and again, till it is a habit.

A group of us in our Meeting aim to pause and worship at 8 o'clock every morning, which is good because it is a reminder for the day. The more I practise prayer in stillness, the more I seem to trust and 'let God'. Sometimes I simply bring my hands together in prayer to connect my whole self in one and be wholly present and empty. For this is indeed a prayer - a light thought or direction, an awakening of the life-force, a moment to give thanks and a renewal of commitment to the path of love.

### *The gift of the Light*

Another resource, that I think breathes more life into Quaker practice, is Rex Ambler's *Experiment with Light* (6). This is a powerful meditation because it is both embedded in the Quaker tradition and very relevant for today. I think it is one of the best things we can do for ourselves, whether on our own or with fellow seekers. It is also a great teaching tool to share with other seekers because many will recognise it from their own explorations. Light is a universal symbol of inspiration, insight, enlightenment, warmth, comfort and life. The Quaker idea of Light being in all of us means that we are each a source of all those wonderful things. Light is energy and we need more of it!

I would like to see lots of Meetings holding Light groups or similar meetings, for themselves and others. Some Friends feel wary of images and imagination; to them I would like to say that I am sure they were part of the teaching of the original Quakers. Though they, rejected outward symbols and rituals, they did not turn their backs on inner ones. They knew images took them beyond words into experience and that, when they engaged in this way, they came into a deeper more complete place. Allowing myself to be held in the light is a form of prayer. Feeling the presence of light helps us live with difficulties and transform them; the light which is the energy of God's love carries and guides us. When I hold a concern or habit held in the light, I can see things differently and perhaps discover truths that were previously hidden. I feel a sense of safety and warmth, that may allow difficult things just be. The light does not necessarily obliterate the dark, but it can certainly flow over it.

When Nelson Mandela quoted Marianne Williamson in his inaugural speech (1994), he reminded us that what we fear most is not the power of others over us, but our own light. I think that George Fox spoke about the Light of Christ within us because he saw that we are each able to connect with the wisdom of God, as Jesus did. Marianne Williamson and others, who are often described as New Age, have contributed to my understanding of love and light; I think we have much to learn from them. Today most us have difficulty seeing ourselves as full of light, able to convey the energy of love and truth. What if we allowed ourselves to consider this possibility and really experience the light as we sit in stillness?

#### *Worship in the future*

To take these ideas forward into the future, I see us perhaps worshipping together in Experimental Worship groups during the week or before Meeting on Sundays. When we have some confidence in what we are doing, we might invite others to join us from other churches and faiths, and from other seekers, such as yoga or meditation groups. We might use the *Experiment with Light* because it provides a well tested framework, that can be readily understood and appreciated by others. In our Meeting Light Group, we felt we needed less of a sense of judgement and inquisition, so we changed the wording a little to bring more warmth and lightness into our circle. Perhaps we can take another step and become more light hearted! Occasionally some of meet up with Jews from neighbouring synagogues. They love a good argument and are fascinated by the idea of silent worship but cannot quite put their toes in the water; perhaps some kind of light meditation would appeal. We would wish to make space for everyone to share their thoughts and traditions about the Light and also to explain the traditional Quaker view, in a modern way. We might even light a candle or put out tea lights for us to light if they wish.

Other Friends will have other ideas for preparing hearts and minds – and for teaching others. The wonder is that when people come into stillness together, we find that the silent emptiness can become full of love and light; we come to understand ourselves and one another and we feel supported and connected to the divine. Here it is that we can truly meet one another.

#### **Deepening Discernment**

Emerging from worship, the Quaker process of discernment is another great gift that can help us find our way, even in the most challenging circumstances. I have come to see that Friends do not always use the process as fully as we might. It is not the same as discussion when people are airing their views and listening to one another. Nor is it the same as consensus, when one is looking for agreement or acceptable compromise. Rather in the stillness of worship, we allow all views to be heard in love and we open ourselves to wider perspectives that are the promptings of love and truth in our hearts.

