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A JOB FOR QUAKERS

“Take heed, dear Friends, 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.”

This is the familiar beginning to “Advices and Queries”; all the rest of our Quaker Faith and Practice is simply an elaboration on this message. It echoes the words of Jesus, “Love the Lord thy God.” this is the first and greatest of the commandments, and the second is like unto it, “Love thy neighbour as thyself.” On these two are based all the law and the prophets.” * *

The difference between these two statements lies in to whom they are addressed: whereas Jesus was speaking to the whole world, Advices and Queries appears to be addressed solely to Friends and this is surely inconsistent with that rock of Quaker belief that “There is that of God in everyone”.

It is my firm conviction, that we need to take the message of A&Q 1.02 and give it to the world. Do we not believe that everyone has access to these “leadings of God”? If we can only persuade the world to “trust them” then the world can move out of the self-imposed darkness that it finds itself in at present.

These thoughts have been with me for well over a year now. In fact they were stirring long before I encountered “The Religious Society of Friends” but it was that contact that persuaded me to begin to express these leadings, in the various ways they came to me, on paper.

I have not the wit nor the time now to work those writings into

a decent attempt at the 2009 Essay Prize Competition but the fact is that I cannot let the chance to put before as many Quakers as possible, the fact that if we could convince the people of the world of the truth of Advices and Queries 1.02, then we would, of necessity, save the world.

The above thirty lines constitute my entry for the competition. However I attach some of those earlier written expressions, in the order in which they were written, as they may be of interest. (Or serve as “padding”! ;-)

WHY QUAKERS SHOULD *NOT* OBEY THE LAW

Once upon a time a group of men were out walking. They hadn't eaten for some time so they decided to have some of the food that they saw growing nearby. It turned out to be illegal and this was pointed out to the group's leader. He was aware (as they all were) that what they were doing was against the law, but even though no-one's life would have been endangered by waiting longer to eat: he was unrepentant. He was later quoted as saying: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

I wonder if "The Religious Society of Friends", would have broken a state's law just because they were hungry. Would they have done so even if they were in severe distress? I suspect not. Look at *Advices and Queries*, paragraph 35, which begins with the words, "Respect the laws of the state..."

I disagree. Please note that I do not advocate disobedience to the law of the land. Rather I maintain one should ignore the laws of whichever land one happens to reside in and live according to the dictates of our hearts.

I understand that in Jewish tradition Moses is known as "the law-giver". But God gave the law: is the law-giver, Moses just wrote it down.

"*Advices and Queries*": Introduction: "Dearly beloved friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; and so in the light walking and abiding, these may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life."

It is my contention that the social conscience of generations is being killed by the letter of laws handed down "for our own good", by those who know better than ourselves what is best for us.

For example: I no longer have to ask myself when driving, “Is my speed appropriate for this particular stretch of road?” The sign ahead tells me. And if I disagree, either way, I might be breaking the law. And yet I am sure many of you are aware of a recent Quaker Quest slogan: *Thou Shalt: Decide for yourself!*

9420 EU laws passed into UK statute between 1998 and 2008. I wonder what they are. I wonder if I have broken any of them. (Or all of them ;-)

When Lao Tzu, one of the fathers of Taoism, wrote: “The more laws you make, the more criminals there will be”, he did not simply mean that it would be harder for the average citizen to keep track of all the different rules and regulations: he was referring to the fact that as the need for individual moral reflection was reduced, so the ability to make such reflection would also be reduced.

Conscience is a muscle, and one which, without exercise, will progressively wither. If we don't make moral choices regularly then we run the risk that we will cease to be able to make them at all. Then we end up with a society where parents can murder their own children and not see that they have done wrong*, only that they have broken the law. Or worse still: just that they haven't gotten away with it.

The common morality of contemporary western society is apparently based on “utilitarianism”: often expressed as “the greatest good for the greatest number”. Does this mean that we have to take out a calculator to determine ethical action? When facing unknown numbers, for example in contemplating going to war, do we call in the statisticians to produce probability analyses? Surely such a definition of morality is unworkable anyway. There can never be a point at which the consequences of *any* action can be said to be over in order for a measurement of “the greatest

number” to be made.

A breeder of horses once found a sick stallion, took it home and, at some cost, tried to nurse it back to health. His neighbours said it wasn't right; the money he was spending was taking food of the plates of his children. When the stallion regained its strength they changed their opinion: he was justified in his actions. When the horse jumped the corral fence, a week later, they said that they'd been right in the first place. When the stallion returned a week later still, leading a string of wild mares, they changed their view again. When the rancher's son was thrown from one of the new mares whilst trying to break it in, and broke his leg, it seemed that they had been right in the first place. When the sergeant came round drafting the young men to that nation's wars the son was excused on account of his broken leg. So the villagers were wrong after all.

