

Experiment with Light

Truth of the heart

Rex Ambler considers the seventeenth century roots of a practice that many Friends are following today. This is the first in a new series about Experiment with Light written by various Friends

Experiment with Light is a relatively new practice for modern Friends, but it is probably best understood as a recovery, or retrieval, of a very old practice.

The retrieval

It is widely assumed that Friends at the beginning, in the seventeenth century, must have done more or less what we do in Meeting for Worship. But this would be a mistake. Friends did have Meetings for Worship, of course, and they were held in silence, so the continuity is there. But they also held smaller Meetings in which Friends were able to open themselves inwardly to the Light and to share these experiences with one another. As Barbour and Frost have put it in *The Quakers*, their fine history of the movement:

'Hearers who were "convinced" by these forms of mission [the public, "Threshing Meetings"] were taken into smaller gatherings in private homes, where they shared their struggles of self-judgment under the Light with other seekers in daily or weekly "Gathered Meetings" with prayer and messages of guidance as well as silence and tears.'

When I first read about these Meetings I was intrigued to discover what went on in them. Would this explain, perhaps, why that early movement was

so powerful, why Friends spoke with such confidence about what they had discovered and were willing to base their lives on it, whatever the cost?

My search for answers to this question over a number of years led to one very important discovery. What Friends were looking for in these Meetings was 'the Truth', as they called it, and they found that Truth, they said, with the help of 'the Light' which they each found within them. I needed to decode those words because they didn't seem to carry the meaning we normally attach to them. This applied to many other words as well, so I found myself writing two books to explain what Early Friends were talking about: *Truth Of The Heart* (on Fox in particular) and *Light To Live By* (on the spiritual practice they all undertook). The words 'Truth' and 'Light' seemed to be at the core of it (linked closely with the words 'Life', 'Power' and 'Spirit'). They were like two sides of the same coin. This is how I made sense of them.

Truth and light

The 'truth' they were after, having been disillusioned by the official teaching of the churches, was the truth of their life, that is, the reality of their life as they experienced it and as they opened themselves up to it. This particular reality of their lives opened out, once they accepted it – this was the difficult part, of course



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– onto the reality of other people’s lives, the reality of social and political life and, ultimately, the infinite reality they called God. They also found that they could get access to this reality in a very practical way, and that they could test its truth for themselves. They had within them, they discovered, as had everyone else, a certain awareness of how they lived their lives, which made them feel either good or bad about themselves. This was their ‘conscience’, in the broad sense that that word carried in the seventeenth century. It was a feeling they could be immediately aware of by simply becoming still and silent; it would ‘rise up’ within them. If they took that feeling seriously and paid attention to the reality of their life as it was now being indicated to them, they would begin to see their life differently.

They would have to deal, of course, with all sorts of contrary feelings that would have been aroused by the thought they they had done something wrong, or that their life had been some kind of pretence. This was the inevitable defence of an ego that felt under attack. But their great discovery was that if they let the ego quieten down, with all its argument and chatter, they would begin to get a clear view of what was really happening in their lives. Something deep within them would show up the truth of it all. If they owned that truth, painful as it might have been, they found they were reconciled to reality and at peace with God.

An experimental method

So the first part of this ‘spiritual experiment upon the soul’, as William Penn called it, was to try out for themselves this method of getting to the truth: to try the silence and stillness, the patient waiting, the promptings of conscience. It was also then to see what happened when they embraced the truth of what they saw and put it into practice in their lives. Finally, they could test their insights by sharing them with others, who may have had similar insights to confirm or disconfirm what they had said. In this way everything they said and did could be grounded in experience, and they could have the confidence that they were indeed ‘living in the truth’.

We can sum up that early understanding of the Quaker movement, as we have come to understand it again, as a recognition that what they most needed for their freedom and fulfilment as human beings was a sense of the reality of their life, both as individuals and in society, and that this could be gained by opening themselves inwardly to the reality that was already pressing on their conscience.

Next week Rex examines the contemporary ‘Experiment with Light’ being explored by Quakers today. Rex is a member of Lancaster Central and North Area Meeting.

Experiment with Light

New possibilities

Rex Ambler continues the series on 'Experiment with Light' by examining how it is being explored by Quakers today

Last week he wrote about the practice as a recovery, or retrieval, of a method rooted in the worship of early Friends

The practice of 'Experiment with Light' is simple, which makes it all the more remarkable that it seems to have been largely forgotten.

It is a matter of attending to our present experience of life so that we can move from there to a deeper and fuller experience of it. We are not looking immediately for guidance or inspiration, which is often the concern of modern Friends. We are looking to see, first of all, what is going on in our life. This may sound like a rather detached and factual concern, which in a sense it is. But when we discover, as we do when we put it into practice, that there are all kinds of resistance to our knowing the simple truth, it becomes quite a challenge. However, as early Friends found to their amazement and joy, there is a resource within us that enables us to rise to the challenge: to look at the reality and accept it for what it is.