With or without God language, I think we need to use this process more frequently amongst ourselves and share it more widely in the world. Wherever we look, violence is too often the default position for responding to conflict, partly because that is what we are taught and offered. Many people know no other way. It is so easy to make assumptions about right and wrong and not to stop to listen and honour one another's experience and knowledge. But before I reflect on its value for others, let's backtrack and recognise its value for ourselves.

### *Personal discernment*

The first thing we might do is to practice discernment in our own lives, either on our own or in a group. I am all too aware, as I write, that my vision for the future of Quakers, requires more time and space in our lives than many of us currently feel able to give. Just as we are feeling overwhelmed by Quaker jobs and everyday pressures, I am suggesting we give more of ourselves to the Society. Yet, this very Quakerly gift of discernment can really help us sift through our priorities and find our directions. In my experience, when something draws us in and gathers our energy, we are enthused and energised, perhaps awakened in some way. We feel alive with meaning and purpose. I have a barometer (only in my imagination), with which I detect my energy for something and needless to say I apply it (also in my imagination) to others. I ask myself whether an activity disperses or gathers energy. If the answer is the first of these, I wonder whether and how it can be changed, what blocks me or encourages me, whether I should give it up or just wait.

For those who would like to do this with a group, Clearness Meetings are a great resource. I wish they were offered more frequently. It may be that someone has a particular concern to reflect on, or they may be struggling with choices in everyday matters. Either way, the person is given space to reflect, in the knowledge that they are heard and supported.

### *Business Meetings*

In Business Meetings, some matters can be dealt with quickly but I think it is good also to reflect a little, even where the choices seem straightforward. Just giving some space to a question, can allow us to see it in a new light. Perhaps we realise it can be done in a more efficient or creative way. Also, practice on simpler issues will help us when there is real disagreement to deal with it. It is so easy to sweep differences under the table. When we skate over them, we may well find our energy sapped, and yet, when we seek understanding and discernment we may find a new way emerges that we never even dreamt of. Sometimes I hear Friends say that there is no time and that we should trust someone because they have done so much preparation, burning the midnight oil and wrestling in the early hours. This will not do! In the end, when we listen to one another with love and lay our different bits of the puzzle before God, a greater wisdom is revealed. I have used a version of our Quaker method in simple community mediation without mentioning God and it has been a kind of miracle to see people finally understand one another and see common ground. From there a new way forward can come to light and one-time opponents found unity.

In my experience Quaker discernment is gold dust. My hope is that when we embed it more in our regular meetings, we remember how valuable it is and go on to practice it with others. I am glad that many Friends have a concern about this and that there are several courses for clerks and others to learn more. I do wonder, though, if there are some very simple changes we can make to turn our energy around. For example in our Business Meetings next year we plan to read a passage from QF&P to remember we are in worship, together. We shall also rearrange the chairs into a circle, so that we will be more worshipful and aware of one another. We shall see. We might even finish sooner!

### *Worship and discernment*

A Business Meeting may not always be the best place to discern the way forward. Perhaps there is a lack of information, too many uncertainties, too many differences or just not enough time and space. In such cases threshing meetings and worship sharing may be helpful. Simple threshing techniques such as spectrum line discussions and brainstorms can easily bring out differences and new ideas. Sometimes the way forward emerges from the simple act of meeting together, with no exercises or questions to facilitate the process. In all these different kinds of meeting, we are learning, praying and sharing more together. We are supporting one another and building community.

Giving ourselves space for prayer is one of the most valuable things we can do. When the British government took us to war in Afghanistan and Iraq, our Meeting held regular Meetings for Peace. We had no sense of what might arise; we simply had a desire to pray together. We spoke of our anxiety for ourselves, the soldiers, the people they were fighting and the level of the fear in the world. We grieved that once again our country had fallen headlong into the trap of believing that misery, death and war can bring peace. After our Worship, we started to talk about what we might do to reflect our belief that, despite all this, the love of God is present in all of us. We decided to hold Meetings for Worship before each of the marches in central London to state our concern and sadness in silence. We also decided to correspond and meet with our MP, not to convert her, but to find shared understanding and concern. I believe that we found the time and energy to undertake this work and form the London Quaker Peace Network because we did not rush in with instant ideas but because we sought guidance in prayer together.

