

Chapter five

Living Faithfully

We have now seen how we deal with the problems we face as a group. We have a well established method for doing that. With matters for personal decision, however, we are less well assured. We have lost the discipline we once had, many years ago. So part of what I want to do here is to remind you of that discipline, and suggest how it might be applied in our new, modern situation.

But let me remind you, first of all, of what we have discussed so far about the Quaker approach to spirituality. You should then see how our present theme follows on inevitably, and naturally.

I was saying that in our spiritual quest we Quakers rely first of all on the resources we each have within us. We turn to other people for help, obviously, and we read books or papers to gain knowledge and insight. But first of all we rely on ourselves, or rather, on the deep resource within us we call 'the light' and 'the spirit'. We therefore have no priests or ordained ministers, no official teaching or creed, and no sacred books that we regard as finally authoritative, all of which presuppose that the truth or strength we need in life is outside us. In this respect we are unlike every other Christian group, and unlike most other religious groups around the world. Some people think we are foolish to deny ourselves the benefit of these external supports. Still others wonder how we can still call ourselves Christian or religious when we have none of the marks that distinguish a religion. But foolish or not, Christian or not, this is the fact about Quakers we most need to understand.

The Quaker way of living

This then provides the background for understanding how Quakers live their lives. *They live their lives, their practical, everyday*

lives, as they are led by the Spirit within them. That, I think, is a sound general statement about the Quaker way, but it needs to be amplified a bit to avoid some misunderstandings. It does not mean, for example, that Quakers live just as they wish to, as they are led by the whim or desire of the moment. The 'Spirit' that leads has nothing to do with the whim of the moment; it is not itself a feeling or an emotion. It is deep down within us, and manifests itself only as we let go the claims of the ego, including our selfish desire, and let its voice be heard, or its light shine. The voice within 'speaks to our condition', and the light shows us the truth of our life, so when we say we are 'led by the Spirit', we mean that we live in response to the reality of our life as the Spirit shows it to us. This can often be quite challenging, because we might not want to face the reality of our life or do the kind of thing it seems to require. Our desire may conflict with what the Spirit requires.

On the other hand, 'being led by the Spirit' does not mean following a strict code of ethics, not even the code of 'Quaker values'. Unfortunately, Friends have taken a liking to 'values' in recent years, because they don't know how else to describe the basic Quaker commitment. Our life then is supposedly based on a set of 'beliefs and values', described perhaps in our *Book of Discipline*, which we try to put into practice. A recent publication from our Yearly Meeting described our historic 'testimonies' as bearing witness to our basic 'beliefs and values', though it could not then proceed to tell us what those values were. This is understandable if we recognize that that is how other people are likely to see us and describe us; all religious and philosophical groups are supposedly based on a set of beliefs and values, that is, things which could be written down on paper as representing what is true and good. But having put it like that, we can see that that *couldn't* be what Quakers do, not really. They accept as their basic truth what is not and cannot be written on a piece of paper. And it is a truth that each of them has to see for themselves. In

fact, knowing how to live is precisely a matter of seeing for oneself and responding to the truth of what one sees with an open heart.

This sounds risky, I have to admit. A lot of people will object that living without rules or 'standards' is irresponsible and dangerous, and could lead to anarchy. They objected to the first Quakers for exactly this reason. They deserve a reply. Three things, I think, can be said:

1. As we have seen, the Quaker experience is that, when we open ourselves to the truth of our life, our self-deceptions and denials are revealed, including the false image we have of ourselves, and at the same time we discover the true self that lies behind these images. We discover who we really are, not isolated and apart from others, but one with them, and with life itself. This awareness awakens a great feeling for life, and for others, that we can only call love. As we hold on to that truth we find love growing within us, until it overcomes the feelings of fear and anxiety that might have motivated us before. We are able to act out of love, that is, out of warm respect for other people and other creatures, so that we want spontaneously to help them and not harm them. Now with that feeling, we do not need laws and commandments to tell us what to do. 'Love is the fulfilment of the law', as Paul the Apostle said, so we don't have to try to fulfil the law, which we will never do anyway, not completely and wholeheartedly (see Romans 13, 1 Corinthians 13). 'The quality of mercy is not strained', said Shakespeare. Love and mercy are spontaneous responses of the heart to a world in pain, a world in God. What holds us back is not a lack of effort or education, but fear and the false sense of self. Let the light remove these, and we are free to love, free to live from our own true self. We don't even need 'Quaker values'!

2. We can prepare the way for this opening of the heart and we

can guard against the temptation to close it again. We will of course feel antagonistic towards people from time to time, because people can be annoying and we can feel insecure and resentful. These things will happen. We can't expect to be free of them. When the early Friends said they could be 'perfect' they didn't have in mind what we mean by the term, free from all fault and blemish, perfect in every respect. They meant they had the power to act rightly and to resist the temptation to put self first. But they had to exercise that power. They had to be watchful, and when they fell down they had to pick themselves up again. None of it could be taken for granted. But if they put their mind to it, they found, they could live as they really wanted to live. And we could have that confidence too, if we continue to let the light show us the truth. That commitment to truth is our core discipline, and it's that that ensures that the love will flow. Similarly, the experience of love, and of being loved, encourages us to stay with the truth. As Gandhi said (no Quaker, certainly, but a man very sympathetic to Quakers): 'Love and truth are two sides of the same coin'⁷⁸.

3. We can also commit ourselves to the path of truth and love even when we don't feel like it. That may seem to contradict what I said earlier about relying on the feeling for others that arises when we open ourselves to the way things are. But we have to recognize that our deeper feelings can be clouded over by the anxieties of the moment, by tiredness or disappointment. We then have to trust that the deeper feeling is still there, buried somewhere, and act on that trust. Also, we don't always understand very well the situation we are in, and may have to wait a while until it gets clearer. But our experience is that when we act on the understanding we do have, and wait in the light for further enlightenment, it does become clearer. So there is a pattern and a process to living a faithful life, and that ensures that, if we follow it, we will do the right thing.

