

## **The Quaker Way Notes & Comments**

### **Chapter 1: Finding the truth**

26 Feb – 2 Mar, 2018

1. "What is truth?" – Two categories

- *Scientific truth (objective)*: facts, proof, replicable evidence that anyone can see
- *Personal truth*: about ourselves, our particular experience of life, our relationships with others

Quakers are concerned with personal truth, out of desire to answer our own confusion and uncertainty, and our puzzlement about who we really are.

*The truth in question is not the kind you could discover from a scientific investigation. Science deals with objects out there, quite separate from me as the observer or researcher. These personal questions are inescapably about me. To answer them, if an answer is to be found, I must become more fully aware of myself, and of the people I share my life with. This kind of truth is more direct and intimate, more all-embracing than the truth that gives you facts. (13)*

"Mirrored experience" is the sort in which we "recognize something of our own experience" in some other representation of life—for example, novels, films, art and music. "Direct awareness" is the Quaker practice: personal truth accessible without outer "mirrors."

2. "The Quaker quest"

- a. George Fox, like other 17<sup>th</sup> century seekers, went from preacher to preacher, but none "spoke to his condition."

*The preachers were relying on a book to give them knowledge, the Bible, but they had to interpret the book themselves and to apply it to the experience of their hearers.... They were making a very serious attempt to understand human life and its dilemma on the basis of a revelation of God in the past.*

*But that was the problem. What had been said in the past, even if it had come from a profound experience of God, did not necessarily reflect the experience of people living much later. And if the preacher did not have a comparable experience himself he was in no position to interpret that ancient text for the people of his own time.*

*Some of these Puritan preachers were aware of this problem and they tried to overcome it by urging their hearers to pray for the experience that would make sense of it all. Most of them however tried to make sense of it themselves and urged their hearers simply to 'believe the word of God; as it had been expounded to them. (14-15)*

- b. Note that Ambler is very careful not to accuse these preachers, as many modern critics do, of merely "imposing" believe systems on their hearers. He credits them with a "very serious attempt to understand" which, nonetheless, fails because of its reliance solely upon written accounts of "past revelation."

This is a crucial Quaker insight. The Quaker way does not reject the Bible or those who study and teach it. Rather, it respects *traditional revelation* and those who study it, but it also insists that continuing *personal revelation* is essential.

*Simply believing what had been said...set up a conflict between what people held to be true in their minds and what they experienced of life in their hearts.... [They] found it impossible to live out the life they professed to believe in....*

*[There] was an unbridgeable gulf between the words that told them the truth about life and their own actual experience of life. What, then, was the point of believing? In fact it seemed to make matters worse. It persuaded them to think that they had the truth, when they only had a description of it....*

*[They] mistook the picture for reality.... It prevented them from seeing reality with their own eyes. It alienated them from the very thing they most wanted and needed to know. (15)*

### 3. The growing 17<sup>th</sup> century distrust of authority

In seeking an alternative, early Quakers shared with others in the England of the 1600s "a fear that in opposing human words they would be opposing the Word of God."

*The teaching of that time, after all, was almost entirely based on the Bible, which was regarded as the one sure source of the truth that people most deeply sought. The preachers and teachers were merely interpreters of 'God's Word.' But that claim...was already beginning to wear thin. The preachers and politicians had obviously not found a truth that could serve the national interest, either politically or religiously. (16)*

In political, scientific, and religious spheres of life

*Those who were disillusioned with the teaching of their time could not recognize that they must have had some rudimentary knowledge of what they were looking for, otherwise they wouldn't have realised that the official teaching had missed it, or muffled it. Something in their experience enabled them to see what was right and appropriate. (17)*

Note that in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, we are experiencing a similar crisis over authority versus experience.

### 4. George Fox's "awakening"

But how could people trust their interpretations of their own experience in place of trusting unquestioned outward authority? George Fox discovered a way with his *experiment in silence*. Ambler quotes Fox's *Journal*:

*"As I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition.*

*"And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do; then, O then I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.'*

*"When I heard it, my heart did leap for joy.... Jesus Christ...enlightens, and gives grace, faith and power. Thus when God doth work, who shall let it [who can stop it]? This I knew experimentally." (18)*

Fox had been relying on words, but

*The disappointment eventually became too much, too comprehensive, and he finally "gave up." This must have been a point of despair....*

*But...feeling utterly alone and deserted, he sensed something in him which began to tell him what he needed to hear.... He was being told to listen to something deeper within him that would communicate the whole truth..., not by giving him just another set of words, but by enabling him to see.... It was making him aware of the reality of his life, which had previously been covered by the verbal description....*

*It was not his normal self that was talking, not his own reason or imagination. It was like another self, another spirit than the one he was familiar with. He could only think that this inner self or spirit was Jesus Christ himself, the one whom the Bible describes as the very word and spirit of God. (19)*

#### 5. "All appeared that is out of the light"

The first part of Fox's awakening came as his inner awareness shown the light on "darkness, death, temptation, the unrighteous, the ungodly" and, far more important, on "my own thought, groans and sighs, and what it was that did veil me, and what it was that did open me." (20)