In common with most other protest actions against war, our witness appeared to make little difference, and yet, along with all those others, I believe our statement contributed to a political shift in our government's attitude to war. Meanwhile, we are back to reflecting on our experience and wondering where else we may be led in our peace witness.

### **Following Leadings**

Following our leadings is another step in the continuing Quaker cycle (or spiral) of worship and discernment. As we wait upon the promptings of love and truth in our hearts, we find the way opens; we may be led in a particular direction or we may discern the time for action is not yet. In doing this, we are supported by our testimonies and the worshipping community (past and present, local and national).

### *Testimonies*

The word 'testimony' comes from 'testify', to witness to the truth that comes to us in prayer and reflection. All the testimonies, to peace, simplicity, sustainability, equality and truth, are expressions of our journey along the path of love towards more and more understanding. They guide us towards a place, where love and connection replace fear and indifference, where war, greed and power struggles are no longer acceptable. They still challenge us to '*turn the world upside down*', as the early Quakers envisaged in the Peaceable Kingdom.

We don't wait for the future to be better; we witness now as we feel led by the promptings of love and truth in our hearts. So, for example, we don't wait for the state to change the law on same sex marriage; we introduce it now, as best we can. Fifty years ago, we would not have done this; it is a concern that has arisen from our journey of understanding and experience. Perhaps now the Society is starting to challenge the question of economic growth, that some of us have been reflecting on for at least 30 years! Humans have a great thirst for exploration, expansion and growth; may these yearnings be diverted in more humane and sustainable directions.

For myself, one of the clearest truths I have discovered since those days of protest against the Iraq war, is to do with relationships and opposition. I have come to see that, when we approach people whom we oppose, in a softer, more open way, the energy in our relationship can soften and there will be more space for change. Just now, as I think about the idea of *turning* the world, I am reminded that Jesus spoke about *turning the other cheek*. I think this means presenting a qualitatively opposite point of view. One day, in a heated discussion, I suddenly found I could just accept that **someone else's** view was their truth. In place of irritation and disappointment came space for understanding and empathy. I was amazed and a little horrified that I could accept that someone I admired **had** a view which I strongly disagreed with. Then I saw that opposition is a form of violence and that it is spaciousness and generosity of spirit, which opens the door to change. Arguing will not change the energy in a situation, whereas listening and compassion, will bring in something new. It is time, I think to explore together in more depth, what it means to turn the other cheek and offer love instead of anger and fear.

It is important to return again and again to prayer and reflection, so that we can deepen our understanding of the way of love. Reform of policies and behaviour, can be of great value. But it is only when we see beneath the surface and connect with the needs and aspirations that motivate people, that we can lay the seeds of lasting change. This, I believe, is one of the great strengths of the Quaker way.

### *Community*

Community is another important source of guidance and support. Early Quakers, according to the New Foundation, were clear that they were returning to the Gospel Order. With no dogma to adhere to, it was in the community where they sought wisdom and clarity, and received support. It was also the place where they put their faith into practice – to be '*patterns*' and experimenters. Following the promptings of love and truth is not just a solo journey but a community journey in which we travel together. On ones own, new paths can be painful and possibly dangerous. Together, we can practice our beliefs so that they can become clearer and more real to ourselves and to others.

I believe that, if we are to be true to our faith and our future, we will need to think more about what it means to be a community; perhaps over the next in 50 years, we will create a testimony to community. In our Meeting, when we thought about the Framework for Action, we drew our visions of the Society and most of us came up with crystal structures or expanding circles. We talked about shared authority, networks, fluid boundaries, changing shapes and having space to grow in our own ways with the support of others. We saw the Society as an open community where we can practice being patterns around out core beliefs. We would demonstrate that human beings can live together in a life-affirming and loving way.

