

Thoughts on the Quaker Way (2)

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I will endeavour to respond to correspondence but cannot guarantee to do so.

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1 Thoughts on The Quaker Way (1)

The Quaker Way was born in 1652 in England because of the failure of the traditional churches to preach a meaningful Gospel message. The Protestant Reformation had centred that preaching on expounding the Bible as the unquestioned word of God, but there was no unity on what that word actually meant. Early Quakers reasoned that the Spirit which had inspired the writing of the Bible must still be available for people to hear and the mystical tradition was re-born as the Quaker Way. They worshipped in relative silence and intuitively came to understand our Creator's intention for humankind.

In this way early Quakers by-passed the teachings and methods of the institutional churches and felt they were re-expressing the Christianity of the Early Church. The surge of liberation in thinking was so great that in eight years it is estimated there were 60,000 Quakers. Then the persecution of Quakers by Church and State developed in earnest.

Quaker worship is essentially spiritual listening and not physical speaking, but as revelation is given, so the physical faculties will express it. The brain which has been conditioned by worldly influences has to be stilled so that sub-consciously the intentions of our Creator can be felt. These intentions become part of our physical life as our brain is given new guidelines. This is a process over time by which new values are established by corporate worship.

The Quaker is essentially concerned with how we live in this world and not at all concerned with religious ceremonies. We see creation as the unity that it is and the traditional dualism, or the separation of the sacred world from the secular world, is no part of our thinking. Our human personality is spiritual and physical (sacred and secular), but the two are seamlessly interwoven. We acknowledge the spiritual side of our personality by stating that there is that of God, or an Inner Light, in every human being. When we sit in silence that is when we are allowing our Inner Light to shine more strongly into our lives and give guidance.

Another immediate consequence of this worship is that all human beings meet on equal terms for all have the Inner Light within them. The cultural conditioning that said otherwise was challenged on every front. Women were as committed and as effective as men in leading and spreading awareness of the Quaker Way.

The Bible was not rejected. Far from it, it was now understood. It was read with the aid of the Spirit, or Inner Light, which had first inspired its production and the result was a revolutionary freshness. What the Inner Light says to the human being in silence is there in the Bible and can now be understood despite the accretion of dogmatic and cultural additions and interpretations which had come to mask its message.

2 Thoughts on The Quaker Way (2)

Quaker worship creates a new freedom to understand human life, both its spiritual and its physical purpose. As soon as the human spirit is released from the inhibitions created by institutional religion, it is free to embrace new revelation. It lives positively and throws off the stifling negativism embodied in the concept of original sin.

Consider the evil of slavery. Formerly its existence was so deeply embedded in biblical and cultural acceptance that nobody questioned its human consequences. That is until a New Jersey Quaker, John Woolman, sitting in the creative silence of meeting for worship in 1743, concluded that it was fundamentally wrong that any human being should be enslaved. The long movement towards emancipation began in the silence where the divine spirit meets the human spirit. Mystical worship transcends the grip of culture. The existence of the Inner Light in every human being is the keystone for accepting the fundamental equality of all people. In our present evolutionary state we are what we are – potentially perfect, presently imperfect in so many ways. The heterosexual and the homosexual are brothers and sisters in creation, all called equally to contribute to a greater future.

This new freedom challenges the power of those myths which have unfortunately been converted into historical fact by the elapse of time. The legendary story of Adam and Eve was created to explain how sinfulness arose but it came to be accepted as historical fact for centuries that the human being was irredeemably sinful. But there was no such 'original sin' or 'fall of Adam' because humankind has evolved from a primitive life form to its present state. It's more a matter of 'original blessing' because the Inner Light is there at the beginning of creation, is present in *homo sapiens*, and probably is in all that is created. It is the guiding Spirit undergirding the continuing evolution of creation. Spiritual worship transcends the limitations of institutional religions which are liable to become fossilized within the culture of a particular age.

There is also the problem of symbols and ceremonies which are inevitably rooted in earlier times. Then one might assume they had some significance, but after the elapse of centuries people either reject them as meaningless or wrongly worship them as their religion, when all they were only meant to be a metaphorical representation of some truth. When inner guidance is experienced, then outward sacraments become superfluous. Spiritual worship transcends the limitations of symbolism.

There is in creation a common sense that transcends all divisions and it is humankind's Inner Light It is not just that Quakers are universalist and inclusive; it is that spiritually we are all united; it is that the Quaker Way exists in every faith. It is only the use of words created by our cultures that divide us. Spiritual corporate worship, allowing our Creator to guide us, is the way forward for the human race.

3 Thoughts on Meeting for Worship (1)

Quakers do not see worship as a First Day or Sunday event, but as the culmination of a week of worship through living in the world as our Creator would want us to, and as integral to the next week of so living. Worship and living, sacred and secular, are always a unity.

1. Whilst Quakers state a public time for the commencement of the meeting for worship, they nevertheless hold that as soon as the first person is seated in meeting then the worship has commenced. A Presiding Friend, that is a member nominated to serve the Meeting, will start the meeting before the appointed time in this manner.

2. All Friends are enjoined to arrive at meeting 'with heart and mind prepared'. This means one is to arrive in a frame of mind in which the brain is already being quietened, so that as they enter and sit the meeting can settle very quickly.