Painful as this process was, he recognized the blessing hidden in it:

*It is not all darkness and death. There is also "the light" which enables him to see the darkness and death. So there is something in him which is uncontaminated by the blight on human affairs and which is free from the pressures of self-interest and pretence. It is concerned with truth.*

Better still,

*It shows how he got into this mess and how he can get out of it.... This is what gave him some leverage in the situation. He can now understand what he has done with his life, so that he is free to live it differently.... What the light revealed to him first of all was something on which he could immediately take action—himself.*

*It would show him many other things later...but none of this would be possible until he had seen the truth about himself and done something about it. He would have to recognize the wrong and foolish things he had done, and why, so that he could find a new way to live and a new "grace and power" to live it. (20-21)*

#### 6. Silent waiting

Fox next discovered that he could guide others into this same awakening process. He could discern how the inner light spoke to him, how he become silent within in order to listen to it, and how he could then see what he needed to see.

*He would urge people to give up their reliance on books and the people who tried to interpret them, and to turn instead to a source of insight and understanding inside them.*

*But that also meant giving up thought and imagination, at least for this special time of meditation, for these too were governed by words and images, and would inevitably distract them from the direct them from the direct experience they needed. (21)*

This practice of *silent waiting* remains the core of the Quaker way, because it lets us see "beyond the limits of words." As we become silent and wordless, even in our thoughts, "another kind of awareness will arise, quite different from our normal, wordy ideas." (22)

*Here we might see things as they are, free from the constructions we like to put on them. We get to a new kind of objectivity—not the "facts" of science, which concern objects "out there" quite independent of "me," but the reality of our own experience, independent of what others (out there) have taught us, or our own thoughts and feelings might have persuaded us to believe. (23)*

## 7. Putting "self" in its proper place ("The pretensions of ego")

*Early Friends talked a lot about self-will, the tendency of the self to assert itself.... The ego is our self as we think of it, our sense of identity. It is not the whole me or the true me, but the me I am conscious of, the me I want to convey to the rest of the world....*

*We need a sense of self, of course, in order to function at all. But we do not know ourselves thoroughly, so any self-image we devise—or take over from others—will be highly selective. It will give us what we need for the practical purpose of getting on with others. But there's the rub....*

*Our fate seems to depend on what others think. So without a good self-image we feel naked and vulnerable. This underlying anxiety is no doubt what makes the image so important to us, yet our holding on to the image creates more anxiety, because the image never quite fits the reality....*

*The danger is not that we tell stories about ourselves..., but that we identify with the image, this flat, two-dimensional picture. We say, and think, this is the real me. But it is not of course. It is a pretension, a fiction.... It has to be maintained always against the grain of reality....*

*And this, Friends have recognized, is...the primary source of the miseries we create for ourselves and for others. (24-25)*

The Puritans, the dominant religious intellectuals of 17<sup>th</sup> century Britain, saw the self as rebellious. The approach was to repress the stubborn self. Since this human struggle could never succeed, the only hope was salvation and forgiveness *after death*.

The Quakers found and embraced a very different path in silent waiting. The stubbornness of the self, they saw,

*was due to a profound misunderstanding. The self thinks it is alone and needs to fight its corner. But this is an illusion created by anxiety. The self, that is the true self, is in fact connected with others, and indeed with the whole creation and with its mysterious origin in God. But it cannot see this because it has identified with an image, an idea....*

*"The truth" as the Quakers understand it and pursue it is the reality of our own life, which we are already in some sense aware of, but have denied and repelled from our consciousness.... We had good reasons, no doubt, for repressing much of the reality of our lives before, so to let it out into the open again would seem to be dangerous, or at least very unpleasant and unfruitful.*

*This danger is real, of course, and the experience of opening up to the truth can be painful, just because we are so attached to the way we normally think of ourselves. But the people who have been through the experience can bear witness that the outcome is well worth the pain....*

*They [are] giving birth to a new self. (26-27)*

## 8. The light within

*That this kind of self-knowledge is possible was...another important discovery of the first Quakers. They found that when they sat in silence and slowed down the thinking process in their minds, the self began to subside. It was less anxious and assertive. But more than that, an awareness arose within them which seemed to come from outside them...because it let them see the whole of their life....*

*This was a capacity of detachment, an ability to get a distance on the things that normally felt too close for comfort and too close to see. And this detachment enabled them to look at things*

*squarely that they had previously wanted to ignore. They would see the "darkness, death, and temptations" that fox talked about, but they wouldn't be fazed by them.... (27-28)*

Better still, with this practice came a new sense of relief and freedom.

*There is a feeling of not being condemned, but rather, surprisingly, of being accepted. They could accept things as they are because they themselves were felt to be ultimately all right. But that sense of being accepted...was dependent on their accepting the truth of what they had seen. The one seemed to depend on the other, and vice versa. (28)*

When we don't yield to the pretensions of self, we can discover our real connections with others and with life. New insights are possible, what Fox called "openings."