It is not the familiar resource of reason or imagination, valuable though these are, but a deeper, largely untapped source of insight, which can enable us to see things as nothing else can. To get to this source, however, we have to let the other activities die down, even the activity of quietly thinking to ourselves or daydreaming. We have to let go of all these familiar

concerns of our conscious self and become still and silent to the core of our being. Then and only then will something different happen.

The first thing that might happen is that we become aware of things in our life that really matter to us, but which we never seem to have the time or confidence to take on. In some forms of meditation we would be advised to let these things go as well. But in this Quaker meditation they can be taken seriously, however trivial or mundane they may seem at first to be. They are pointers to the truth we need to know. As our first Advice says – a remarkable survival from that very first practice – '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.' That Advice could be taken in fact as an ideal summary of 'Experiment with Light' and many Friends who have undertaken the practice have referred to this Advice as the best possible expression of it. These promptings may be experienced as little more than nudges or niggles, but if they are pointing to the truth that we need to acknowledge or the love that seems to be required, they are worth paying attention to.



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That, of course, is the first challenge: to ‘take heed...to the promptings’ when all sorts of other thoughts and promptings will be pressing for our attention. But if and when we do ‘take heed’ to the little we are already aware of as ‘love and truth,’ we become immediately more aware of them. The promptings become disclosures. The ‘darkness’ in particular, which we didn’t really want to know about because it threatened our self-image, is disclosed anyway, and with it the whole truth of the situation, which gives us at least a realistic basis for knowing what to do.

In fact, discovering and accepting the whole picture of our life as we are presently living it allows us to see the potential for our life that we have been ignoring. It ‘brings us to new life.’

That, as I see it, is the simple process we go through, or may go through, when we do the Experiment. We are opening ourselves up to new possibilities for our life by allowing a deep, divine resource within us to light up the truth of it.

Rex is a member of Lancaster Central and North Area Meeting.

***‘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 ... Do not look at the
temptations, confusions, corruptions,
but at the light that discovers them
... and you will feel over them, to
receive power to stand against them
... For looking down at sin, and
corruption, and distraction, you are
swallowed up in it; but looking at the
light that discovers them, you will
see over them. That will give victory;
and you will find grace and strength;
and there is the first step of peace.’***

George Fox: Letter to Elizabeth Claypole, 1658

Experiment with Light

A deeply healing process

Rosalind Smith, in the third article of our series on 'Experiment with Light,' considers the distinctive nature of the practice

Quakers are quite experienced at Meetings: Meetings for Worship; Meetings for Worship for Business; Meetings for 'the solemnisation of a marriage,' etc, and, as we often joke among ourselves, Meetings about Meetings!

For well over seventy years the Friends Fellowship of Healing groups have been holding Meetings for Distant Healing – sometimes just called Meetings for Healing – all around the country. The intention is to hold those who we know are unwell, either physically, mentally or spiritually, in the Light. In fact, the concept of the Light, and the deep healing that it offers to anyone who allows themselves to 'go into' it, is an integral part of our healing ministry.

Healing

So the Experiment with Light is something that fits naturally with what the Friends Fellowship of Healing has been doing quietly and regularly for a very long time now. However, it goes somewhat deeper in that, as well as holding others in the Light, there is an opportunity to use the method for oneself. This is where we need to make sure that we differentiate between Meeting for Worship, which is the basis of Quakerism, and the Experiment with Light, which is a valuable healing method.

It can, of course, be done privately while in Meeting for Worship, although it does seem to be more efficacious when it is 'led' by someone else. Not only does the process flow along at the right tempo, so to speak, but it is less likely that one's mind will wander. And any troubles, be they bodily ills, problems of the mind, concerns about others, fears, doubts, guilt, anger, resentment, etc, can all be brought, very gently and gradually, at the pace that a person can accept and cope with, into the Light.

Often, these problems are then viewed in their right perspective and, rather than feeling overwhelmed and defeated by them, they assume their rightful place as just a facet of our lives. We are brought into a space where we can look at them dispassionately. We come to a knowledge of what is in our soul rather than what is churning around in our conscious mind. From that place of healing discernment we can then try to do something about changing things for the better, bringing our own lives into balance, seeing the good in ourselves as well as the faults.

This rather objective view of ourselves, which the Light offers us, can be used as a 'tool' for healing, something which we then return to again and again until we see our lives transformed, put into 'right ordering' and, indeed, 'open to new Light'.

Connecting

While we may go into an 'Experiment with Light' experience with our conscious minds, perhaps with various ideas about it at first, perhaps hesitantly, perhaps even sceptically but usually expectantly, it will have been some sort of obedience to a request from our subconscious mind, or inner self: some deep awareness that 'something' is there, something with which we can make contact. My own feeling is that it is not instigated by our own ego alone: it follows on from some sort of drive or incentive – dare I call it a 'call'? 'You did not choose me, but I chose you...' (John 15:16).

Anyone who has been fortunate enough to take part in an 'Experiment with Light' session will, usually, have come to realise its value, even though the depth to which individuals will go will differ enormously, depending on their personality *and* their willingness to 'let go.'