3. The Quaker Way is to let God our Creator do the talking, whether individually or corporately in the souls of those present, or publicly through one of those present ministering to the meeting. This silent and public ministry might then be built on by others present, but taking great care that the ministry follows the promptings of one's Inner Light. The person ministering will normally stand to give ministry.

4. There is no necessity for further public ministry at any time because the ministering of God the Inner Light within the souls of those present can produce such a gathered meeting, such a strong sense of a loving community, that human words are superfluous. And when a Friend has ministered there should be a pause of several minutes before further ministry is offered. This is because all ministry has to be taken down to the soul and absorbed so that any response comes primarily from our Inner Light and not solely from the brain.

5. After approximately one hour the Presiding Friend will rise to signify the end of public worship. All people present may then acknowledge or greet one another in the manner they feel appropriate.

6. Small meetings seated in a circle of chairs may well stand for a while holding hands in a circle to signify the community of love that exists between them, and after a minute or two the meeting will end as hands are unclasped.

7. The Presiding Friend may invite Afterthoughts. Giving ministry in meeting can be daunting and there may be somebody who feels they have received an insight but is unclear about how to express it; they should be given space to speak. Another may be left with a question and may be needing insight. The Clerk of the Meeting will give any notices and when that is finished it is time for refreshment and sociability.

4 Thoughts on Meeting for Worship (2)

Our Creator, who is spirit, is in communication with the spiritual side of our personality all the time. Much of the time, if not all the time, we are individually too busy with our physical side to hear him. So those committed to the Quaker Way set aside a time for making it possible to hear our Creator's guidance. This time is called meeting for worship and it is essential that it is corporate worship and not individual worship. Normal practice nowadays is to restrict this to one hour on First Day (Sunday) morning, though in former times it might have last for two or three hours, particularly when a Friend travelling in the ministry was present.

Meeting for worship is the interface between the human and the divine; it is a time of communion; a communion or relationship which Quakers see as appropriate for every hour of every day; at all times we should be striving to live in our Creator's Way. Each meeting for worship sees the birth of a new community as all are brought into the unity of a loving relationship.

What we are seeking to do is to hear our spiritual Creator and not our own physical brain, so the brain has to be quietened and by-passed as we journey into the nothingness of eternity. How else can one describe it? Human words have generally been created in response to our physical existence, so when it comes to describing our spiritual circumstances words have limitations. The two spheres of existence are different in characteristic and appearance and yet fully integrated. In a truly gathered meeting the silence of worship and the words of ministry are of one texture.

The spiritual world is as real as the physical world, but our ability to relate to it is still immature. How do we know our Creator is communicating with us? Yes, exceptionally, we may 'hear' an inner voice, but we also believe that when we 'return' from the silence of eternity we are changed in some way, however small, that subsequently is reflected in our way of life. Also, by bringing our new thoughts into the open by laying them before the members of the worshipping group, we engage in the corporate process of discerning the extent to which our thoughts may be truly divine or solely human or a bit of each.

Divine openings or understandings will generally only be received as a result of continually seeking, thinking and questioning. In that sense, First Day is only the first day; the same Quaker discipline of worship needs to be exercised on six other days. That which is implicit in worship must be explicit in living from day to day.

5 Thoughts on Meeting for Worship for Business (1)

1 The act of formal worship and the act of living in this world are two sides of the same coin, so a Quaker business meeting is referred to in full as 'a meeting for worship for business'. If the meeting is on Sunday and follows a meeting for worship there will only be the need for a short period of worship because the soul will already be leading the brain. If the business meeting is on another day there will be a much longer opening period of worship.

2 Human oversight for the meeting will come from the Clerk appointed by the Meeting whose position requires her to be essentially neutral in whatever is being discussed. She is the servant of the meeting. Her job is to discern from what is being said where the unity of the meeting may lie.

3 A member will normally stand to contribute to the matter being considered, just as they would in giving ministry in worship. There needs to be a thoughtful silence between contributions as each person present absorbs what has been said. There is no debating or voting.

4 If there is a difficult decision to be made it is within the experience of many Quakers that when, within themselves, they let go of a position they cherish, they find that a new spirit arises and a way forward opens that had not occurred to them or been acceptable to them before.

5 The Clerk will offer a draft minute and while she has been preparing this the meeting will have upheld her in silence. This draft minute may be accepted or it may give rise to further consideration. Exceptionally, a particular issue may have to be adjourned to a further meeting because a sense of unity has not been reached.

6 A minute is finally agreed by the meeting; that is everybody accepts a certain way forward. This does not imply that absolute unity has been reached in what has been discussed, but it does imply unity in the way forward. Some individuals may be waiting for further light to be given but in the meantime have accepted the way forward the Clerk has indicated in the minute.

7 Whilst there is a skill in discerning what should go into a minute, most minutes are, of course, very straightforward. All minutes are agreed as the meeting progresses and at the end of the meeting the body of minutes is signed by the Clerk during the closing period of worship to indicate that it is an agreed set of minutes.

8 Regular attendance of members at business meetings and the setting aside of the necessary time for Quaker methods to work are vital for the health of the community as it seeks to reflect the nature of God in its life.

