

On not so much changing ourselves as allowing ourselves to be changed.

1. "Without contraries is no progression." Wm Blake.

Jesus, in as much as he was undoubtedly a man, had his full share of human contrariness. In the Sermon on the Mount we are enjoined to "Take no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself." Yet in the parable of the seven prudent virgins and the seven unwise ones he is specifically extolling the virtue of forward planning. What therefore shall Quakers do faced, as we are, with a problematic present and an uncertain future?

Wasting words on the future is to cast bread upon waters when no swans swim. So, to be brief, let us make such sensible provision as we can for tomorrow but never let this distract us from what we need to do today.

But there is a bit more to be said about contraries. The tower of Babel story has this message for all religions: that when it comes to belief there is never a common language. The various creeds are attempts (and I suspect in the long run vain attempts) to impose uniformity where there is, in the nature of things, nothing but diversity. In contrast Quakerism thrives on the heterodox. It is in the being brought up close against persons of a different, even opposite, persuasion that we come to understand that our viewpoint is just one particular viewpoint among a multitude. Further we come to understand that only by meeting in silence and refraining from preaching at each other can persons of differing belief worship comfortably together. And as we strive to be an interfaith church we can hope to become be a model for all interfaith relationships. Above everything else our differing beliefs cause us rather to seek communality in a shared spiritual experience.

2. Six optimistic thoughts on outreach!

A retired psychiatrist Ronald Maggs, wistfully remarks. "I like to think that some of the interventions I made 20 or 30 years ago are now just beginning to bear fruit." However, in sad contrast, GOOD MANAGEMENT PRACTICE demands that we set targets and measure results: that cause and effect must be demonstrated as being quantifiably linked. This may ensure the short term survival of a limited company but is death to the soul -- it ignores the butterfly's wing in the Amazon rainforest -- the kind word that, remembered later, sets a whole life off on a new path. The bums on seats index is measly measure of spiritual health. No indeed -- ours is to do the best we can for now -- what happens next is not up to us. As TS Eliot wisely remarks. "Take no thought for the harvest but only to the proper sowing."

The Society seems to be the grip of an anxiety -- engendered by our ageing demographic and doomsday predictions of Quaker extinction by mid-century. However we are an ageing population in an ageing population and Quakers are a notoriously long lived bunch. So maybe part of the Society's problem is part of this general problem for society.

"Where have all the young people gone?" the scarcity or absence of children and young people in our Meetings is an understandable cause for sorrow and concern. However it is difficult to see what many young people today would find attractive in the Quaker way. If they feel the need to embrace religion they are likely to go for something more vigorous, clap happy and providing certainties in which to believe. Quakerism is, essentially, a grown-up religion and is born from the reflective mind -- and most reflective minds have been out and about and around for a bit. My old yoga teacher Paul Saint held, "that no one under the age of 50 should do yoga -- young bodies have more important things to do!" So, while we rejoice in such young blood as we have, it is not surprising that the maximum transfusion consists of those who come (or return) to us in middle years if not at an advancing age.

"Quakers come and Quakers go." It is a great strength of our Society that we apply only the gentlest pressure on attenders to "sign up" and bid a fond farewell to any whose spiritual journey takes another turning -- they carry the seeds with them. So perhaps also with outreach -- It is, perhaps, not seemly (indeed smacks of the oxymoronic) to too stridently trumpet the still small voice.

All people in all ages have had available to them, in the recesses of their awareness, the still small voice, a spark of Zeus, a light to live by, the spirit of pure goodness, "the Jesus within". Call it what you will -- it has its existence beyond the dictates of conscience or the reach of words. If there is, as Quakers proclaim, "that of God in everyone" then we have, perhaps, less cause to fear the demise of our Society -- for that will still remain true even if there are no Quakers around to proclaim it.

Loose roof tiles, dodgy plumbing and electrics, rising damp and dry rot. The world is full of things that need fixing. However, in the unlikely event of us fixing everything in our lifetime, what on earth would there be for the next generation to do?

3. An appeal to speak truth not only to power but to each other.

Quakers are rightly possessed of an overwhelming desire to be tender one with another. We also own a tradition of and impulse to plain speaking. It is a dilemma. But there is such a thing as "tough tenderness" and perhaps we should offer and welcome criticism, even seemingly harsh criticism, as the gift of a different truth: as a thing to be held at arm's length with the question "Is there anything here I need?"