The Light

We should acknowledge that we all have the inner Voice, or inner Light. How often do we suddenly receive an intimation – a flash of insight – which gives us guidance or answers to a dilemma? We even receive sudden answers when we have mislaid something, and it's usually when our minds are clear and uncluttered, so

the Voice 'which knows' has a space in which to operate. There is that flash of 'Oh yes, I know...'

So, from where does that come? There is a whole inner part of ourselves which functions independently from our normal waking self – and it is that part that we attempt to access, or tune in to, when we take part in the Experiment with Light process. Then, sometimes, answers for which we have searched will surface, either during the session or perhaps a little while afterwards.

Some might say that this is just a part of our own ego or psyche. Perhaps it is. But the deeper our experience becomes, the more we can acknowledge that there is something greater at work, something utterly trustworthy and all-knowing. So, perhaps we might then think of it as 'that of God within', or any one of the well-known Quaker epithets for that within which 'we live and move and have our being'.

We approach the Light with openness and expectation. We go into the Light, and yet we seem to hear the 'still small voice'. That still small voice actually *is* the Light that we seek.

Rosalind is a member of Ipswich and Diss Area Meeting. She is the editor of Towards Wholeness, the journal of the Friends Fellowship of Healing.



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Experiment with Light

Sink down to the seed

Jane Holmes reflects on her experience of Experiment with Light

When Cockermouth, in Cumbria, was flooded in 2009, our house was one of the first to be filled with silty water. I was flooded at the same time with emotional muddle and confusion. At first it was simple and we all got on with coping. After a bit, the casual destruction by those responsible for clearing up and the numerous decisions about total unknowns, overwhelmed me. That was when Allan, my husband, and I began to experiment with the Light together.

Allan had been in a Light group since the beginning of the year and I had been on the initial training courses with him. The experience had an immediate effect. I found out how to remain independent from the pressures of the loss adjuster and to guard against the culture of greed that surrounds the whole flood recovery process. The Experiment with Light routines became so useful that I slowly evolved my own ways of doing it.

Sometimes I use the disc with the long meditation read out by Rex Ambler himself. At other times I use the four stage process mentioned in the training programme:

*Mind the Light
Open your hearts to the Truth
Wait in the Light
Submit to the Truth*

When I am on my own, I often use a routine based around the paragraph in *Quaker Faith & Practice* 26.70

by Isaac Pennington: 'Give over thine own willing, give over thy own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee and be in thee and breathe in thee and act in thee; and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of Life, which is its portion.'

There are three vital parts when meditating with others. First, confidentiality is paramount. Complete trust is essential. The experience of other people must remain theirs. It is OK to share your own experience outside the group but *only* your own. Second, other people's experiences are unique to them and comment or discussion about them must never happen. Threads and parallels will often crop up, and can be enjoyed, but advice must never be offered. Third, as Quakers we are comfortable with silence and silence is such a powerful part of the whole thing. After the formal meditation is complete the twenty minutes of silence (with coloured pencils and pens and paper available) before the worship sharing comments is vital.

I have joined a newly formed Light group too. The worship sharing at the end is a chance to actually hear my own thoughts and in so doing they are transformed. Hearing others' internal dialogue encourages a deep honesty and generates love between the members of the group. It is so important that it needs guarding and treating with care.

Jane is a member of Cockermouth Meeting.



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Dwelling in the light, there's no occasion at all of stumbling, for all things are discovered with the light. Thou that lovest it, here's thy teacher, when thou art walking abroad, 'tis present with thee in thy bosom, thou need'st not to say, lo here, or lo there. And as thou liest in thy bed 'tis present to teach thee, and judge thy wandering mind, which would wander abroad, and thy high thoughts and imaginations, and makes them subject; for following thy thoughts thou art quickly lost. But dwelling in this light, it will discover to thee the body of sin, and thy corruptions, and fallen estate where thou art, and multitude of thoughts. In that light which shows thee all this, stand; neither go to the right hand, or the left.

George Fox

Experiment with Light

Waiting in the Light

Ann Banks describes a personal experience of the practice of Experiment with Light

I couldn't make out what it was. It looked a bit like one of those sand dollars or a smooth shell of some kind – or maybe it was just a step on the way to an image that would mean something. Just wait – ‘mind the Light’.

I looked again and there it was again, only this time, something black was trying to escape from the top of it. No thanks – I don't want to look at that – it might be a spider or something frightening. OK, you've asked for this information about yourself – are you going to chicken out of looking at what you're offered? No, I suppose not – ‘open your heart to the truth’ – if this is the truth then I'd better see what it is that I'm running away from.

At that point, as I brought my inner sight back to the image, the ‘shell’ fell open and to my surprise and amusement there was an image of myself, in black leathers, astride a black world war two motorbike. My head is down, a scarf is fluttering behind me and I'm obviously driving at great speed, making the hard, revving, explosive noise that only bikes of that era could make. Oblivious to my surroundings, I sense that I'm driving myself hard, that my awareness is closed down and that nothing matters except me and the speed and whatever it is that I'm driving towards.

