

Reflections

on key words in the
Quaker tradition

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Light

I have been puzzled by what early Friends meant by 'the inner light'. It obviously meant a great deal to them. They followed it. They trusted it. They lived by it. But they don't seem to have said very much about what it was. Is it possible to piece together what early Friends said, I've wondered, so that we can begin to make sense of it? If we can, it might help us to make more sense of *our* experience.

I recently came across this passage in Thomas Ellwood's *History*, describing his experience of the light, which gave me a new understanding: 'The general trouble and confusion of my mind, which had for some days lain heavy upon me and pressed me down, without a distinct discovery of the particular cause for which it came, began now to wear off, and some glimmerings of light began to break forth in me, which let me see my inward state and condition towards God. The light, which before had shown in my darkness, and the darkness could not comprehend it, began now to shine out of darkness, and in some measure discovered to me what it was that had before clouded me and brought that sadness and trouble upon me.... Now was all my former life ripped up'. What the light did was to show him who and what he was, before God, and to make clear to him why he was troubled and confused. And this was such a new and clear understanding that it changed him completely. Whereas before he had been in a darkness of ignorance about himself, now he found himself living in the light.

I discovered a similar account in William Penn, but delightfully brief: 'For of light came sight, and of sight came sense and sorrow, and of sense and sorrow came amendment of life' (Preface to Fox's *Journal*).

It began to be clear to me that the light, for them, could be harsh, because it showed them everything, warts and all. In particular it highlighted their self-centeredness, 'self-will' as they called it, which they saw as the main obstacle to an awareness of God. No wonder they were distressed and 'ripped up' before they came to an experience of peace. They had to face the hard truth about themselves before they were able to let go of the self and put their trust in God. Margaret Fell urged them to stay with the process: 'Now, Friends, deal plainly with yourselves, and let the eternal light search you... for this will deal plainly with you; it will up you up, and lay you open... naked and bare before the Lord God, from whom you cannot hide yourselves. Therefore give over deceiving of your souls' (*Works*, pp.95, 136).

But the same light that struck awe and dismay into them also healed them, gave them new life and showed them the way to go. It could do this because it freed them from the narrow bounds of the self-centred view and opened them up to a vision of what they really were in God's wide world, releasing in them feelings and energies that had been repressed by their narrow and fearful egos.

Could all this be relevant to us? I think it is. There is a great simplicity here, which speaks directly to us. Our troubles derive from ourselves, from our ignorant self-will. But help also comes from us, because we have within us a God-given capacity to know the truth about ourselves, if we are willing to receive it. And, as Jesus said, 'the truth will set you free'. I must say, I can't think of a more relevant message for our time.

14 Jan 1995

Truth

Before we were known as 'the Society of Friends' we were 'the Friends of Truth' or 'Friends in the Truth'. It defined precisely what Friends were committed to. But truth is not so easy for us, in the late twentieth century. As a politician said recently in connection with the Scott Inquiry, 'truth is a difficult concept'. It is difficult for us because, among other things, we are much more aware that the way we see the world is shaped by our particular background and training. We therefore all see the world differently. This is even more obvious in relation to the big questions of life: we all have different views about the meaning of life and the way to fulfilment in life. Who is to say which is right? Who can honestly claim to have the one and only 'truth'?

But behind this confusion is the idea that truth, if it exists, must be something like a correct opinion, or a correct theory. That shows how our everyday attitudes have been influenced by modern science. So it is interesting to discover that these early 'Friends of Truth' had very little time for opinions and theories. They called them 'notions', and they struggled to be free of notions so that they could get to the truth!

Notions, to Friends, were merely ideas that people had put together to stand in for the truth: but relying on notions, as most Christians did at the time, would inevitably lead people into serious differences and therefore into conflict. The truth, on the other hand, was more immediate. It was the reality of one's own situation. A notion might tell you, for example, that you were a sinner and needed to be forgiven by God through the sacrifice of Christ. The truth, on the other hand, would be exactly what you could experience yourself, no more and no less. You may well come to believe you were 'a sinner', but only if you yourself had come to experience guilt and knew it to be genuine. By the same token, though, you would find that in accepting your guilt there was a sense also that you in turn were accepted. No notion was required to assure you that everything was okay, and just as well, because there would always be the doubt, that Puritans knew so well, that the notion may not be quite correct or one's believing it may not be quite adequate. So Friends brought all these questions back to the immediacy of personal experience. Each of us has to find out for ourselves the truth about ourselves, and the truth about others. No one can do our experiencing for us, we might say; no one other than me knows what it is like to be me.