Being human we can do no other than give preference to our predilections and feel threatened when any particular sacred cow is under attack. But to reject criticism out of hand is an error comparable to swallowing it whole and unexamined. As a committed supporter of Faslane 369 I was set on my heels by article in the Friend suggesting that our actions might be counterproductive. Nevertheless I could see that the author had a point. I was given pause and food for thought. (Nevertheless I returned for the Big Blockade.)

Quakers have a tradition of wrapping up hard truths in a tangle of lugubrious circumlocution with the liberal sprinkling of mollifying qualifiers: "perhaps," "maybe," and so forth. There is no harm in this in as much as it stems from that desire to be tender but, sometimes, in consequence criticism can be so muted as to be virtually inaudible. And indeed in an age of (perhaps) exaggerated sensitivities and a general concern to be politically correct I suspect that often deeply felt criticism is left unsaid.

Therefore let us consider being more robust in our dealings one with another. To withhold criticism because one feels that another will be unable to bear the weight is arrogant: it is both inflating of self importance and diminishing of the other. Strong feelings, if suppressed, often find more subtle and damaging ways of expression if not eventually exploding in a furious, uncontrolled outburst. There remain to us these two great abilities -- to speak the mind and to hold the tongue. But to hold the tongue because we fear to speak the mind or to speak the mind because we cannot control the tongue are, alike, species of stinking fish.

4. The following two sections concern current trends in our Society which may have adverse effects if continued. I hope they read as cautionary rather than admonitory. Both these trends would appear to be born out of our increasing ability to communicate by telephone, printed word and more particularly via the Internet. As a result we are increasingly removed from our sources of information and motivation: we have reduced opportunities to form judgements on our sources face to face: we are increasingly available to those who would persuade us to grind an axe on their behalf and networking and the formation of pressure groups has never been easier.

5. Special Friends.

We need to distinguish between authority and expertise. The society is blessed with a plenitude of the latter for many members are "good at something practical" and that knowledge and experience is put to good use. But God preserve us from authorities! Yet in this era of mass communication undoubtedly some worthy Friends are better at putting their particular viewpoint across than others and may acquire a subtle mantle of authority and a disproportionate influence over the affairs of society as a whole

It is perhaps time to abandon the designations "Friend in Good Standing", "Seasoned Friend" and "Weighty Quaker ". These bear with them the not so subtle suggestion that, while all Quakers are of course equal, a chosen few might be just a little bit more equal than others. While there will naturally be an obvious variation in the distribution among us of trade, administrative and leadership skills -- and we rightly encouraged those who can to do -- when it comes to spiritual matters (and the direction in which the society moves is a spiritual matter) who on earth is to judge?

It seems we are congenital constructors of hierarchies. It goes with the human territory. We feel a need to locate ourselves in the social cosmos and this means trying to identify not only those who are around us but those who are above and below. In the Society of Friends we have largely eliminated the raw struggle for power -- the suspect honorific of "Seasoned Friend"*, for instance, is not one that can striven for -- there is no application form or examination board. But this does not stop one individual Quaker from conferring an ever so slightly enhanced status on another. The implication is that some Friends are not only "better" at being Quakers but best placed to advise others and Society as a whole. It is only a short step to guruism, the development of an informal priesthood and the abandonment of personal responsibility for spiritual growth. We need to remember that every time we thus confer we also defer and are participating ever so slightly in constructing the rudiments of a pecking order within the Society.

"Except you become as a little child you shall in no way enter the Kingdom of Heaven." As with Gestalt Psychotherapy many of those who are fresh to and "doing" Quakerism for the first time very often "do" it best: before they have become savvy to the culture and have gained an idea of how it "ought to be done". For, in reality, there is no best way to be a Quaker. Indeed Quakerism is, if nothing else, a mutual endeavour to enable each individual to achieve, for themselves, the best possible way of being. Many years ago, in a mood of ritual self abnegation, I confessed to one of the many wise women among our number (no doubt in the creepy hope of a kind contradiction) (and I was then up to the very thing that I am speaking against now) that I didn't feel that I was a very good Quaker. "John" she responded "you're your kind of Quaker!" Done and dusted in a nutshell! We join the Society with the object of making progress in our personal spiritual journey, helping others (cautious, cautious) if we can and certainly refraining from hindering another's progress. Making, let alone expressing, a judgement on the spiritual path of another, either by conferring elevated status or the opposite, is always supererogatory and never helpful. Let us therefore watch what we are thinking and, as we quite rightly, decline to put another beneath let us be correspondingly cautious when tempted to elevate!