To create and maintain the kind of community I have described in this essay, requires attention and commitment. I hope that I have shown that if we pray for it, we will receive the energy for it. On one level Quakers are good at this. On another, I think we have more learning to do; this is not easy. We live in a society where the individual comes first so that ideas about community are not so important. We are used to doing our own thing and we have plenty of other calls on our time. So we just don't have enough experience of working things out together. May be will need to go through a period of 'chaos', as described by Scott Peck in *The Different Drum* (7) before we can come to a place of deeper understanding and agreement. Community is a challenge to ourselves as well as to the wider society. But our resources are good enough even for that, as I hope I have shown!

This kind of community is both a club and movement; it expresses a clear, central core from which flexibility and openness grows. We have seen how Quaker practice allows and indeed honours difference. It offers a way to work with differences so that new ideas and solutions emerge and it supports us all on our individual journeys. It gives us a model of partnership in which authority and decision-making is shared and plenty of opportunity for co-operation. It is the best kind of community I know of.

### **Being Quakers**

I do not know what the future will be for Quakers. What I do know is that if we wish to grow, we will need to give more time, attention and commitment to worship and discernment – and to following our leadings both as individuals and as a community. As climate change, threatens the security of our world, it may be that more and more people will turn to us for our skills in conflict resolution, our alternative perspectives and our support for community. I have a hunch that prayers and dreams are the seeds from which visions grow and that in the stillness we can find the nourishment and insights to create them. We will need to be open to new light, as well as true to our central beliefs and practices.

So in this concluding part of my essay, I would like to share with you my dreams and prayers for our future. Everyone will, of course, choose their own particular path, learning from one another and testing different possibilities. As a Friend recently said in ministry, in place of walls dividing people, let's have trampolines where we bounce together!

I will start with ourselves and move out to the local Meeting and to the whole Society and beyond. I can see us pausing frequently during the day just to be in the presence of God's love and light within and all around us. How we do this is entirely up to each one of us; in making a commitment to God, we are, I believe, giving more energy to that transforming power which takes away the occasion of all war. We are saying 'let my life speak', let God's love be my guide. I would also like to see us teaching this practice not only to ourselves, but to many others. For those of us, for example, who live with a low level of anxiety or who are addicted to busyness, this is a wonderful way to steady oneself and feel supported. To feel the presence of love and light, is to receive God's energy into our lives.

Our worship will remain the same. We will regularly practice bringing our whole selves into the presence of the divine, so that we know how to come with both hearts and minds prepared. We will continue to explore and learn from a wide variety of texts, not only those of different faiths, but also from science, psychology and others searching disciplines. ( I see now that I have not written about this earlier. Though, I hope I have implied it!) Seekers of all kinds will join us in our explorations and learning, and they will sit with us in our stillness.

On a simpler level, we might take more time to be with one another; to listen and share, to have fun, laugh and move together! For those who are drawn to group activity, we could do Circle Dancing, Chi Gong or some other form of movement. Anything to get us moving in a way that links us with our whole selves! Others may like to share their experiences of Apple Seed and sew and paint. Or we might sing or read poetry together. Who knows what might happen if we were to enjoy being together regularly through the year.

Outreach will not be a thing of itself, but something that is an act of witness, which engages others. In the summer, we might support the Meeting for Worship at Speakers Corner, and perhaps have an all-age picnic as well. Anything to show that we are not the familiar face on the Quaker Oats packet, but a living group of pretty ordinary folk! I dream

of each Meeting, or group of Meetings, committing themselves to witnessing in some way to the Peaceable Kingdom. Then our Meeting Houses will become more vibrant and visible, drawing people in to them, in ways such as those I have already suggested, demonstrating Quaker faith and witness, more clearly.

