

## The Light Within

Trying to put spiritual experience into words might be inadequately compared to trying to stuff fifty energetic kittens into a small cardboard box—the experience is too vibrant, great and powerful to rest comfortably within the limitations that words inevitably impose, and we risk stunting our spiritual lives if we insist on neat definitions. What we experience as infinite and unconditionally loving, as wisdom, strength and life, is ultimately indescribable. All metaphors miss something.

Yet words are key to our communication with others. We're stuck with using them, even if they aren't adequate.

Early Friends went a long way toward solving this problem—insofar as it's possible to solve it at all—by using a multitude of terms and phrases when speaking or writing of their spiritual experience. Many of these have biblical roots. Everyday words were called into service in new ways so that Friends' experience could be known and shared with others. This vocabulary includes words and phrases like the Word of Life, the Seed, Truth in the heart; the eternal Spirit of God; the inward light, spirit, and grace, the light of Jesus; that of God in everyone, and many more.

One of the most basic and important of these terms is the Light. Its biblical sources lie in the beginning of the first chapter of the Gospel according to John and in Paul's letters to the Ephesians (Eph. 5.8) and Thessalonians (1 Thess. 5.5).

John's rich theology notes that all things came into being through the Word, which was God, and that what has come into being in the Word was life, and this life was the light of all people. Verse 5 reads: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version). The true light is then described as the one witnessed to by John, one in the world but not known by the world, not accepted by his own people, but giving power to become children of God to all who received him, as Jesus Christ, this light enlightens everyone (1:9).

Ephesians 5 is full of Paul's advice to Christians in Ephesus about how to live. Verses 8-9 read: "For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true." Early Friends took "children of light" as one of their names. The phrase is also found in 1 Thessalonians 5:5: "for you are all children of light and children of the day...."

Although a metaphor as full of meaning as the Light resists definition, it is possible to talk about how Friends have used the term over time. Here is a list of characteristics which begins with those developed by Sam Caldwell (contained in next week's reading) and expands on them:

The Light is

*divine* – refers to God and God's work in our lives; it is not reason, conscience or emotion, although it works through these – not "natural." but "supernatural"

*single* – one and indivisible, not *my* Light vs *your* Light, but each of us has the Light "in measure" (i.e., *some* of the Light, which we need to heed and live up to), not "spark," because this implies separate lights, this oneness of the Light is the basis for the "gathered" Meeting for Worship

*unifying* – the Light brings us into unity within ourselves, and draws Friends together into a single body

*universal* – the Light works in the life of every person, and has from the beginning, whether a person knows it or not

*eternal* – existed before time and will exist forever; in the Gospel according to John, the Light is the Word, which was in the beginning, and through whom all things were made

*pure* – perfectly good, unerring and infallible, although we may misinterpret its guidance

*unchanging* – our awareness of the Light changes, but the Light itself does not

*personal* – not an abstract force, not some "clockmaker God" who set the universe in motion and then left it to run by itself, but the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Job and of Mary, with whom we can have an "I-Thou" relationship (Martin Buber)

*inward* – implies action, dynamic, the Light shines *within* each of us, sometimes it is a "search light" focusing on aspects of our lives which need changing but which we might prefer to ignore

*saving* – if we follow the leadings of the Light within, we will be brought into fullness of life and right relationship with God, ourselves and each other

*guiding* – if we let it, the Light will guide, nudge and lead us into a more meaningful, richer life—step by step

*resistible* – we are perfectly free to ignore the guidance of the Light, which can't force us to do anything

*persistent* – God starts with us, again and again, where we are. If we continually disobey the leadings we receive, our perception of the Light may dim, but we can't completely extinguish it

*empowering* – if we seek to follow where the Light leads us, we will be empowered to do what is required, even if we start out feeling inadequate

*ineffable* – the Light can't be fully understood and described, words are insufficient.

The Light, as noted before, isn't the only term Friends have used for God and God's work in our lives, and this is important, since like all other terms, it has limitations. Like early Friends, we do well to use many different words and phrases to describe what gives us life, joy and strength.

– From *Quakerism 101* by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (pp.19-21)