(* Perhaps the only "Seasoned Friend" is one who has come to the realisation that there is no such thing?)

6. Other associations and informal groups -- fresh shoots or cracks in the basement?

In 1901, there were 4 listed informal groups, namely Friends' Foreign Mission Association, Friends' Temperance Union, Friends' First-Day Schools Association and Friends' Tract Association. 9 groups were listed in 1921 and thereafter a substantial number of informal groups were routinely included in the Book of Meetings under 'Other associations and committees.' From 1955 all appear under the heading 'Other committees & associations', as they had done in 1948 and before. From 1989 the heading was 'Other associations and informal groups'. In the 2004 Book of Meetings 45 such groups were noted: by 2008 the number had risen to 51. If the current decline in membership and the current growth in these groups continue then, sometime mid century, there will be one special interest group per Quaker!

Of recent times these groups have been hailed as "points of new growth." But I think this is making a virtue of necessity and the Society's attitude was not always thus. For between 1949 and 1954 the distinction was made between those ideologically neutral designated "Other Committees and Associations" and those with a more specialised focus designated "Self-appointed associations." Of the 51 currently listed the vast majority appear ideologically neutral but not, by any means, all. It is of further concern that while most offer a secretary or convener as contact some of the groups are set up with "clerks". This might give the impression that these groups are Quaker groups rather than groups of Quakers. I am aware that thus voicing my thoughts may give offence. But I believe that, while we rightly join forces with Friends and others to work in the world, our Meetings are special places where birds of a different feather flock together; that we learn most when we associate with others most unlike ourselves: that we distort our own spiritual progress if we take time out to persuade others into our way of thinking: that pressure groups, proselytising, special pleading let alone "getting our own way" have no place in the Society of Friends.

While I regret this potential proliferation of factious subgroups I am delighted to belong to a Society in which one could form, if one was so minded, a special interest group perhaps named "Quaker Action against Divisions and Inner Circles." It is a sobering thought that we are, in the Society, free to disagree but we have no freedom to be other than diverse and no purpose short of finding our underlying unity.

"Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity." As may well have become apparent I believe that the Society could benefit from a liberal, if unorthodox, laying on of Ockham's razor! It is not that each concern, cause or urge to congregate is unworthy in itself but that the sheer number of these groups are rendering our Society top heavy and potentially unstable. Friends would do well to consider carefully before thus registering their networks and gaining quasi-official status. Those who are considering laying down such a group might take comfort that their loss is a paradoxical gain for the Society as a whole. I look forward to a time when the current trend (there is growth and growth) is reversed and we return what we have always been -- just plain Quakers and good Friends.

7. A plenitude, profusion, plethora and overabundance of Quaker paper.

Much of the preceding could, in essence, be repeated here. Clerks and Correspondents are inundated by a deluge of paper information: charities and appeals to be supported: courses to be attended: instructions from head office to be followed. Our Notice Boards creak under the weight of thumb tacks and posters -- one pinned up over another -- all clamouring for attention. Once again each and every communication is, no doubt, worthy in itself but collectively they overwhelm the senses. Friends would do well to think thrice before adding surfeit to superfluity. The time spent soliciting help or drumming up support is always time stolen from the task in hand.

8. The lobster and the amoeba.

An amoeba is different from a lobster -- and human beings, by the grace of God or not as the case may be, differ from both. An amoeba, having no fixed shape, is defined by its essence -- a lobster by its rigid exoskeleton. We humans are all too vulnerable and have our work cut out to keep in shape however, being possessed of firm bones beneath the skin and fat and muscle, we can dodge and weave and grow. We are not rigid; we are not flabby; we are flexible. This metaphor is not making a boastful claim for Quakers at the expense of other faiths but is rather a way of stating both the problem and the aspiration we have with regard to form and substance. We may appear to outsiders to be a protean people with a "no one fit all" -- "anything goes" approach to belief but this appearance of mutability conceals, deep down, a sturdy skeleton of shared experience. We may be flexible but we are not flabby.

9. Organisation or Movement?

Damien "I want to find firm ground to stand on and you demonstrate that there is nothing in the world but bog."

Epictetus "A philosopher is not a man who finds firm ground to stand on but one who learns to go sure-footed on whatever ground he finds himself."