We will need to take our time with this. As with all discernment processes there must be space for allowing differences and waiting for guidance, perhaps with time out for threshing and clearness. I am thinking of a recent conference held by Six Weeks Meeting on '*Our Meeting Houses: Beacons or Burdens?*' It will not be easy to decide what to do with all the buildings that they own on our behalf. Which can become beacons and which are the burdens that may need to be laid down or moved to other premises? Perhaps after due process of discernment, it will become clear that some Meetings may need to travel more lightly and rent premises. Perhaps others will find the energy and inspiration to be a pattern for the Quaker way; after considerable reflection, some Meetings may choose to create a place for quiet meditation that is open to the public or a retreat for fellow seekers, an eco-house or a peace centre.

Time and money may flow in when and where they are needed, when the project is ready to be sown and grown, however small. Perhaps someone could receive an honorarium or even a salary to help realise the vision. Or perhaps some Friends will choose to give service for free. Perhaps a way will open towards partnership with another organisation, or the building may be handed over entirely to them during the week. At present, many Friends give to many organisations outside the Society; perhaps they will decide to give instead to a special project that is dear to their Meeting. I hear Friends say that the rest of the world is important too. If so the Meeting project will reflect that; it too will reach the wider world.

I am reminded earlier of what I said about our energy being dissipated. I think we need to bring our energy into the Meeting in such a way that it goes out too. What I have just said about giving money for the Meeting to do work in the community, is a simple example of this. Holding multi-faith worship meetings is another, as is partnering a voluntary group or charity with which we are in sympathy. It may be good if we were to work on this with other Meetings in our Area; perhaps we will be able to combine resources and come up with new ideas that we had never envisaged. I am thinking now of one of our sister Meetings that gave hospitality to many faith groups when the Walk for Peace came through, on their way into central London. Perhaps the Area Meeting might be able to help develop those links. Who knows!

So far I have not said much about the wider Society and the Yearly Meeting. My vision for them is less clear because I see the focus needing to be local. However, many national networks such as Living Witness and national projects, such as Circles, are helping to lead us along new paths. Bringing a spiritual dimension to social and political issues, means that we offer something more than the average NGO. As with Circles and other innovative projects, we can bring new, deeper understanding of love and truth that emerges from our reflection and discernment. The great thing about Circles is that, having started as a pilot scheme, it is now being adopted by local Area Meetings. Living Witness is also a good model for the future because it empowers local groups and helps them learn from one another in a non-hierarchical way. So in the wider context, we offer our spiritual underpinning, our skills in conflict resolution and our capacity to embrace alternative lifestyles. In place of economic growth, we can develop these other kinds of growth!

What I have suggested invites Friends to become more engaged with the gifts of the Quaker way. I do not know whether enough of us are ready to do this. Flourishing requires

movement, energy, enthusiasm and enjoyment – and belief in ourselves. In the introduction, I wondered whether we were a club or a movement; I think we can be a community where we are both of these. We have a core of belief and practice that needs to grow out in new ways, to be more visible, both to ourselves and others. The whole point about seeking truths is that we grow and where possible share them. Hiding them away is tantamount to destroying them, as Jesus said in the parable of the talents. In this essay, I chose to talk about my own experiences because I believe that all these practices can help us individually, as well as collectively, to be more at ease and more energised. Our core will be stronger and our movement more open and engaged. This is the gift I wish for Friends, as we seek to maintain our identity in a fast changing, diverse world.

#### References

- (1) Margaret Heathfield: *Being together, our corporate life in the Society of Friends*, Pub QHS 1994
- (2) Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett: *The Spirit Level: Why more equal societies always do better*. Pub Allen Lane 2009
- (3) Ben Pink Dandelion: *An Introduction to Quakerism*, Pub Cambridge 2007
- (4) Beatrice Saxon Snell: *A Month with Isaac Pennington*, Pub QHS 1966
- (5) Thomas Kelly: *Testament to Devotion*, Pub Hodder and Stoughton 1941
- (6) Rex Ambler: *A Light to Live By*, 1996
- (7) Scott Peck: *The Different Drum*, Pub Arrow Books 1988