6 Thoughts on Meeting for Worship for Business (2)

Eternity is rooted in our humanity. Quakers call it the Inner Light from God. It is the 'Living Christ' within us. This is the inner core of each human being from which our understanding of right and wrong arises. All the values held by our society, our culture, which hold to righteousness, or right living, are initially derived from this inner core. Holding these values in common enables us to form stable societies. We are naturally sociable creatures; we form communities.

This fundamental understanding is the basis of the Quaker Way. Because there is this unity underlying all life, so it must express itself in every aspect of our social, economic, political and religious life. Every group or committee must work from the premiss that the Inner Light is working to produce unity. So a Quaker business meeting does not have debates and votes to decide an issue; it consciously seeks the will of God. The process is sometimes called 'seeking the sense of the meeting'.

This process does not represent seeking consensus. Achieving consensus is a rational secular process whereby all options are carefully thought through, there may be some negotiating or compromise, and the best answer to suit the majority is arrived at. Consensus always tends towards the lowest common denominator.

The Quaker Way of finding the sense of the meeting is to submit the process to the Inner Light when we sit in humble obedience and allow unity to emerge. It is a commitment to faith, whereby we allow God's presence to determine the outcome. Allowing the Inner Light to lead us means we surrender to our highest nature.

But we human beings are still an imperfect creation and our search for the will of God can be a struggle. In one sense it has to be a struggle because the nature of that love which is drawing us on can only lay before us choices which we have to make. In trying to overcome human tendencies there has developed a sense of Quaker discipline to restrain the ego. We seek to discern God's guidance through listening carefully to the contributions of others.

It is possible that the process of achieving the right outcome benefits the community even more than the outcome itself. As we respect the views of each other so we grow as a community; we see each other differently because we have allowed ourselves to be guided by a sense of Presence; we feel the love that emanates from such a natural unity. The discipline exercised in a Quaker business meeting is an example to the world. The 'priesthood of all believers' at work in the world. No leaders other than that loving Spirit which seeks to further the evolution of creation through persuasion. It is the corporate discernment of the will of God and this effects the transformation of those participating.

7 Thoughts on Quaker Testimonies (1)

Testimonies are the Quaker response to the challenge of the Gospel. Whilst they encompass guidelines for right living (righteousness), their origin lies in the Quaker response to divine guidance and is reflective of how spiritual understanding should guide our physical life. The life of Jesus of Nazareth emphasizes that it is one's way of living that is fundamental and not the religiousness of the Pharisees. The aspect of pharisaic living that Jesus most condemned was their attachment to their own rules which then became central to their religious life, when in fact it is the human being set in creation that is the centre of our Creator's concern.

These testimonies arise from the creative power of the Inner Light which is the living experience of our Creator within every person. This drove early Quakers into the missionary activity of being living examples of their beliefs and of preaching this new understanding to the world. God, our Creator, is speaking to us. Just listen! What the Inner Light is experienced as saying can be a very powerful force to the newly opened person.

They are living testimonies. As the centuries pass, so they are able to respond to changes in the culture in which we live. They guide us in a right use of resources and strengthen us in resisting the fashions of the day. In earlier centuries, for instance, there were testimonies against swearing an oath in court and paying tithes for the support of the church, but society has now conceded these points.

The main heads of the testimonies nowadays are not drawn in terms of specific prohibitions, but in how we should be living in society, and they are: Simplicity and Plainness, Truthfulness and Integrity, Equality and Community, and Peace and Nonviolence

Quakers have produced in pamphlet form 'Advices and Queries', which are intended for both individual and corporate use and which ask probing questions on matters which come under the main heads of the testimonies. There is no specific attempt to make Advices and Queries absolutely comprehensive, except perhaps through the use of some generalities, but the self-questioning is not to be evaded.

The language of Advices and Queries is today's secular language. It is down to earth and concentrates on how one lives one's life; probably much more reflective of the style of Jesus of Nazareth when ministering to people than the formal religious style of many institutional churches. Advices and Queries is available as an e-pamphlet if anybody wishes to receive it.

So Quakers concentrate on guidance for living in this world (testimonies) and reject the use of any religious creeds which may gain one membership of an institutional church but which say nothing about how one should live in the world.

8 Thoughts on Quaker Testimonies (2)

Our universe is on the move. God's creation is evolving all the time, both on a macro level beyond our comprehension and on a micro level increasingly discovered by scientists. But what of us, we human beings? As part of God's creation we also are changing and, incredibly, we are being entrusted with the responsibility to guide and create that change. Our future is in our hands.

We have come to realise that the presence in creation of God our Creator is reflected by the attributes of love. All of creation evolves correctly only in response to love. I am not able to say why homo Neanderthal failed to respond to love and became extinct, but I do understand that homo sapiens is, in principle, on the right track because it occupies the present pinnacle of creation. But is it in turn doomed, or can it continue to evolve into the kingdom of heaven, the community of God, paradise, the Garden of Eden, or whatever words the human being uses to try and describe the indescribable intentions of God?

This is where Quaker testimonies stand. Not just one of them but all of them interwoven to create that community which is yet to come. Early Quakers were ridiculed for claiming perfection for themselves and all who followed in their footsteps. They understood their claim to perfection intuitively; they had absorbed the vision of the fulfilment of creation; they were filled with the Spirit of God. And that is the key to understanding them.