Finding the meaning

So, what is it I'm seeing here? As I inwardly ask the question, I see myself in various situations, driving forwards. Now, I'd always thought that my enthusiasm was quite an endearing characteristic, but no, I'm seeing it quite differently in this meditation.

Opening further and ‘waiting in the Light’ I begin to see that it's not the cuddly thing I thought it was: it's been focused to the point where it's not swept people along with me, it's pushed them away; instead of

creating the unity I've always said I was so enthusiastic about, it's actually destroyed it – in my head down, goggles on way of going about things I've excluded others, not included them. Oh...oh dear...oh no, really that's not what I've meant. Oh, I'm so sorry. In ‘submitting’ to this view of myself, and seeing its truth, I'm agreeing that I must change. No blame, no judgment, no sense of not being loved, just a different sense of myself, how I behave and that I need to be much more conscious of the power of those bees in my bonnet to occupy all my attention, to the exclusion of other people and their concerns. Phew! That was interesting! And, while it was a serious piece of work, it left me with a fantastic sense of the humour of the image and how perfectly it fitted what I needed to understand. They are brilliant – these Experiments with Light!

The wider world

We had arranged a day at Skipton Meeting House for our local Light Group. This was the first of two meditations we had planned: the one in the morning for ourselves as individuals and the second, after a delicious shared lunch, for the world. In the sharing before the second meditation began, we talked about the things that concerned us about the world situation and what worried us most. In my usual way of not seeing the relationships between things I said I was most worried about extremism.

We settled to the meditation and, immediately, there is the same image of me roaring away on my motorbike – head down, scarf streaming out behind, making a lot of noise. As the image expanded, I saw there was a huge circle of light and all around it were people JUST LIKE MYSELF – on their motorbikes; but what shocks me, and brings the tears, is that we are

all driving away from the love and light at the centre, out doing our own thing, not conscious of what we're leaving behind, who's in the way, what's around us, just heads down tunnelling into the narrowness of our own perceptions. It was shocking to think that all the while I've been worrying or, dare I say, condemning the extremism which causes so much damage, pain and loss, that this 'enthusiasm' of mine, the energy of it sorely missed during a long period of illness only a few years ago, is actually the same energy! Cranked up a bit certainly, but the message here, loud and clear, is that it needs awareness to go with it in order for it to truly be the God within that the word means. Oh dear, double whammy! But what a valuable insight – what a fantastic illustration that the things that most wind us up are, in truth, aspects of ourselves, otherwise there would not be the emotional resonance with them.

Life-changing

On another occasion, I'd arrived at the Light Group feeling angry with someone I'd thought was a good friend and who wasn't behaving as I thought a good friend should. As I settle down, 'minding the Light', I see my friend standing in my cupped hands. As I watch this image, I can see my hands are getting feathery, protective, and I'm feeling very sad. 'Opening my heart to the truth,' the hands turn into wings, attaching themselves to her shoulders whereupon, without a by your leave, I'm picked up in the hooked beak of what has turned into a bird of prey and find myself lifted up into the sky, dangling helplessly before being dropped, quite literally, from a great height! 'Waiting in the Light' for further insight, I see that this is a pattern of dependence and inappropriate attachment I've run all my life – and it's always ended in the same way. I can certainly submit to that! It needed to be changed and it has been, over the ensuing months, with wonderful benefits in all my relationships.

These meditations have been truly life-changing experiences for me. They are always different: sometimes it feels as if nothing has happened, then a few days later a dream or insight reminds me that in opening to the Light I am putting my hand up, saying 'yes please' to change, whatever that might mean; at other times it's dramatic, 'in your face' stuff; or, again, I might be presented with something very funny, but in a way that makes me wonder why I hadn't been able to see myself or a situation in that way before. So, before I get off my motorbike, I suggest you try it for yourself!

Ann is a member of Hebden Bridge Meeting.



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Experiment with Light

A spiritual practice

In the beginning of the year 1655, I was at the plough in the east parts of Yorkshire in Old England, near the place where my outward being was; and, as I walked after the plough, I was filled with the love and presence of the living God, which did ravish my heart when I felt it, for it did increase and abound in me like a living stream, so did the life and love of God run through me like precious ointment giving a pleasant smell, which made me to stand still.

Marmaduke Stevenson
Quaker Faith & Practice 19.17

Gerald Hewitson continues the series on Experiment with Light

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The sense of the call, of being called, is part of our Quaker DNA. Once heard, the call has a life-changing impact:

If you build upon anything or have confidence in anything which stands in time and is on this side [of] eternity and [the] Being of beings, your foundation will be swept away, and night will come upon you, and all your gathered-in things and taken-on and imitated will all fail you... Why gad you abroad? Why trim you yourselves with the saints' words, when you are ignorant of the life? Return, return to Him that is the first Love, and the first-born of every creature, who is the Light of the world... Return home to within... and here you will see your Teacher not removed into a corner, but present when you are upon your beds and about your labour, convincing, instructing, leading, correcting, judging and giving peace to all that love and follow Him.