It is initially quite a lonely, risky enterprise, to look for truth. We have to let go, dismantle our defences, and allow whatever is there to become clear to us, whether we like it or not. If we are sincere, and receptive and patient - waiting in silence is crucial to this quest - the reality of our situation will be slowly revealed to us. And with the pain and shock comes also a sense of being close to reality, being part of it, even being embraced by it.

Once truth is experienced as therapeutic, liberating and empowering it becomes impossible to accept deceit and dishonesty in any form, wherever it appears. The deceit which regards the poor as undeserving, black people or women as inferior, war as ennobling, has to be exposed. Early Friends were often quite forthright in their exposure of the deceits of their violent, class-ridden society. William Dewsbury, for example, wrote a *True Prophecy* to the people of England in 1655 denouncing their evil doings and threatening disaster if they continued. 'Here I have cleared my conscience, dealing plainly with you, declaring unto you where you are, as the Lord hath made known unto me, that you may be without excuse in the might day of the Lord, which will speedily come upon you.... To the light in every one of your consciences I speak, which shall eternally witness me, when the Book of Conscience is opened'.

It is surprising how much of Quaker life and thought becomes clear when understood as a devotion to truth. In his new biography of George Fox, Larry Ingle has written of his teaching: 'This insistence on veracity, on speaking and living the truth in contrast to lying and acting deceitfully, became his main message. Its ascendancy over traditional Christian doctrines and creeds helps explain why one of the earliest names for Fox's followers was "Friends in the Truth"'.¹

One of the very first 'queries' sent out to Friends for their response concerned their spiritual welfare. It is a query we might put to ourselves. It asked simply, 'How does truth prosper among you?'

27 March 1995

Life

Many modern Quakers live mostly in their heads. I include myself in this. They imagine that the light is meant to give them a clearer intellectual understanding so that they can know better what to do with their lives. But this intellectual approach, though sound as far as it goes, does not go far enough. It leaves out a whole dimension of spiritual experience which has to do with emotion, insight, passion, love - in a word, the experience of life. Early Friends had a powerful image of what the light can do for us when we are open and attentive enough to let it do its work in us. This spiritual light, like the sun, brings the buried seed to life and enables it to grow. It liberates it from its enclosed dark place in the ground so that it can become what it is truly meant to become, a full living being.

Isaac Pennington described his first experience of Quakers gathered in worship in his *Account of his Spiritual Travels*: 'When I came, I felt the presence and power of the most High among them, and words of truth, from the spirit of truth, reaching to my heart and conscience, opening my state as in the presence of the Lord. Yea I did not only feel words and demonstrations from without, but I felt the dead quickened, the seed raised, insomuch as my heart (in the certainty of light and clearness of true sense) said, "This is he, this is he, there is no other; this is he whom I have waited for and sought after from my childhood, who was always near me, and had often begotten life in my heart, but I knew him not distinctly, nor how to receive him or dwell with him"' (in ed. Hugh Barbour and Arthur Roberts, *Early Quaker Writings*, p. 233). The light enabled him to see what had been there all along but which he had failed to see because of his restricted view. And as he recognized and acknowledged what was in him he began to feel himself already coming to life and growing.

Hugh Barbour has an interesting explanation of this typical experience of early Friends. He refers to 'the modern psychologist's description of how an old self-image, with its narrow defence mechanisms and ways of self-fulfilment, can be broken open by a period of conflict. In such a breakthrough many previously buried impulses, appreciations, and creative abilities from outside the known limits of the old personality may be released' (*Quakers in Puritan England*, p.109).

Conflict there certainly was, and will be. If we open ourselves to more than we are normally comfortable with there will be pain and distress. We will see how selfish we are, how narrow and rigid, how unsympathetic to the needs and gifts of others. But if we can survive this difficulty we will also, just as surely, experience new life.