Subsequent generations of Quakers have been prepared to write this claim to perfectionism out of their history, because without the empowerment of personal inspiration of the Spirit we are embarrassed by such 'boasting'. Too many of us are living on second-hand values that we inherit and not on the first-hand personal experience that would drive us.

Individual mystics and anchorites may retire to their hermitages in order to live God's message; a withdrawal from the world in an attempt to live God's perfection untainted by human imperfection. Quakers are members of a movement called to live in the world untainted by human imperfection. A seemingly impossible task but a challenge that must be accepted. It is God's way, though, in the world's terms, it is the way of crucifixion, the foolishness of God.

The message is clear: Find again the original inspiration, live the testimonies without compromise to culture or religion, and the claim to perfectionism will not be a boast but an understanding of the fulfilment of creation.

9 Thoughts on The Testimony to Simplicity and Plainness

The origin of our universe lies in matter and timescales beyond human comprehension. The evolution of our universe has produced life in innumerable forms and in unbelievable complexity. The human being is the present climax of this development and yet struggles to comprehend the immensity of it and his own place in it. And Quakers have the temerity or foolhardiness to introduce the concept of 'simplicity' as part of our Creator's design.

How can it be? As with all things spiritual, the true answer can only be found in personal experience. We know. At the interface of the physical and the divine, the secular and the sacred, we have understood that the seemingly hidden purposes of life can only be seen by simple eyes. If this pseudo-scientific introduction doesn't help, then just go back to Jesus of Nazareth encouraging the children to come to him.

Simplicity does not begin in simple living; it begins inside with the quality of the soul. For the child, this gateway to the spiritual world is wide open. If you only become aware of your soul after 50 years of living in this materialistic society, you will find the gates so firmly closed that they might appear to be locked. Simple living would not give rise to the wanton squandering of the world's resources that we are plagued with today. And why spend our human life gathering material things when we cannot take them with us? It's all too simple!

Likewise the busyness with which we fill our lives. We think our busyness is doing good somewhere, when in fact it is preventing us from being spirit-centred. God is speaking to us; we must take time to listen. Quaker worship is so simple and so unsophisticated that a simple lifestyle immediately relates to it and benefits from it.

A Quaker Meeting House is plain. No pulpit, no communion table or altar, no symbols or icons; just benches or chairs. But the plainness can be very moving and very beautiful. There may be a small central table with the New English Bible and Quaker Faith and Practice for anybody to pick up and read from, but basically there is nothing to hinder the meeting of the divine with the human.

Simplicity is singleness of purpose; to love the Lord your God …….; to turn all we possess into the channel of universal love. If our wealthy western civilisation is to step back from the precipice of possible extinction through climate change, it has to embrace simplicity as an overriding virtue in all our outlooks on life. When the political world presents us with its power politics and its insoluble problems, just think simplicity and act accordingly. Simplicity is not naivety; plainness is not drabness. The foolishness (simplicity) of God puts to rout all the wisdom (folly) of humankind. Think God first; then think humanly, but only when inspired by the Spirit of God. Seek first the spiritual world and all will come clear.

10 Thoughts on The Testimony to Truthfulness and Integrity

Surely personal truthfulness and personal integrity are so basic a need in the human personality that for Quakers to claim it as a Quaker testimony is an affront to the standards of the rest of society? Alas, no. Society's standards are so poor that recognisable integrity in public service is in short supply. The disregard in which politicians in the United Kingdom are held (2023) is witness to this fact. When governments lie to their people and nations lie to one another, then the taproot of integrity which lies within the individual must be well rotted.

The wisdom which says 'the means we use are the end in the making' has been changed into a policy which says that 'if the end is right, then any means can be used'. It is the means we use that are without fail integrated into the end product. If we achieve political control by deception then it is inevitable that our continuing political institutions will employ deception.

Where is this taproot of integrity in the human being? It is rooted in the soul, in our spiritual identity; it is of the nature of God. If we do not nurture it by allowing it to guide our thoughts and actions, then even the soul can be corrupted by the backward spread of the poison. Integrity is not just a matter of truth telling; it is fundamental to the health of the human personality.

For the Quaker it is responding to the Inner Light that leads us into a discernment of what is right. And not necessarily the Light within us, but the Light, that of God, in the other person pleading for supportive fellowship. Our basic need for personal integrity can only be expressed through a life that is whole and consistent. In simple terms we must not do anything in our lives which we know Jesus would not do.

Quakers emphasize that one's religious beliefs are reflected in how one lives. Our religion or understanding of life is reflected in the person we are, the personality we are. Contained within ourselves we offer the fruits of the Spirit even before we act. Provided our belief, our demeanour, our life has been built with the right means, the right building blocks, then the end product is to the glory of our Creator.

Standing resolutely by the testimonies of the Spirit can be costly. For early Quakers their testimony to integrity led them to refuse to swear an oath in court. Swearing an oath implied a double standard; that in normal life one might well be deceitful, so before speaking in court one took an oath to promise that one would not be deceitful in what one said. Quakers would not accept that they were ever deceitful; their normal language was truthful; and the price they paid for refusing to take an oath was enormous; they had to forego the protection of the law until society conceded the principle and allowed an affirmation instead of an oath. Integrity is of the nature of God; it is not to be compromised.

