

## CHAPTER 13

# *Why the World Needs Quakerism*

THE ROOM IN THE OXFORD QUAKER MEETING HOUSE is light-filled, with a group of twenty or so Friends sitting in a circle on a Friday evening in June. I'm grateful that my friend and elder Eleanor Godway is here, and thrilled Mary Penny, a professional colleague, has also chosen to come. We settle into worship after the tea and light refreshments, and I wait until I'm clear to share. We Quakers today are a pale shadow of who we are called to be. We are stewards of a powerful tradition, one that the world desperately needs. Three unique threads are embedded in our beliefs, structure and practices: (1) the invitation to walk together in ambiguity and paradox, (2) the knowledge that love is first, not belief, and (3) the ability to be together in a loose network of affiliations with a minimum of hierarchy.

When I reached out to British Friends in early 2015, looking for opportunities to gather with them in conjunction with a professional trip, Oxford Meeting was one of the two meetings that responded. John Mason and Anne Watson reached out as representatives of their Ministry and Counsel, and invited me to share as part of their regular "Friday with Friends" series. We put together a title and short description focusing on travel in the ministry for the advance publicity. The morning of the event I sat with what I was led to share, and the title came first. I played with different wordings: "The Amazing Gifts of the Quaker Tradition," "Strengths of the Quaker Tradition," "What Quakerism has to teach/offer the world." I settled on "Why the World Needs Quakerism, and Why We Need to be Better Quakers" as best capturing the gist of the threads I had been given as I sat in worship. Part of what I was led to lift up that evening is that each religious tradition at its founding holds the potential for a unique gestalt, a particular path to the Divine. Understanding the uniqueness of a tradition provides an important lens for considering multiple paths to the Divine, each with its own integrity.

I have carried the specific threads I was given for several years now, checking them with Friends from the different branches of Quakerism, and they continue to resonate. These threads are elements of the Quaker tradition; while each are present in other traditions, the Quaker combination provides a unique whole. The potential embodiment of each of these is embedded in the tradition, and has been present when we are working at our best. The three characteristics which I planned to talk about that morning are the following:

1. We have a process that allows us to walk together in uncertainty, ambiguity and paradox.
2. Love is first, not belief.
3. We have a relatively flat and localized structure, with the worshiping community at the center. We have maintained a global community with a minimum of hierarchy.

Two days later, on the same trip to England, I visited Ipswich Meeting for Sunday worship and a program following worship. As I listened in preparation Sunday morning, I realized I was being given the second part of the Friday evening message: *How we can be better Quakers*. This message was about the practices of Quakerism — we have a skills-based tradition, which relies on practical skills of tuning, discerning, listening and translating the Inner Christ, first at the individual level, and then at the corporate level. The fruits of these practices are transformed lives — lives lived from the Spirit.

The question of *why*, or even *if*, the world needs Quakerism has been discussed by Quaker scholars and theologians over the centuries. Early Friends such as Robert Barclay were clear Quakerism contained a unique restoration of the same living authority and power of God embodied in a religious tradition as early Christians experienced.<sup>1</sup> Over time perspectives shifted and Quakerism came to be viewed by some, including Rufus Jones, as a thread of the Christian mystical tradition.<sup>2</sup> Others such as John Punshon saw Quakerism as a

1 Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, first published in 1678 (Farmington, ME: Quaker Heritage Press edition, 2002).

2 Rufus Jones, *A Call to What is Vital* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1948); Rufus Jones, *The Faith and Practice of the Quakers* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1925).

strand of the Puritan movement.<sup>3</sup> Lewis Benson, in his 1961 essay “The Relation of Quakerism to Its Own History”<sup>4</sup> lifts up again the potential seen by Robert Barclay, of a tradition which can stand in the same power and authority as early Christian apostles. Howard Brinton’s *Friends for 350 Years*<sup>5</sup> emphasized how in practice Quakerism seems to be balancing mysticism, activism, rationalism and evangelism, although he also saw the potential of embodying the same power and authority as early Christian apostles.