*Whatever situation we are in, we have a capacity deep within us to see the truth of our situation, to wake up to who we are and where we are, and to do what we know in our hearts to be the right thing to do. (29)*

## Comments from 3/9/2018

### 1. "What is truth?"

Added Resource: *Entering the Castle: Finding the Inner Path to God and Your Soul's Purpose*, Caroline Myss (2008) <http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Entering-the-Castle/Caroline-Myss/9780743255332>

Exercise: Myss' example of being moved by something (e.g., a sunset)

- Remember such a moment
  - What, where, what you felt, etc.
  - Reanimate your spirit with this memory
- What did you experience? Bliss, transcendence, etc.

Comments:

- I.e., try to find an experience of personal truth and experiment with putting it into words.
- Elaine's example of watching an old version of *A Christmas Carol*
- As part of this exercise, spend some time in the silence
- Affirm that *imagination is a real experience*.

### 2-3. "The Quaker Quest" and "The growing 17<sup>th</sup> century distrust of authority"

Added Resource: PYM's *Quakerism 101: Lesson Plan – Unit A*

Comments:

- "Roots in the Protestant Reformation" (pp.10-12) – A history of the times.
- This passage is particularly telling:

*Quakerism arose in a time of major religious ferment. Spiritual questions were discussed then with the intensity of conviction given to matters such as abortion today. Theological debates occurred not just among theologically trained people, but among the general population, who would come out to hear a debate or listen to a visiting preacher the way people today come out to watch a major athletic event. Spiritual life was taken very seriously, and for many people religion was perhaps the most important area of interest and concern.* (12)
- "Roots in Anabaptism" (pp.12-13) – Not well known by modern Quakers, but crucial for putting Quakerism into the larger European context of the times.
- Both sections of Q101 relate to Mike's Chapter 1 notes:
  - *Note that Ambler is very careful not to accuse these preachers, as many modern critics do, of merely "imposing" believe systems on their hearers. He credits them with a "very serious attempt to understand" which, nonetheless, fails because of its reliance solely upon written accounts of "past revelation."*

*This is a crucial Quaker insight. The Quaker way does not reject the Bible or those who study and teach it. Rather, it respects traditional revelation and those who study it, but it also insists that continuing personal revelation is essential.*

- *In political, scientific, and religious spheres of life*

Those who were disillusioned with the teaching of their time could at recognize that they must have had some rudimentary knowledge of what they were looking for, otherwise they wouldn't have realised that the official teaching had missed it, or muffled it. Something in their experience enabled them to see what was right and appropriate. (17)

- Note that in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, we are experiencing a similar crisis over authority versus experience.

Draft queries:

- In what ways do you or have you experienced a disconnect between authority or the teachings of authority and your own experience?
- Have you experienced a dilemma in which established authority's "answer" was way off, a sense that "it has to be something else"?

Exercise based on these queries:

- Finding the similarities between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries
- Speaking to why we are dissatisfied with today's teachings
- Experiencing our own disconnect
- Comparing this with Fox's dissatisfaction.

#### 4. "Fox's Awakening"

Comments:

- "George Fox" (pp.12-15)
- Key idea: The gulf between *belief* and *knowing* (Ambler)
- Address comfort/discomfort with the use of "Jesus Christ language"

#### 5. "All appeared that is out of the light"

Comment: Modern seekers, whether Quaker or otherwise, tend to avoid looking at the darkness in themselves. They focus on the darkness outside. They do not know the cleansing freedom of looking first within, owning their darkness, and then discovering that they are *still accepted by the light*.

#### 6. "Silent waiting"

Comment: Ambler writes about "the light" but omits description and discussion of "the seed." First Friends did not just wait on the light; they also knew from experience that there was a "seed" within them that the light could call forth into life.

#### 7. Putting "self" in its proper place ("The pretensions of ego")

Comments:

- The distinction between the inner self ("the witness") and the outer self ("the ego")
- How do we help people to see the ego? Most of us don't see that there is anything else. We identify ego and self.

"Who is the 'I'?" – Ambler, p.24:

*The stories we tell of our life, even to ourselves, are not only selective, but also somewhat exaggerated if not actually deceitful.... This may seem to us a fairly innocent quirk of human nature, if we are aware or it at all, but Friends have always regarded it as a serious problem. The danger is not that we tell stories about ourselves, or that we entertain an image of ourselves, both of which are necessary and helpful, but that we identify with the image, this flat, two-dimensional picture. We say, and think, this is the real me. But it is not of course. It is a pretension, a fiction, in so far as we identify with it. It has to be maintained always against the grain of reality. And this, Friends have recognized, is one of the sources, perhaps the primary source, of the miseries that we create for ourselves and for others.*

Added Resource: *Entering the Castle* (exercise on xiv-xvi)

- "Thoughts" and "feelings" are like "clouds." They arise in the inner spaces of awareness.
- There are
  - Me/myself as "things"
  - Things that I know are not "self"
  - Several "selves"
- But "I" can see all of these, so "Who is the *seer*?"

Exercise: Get a good sense of your "self"

- What you see as "self" is actually an object
- Anything you can see is an object
- What would be the difference between "seeing" and "getting a sense of"?

"The witness" – "Who is *behind* the 'I' "