Francis Howgill, 1656
Quaker Faith & Practice 26.71

Howgill knows – in his deepest, innermost being he knows – that he has met the centre and foundation of all life. Such an encounter leads to one's life being

turned upside down, drawing closer to those who know each other in those things which are eternal, and gladly working in response to inner prompting: the Quaker call leads to transformation, community and service. One cannot predict the call, or demand the encounter – but one can prepare oneself by expectant waiting. Such preparation implies regular sustained practice, a discipline (from Latin *disciplina*: teaching, learning) above and beyond Meeting for Worship. Experiment with Light is just such a practice.

As a community

This is not how it all seemed to me when our Meeting invited a Friend to lead us in a day long session of Experiment with Light. What happened that day was powerful enough, individually and corporately, for a number of us to want to continue the practice, which offers opportunities both for individual experience and group sharing.

At different times it is clear that the depth and intensity of the private experience varies – I have been given strong, affirmative visions of immense love and tenderness; at other times I have been challenged to metaphorically walk into the fire; at yet others, I have fallen asleep. On all these occasions, I have never lost the sense of being nurtured, upheld, of being carried through points when I was not ready for intense encounter at depth.

It is not the only spiritual practice of the members of our group: some of us undertake meditation sessions or journal regularly. But there is a power in Experiment with Light because it feels so rooted in Quaker tradition. There is also a strength and energy to be gained from the group.

We were aware that, in some Meetings, Experiment with Light has been a source of division. Our experience is that it has helped our Meeting to grow in depth. Since about half the Meeting has shared some of our deepest experiences with each other, when we come together in Meeting for Worship we meet as a community caring for and upholding each other because we know each other in ‘those matters which are eternal’. This is not to ignore or deny the great differences that exist between individuals and their circumstances. Some people carry a disproportionate burden of pain or difficulty. Through Experiment with Light many of us have been able to take this pain into the silence, finding a way to share our sorrows. Indeed it seems to me that there is a close link between the spiritual journey and inner healing. They may not be synonymous, but it seems an essential part of a search

for Truth and Integrity (from Latin *integritatem*: soundness, wholeness, blamelessness) that we pay attention to our deepest sense of who we are, and what motivates us. Much deep searching is required in order that we become our true self, fit for service in the world; I take great strength and reassurance that the first act Jesus performs in the Gospel of Mark is the casting out of devils.

Personal experiences

This encounter of oneself at great depth, in order to encounter that which lies beyond us – ‘that of God in us’ – might appear like a psychotherapeutic programme. Encountering one’s deepest symbols, finding and giving voice to one’s deepest motivations and desires, and bringing these into the Light might appear challenging, even frightening. I take heart from the first of our *Advices & Queries*:

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.

Working alone together

Let me close with a quote from Ira Progoff. He is writing about his own work, but what he says seems to me to apply equally to Experiment with Light:

Spiritual contact, the awareness of the profounder meanings of life and experience of its symbols, is an individual endeavour that can be carried through only in the silence of one’s privacy. It is work that each individual has to do alone, but it is helpful to know that many of us are working alone together. It is helpful also to understand that we do not all have to hold the same beliefs in order for us to contribute an atom of spirit to the human atmosphere. It seems important that as many persons as possible do their private inner work as deeply as they can. For that we require a methodology that can be used in the modern age by individuals whatever their faith or lack of faith, and whatever their level of intellectual development and personal interest.

In Experiment with Light we Quakers have such a methodology, a process that we can own and that speaks to our condition. Through it, individually we can be shown new Light, and in that process become full, whole, integrated people: we can be transformed; ‘and this I knew Experimentally’.

Gerald is a member of North Wales Area Meeting.

Experiment with Light



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Beyond our shores

Marisa Johnson offers an overview of Experiment with Light in Europe and the Middle East

Experiment with Light (EwL) was introduced to Meetings around Europe by Rex Ambler and other Friends who travelled in the ministry, such as Diana Lampen, who used it when visiting Friends in Denmark and holding retreats with them.

Sweden

Julia Ryberg, ministry and outreach co-ordinator for Friends World Committee for Consultation: Europe and Middle East Section (FWCC-EMES), has used EwL on many occasions at retreats both in Sweden, where she lives, and in Denmark, where she is a regular visitor. Julia has also regularly included EwL as one of the Quaker 'forms', like Worship Sharing, in the 'curriculum' for Meetings for Learning, with Quaker and non-Quaker participants.