A Quaker Haiku  
*Wholehearted loving*  
*Hear and move with the Spirit*  
*The testimonies*

If you ask those in many Quaker meetings today, a common answer about our uniqueness would be the Quaker testimonies, which we teach to our children with the acronym of SPICE and sometimes SPICES: Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, and Stewardship.<sup>6</sup> We proudly proclaim our testimonies, particularly the peace testimony, to the world. They may be the closest thing we have to a creed. Some years ago I was on vacation, and chose to visit the closest meeting for worship on Sunday. I struck up a conversation with the clerk and asked about the life of the meeting. I had visited the meeting before, so the clerk felt free to share deeply. He was concerned about an application for membership the meeting had received from a veteran who had some cognitive disabilities due to military service. Some on the membership clearness committee and in the meeting were concerned this individual didn’t fully subscribe to the

<sup>3</sup> John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> “The Relation of Quakerism to Its Own History,” by Lewis Benson (1961), *Quaker Religious Thought*, Vol. 6, Article 4. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol6/iss1/4> (Accessed 11/1/2017).

<sup>5</sup> Howard Brinton and Margaret Hope Bacon, *Friends for 350 Years* (Pendle Hill: Pendle Hill Publications, 2002), chapter 10.

<sup>6</sup> “The Origin of the Spices,” by Paul Buckley (2012), delivered at South Central Yearly Meeting. Available online at [https://www.concordfriendsmeeting.org/sites/all/files/documents/241.0496TheOriginOfTheSPICESbyPaulBuckley\\_bookfold.pdf](https://www.concordfriendsmeeting.org/sites/all/files/documents/241.0496TheOriginOfTheSPICESbyPaulBuckley_bookfold.pdf) (Accessed 11/1/2017).

peace testimony, and the individual might have cognitive difficulties understanding the peace testimony in situations of conflict. I was taken aback at the situation and shared my understanding: the testimonies grow out of a life lived in the Spirit, not the reverse. When we set a challenging goal, sometimes we can make it look right when the heart is completely wrong. Forcing ourselves to conform to the testimonies flips the order. The historical testimonies were the outward witness of an inward transformation by the Light of Christ, the Spirit, the Inward Teacher.

In Quakerism our words proclaim pride in our peace testimony, yet we have a dramatic history of divisions continuing in the present day, where even within our small communities we are unable to find a way to live into the truths of living with ambiguity, paradox, love and deep equality. People of color, business people, military members, political conservatives, and other groups have sometimes found themselves judged and excluded in Quaker settings. They are living witnesses to the difficulties Friends have had embodying the truths of our tradition. Since talking with Friends in Oxford in the summer of 2015, when I was first given the framing of these three elements of what the Quaker tradition carries, I have walked with each one. Each element has shown up in other places in my life, sending ripples which highlight the importance of these ideas. I have reflected on how each has been manifested historically and today, as well as what might be possible if Quakers could more fully embody these principles.

## Uncertainty, Ambiguity and Paradox

We know how to walk together in uncertainty, ambiguity and paradox, in a world which loves certainty, even when it's wrong. Quakerism at its best, by disavowing creeds, challenges us to hear the Spirit in another, regardless of whether we agree with their beliefs, words or actions. Can we hear the Spirit in someone else's choices, even as they differ from our own? In addition to the emphasis on listening for the Spirit in the moment, Quaker business practice is structured in a way that provides a safe container for difference. Our business practice at its best seeks discernment on actions, not beliefs. A previous chapter, "Four Pillars of Meeting for Business," explored my understanding of Quaker business process, which has the potential to hold space for

differences and for listening with deep respect and love. The truth sought through Quaker business process is the next step, the next action. In the focus on hearing the next step, we create a space which is able to hold paradox and ambiguity.

Quakerism has an emphasis on engaging authentically with others in our differences, similar to the Gospel order of early Christians. Some years ago, my home congregation was considering the question of whether to withhold donations to Friends United Meeting (FUM) because of strong ethical and moral objections to their personnel policy. I believe withholding funds to send a message to someone with whom one is in a relationship is manipulative, destructive to the relationship, and unlikely to lead to the changes we hope for. However, in a deeply memorable session for discernment, I sat next to a long-time Friend in his late eighties who believed deeply he needed to withhold his donation. I felt the Spirit moving in him as he spoke. Since then I have walked more intentionally in the ambiguous space of disagreeing with the FUM policy and being clear to support FUM financially, while also knowing other Quakers may be led to withhold funds.