Or were they? The story is continuing.

*In using the terms “right” and “wrong”, I mean them in an absolute way. I believe that everyone knows right from wrong: right feels pleasant, wholesome. Wrong seems uncomfortable, restrictive. Right feels like you've become somehow “larger”; wrong pulls you in on yourself as if you've built a prison for yourself. This does not mean that “right” for you is “right” for me: I suspect it probably is, but have no evidence.

RESPONSIBILITY

I am responsible for the things that I do. I am also responsible for not doing those things that I leave undone. No one else is.

If, as a soldier, I kill someone whilst carrying out my orders, then I am responsible for that death. I cannot dodge that responsibility by claiming that, "They made me do it!" Or, "I had no choice!"

The argument that "If I hadn't done X then someone else would have done Y," does not hold up. The physical laws of nature may be seen as certain, but the "laws" of human behaviour are not. Whether in pursuance of a threat, or of a promise, a prior commitment or a fear: whether motivated by legal requirement, personal morality or religious conviction, the actions of human beings are *not* certain. People frequently do not act as they said they would act.

Marshall Rosenberg, the originator of Non-Violent Communication, tells the following story. It came from a meeting he was holding in the West Bank.

A Palestinian man was crossing a border checkpoint. He did this every day on his way to work. On this particular day he was stopped by one of the Israeli soldiers on guard duty. This soldier put a gun to the Palestinian's head and told him to strip naked or be shot. – There was no suggestion that the man was a terrorist, a subversive, or in any way a danger to the people and state of Israel. This was simply an apparent case of a bored young man with a gun who wanted "a bit of a laugh"; wanted to flaunt his power in the face of the people passing through his control. – The Palestinian said to Marshall, "I had to do what I was told! *I had no choice.*"

"But you did have a choice," replied Marshall, "And judging by the fact that you're here, I think we can tell what choice you made!"

The young man in the story looked a bit sheepish before continuing, “Yes, I suppose I did. I defied the soldier and I kept my clothes on! And he changed his mind – he didn’t shoot me after all. I carried on, on my way to work.”

this aspect of my life, then you must be in control of yours. To claim otherwise is to claim I have a power that you don’t have: pure and simple vanity.

This story was told as illustrating the fact that we have choices even when we feel we are being compelled to act in a certain way, but for me it shows something else as well.

The following story is *not* true: it’s a plot-line from a Quentin Tarantino film, although it quite likely has a counterpart in real life.

Bank robbers inform the bank staff that if they co-operate they will not be harmed. The employees help the robbers in every way they can but during the getaway one of the robbers shoots the manager anyway; just because he can.

People frequently do not act as they say they will act. We are the least reliable species on the planet. No other creature fails to do what it says it will!

This unreliability is so obvious that we almost take it for granted, but if it becomes a factor in our ethical choices then, once again, we need to consult a statistician before we can act.

No-one can force or otherwise coerce me to act in a way I choose not to act. No-one can force me or otherwise coerce me to not to try to act in a way that I choose to try to act. I am responsible for my own action: no-one else is.

But the corollary of this is that if others are not responsible for *my* actions, then I am not responsible for the actions of others.

To claim that I am master and sole author of my deeds, and to simultaneously claim that I in some way control the deeds of another, smacks of ‘delusions of grandeur’. If I am in control of

THE GREATER GOOD

Once upon a time...

A good man found himself wearing a uniform; holding a gun. (Let's call him "the soldier".) In the sights of his gun he saw a man he thought was attacking him. (Let's call him "the attacker".) The soldier shifted his aim, fired his gun, and hit nothing. Neither man died.

After the war "the attacker" became a politician, started his own party and then his own war. He was responsible for the deaths of millions of soldiers and civilians, men women and children died horrific deaths because of him.

He lost the war.

At about the same time, another man, one of "the attackers" enemies, (We'll call this one "the enemy".) was leader of a totally opposing political ideology. An ideology which, until the war, was gaining in popularity so much, that many thought "the enemy", or at least his policies, would come to dominate the world. But "the enemy" was responsible for the massacre of even more innocents than "the attacker".

After the war both political extremes were discredited in the eyes of many. Perhaps this war saved more lives than it cost. Who can tell? The counting goes on.