George Fox, who made much in his writing of the 'seed' within us, urges us in one of his letters to be patient with all the difficulty and pain that comes with growth. 'This is the word of the Lord to you all: those that are convinced by the power of the Lord God and the light, let them dwell in it, in which they may have unity. For the Lord hath a Seed that ways, if ye in patience all of you wait, and not matter the weather, the storms, the winds, the hail, the rain, when you are to sow the seed, nor the rough ground that is to be tilled. For the husbandman waits patiently after the seed is sown. There is a winter before the summer comes. And there must be a great work before the misty heathen be cleared in their understandings (that are so naturally) and the dark air be driven back and the Prince of life and light be witnessed' (Epistle 189, in ed. Cecil Sharman, *No More but my Love*, p.69).

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Silence

Why do we largely keep silent in meeting? What is the silence for? An answer that comes readily to modern Quakers is that it allows each of us in meeting to entertain our own thoughts and hopefully to come to some resolution of the issues that concern us. Another answer is that in the silence we can let our imaginations go and hopefully gain an image that gives us a sense of God's presence. But there is something unsatisfactory about both of these answers. When we think quietly to ourselves we are still using words, and what we get at the end of a process of thought is just another cluster of words - this is not much different from talking through something with a friend or writing a diary. Similarly, if we choose to use images instead of words and if we do the imagining, we end up with one of our own images - we do not experience anything beyond what we ourselves can envisage for ourselves. There is something missing here.

We may find a clue to what this is when we read what early Friends expected of silence, e.g. Fox writing to Oliver Cromwell in 1655: 'Be still and silent from thy own wisdom, wit, craft, subtlety or policy that would arise in thee, but stand single to the Lord, without any end to thyself' (*Journal*, ed. Nickalls, p.194). That means Cromwell should give up relying on his own powers and give up any desires that are focussed on his own self-interest. Instead he should be totally honest with himself and open to God. Fox wrote later to Cromwell's daughter, Elizabeth, on similar lines: 'Be still awhile from thy own thoughts, searching, seeking, desires and imaginations, and be stayed in the principle of God in thee... and thou wilt find strength from him' (*Journal*, ed. Nickalls, p.346). This is surprising advice to modern ears. What can be so wrong with thinking, planning, imagining? Surely these are precisely what we do need if we are to make some real progress in life. But believing this we miss out on one of the best things the first Friends discovered: that when you stop thinking and imagining and all the other things we love to do in our heads, you make a space in your life for God to act in you.

This space is so large and empty that it can be frightening. It is generally easier and safer to cover it up with reassuring thoughts. 'It is a strange life to you to come to be silent', Fox wrote to people who thought of silence as a 'famine', 'you must come into a new world. Now you must die in the silence, die from the wisdom, die from the knowledge, die from the reason, and die from the understanding' ('An epistle to all the people on the earth', 1657, *Works* 4:132). Not literally, of course. The 'you' that must die is the self-centred ego, the person they think and imagine themselves to be. And it has to 'die' because, with all its reasoning and talking, it stands in the way of seeing reality clearly and experiencing God.

Those first meetings for worship must have been awesome affairs. People went silent for hours, sometimes three to four hours at a time, and they sat there passively, without offering any 'ministry' at all. They were opening themselves inwardly to 'the truth', whatever that happened to be in their case. And in seeking this reality they dispensed with images and ideas, at least those of their own making. They simply let 'the light in their consciences' show them whatever in their life they needed to see, and what they needed to do. No wonder Robert Barclay was moved when he first 'came into the silent assemblies of God's people'. 'I felt a secret power among them which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed' (*Apology*, Prop. 11, § 7).

By the time Barclay came to the meetings, in the late 1660s, they already had spoken ministry. But it was understood that anything that was said arose out of silence, which meant a silence of the mind as well as of the body. Barclay's friend Isaac Penington explained: 'If any man speak there, he must speak as the oracle of God, as the vessel out of which God speaks, as the trumpet out of which he gives the sound. Therefore there is to be a waiting in silence till the spirit of the Lord move to speak, and also give words

to speak. For a man is not to speak his own words or in his own wisdom or time, but the spirit's words in the spirit's wisdom and time, which is when he moves and gives to speak' (*Concerning Silent Meetings*, 1670?). Once again there is a distinction between our 'own wisdom and time' and the spirit's. The point is to give up our own conscious activities, of whatever sort, inward or outward, so that we can become aware of something else in us which we can't claim as our own but which is unquestionably part of us, in the depth of our being. So the silence is not an end itself. It is a means to an end. It is like a stilling of the waters that enables us to see through the water to the life inside. And when we see the life, or better, experience it in ourselves, we will respond with our whole being - mind, heart and body. And then we will experience for ourselves the meaning of the silence.