11 Thoughts on The Testimony to Equality and Community

The fundamental starting point of the testimony to equality is the recognition that every human being has God's Inner Light within them; we are made in the image and likeness of God. Nevertheless, it is unfortunately normal in human society for the male to dominate and that is reflected in our culture. One needs to read the bible stories which mention women with a sense of amazement that their stories should ever have been remembered and realise that despite the power of culture something important is being said to us. Quakers realised this though it needed all the strength of leadership from George Fox and Margaret Fell to ensure equal opportunity for men and women within the Quaker movement.

But gender equality is only the beginning. The institution of slavery, the backbone of the economy of the southern states in America and the wealth of the English ports of Liverpool and Bristol, among others, had also to be challenged; and the challenge had to be maintained over many decades. We need to be aware that our educational attainments might give us a false sense of superiority over aboriginal people, when it is aboriginal people who maintain the balance of nature and we academically educated people who destroy it.

But the sense of God-given equality must lead us into the unity of community and it is in community that we can most powerfully reflect the nature of God. It is in the act of coming together in God's love that we demonstrate the power of that love, not simply to strengthen us, but to lift other people from the depths of despair when we embrace their lives with that love. The vibrancy of every community is so important. In community we make ourselves channels of God's love to those in greater need and we are the stronger for it.

One of the astonishing facts of life is that when we truly apply ourselves to the needs of others, then our own problems and needs shrink into insignificance and disappear. Once again, it is at the interface of the spiritual and the physical that seeming miracles happen. Pour out unconditional love from one human being to another and the world surrounding those two human beings becomes transformed. The act of giving unconditional love is Easter Friday; the act of receiving unconditional love is Easter Sunday. Together they form the commonwealth of heaven, community as God intends.

But community, as God intends it, isn't limited to the human community. Some have recognised for a long time that the whole of creation is an interdependent and balanced community. All parts of the balance need to be respected as much as we endeavour to respect human life, but, of course, it isn't happening. Human greed is damaging the balance and the testimony to equality within creation calls us to recognise the effect our lifestyle is having on the balance of creation and to do something about it. Quaker testimonies are a call to action.

12 Thoughts on The Testimony to Peace and Nonviolence

There have been many pacifist groups in the history of Christianity and that is not surprising because nonviolence is the teaching of Jesus which permeates the Sermon on the Mount. But the Quaker Way was born in England in the immediate aftermath of civil war when many good people had tried to force the coming of God's kingdom by the violent overthrow of a regressive monarchical system. The system was overthrown but God's kingdom was not born. A salutary if costly experience; yet how many wars have we experienced since with the same unhappy result? Quite simply, every war that has ever happened.

It is not just that violence is not in the nature of God; it is that nonviolence is the nature of God. Our Creator works through the power of persuasion and the example of unconditional love. Love can do no other. God denies himself the fruits of easy victory because such fruit would quickly wither. The creative achievement comes through the long haul of loving your enemy. Indeed, it comes from denying the validity of any such concept as 'the enemy'. All humankind is created in the likeness of its Creator. We have an underlying unity which creatively expresses itself in the actions of self-giving. All our gifts and possessions have to be channelled into unconditional love. Only that way will the Community of God be built. This calls us to understand the fact that whilst our physical life is time-limited, our spiritual life is infinite. As we are made in the image and likeness of our Creator, so we are spiritual beings and must live this finite physical life against the backdrop of our spiritual infinity.

The actions of nonviolence and peace are not simply the right practical responses to the immaturity of the world's condition; they express the spiritual belief which enables its transformation from imperfection to perfection, the movement from the kingdom of humankind to the Community of God.

Quakers didn't inherit the nonviolent tradition. The Quaker Way receives it directly from our Creator. The way of the mystic creates a direct relationship with God which the secular philosophy of the Just War is unable to undermine. The otherwise dominating grip of custom and culture is made powerless by direct revelation from our Creator. Once the Quaker Way has been established through its corporate seeking, there is no turning aside. In the words of a 1660 declaration by leading Quakers of the time:

"The Spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable and we certainly know, and testify to the world, that the Spirit of Christ, which leads us into all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man, neither for the kingdom of Christ nor for the kingdoms of the world."

Nonviolence – there is no other way. A testimony to die for.

13 Thoughts on The Big Transition into Silence

God is spirit and has to be communicated with in spirit. Our Creator's communication with us is our spiritual lifeblood and that communication we know as Truth. If we live without listening we are as if dead. So it's our spiritual half that we use for this communication, or, in religious terms, this worship. This is the big challenge in listening: to move from the physical brain to the spiritual soul.

The gateway between our physical self and our spiritual self is traditionally referred to as the soul. When we sit in meeting for worship, or alone, there may be external silence, but thoughts run through our brain incessantly. To approach the soul we need to calm the brain. This often involves meditation by channelling all the brain's activity into one thought and gradually phasing that thought out; the thought may be love for the community around us, or it may be a mechanically repeated phrase. We may well find that just when we are feeling a sense of quiet, our brain is away again on some new impulse. Just patiently bring it back, again and again and again, but not lose sight of the possibility that these new impulses may be the leadings of God.