'In my understanding and experience, EwL is a fine tool to help people make better use of Meeting for Worship. The elements of EwL are the very ones that Fox and early Friends used in their worship and soul-searching: waiting in the Light, opening to the Light, being prepared to see, acknowledge, submit, welcome what the Light of God/Christ/Spirit showed

them in their inner being,' Julia said. She recalls one particular occasion in which EwL was used: 'At one of the Sweden Yearly Meeting's annual seminars for Executive Committee and Elders and Nominations Committee, EwL was used as a way of evaluating the important truths and themes of the weekend, the purpose of which is to "take the pulse" of the Yearly Meeting and to deepen the fellowship among members in these important working groups and committees. The experience was powerful, and we focused on the Yearly Meeting rather than on ourselves as individuals.' There is an ongoing Light Group in Stockholm.

Also in Sweden, Gun-Britt Karlsson, who is not a Quaker, attended an EwL retreat at Svartbäcken, and then tried the Experiment at her own church. She writes: 'For me, it became a valuable meditation that I wanted others to experience. I, therefore, wanted to introduce EwL to fellow worshippers at the Swedish Lutheran church that I attend. Between 2007 and 2010 I led twenty-four EwL sessions in Stigtomta Church. We sat in a circle, with a candle at the centre, in the large medieval church. After the meditation we shared our experiences. It was not uncommon for someone to stay on afterwards for deeper conversation. A total

of 269 people took part in these EwL sessions. Lots of people came at the beginning, fewer towards the end. Many only came once and didn't return. Everything has its time and season and I now practice EwL alone and sporadically together with friends. For me, it is an important way of seeking the truth. It works best when I focus on a specific issue that I want to hold in the Light. I have received guidance on many occasions. For example, the first time I held my rowdy children in the Light the word *Thankfulness* came to me. Rather surprising, but true!

Norway

'Silent Saturdays' are practiced in Oslo Monthly Meeting about once a month. Marit Kromberg, a former clerk of FWCC-EMES, writes: 'We call it Silent Saturdays because we start with introductions to meditation in general (posture and body awareness); we eat together either in silence or with someone reading something to focus the conversation, and then we experiment with the Light according to a simplified text prepared by Diana Lampen. We have found these Saturdays very helpful.'

France

Richard Thompson, a member of Reading Meeting and Groupe de Languedoc Roussillon, writes: 'Two years ago I was asked to deliver [a talk on] the theme "Experience avec la Lumière" at France Yearly Meeting's Assemblée Annuelle at Pontmain in Brittany. We were invited, in small groups, to share our recollection of any luminous moment in our lives. This helped to create a confidence in the expression of our inner search, so often dismissed by our materialistic culture as at best "merely subjective" and, at worst, "illusory". An introduction based on Rex Ambler's book, *A Light to Live By*, and essays by John Lampen given, of course, in French, led into a period of reflection: some Friends wrote a few notes, some drew impressions, some went into the little church in the Abbey. We then reassembled in small groups and experienced an hour of "Partage" [sharing], finally sharing in the whole group of about fifty.'

'Some Friends have since said that this experience is just what is needed in a Yearly Meeting characterised by small groups, entailing quite a lot of travelling, or by isolation. The experience of this depth is what is most precious in the Quaker Way and made a bond in us. Since 2009, we have arranged a day at Congenies in the south and Kate de la Mare, clerk of France Yearly Meeting until recently, has introduced the Experiment in Brittany. The plant is both fragile and strong! I am sure that it will grow!'

Italy

There is a small Quaker worship group in Bologna. The books of Rex Ambler inspired local Friend Pier Cesare Bori, a professor of History of Christianity at the University of Bologna, now retired, to study the use of silence within Christian practice, and also in other faiths, in particular Islam and Buddhism. In November 2002 Pier Cesare ran a seminar called 'Sharing the Silence – starting from diverse spiritual traditions: a historical investigation and a proposal.'

The proposal was to make the silence the basis of encounter and dialogue with inmates, from different cultural and religious traditions, held in Bologna's penal institutions. This was the beginning of a service that has been maintained faithfully to this day, with weekly meetings through most of the year, using silence, readings and reflection. The practice places the emphasis on each tradition's documented use of silence in a collective context – be it Quaker Meetings, Buddhist *vipassana* or Christian and Muslim contemplative disciplines.

And beyond . . .

EwL sessions have also been held in Ramallah, with participation from the wider community there. Helene Pollack, an American Friend, first introduced the practice, and later Rex and Catherine Ambler also ran a session. Kathy Bergen, co-ordinator of Friends International Center in Ramallah, says there is interest in an ongoing group, but so far attempts to establish continuity have run up against people's other commitments and busyness.

In spite of the general popularity and positive reports from those who have embraced it, EwL has also met with some resistance in places. When asked to contribute to this article, Friends from the Netherlands wrote: 'One can see EwL as a method derived from psychotherapy, dressed up with quotations from George Fox. It resembles "focusing" (a form of therapy). We are a religious society, not a psychotherapeutic community. The "rediscovery" does wrong to Fox, he used to refer to "the Light of Christ". The way early Friends thought about God and the world was so different from our views in the twenty-first century. We may try to explain it, but are not able to comprehend, imitate or reinstall it. Quakers do not have teachers or gurus, do not have a method.'