One of the places Quakers today are directly challenged to walk in ambiguity and paradox is around the question of Christianity. There are Quakers who are deeply Christian and others who see themselves as not Christian at all. Walking together across these varied beliefs requires an ability to hold paradox and ambiguity together. In April 2014, I was in a Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas workshop on cross-cultural communication in High Point, North Carolina. We were invited to think about the range of cultures in our own meetings. The conversation soon turned to Friends who felt their Christianity was being suppressed because others in their meeting were hurt by Christian language. After listening for some time, Carlos Moran,<sup>7</sup> a Latin American friend rose and spoke in translation. He started by saying he heard what people were saying, and he thought he understood. But he didn't understand, because his relationship with Jesus had nothing to do with the relationship to Jesus of the people around him — their relationship with Jesus was up to them. His message fundamentally changed the tenor

<sup>7</sup> This anecdote is shared with the permission of Carlos Moran.

in the room, as he encouraged Friends to more faithfully walk with what they're given, while loving others in the community who see things differently.

In the fall of 2015 my husband and I were visiting close friends in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Their Department of Public Works (DPW) composts residential food waste if residents bring it to the DPW disposal site. My friends Jennifer and Ed are very diligent in composting and taking food waste to the DPW on a weekly basis. Their DPW also has an area set aside for free-cycling, where individuals can leave gently used books and household goods for others to take. Jennifer, as a high school English teacher, enjoys going through the books on a regular basis. This particular visit Jennifer offered to loan me one of her recent DPW acquisitions, a review copy of *Nonsense: The Power of Not-Knowing*, by Jamie Holmes. I accepted the synchronicity and took the book home. *Nonsense* focuses on the challenges uncertainty causes, and particularly on the ways in which ambiguity creates anxiety and affects decision making. I devoured the book, as it spoke so directly to the importance of building the skills of holding uncertainty and ambiguity. The following spring, Alder Keleman, an amazing PhD student I had the honor of working with, recommended another book on ambiguity and uncertainty, Annie Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Tsing uses the example of the matsutake mushroom economy to illuminate the growing uncertainty in today's global economy. The matsutake grows in groves of pine and, much more seldom, oak trees of a particular maturity and density. Such groves have disappeared in Japan, but conditions for matsutake growth are prime in the second growth forests of the Pacific Northwest. Matsutake cultivation, given the complex partnership with trees, doesn't fit within the western agricultural paradigm of controlled monoculture. The collection, processing, marketing and distribution system which has developed around matsutake is resoundingly in the informal economy, where individuals collect mushrooms and independent agents consolidate. As independent contractors, the individuals cannot count on regular paychecks, health benefits or retirement plans, and the individual agents speak of the freedom they feel. There is uncertainty about the hunt for matsutake, and with uncertainty comes an economic uncertainty. The matsutake economy is emblematic of the growing global economic

uncertainty, where individuals are struggling to support themselves and to live. *Nonsense* suggests that we each have a base level of tolerance for ambiguity, and outside our comfort zone we tend to make much more conservative decisions. In such a climate, a greater ability to function with uncertainty would be very beneficial. Holmes notes in *Nonsense* that we can work to enlarge our comfort zone, which then expands the options we will consider for decisions. Paul Levy's *Dispelling Wetigo*<sup>8</sup> compares two-point and four-point logic. Two-point logic has two options, (1) yes or (2) no. Four-point logic has (1) yes, (2) no, (3) yes and no, and (4) neither yes nor no. Being able to accept options three and four allows us to break out of dualistic thinking and to consider more complex truths. Similarly, by focusing on listening deeply to each other and the Spirit, while seeking to avoid two-point logic creedal tests, there is potential for transformation which is sorely needed in times of personal, community, national and global uncertainty and change.

## Love Is First, Not Belief

The second core element of Quakerism focuses on loving others. In George Fox's journal where he speaks of his experience of coming through the ocean of darkness, he describes coming into an ocean of light and love.<sup>9</sup> We sometimes forget the "love" part of the quotation. We each have a hunger to be loved, and we have an image of the love we want — generally unending and nonjudgmental. *Long Life Honey in the Heart*, by Martin Prechtel, tells his story of participating fully in the ritual life of Guatemalan villagers in the 1970s. The book is oriented around the initiation ritual, whereby youth are started on their path to being adult, which means being fully human. One is brought to her first initiation when she starts showing interest in romantic relationships, an indication she is becoming aware of the hollow in her heart, and seeking to fill it. Youths who are not initiated will try to fill the hollow with other people, never realizing the hollow is for God.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Levy, *Dispelling Wetigo: Breaking the Curse of Evil* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2013), pp. 40–44.

<sup>9</sup> George Fox, *Journal*, edited by John L. Nickalls (Philadelphia: Religious Society of Friends, 1997), p. 19.