When most members of the meeting are approaching or have reached their soul, Quakers say that the meeting has 'gathered' or 'centred down'. If you were to enter the room at any time after this centring down, you would find the atmosphere palpably different. But if a form of meditation brings you to the gateway of your spiritual self, it is contemplative attention that takes you into your spiritual self. Attention to what? Attention to nothing! The physical road has reached the top of the mountain and has ended; now we must go forward into that true prayer which is God speaking through us. It is contemplation which takes us forward into nothingness. Contemplation is loving attention; seeing with the eyes of the spirit, a way of seeing which needs no direction and no object to look at.

At best, most of us remain in the gateway and this allows some feeding of the physical brain by the spiritual self. Greater maturity allows some to go forward into more conscious union with their spiritual self which in turn is related to God. In this nothingness it is God's love that feeds us, in religious terms we are receiving God's grace. Mental activity can never get us here. When we return we will know better the Way that we are to live. Some can go deeper still and achieve conscious fusion with their spiritual self which then comes to direct the way they live their physical lives.

Thirty years ago when I thought I was a committed Christian, that understanding was simply reflected in my outward trappings; I was a Church member, I understood theology and could teach institutional beliefs, people believed me to be a Christian. Now my spiritual journey along the Quaker Way has moved me on a very long way. Paraphrasing Paul, then what I saw was but a poor reflection in the mirror; now, perhaps, I see face to face.

14 Thoughts on The Big 'T', Truth

The word 'Truth' with a capital T has a special place in Quaker writings. George Fox discovered Truth with his realisation that God, in the nature of the Christ, was speaking to him and to every person directly and individually. It follows that as God is the source of the communication, so the message for everybody must be the same. The message tells us how to understand human life and is described as the 'Truth'.

Even Quakers are guilty of complicating that message and detracting from their testimony to simplicity because there are a number of concepts which more or less mean the same thing as Truth. The Inward Light, the Christ, the Inner Light, the Light, the Spirit, the Seed, the Holy Spirit; they are all attempting to express the idea of a God, traditionally thought of as all powerful, but in fact seeking to communicate with his creation, the human being.

Why should God attempt to communicate with us or through us, except that we are an integral part of the process which will draw all that is created nearer to its final destiny? From within our human limitations we really have little or no understanding what that final destiny may be and we can only use limited human terms such as heaven, the Garden of Eden, perfection, to describe that destiny. We do have quite a problem to overcome with being human! Almost inevitably, we finish by ascribing to 'God' human conceptions such as heaven and hell, forgiveness and judgment, and then treating them as if they are characteristics of him … even the male gender!

So don't consult a dictionary to find the meaning of those words which are trying to describe feelings arising from within our spiritual nature. We must always go beyond the human words and listen to the Spirit which caused human beings to write those words. Then we might feel and find their meaning. If we open ourselves to that spiritual power and absorb its message in its entirety we will, in a sense, already be part of that perfection, that destiny, even though only dimly grasped from within the limitations of our humanity.

The message is that we are co-workers in this task; yet so essential to the task that we are potentially co-partners. Does this mean that we sing more hymns, take more sacraments, listen to more readings from the bible? No. It means we feed the hungry and offer the path of release to those who have been physically or spiritually imprisoned by their human circumstances. We are called to live the life of self-denying love, God's love.

The Truth, for Quakers, is that God is spirit and is communicating with each person through that person's spiritual identity, and the communication is that we are to be God's co-workers in the evolution of creation and that our immediate concern must be to enable all people to hear God's message themselves.

15 Thoughts on Another Big 'T' - Testimonies

The two big Ts, Truth and Testimonies, are not two separate matters, but united as two sides of the same coin. The understanding of both comes to us through our spiritual identity, from God the Spirit who is communicating with us in spirit. When we transmit this experience from God into human language we are immediately beset with the inability of language to convey the spiritual or divine experience – but we must try.

Absolute human non-activity is the first gateway to hearing/feeling/knowing the Truth. Each time we return from that journey into silence, into eternity, we are slightly changed. We do not know the mechanics of how this change happens (in religious terms we live by faith), but we do know a little more about the Truth. But this knowing must not be confused with the activity of the brain. It is a knowing that has entered our physical being from our spiritual self; it is an experience which must now be lived by our physical being.

This experience, or new knowledge, and its consequence of directing our physical lives, we label as Testimonies or declarations of Truth. As human beings we communicate by language and speech that has developed largely from physical observation, so we struggle a little when it comes to conveying truths learnt experientially through our spiritual selves. Testimonies are spiritual truths to which we give expression in the way we live our physical lives.

We learn directly from God that our human life should reflect simplicity and plainness, truthfulness and integrity, equality and community, earth and the environment, peace and nonviolence. These Testimonies are declarations of spiritual truths and living them will hold us in the Truth … we will be living as God intends human beings to live.

This is the root of the fundamental Quaker understanding that there are no such separate things as the secular life and the religious life; there is only human life to be lived as God intends. The knowledge of the Truth that we receive through our spiritual selves, our Testimonies, is the only guide to be used in living our human lives. Concepts such as heaven and hell, reward and punishment, are simply anthropomorphic; they derive from our human nature, not from our divine potential. They are not characteristics of our Creator. We create our own heaven or reward, hell or punishment, when we live, or fail to live, by our Testimonies.