Being a Quaker is not so much to be a member of an organisation as to be part of a movement. Others may wish to rest on certainties -- to find firm ground under their feet but Quakers are a travelling people. We relish the sense of motion -- of leaping across the bog from tussock to tussock -- and so we find ourselves participating in a process rather than making up the numbers of an association. And as we travel on we will inevitably stumble, wander off course, feel on occasion confused and lost, yet we trust in the leadings of the spirit to reveal the right path both for us as individuals and for the Society as a corporate whole.

Looking back on the history of our society we can see that it has proved a zigzag journey that has sometimes led us up blind alleys (but never to explore a blind alley is a mistake comparable with remaining in one after discovering that it is so). We should have learnt by now that the spirit today often seems to tear up yesterday's plans: that all preparation for future change must be extremely provisional. The one lesson of history worth the learning is that the lessons of history are not to be relied on. Even so we feel this overwhelming urge to forge the future. It is somewhat sad. It is as if we set out across the Sahara with a map of Hampstead Heath on the basis that it is better to have a map than no map at all. Quakers would do well to trust the spirit to look after the long-term. "We do not shape the dance but as the dance changes shape so we move with it."

Ours is a theology of shared experience rather than of belief. And we all experience and desire to refine the experience of what is so beautifully described in our Advices and Queries -- "the promptings of love and truth in our hearts." The theology of belief comes later -- it is extremely subsequential! A Christian might speak of this experience as being that of the Holy Spirit or the Christ within. Other theists and Universalists think that thus the sublime and eternal reaches out to the flesh bound and mortal while to an atheist it could appear to be manifestation of the super-ego: a profound psychological necessity evolved along with our progress as social animals. Agnostics and perhaps many plain Quakers might be unsure quite how to categorise but are pretty sure such categorisation doesn't matter much. But all remain certain that the experience is worth the having and refining.

For 350 years the Society has been travelling and doing. Let us not fear for the future: for the Society fares well. Quakers have always been prompted, over the centuries, to manifest love in practical action. And that remains the case today. We should not be overly concerned about present demographic trends or the sorry state of some of our Meeting Houses. For in truth we can't do anything about the long-term only about the now. And it is now or never for us to be out and about meeting with each other and the world with love. Social inequality and injustice, nuclear weapons, war, climate change, oppression and exploitation, a plethora of prejudices with which to grapple (not forgetting a proper concern for our own neck of the woods -- families, communities and Meetings) -- there's work to be done.

Enough or too much!

10. The things I meant to say but on which have been expended too many sentences.

The kernel and nut and full fruit of it is: somewhat less authority -- even more participation: fewer like-minded friends -- more meeting of unlike minds: fewer paper appeals -- more spirited action: less trying for change -- a greater openness to change: less anxiety about the future -- more trust in the spirit.

11. Words, words, words – Meeting for Worship 28th December 2008.

How to express in words something experienced in silence? In my dream last night I am looking down at a rusty manhole that lies in rough grass 2 or 3 feet from a tarmac and gravel road. I am told that this is my water supply. It does not look promising. So imagine my delight when, on lifting the cast iron cover, I find myself looking down on a spring of clear, cool water bubbling up through a rubble of chalk and limestone -- then running off down a culvert lined with clean pebbles. This was a dream accompanied by no thought; it was an experience of pure, if momentary, wordless delight. Thoughts and words came later -- come now.

There are a thousand ways of imagining God; Jehovah; the King; the Shepherd; the still small voice; the spark of Zeus; the light; the divine essence; the spring of pure water -- to name but a few of the personifications and symbols. But indeed all are imaginings -- ways of thinking about and putting into words the ineffable -- though, of course, each a possible focus for contemplation or prayer.

And in my personal imagination my walkabout, everyday self attempts, fearfully and often half-heartedly, to be in communion with the source of that still small voice: the fount of all goodness that resides forever beyond the reach of language or the dictates of conscience. And already weasel words are running off with the truth!

If I am born deaf, how do you explain to me the experience of sound let alone music? How, indeed, to describe to another with perfect hearing one's experience of music? We attempt as best we can with metaphor and comparison -- but we will always fail or, rather, there is no way we can know if we have succeeded. So, for me at least, I try to experience in silence what is said without words and resist, as far as possible, the temptation to verbalise to myself and to others.

Despite the best of intentions however all too often in Meeting my mind is full of ricocheting thoughts and this morning my brain was using my skull as a squash court. Yet I wanted to rest my mind on that image of pure water. And then there was silence. And out of the silence came words again but not many and quietly spoken and, though I kept them to myself, not only for me perhaps. "Without words we become one."