In each of our hearts there is a yearning for unconditional love and acceptance. We know in our bones and deep in our hearts what it feels like. And yet when we turn to people for this kind of love, be it parents, friends, lovers or our children, we are doomed to disappointment. In our humanness we will fail each other; we're not there when needed, or we judge others.

While the unconditional love we yearn for can only come from God, religious communities, families and other human relationships are important laboratories for practicing. It is in our personal relationships we practice acting from a place of unconditional love. Religious communities can create a place where we are more able to trust.

It is much easier to share the love in our bones with strangers. These people will come into our lives and leave them without there being a possibility of our coming to expect too much of them. And as long as we can give without expectation, we can move with Divine peace. With our friends and loved ones we have expectations — of how they will act, of what they will do for us, and of what their actions mean. The expectations can intervene between the Divine center and our actions. I place my own judgments of others between the Divine in me and the Divine in others, and this is most apparent in my closest relationships. Seeing the ways my thoughts and behaviors are out of alignment with my deeply held beliefs requires regular practice. Remembering and living from a centered place of love can take a lifetime of transformation. Changing the thoughts and behaviors is a lifetime journey which can be supported by a religious community.

When Isaac Pennington tried to capture the everyday joy of early Friends, he said “Our life is love and peace and tenderness.”<sup>10</sup> I hear descriptions of Quaker youth retreats and some adult retreats being able to capture the life of love and peace and tenderness Pennington spoke of. Such retreats can be a valuable learning laboratory, particularly when participants learn from the intentionality of the guidelines and container around the retreat. When John Woolman wrestled with questions of whether he had a clear leading to travel in the ministry visiting with the Indians in the Pennsylvania wilderness, part of his justification for the authenticity of the leading was “Love was the

<sup>10</sup> Isaac Pennington, *Letters*, edited by John Barclay, 1828, p. 139; 3rd edn, 1844, p. 138 (Letter LII, to Friends in Amersham, dated Aylesbury, 4 iii [May] 1667).

first motion.”<sup>11</sup> His intention was not conversion, or the need to preach, but rather a desire to reach out with love. When I listen for my own intentions and motives, similar to Woolman, I often find it difficult to be certain as I wade through the twisted motivations and logic of my own heart. It always feels like a gift filled with grace when I come to a place of knowing love is the first motion.

While the rhetoric in Quakerism is about loving each other, sometimes the reality is not. Mike Huber, pastor of West Hills Friends Church in Portland, Oregon, gave a sermon in March 2017 on authority and listening in love, where he reminded the congregation (and all who listen) of the importance of putting love first in our interactions with each other, while noting patterns of behavior within his meeting where love might not be coming first.<sup>12</sup> I have noted through the years times when my Mormon siblings demonstrate in their daily lives the practice of the non-judgmental love Quakers aspire to. One of the more profound examples was when a childless sister and her husband took in a teenage boy who was accused of sexual assaulting a relative. He was no longer able to live with his family, and when a church leader asked my sister and brother-in-law to help, they did. The boy lived with them for some months. I have shared the story with a number of Quakers, none of whom have thought they would be willing to do the same.

## A Very Limited Hierarchy

The third element of this Quaker gestalt is an organizational structure with a limited hierarchy. Quakerism has a relatively flat and localized structure, with the worshipping community at the center. Quaker monthly meetings are the primary authority, particularly among liberal yearly meetings. Some yearly meetings do have a hierarchy, where the yearly meeting is understood to have authority over the monthly meetings. This variation and ambiguity about hierarchy is important in reminding Quakers how at our best we are all

<sup>11</sup> John Woolman, *Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, edited by Phillips P. Moulton (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989), p. 121–22.

<sup>12</sup> “On Authority and Listening in Love” by Mike Huber, accessed June 30, 2017. <https://soundcloud.com/westhillsfriends/on-authority-and-listening-in-love-by-mike-huber>

listening for the same Spirit. It is also unique in maintaining a diffusion of power and authority. While hierarchical structures may be able to smooth functioning, the nature of the structure values people at different places (higher and lower) in the hierarchy differently. This differential valuing across a hierarchy has historically led to oppression and the justification of rewards and benefits for those at the top, generally drawn from mandated or expected sacrifices of those below them. The differential valuing based on position is the foundation of oppression. Quakerism's limited hierarchy emphasizes the intrinsic worth and equality of all human beings, and the knowledge of worth is integrated into the structure. Complex societal and organizational hierarchies can violate the truth of the intrinsic worth and equality of all. John MacMurray, a Scottish Quaker philosopher, writes in *The Clue to History* of the importance of distinguishing between personal equality and functional equality. While knowledge or expertise may place someone in a position of functional power, the functional inequality does not mean someone is of less worth as a human being. Care for the personal equality of all is embedded in the Quaker structure. There are downsides to the lack of hierarchy, particularly when there are questions of poor functioning. If there is no external authority, who is able to challenge a community which is out of alignment, particularly when the community does not see itself as out of alignment with Truth?