It is quite likely that in the world's terms by following our testimonies, that is by living as God intends that we should live, we shall be the losers. But the world's terms have no spiritual value; in God's terms we shall be advancing his creation to that maturity which we can only describe as heaven.

16 Thoughts on The Big Failure

One of the many insights into human nature that the Book of Genesis offers us is that the human being is made in the image and likeness of God and is therefore spiritual as well as physical. God himself remains spiritual but creates the physical human being on earth as his representative. Communication from a spiritual God will be through the spiritual nature of the human being.

The big failure of current civilisation, including our religions, is that it has not recognised fully the spiritual identity of the human being. Our upbringing and our education concentrate almost inevitably on our physical identity. In religious language the concept of God the Father dominates and the concept of God the Spirit recedes into the background. But human wisdom and human willpower, representing our physical identity, need to be set aside until they can be formed again by our spiritual identity, by listening to God first. Only then will our new nature begin to fulfil the potential of us having been created in the image and likeness of God. From this new perspective we can then re-read our sacred books and recognise the insight we have lost. It's back to basics; first adopt the Quaker Way, then see how our religious books come alive.

And the Quaker Way is so simple it eludes those who are learned in institutional theology. It is also so simple that it does away with the practice of institutional control of religions. Just listen to what God our Creator is saying to us; and when we understand it, we must live it; and part of living it will be telling the rest of the world how wonderful this spiritual relationship is. Our human lives are continually conditioning us to accept and live by human values. Our transformation from living by human values, which are presently unfulfilled or imperfect, to living by our potential of divine values is going to take a long time. We have to make the choices that will bring it about. When God made us potentially in his image it was of necessity an image that we would have to choose to grow into, and our spiritual dimension is the lifeline that is trying to help us make the right choices.

A humankind which has made the right choices is referred to in the bible as 'the Son of Man' (the descendants of humankind [Man] originally created by God). The Son of Man, or Paul's 'new creation', will come about within human history. For this to happen we need both to recognise our spiritual nature and listen to what a spiritual Creator is saying to us.

Are Quakers really the only people who nourish their spiritual identity by seeking to open themselves to God's communications? Are religions really still so immature that they think they have to do the talking and God do the listening? Yes, the Quaker Way tries to remedy the big failure and it leaves every Quaker with a big responsibility … to bring every human being into meaningful relationship with their spiritual self.

17 Thoughts on The Big Responsibility

Two things happened one Sunday morning recently. First, the religious service on the wireless came from a Methodist church. Thirty years ago I was an active Methodist. The hymns in the service were of the sort I would have chosen – they were understandable and they exhorted one to higher standards. I was unmoved. Then, later that morning, I attended worship at a Meeting House which was physically in the shadow of a steeple house and many worshippers came in late after attending an ecumenical service in the steeple house. One Quaker said the ecumenical service merely reminded her of why she had left her previous church – she felt an absence of spiritual seeking among her fellow worshippers.

Why are Quakers unmoved by programmed worship services? Because in George Fox's terms, they represent shadows rather than the substance. The shadow created by the sun shining on an object is not the real thing; it is shadow; the real thing is the substance. The hymns and prayers, liturgies and sacraments are shadows and we are likely to make the mistake of believing they are substance and therefore attach our lives to the wrong things. The direct communications from our Creator are the real thing.

Thirty years ago I was outwardly a religious person, but inwardly only just beginning to ask the serious questions about why does humankind exist. So I was physically a human being who was becoming aware of a spiritual dimension in life. Now, after thirty years of moving along the Quaker Way, I regard myself as a spiritual being living temporarily in this physical human form. I was a spiritual being before being conceived into this human life, I live this human life with my spiritual identity still an integral part of my personality, and when my human life expires then my spiritual being returns to my Creator.

That different perspective causes one to observe the physical and political world around us in a totally different way. No wonder the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth turned the world's standards upside-down. The world's standards are thrown into disarray when we learn and adopt God's standards of self-denying service.

Receiving that different perspective leads one to join a community of believers who, from the basis of their fellowship together, are empowered to speak to the rest of their world. That act of going out and telling other people is the big responsibility. And following the nature of that love which does not force or dictate, the act of telling is not telling people what they should believe, but telling them how to find belief by listening to their Creator speaking to them individually and directly.

18 Thoughts on The Big Dimension

Everything in our physical world has at least two sides to it. No matter how thin a sheet of paper is, it has two sides. The human being is no different. Our physical self is one side; our spiritual self is the other side. And like two sides of the same sheet of paper, they are indissolubly united; together they form our human personality. Nevertheless, the two selves operate in different planes of existence. Hence, whilst our eyes which are physical can see our physical self, they cannot see our spiritual self. Our feelings, which cannot see, can feel our spiritual self and they communicate through a different medium which our eyes cannot see. Our physical self we keep alive by feeding it and controlling it through our brain. Our spiritual self equally has to be fed, but with spiritual food, and we relate to it through our soul.

In our present state of evolution our physical self appears to dominate the way we live; our brain controls our lives. But this has to change, so that our soul informs the brain as to what it should do. We live in that period of time when we are struggling to hear more clearly our Creator's communication with us through our soul, so that the brain can more appropriately guide our physical life as our Creator wants it. But there can be no compulsion in this relationship. For the new way of life to be effective, it has to be the result of our free choice. How do these seemingly theoretical statements about our spiritual nature affect us in practice?