Nevertheless, these Friends acknowledged that 'every Quaker is free in his or her responsibility and in what he or she chooses to do.'

Marisa is the secretary to the Friends World Committee for Consultation: Europe and Middle East Section.

Experiment with Light

The culture of silence

Helen Meads reflects on her experience of Experiment with Light



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Why is Experiment with Light not practised more widely among British Quakers? This was the question at the back of my mind when I began work on a doctorate in 2003. As my work progressed, I found that I was looking at British Friends more generally and that at the heart of the answer was the fact that there was a cultural barrier.

I have been experimenting in a Light group at High Flatts Meeting since 2000. From 2003 to 2005 I interviewed 'Experimenters' and observed and took part in different Light groups as part of my research for a PhD at the University of Birmingham (through the Centre for Postgraduate Quaker Studies at Woodbrooke), which I have just completed. I am only one of several Quaker scholars who have been researching contemporary Friends. Ben Pink Dandelion and Caroline Plüss undertook research in the early 1990s, and more recently Susan Robson and Doug Kline studied internal conflict-handling and Simon Best adolescent Quakers. My conclusion about where the Experiment sits in relation to Britain Yearly Meeting draws on their work.

Studying silence

Ben coined the term 'culture of silence' to describe the value of silence, devaluation of language and consequent unspoken rules about how silence might be broken with speech. He found that our religious experience happens in the silence of Worship, but is not spoken aloud (silence as defence) and so there is no reaction to it (silence as consequence) and changes in belief are hidden in silence. Fear of treading on toes and ostracism then prevent discussion of experience or belief and extend the culture of silence outside Meeting for Worship. Ben's findings were borne out by what Friends told me: one spoke of a very delicate experience to Friends in her Meeting and was ridiculed, told she was making it up. Another referred to Friends 'treading on the rose petals of my experience, my felt experience'.

Caroline's work found that acceptable ways of behaving amongst Friends are implicit, that the newcomer discovers them for themselves within the culture of silence. Susan found that Friends averted their minds from the possibility that conflict could exist within their Meetings, from questions of power and from expressing strong emotion: these, too, were hidden in the culture of silence. I noticed, however, that the Experimenters I observed and interviewed did not avert their minds from questions of conflict, instead they addressed and challenged it with expressions of strong emotion. Simon found that adolescent Friends had a culture of contribution, rather than a culture of silence. Younger Friends share their religious experience both in Worship and at other times, each Friend's sharing encouraging others to share more: diversity is accepted so that changes are not hidden. I found there was a culture of contribution amongst Experimenters as well, but only within their Light groups, not with other Friends.

Experimenters

Jane Holmes' recent article (*the Friend*, 21 October) explains how important confidentiality is, that it is OK to share one's own experiences, but not others'. I observed that Experimenters rarely speak about their own experiences with other Friends, although some may write about them (see *Seeing Hearing Knowing* by John Lampen, for example). For the Experimenters I met (and as a 'Friend on the bench' I observe this in the case of Friends generally) belief frameworks are irrelevant, experience is paramount. Some described themselves as Christian, some Buddhist, a few were nontheist, one Hindu and another 'New Age'. Several used more than one belief framework.

I found that Experimenters go through a process of transformation. They realise the Truth of their lives, they face their own darkness, see how their behaviour can change, change their relationships, draw closer together and accept what they cannot change. But they also challenge what they feel they may be able to change, especially where instances of conflict arise. I was privileged to hear Experimenters' very personal and extraordinary (I would say mystical) experiences.

The Experiment challenges Friends to ask 'what is my part in this?', to face the Truth they are shown and to admit to others in the Light group (who are doing the same thing) what they have done wrong. As Jane says, this encourages deep honesty and engenders love within the group. I also found that it permeates the whole of Experimenters' lives: one, for example, became a vegetarian and could no longer tell 'white lies' whilst another realised that, instead of her colleagues causing tension at work, her own

attitude played its part. The Experiment is not simply a 'tool' for spiritual development or healing. It is a way of living out being a Quaker and of keeping oneself accountable to the Light, to God (if such a word makes sense) and to each other.

At times of conflict

When conflict arises in Meetings, Experimenters work hard against the culture of silence to get simmering discontent and differences into the forum of Business Meetings. Doug Kline found, in the Meeting he studied, that when contentious matters arose protagonists would stay away from Business Meetings: in other words, Friends were remaining silent even when presented with a way of expressing their viewpoint, or even leaving Meeting altogether. I observed a group drawing strength from their sharing, their feeling of love for each other and their sense of God in dealing with individual conflicts in their lives and in dealing with conflicts in their Meetings. Susan Robson found there was a lack of successful conflict-handling narratives to enable Friends to tackle what made them uncomfortable. I found that the Experiment presented a group with diverse narratives.