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That of God

Among the key words of our Quaker tradition this must be the favourite. Indeed, what would we ever do without it? A recent study has shown that a belief that 'there is that of God in everyone' is the one item of belief that Quakers have in common. Given the anxiety among Quakers about their wide differences of opinion, this fact in itself is reassuring. At least we all hold to this one idea.

But what does it mean? It is an odd turn of phrase. I have to confess that I used to be somewhat irritated by the phrase because, to my modern ears at least, it didn't sound grammatical. I expected something else to follow: 'that of God which...'. So I was pleased to discover in a semantic study of Fox's writing that the phrase wasn't grammatical in the seventeenth century either. The author, Aimo Seppänen, argues that Fox must have contrived the phrase himself, since he could find no other use of it before Fox. But why? Was he simply not good enough at grammar? No, he contrived it quite deliberately as a grammatical nonsense. This is clear from the fact that he also used the grammatical form of words when he wanted to explain himself. E.g. 'Mind every one that which is of God in you to teach you' (*Journal*, ed. Penney, 1.96) and 'with that he may see another, and reach that which is of God in everyone' (*Journal*, 1.329). Even so, this is an unusual way of writing about spiritual matters. It is indirect, oblique, as if he was trying to avoid something. He didn't, like the Puritan writers of his time, speak directly about 'the Spirit of God in you' or 'Christ' or 'the divine'. He didn't say, e.g., 'listen to Christ in you' or 'mind what God is saying'. There was a reticence there, which pervaded his whole writing. He was talking about something mysterious. He had experienced it himself, of course, but it was an experience in silence, without words. So when he wanted to bring other people to an awareness of this reality he pointed them to their own experience and to what they would personally have to do to experience God, or rather, 'that of God which' would become real to them.

The phrase 'that of God' is then simply an abbreviation of a longer phrase which says what can be experienced. It was as if he were saying, 'There is something or other in you which, if you pay attention to it and act on it, will lead you into an experience of what you will have to describe as God. So it has something to do with God, but what precisely I can't say, it's beyond my ken.' All that needed to be said was that when you keep still and silent, and give up your own ego-driven thoughts and desires, you will experience this thing that will bring you to God. But of course, if you don't surrender your ego, you won't experience God, or this mysterious inner reality that makes you aware of God, so there is little point in trying to describe God, or it, whatever it is.

He sometimes used 'the principle of God' as an equivalent, meaning a basic source of life. Listen to Fox writing to Lady Claypool: 'Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God, whereby thou wilt receive his strength and power from whence life comes'

(a letter of 1658 in *Journal*, ed Nickalls, p. 346; emphasis mine).

It is evident from these few examples that 'that of God' in us is not part of our normal personality. It is not something like reason or conscience. It is not a quality in people or a special value in people, as many modern Friends think of it. 'The pearl is hid', said Fox, and we have look for it. It requires the loss of our normal ego-centred attitude even to become aware of it, but when we do this mysterious thing in the depth of our being makes us aware of reality as we have never known it before, and it gives us life as we have never experienced it before.

The sense of mystery seems to have affected the whole of Fox's life. He wanted to share his experience of this inner reality, but how could he convey this to people without describing it to them? And how could he persuade people that the experience was open to them too if they weren't even aware of this divine something inside them? He could try metaphor and poetry. So he spoke of 'the light within' and 'the seed buried in the heart' and he urged people to look within for themselves. But words would never be enough, because they can always be kept at the rational level. Fox's response to this dilemma was dramatic. He would 'speak' to that hidden light in people with his life, and urge his Friends to do likewise. This gives us the context for that famous text about 'that of God' which we might otherwise easily have misunderstood: 'Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone, whereby in them ye may be a blessing and make the witness of God in them to bless you' (a letter 'to Friends in the Ministry', 1656, *Journal*, ed. Nickalls, p.263).

How was that possible? If Friends lived their lives in response to 'that of God' within themselves, giving up their conscious control for a deeper wisdom and guidance, then their lives would have an affect on other people who would feel something in them stirred by what they witnessed, and when they gave attention to this 'something' they would find it began to inspire and transform their lives too.

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