When we sit in meeting for worship that which we cannot see unites us. As we seek together to feel the inspiration of our Creator, so our spiritual selves are joined together. A new and different unity is created. Our Creator's presence becomes a reality which we experience both as an inpouring and an outpouring of divine love. We become channels of this divine grace and this new empowerment informs our physical life. Every encounter with the divine presence, every immersion in the divine presence, is another step towards becoming 'a new creation'.

Recently I attended a lecture on Ignatian spirituality [Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order in 1534]. Admittedly the speaker spoke in generalities and not detailed procedures, but what I heard was largely my Quaker spirituality! Our spiritual selves are already united in God the Spirit; our physical religious practices and creeds are human creations that unnecessarily separate us. And with this artificial separation we lose sight of the fact that basic unity belongs to the whole of humankind, the big dimension.

Our spiritual dimension has to maintain the integrity of our Creator's message and inform our brain accordingly. When our spiritual dimension leads in every part of our lives, then we will become a new creation and we will be living our lives as if we are living in a new dimension (the kingdom of heaven).

19 Thoughts on The Big Discovery

God is Spirit and has to be communicated with in spirit. So why do we use our physical voice or physical brain when we worship or communicate with our Creator? These are part of our physical self, not our spiritual self (though there is so much about the brain that we do not understand that we cannot be dogmatic that all of it will always be solely physical; its capacity may yet develop in surprising ways).

Our spiritual self is an integral part of our personality. As with our Creator, it cannot be seen with our eyes because it has a different plane of existence, and yet it is fully integrated with our physical existence. It is around us and through us. To communicate with our Creator we need to work through our spiritual self, and the gateway to our spiritual self is the soul.

To open the soul we need to quieten the brain, because, unless the brain has already been well trained by the message from our Creator that comes through the soul, it will be continually active with physical matters and thereby unwittingly obstruct our access to the spiritual soul.

The starting point of personal religion is within and around us. It has always been there and, like a jigsaw puzzle, may even be thought of as interlocking with the spiritual world of others and of creation as a whole. How else do our prayers of intercession work, our wishing for the well-being of others, except that we are spiritually inter-related? Paul recognised this and tried to explain it to the Athenians as 'indeed he is not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move, in him we exist'. But an understanding of reality does not come from reading Paul; it comes from experiencing God's communications within ourselves.

Quaker worship leads us into experiencing God's communication through a disciplined silence, a quietening of the brain, a searching by opening oneself to the seeming 'nothingness' of the spiritual world. Our Creator will feed us through that nothingness. We may not be physically aware of being fed, as when we eat a meal, but we will return from the nothingness changed in some imperceptible way or indeed instructed in some direct manner.

But the change or the instruction doesn't have to happen within the hour of time designated as a meeting for worship. We can receive our Creator's guidance at any time and any place. The importance of meeting for worship, or corporate worship, is that it strengthens community. We are never isolated individuals. We are always members of a community, and always at a number of levels, and this is where the use of our physical voice and our physical brain is essential. Community in our physical lives reflects the unity in our spiritual lives. All life, all of creation, is interdependent. All life is holy, all of creation has its spiritual counterpart. We can never be separated from our Creator. The death of the physical body does not separate us. In him we have both unity and everlasting life.

20 Thoughts on Quaker Worship

As human self-consciousness began to develop quite a few thousand years ago, humankind came to recognize that it existed in a benign world; consequently, there is now an innate and recognizable tendency in the human condition to give thanks for that fact. The simple existence of planet earth means that something has created it and for Christians that something has been called God. God and beneficence have become synonymous and because this beneficence is available to everybody, the nature of God is understood to be unconditional love.

The source of this unconditional love, the Godhead, is beyond human comprehension, but a consequence of its activity is the creation of an apparently material universe whose evolutionary development is inspired spiritually by unconditional love. One form of giving thanks, or worshipping, is to sit in contemplation and feel the spiritual and practical dimensions of unconditional love.

Thus, one has the basis for Quaker worship. Waiting together in the stillness for guidance to form within the mind and allowing the personality to be moulded sub-consciously in the course of time by this spirit of unconditional love. The primary aim of this spiritual or mystical worship is to be transformed by unconditional love and seek to be a channel for its expansion in every community in which Quakers are represented.

Quakers seek to experience God and experiencing is a spiritual activity. That they do experience guidance from God is verifiable by their lives and their history because this experience is the prelude to action. The work for peace, the abolition of negro slavery, prison reform, temperance work, the care of the mentally ill and innumerable smaller campaigns which the history books may not have mentioned, these are the consequence of absorbing the spirit of unconditional love. The current activity for reducing carbon dioxide in the atmosphere linked with the search for economic sustainability is a consequence of worship, of thanking God for this wonderful planet and at the same time recognizing that humankind is ravaging it even to the point of potential self-extinction.

Life is to be lived from a spiritual centre. Quakers call it the Inner Light which can enlighten every individual human being who responds to it. Orthodox Christianity understands it to be the inner guidance given by the spirit of the resurrected Christ. It is the spirit of unconditional love which streams from the Godhead and permeates the universe.