## Conclusions

None of these three elements are unique to Quakerism. They provide a different, perhaps more pragmatic, perspective on what Quakerism has to contribute. I cannot accept the traditional exceptionalism of the power and authority of early Christians others have spoken to, perhaps because of my experience of the same claims within Mormonism. Paul Levy's four-point logic allows me to hold the potential in Quakerism and Mormonism (and all other religious traditions), that when believers are faithfully living in the vital stream of their origins, they can carry the power and authority of the Divine. The exceptionalism I embrace is a constellation of structure, practice and belief that can provide a different way of walking in the world, embodying the living and vital Spirit in a uniquely Quaker way. To

build on the metaphor of grafting from “On Being Grafted into the Root,” Quakerism is a unique and valued rootstock, and Quakers need to be grafted in to live into the fruitfulness of the Quaker tree. The alignment, and grafting in, is a lifelong journey, inviting us to ripen into bearing the fruits of the potential of the Quaker tradition. We live in a world deeply in need of the truths Quakerism can attest to when we are fully embracing this vital and living tradition.

Many Quakers today have been grafted in to the Quaker tree from another religious tradition. And even if someone has always been part of the Quaker tradition, we all need to attend to the grafting Robert Barclay spoke of, “To forsake unrighteousness and be turned to righteousness, and, in the inwardness of the mind, to be cut out of the wild olive tree of our own first fallen nature and ingrafted into Christ by his Word and Spirit in the heart.”<sup>13</sup> We need to be willing to be fully grafted in to whatever tradition we are drawn to. We need to bear the fruits of our tradition. Within Quakerism, the challenge of coming in to this tradition with no catechism or structured teaching program to help us come to know the unique fruit, sometimes makes it difficult to accept the responsibility to be the tree and to bear the fruit.

Quakerism is rooted in personal transformation. Hearing the Spirit requires that we then take action based on what we hear with the inward ear, and that we change our lives to be ever more responsive to the promptings. Our eternal work is to transform ourselves, to move from being convinced of the reality of the Living Christ in our hearts to converting our lives to be centered around the Living Presence. We are called to come into the Presence. And then we are called to move out into the world, holding ourselves in the Living Stream, moving in tune with the Divine. This is how Quakers have always been transformed, and the world around them.

Grafting in to the Quaker tradition roots us in the Judeo-Christian path in a powerful way. Early Quakers would have known of Jesus’s use of the word “Friends” — Friends today are less aware. We are called to be Friends, as Jesus used the term when he said to his disciples, “I will no longer call you servants, because the servant doesn’t understand the Master’s purpose. I will call you Friends, because

13 Barclay, loc.cit.

everything I have learned from my Father I have shared with you.”<sup>14</sup> Growing in to the xylem and phloem of the Divine Source gives us a direct connection.

We are called to be Friends, to hold the truths of our traditions together in one tree. The truths of the Hebrew prophets who knew God’s laws are woven into the fabric of the Universe — how our society looks and whether it is oppressive grows out of whether we are in right relationship with the Divine Source. We are called to bring those truths together with the truths that Jesus brought — God’s purpose is to build the kingdom of heaven on earth, and the kingdom is both within and without. We are called to hold together the truths George Fox and the early Quakers knew, as they had the kingdom of heaven open to them. We are called to sit with these truths, to grow into the rootstock of these truths, to hear the vision of the kingdom for our time. We are called to open the kingdom. This is the fruit of the Quaker tree.

## Queries

*What are your experiences of the unique threads of Quakerism?*

*In your daily life, how do you manifest the principle that love, not belief, comes first?*

*How comfortable are you with ambiguity and paradox? How does your meeting hold ambiguity and paradox as a community?*

*Who can assess alignment with Truth of another?*

*How do we hold each other accountable to the authority and power of the Spirit?*

<sup>14</sup> John 15:15.