"The soldier" woke from his dream and got on his knees and prayed to God, or The Light, or whatever (or "whoever") he believed in (we'll use "God"), and asked for guidance but God wasn't answering. The Jesus commandment kept running through his head: Love - (God and yourself and your neighbour.) But it hardly seemed relevant.

In his trench next morning he looked through the sights of his gun and saw the attacker running at him, didn't really have time to ask God what to do, so he took what answers he had and he pulled the trigger.

So what of "the greater good"? Where is it? How can we or anyone else know it? The point of my story is that the effects of our actions, of *all* our actions, are unknowable. But this doesn't mean that we cannot know how to act.

As Quakers, we are aware that we have at our disposal a direct and infallible guide known as "that of God" which is there for everyone. You cannot know what will happen as a result of what you do but the Light knows, if it is known at all, and that knowledge is the best that there is. We have to trust it.

THE CASTLE AND THE VIEW

Once upon a time:

A child was born. He had the name Lord Me. The child was of high birth and his parents had fears for his safety so he was placed in a fortress named Castle Self. (The reader might suspect an allegory coming.)

As anyone who reflects on castles will realize, they are not places of security but places of fear. If you have to live in a castle you must be afraid of something, mustn't you? So the young lord grew up frightened. The only way he knew of dealing with the fear was to increase his "security", and so he built stronger walls, higher battlements, deeper moats, and more of all of them. If at any time he felt particularly frightened, then he would go into the innermost keep, and into the innermost room of the keep. Perhaps he would crawl under the bed in there, close his eyes and put his hands over his head.

But no one feels afraid all the time, so occasionally Lord Me would climb to the top of the highest tower and look at the world beyond. That was good. That was not scary but nice, and sometimes he would look upwards at the stars. The stars were/are something else again. Beyond our dreams, our fears, our imaginings. Beyond questioning and beyond wonder, the stars are the stars. (Yes, the Hubble Telescope's pictures are very pretty, but they kind of miss the point, don't you think?)

Lord Me noticed that even when clouds obscured the view, the stars were still there. Even hiding under the bed the stars hadn't gone away. Even when he didn't look at them they were still there.

Even if he died the stars are still here.

Love feels like space. Feels like I'm getting bigger. Probably

because I'm accessing something bigger than I am.

Acting from the foundation of the Light/God/LOVE within feels like I've given myself more room inside: room to let my soul grow.

Denial of that impulse feels like closing doors around me. Feels like crawling under the bed or into the womb and being "safe". This is not simply not growing, this is dying a little bit. (Perhaps you are familiar with a song entitled "The Grave", in which soldier is so terrified of death that he buries himself alive. Indeed if you wish to be truly safe, arrange to pass from "mother birth" to "mother earth" with no exposure to life in between. It might work.

The alternative to love, if there is one at all, is fear. And the unending search for safety in Castle You.)

Right action "embiggens the smallest soul" to quote "The Simpsons".

Refrain from right action and get smaller. It really is a feelable sensation.

ON THE SUBJECT OF “*THE LIGHT*”

“This little light of mine,

I’m going to let it shine...”

Of course, it’s not “mine” at all is it? I don’t possess the Light, I’m just there when it shines. Usually, I just close my eyes and prefer darkness. I don’t think I’m alone in that, indeed the newspapers are full of tales of those who prefer to ignore that portion of Light they are given. Where I am in the minority, is that I am aware that the Light is available. That the Light can be trusted, not only to do right by others, but also to ensure my highest good. Most of the people who walk the planet are not encouraged to believe in that Light.

I want Quakers, (The Religious Society of Friends, Known as Quakers), to put that right. To tell all the dark seekers that they already know right from wrong. Tell the world that they only have to ask themselves, “Is this the thing to do, or not?” and they will know; the Light will make them know.

If I walk into a wall in a pitch black cellar, I can’t be blamed for not seeing it. Even if I have a torch in my hands, it isn’t my fault if I don’t know how to use it, but if I not only have a torch, but it is already switched on, and I am deliberately pointing it in the wrong direction, then I don’t deserve your sympathy. At least not for the bloody nose: perhaps for the errant stupidity I deserve a little pity but that’s not for me to say.

Many of our fellows in this world, haven’t been told that they have the Torch. Very few people know how to switch it on. The results of this are wars across the whole globe. Fear and loathing of anyone that seems “different”. Cruelty because it seems easy, or fashionable. Casual disregard for everything unless it impinges on

my life, *my* wellbeing, *my* status, *my* “happiness”.

“...let it shine, let it shine”.

Surely it is the duty of those with access to the knowledge of how to contact Light, to share it. Without Light, this world is drowning in darkness.

The following pages offer some notes on hearing the Light.