In 2006 there were tensions in my own Meeting surrounding the Light group. I asked the clerk to put the matter onto a Preparative Meeting agenda and a further special Business Meeting was held. We aired all the issues. I recall a Friend accusing me of 'specious' use of language. I agreed with her. Other misunderstandings were voiced and explained and one Friend wept. The final minute concluded: 'The Meeting warmly welcomes the work of the Light Group in exploring the spiritual experience of individuals and believes that our Meeting can continue to be enriched by its work.' We broke the culture of silence and the whole Meeting was the better for it.

I believe the Experiment literally encourages Friends, emboldens them to speak for what is Truthful and so also encourages others not to remain silent in the face of uncomfortable differences. It is a wonderful practice in my own experience, and in that of Friends who helped me with my research – as the High Flatts minute says, it enriches the whole of Meeting.

Helen is a member of Central Yorkshire Area Meeting.

For further information about how you may start the practice, go to www.experiment-with-light.org.uk or email: experimentwithlight@gmail.com

Helen's thesis is available to read at Woodbrooke and will be available electronically from the British Library after December.

Experiment with Light

Movement of the Spirit

Hilary Pinder brings the series on Experiment with Light to a close

The practice of opening oneself to the searching Light of the Spirit can bring many benefits. Among these are a deepening of consciousness and a strengthening of our Quaker faith:

'... it wasn't just my faith that had grown strong, it was Quaker faith. That is, I had come to discover in my experience how deep and powerful the Quaker faith really was.'

Rex Ambler

In the beginning

The first public Experiment with Light was held in 1996 and, as Rex Ambler says in *A Light to Live By*, this showed that:

'it was possible to teach this practice, it did help people to open to the Light and, surprisingly, they could help one another to understand it.'

Light Groups began in 1997 following a talk at Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM). Initiated by Alan Kirkham, small groups met regularly in Norwich and Lynn Monthly Meeting to 'wait together in the light' and to share their experiences.

In the fourteen years since that first talk at BYM, Experiment with Light has gradually taken root across Britain. A website has been developed with meditation outlines, details of introductory courses and a Practitioners Pack for those who wish to start a Light Group (www.experiment-with-light.org.uk).

A network of such groups has sprung up, with about sixty known groups currently practising together. The first newsletter has just been circulated and a growing band of facilitators are available to deliver introductory retreats and workshops at Quaker Centres and in Area Meetings.

Many introductory workshops have been run in Europe (see 'Beyond our shores,' 11 November), in the USA and as far afield as South Africa and New Zealand. Introductory workshops may be offered at the Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) World Conference in Kenya in April 2012.

Light Groups

Jane Holmes (21 October), Ann Banks (28 October) and Gerard Hewitson (4 November) have all testified to the value of the practice in their personal lives. The practice of sharing our discoveries with others in the supportive witness of a Light Group can deepen our sense of the transformation that is at work in us. Regular practice can also make it easier for us to speak our truth in ministry in our Local or Area Meeting for Worship.

'In this way, small Light Groups can be a great service to a larger Meeting, deepening the life of its members and preparing them "in heart and mind" for their more public worship together.'

Rex Ambler

The focus of the meditations does not have to be on one's own life; groups can share a focus, for example,

*'Let the light of Jesus Christ,
that shines in every one of your consciences,
search you thoroughly,
and it will let you clearly see.'*



George Fox

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on the life of the Meeting or on the state of the world. Sharing what comes in these settings can provide opportunities for mutual support and for extending our thinking beyond what we thought was possible. Ros Smith (*14 October*) talks about Experiment with Light as a practice that fits quite naturally with the healing ministry of the Friends' Fellowship of Healing.

A Framework for Action priority is 'strengthening the spiritual roots in our Meetings and in ourselves'. It is the experience of practitioners that Experiment with Light provides both a meditation practice and a supportive setting in which both our souls and the spiritual roots of our precious Quaker tradition can be nourished and enabled to flower anew.

The future

The Experiment with Light Network is a small group charged with steering the development of Experiment with Light within BYM and beyond. At a conference held in May 2011 thirty practitioners came together with representatives from Quaker Life, the European and Middle East Section of FWCC, Young Friends General Meeting and Friends' Fellowship of Healing to discern the way forward for this movement of the Spirit. The Epistle has been distributed to all Area Meetings in England, Scotland and Wales as well as being available on the website <http://bit.ly/sJLNxq>

The vision that emerged from the conference was one of an increasingly vibrant gathered community, a community that:

- allows us to be raw and real and vulnerable with one another;
- encourages us to challenge and to be challenged in love;
- expresses, acknowledges and resolves conflict;
- is open to new light, to amazement, to astonishment, to awe and wonder, to passion;
- is able to face the truth of our condition as individuals, as groups and, through this courageous encounter, be freed to change.

Helen Meads, in last week's article, contrasts this sort of culture of contribution with a culture of silence that can suppress the honest sharing of difference and avoid the open expression of conflict. We see Experiment with Light as a ministry to the Religious Society of Friends, a ministry that needs a resilient community of practice that is rooted in Quaker discipline to take it forward. We have laid plans to develop just such a community and will hold our next conference in September 2013.

Hilary is clerk of the Experiment with Light Network and a member of Chilterns Area Meeting.