

## Session 2: May 6, 2018 – Finding the Truth

**What is Truth?** – There are two complementary sorts of truth that need not contradict each other:

- *Scientific truth* – objective, provable, facts, fundamental to our way of life
- *Personal truth* – direct, intimate, about ourselves, our experience of life, our relationship with others, and our spirituality

Scientific truth is by definition "consensual and collective," yet Quakers seek consensual, collective sharing of personal truths as well. We accept the paradox that personal truth may express itself differently to each individual, but that all beings have the same underlying collective truth planted within them.

**Exercise 1: Sharing of personal truths** – Ambler uses the example of experience elicited by movies or novels. It could also be sunset or something in nature. Try to recollect a time when you were "moved" by something.

*Group examples:* Willie's sensing of situational energies, Amanda's seeing herself from angles she'd never seen in dressing room mirrors, and Wendy's watching the slow movement of raindrops on windows.

### Handout 2.1 – Quaker Roots in the Protestant Reformation & the Anabaptists

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Quakerism arose in a time of major religious ferment. Spiritual questions were discussed with the intensity of conviction given to matters such as abortion today. There was growing distrust of the authority of Church and State, and therefore much dissent. External authorities were increasingly unable to address the real needs of the people.

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

**Discussion** – Is anyone seeing parallels between what was happening in the 17th Century and now?

- There was serious erosion of authority in both the 17th century and the present.
- People who are "spiritual but not religious" (SBNRs) are serious about personal truth and integrity. They long for spiritual community but are wary of groups that impose external beliefs.
- We recalled the efforts of Occupy and other 21<sup>st</sup> century groups that work collectively, decentralize authority, and seek discernment between authentic and illegitimate authority.
- One of us shared the trouble and pain experienced with "waiting silence." This Friend struggles with the internalized teachings of the Southern Baptist Church that "heretical" leadings are "from Satan."

In fact, we all struggle with this personal-versus-external-authority conflict. As Fox and others found, external authority does not satisfy our inward sense of the real. The Quaker way affirms personal authority from within.

### Handout 2.2 – Fox's Awakening

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George Fox "wanted desperately to find the reality he could trust to give him a sense of who he was and what he was to do" (Ambler 19).

He suffered extreme depression, spent time alone, and went back to the Bible over and over. After his initial awakening he still struggled, but now he knew that "he was upheld by the Spirit," *because he had experienced it*. With practice entering the silence, his growing awareness enlightened him. This was a *process*, not the flick of a switch, and it still is for us today.

**Quakerism doesn't have a creed or dogma** – Two central principles are accepted by most Friends:

- *There is "that of God" in every person.* It is universal. William Penn said that when the Christian, the Jew, and the Turk (Muslim) remove their masks, "they will see that they are one."
- *There is direct and continual revelation:* This inward truth communicates with us directly and it is present continuously. Whether we access it continuously is another matter.

### **Silent Waiting**

"Fox urged 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.... It meant giving up thought and imagination for at least this special time of meditation, for these too were governed by words and images and would inevitably distract from the direct experience they needed." (Ambler 21)

### **Exercise 2: Experiment with silent waiting**

It was at this point that one Friend shared discomfort with silent waiting. We listened to this and similar life stories, instead of doing the exercise. For example, a Friend told about coming out as gay while in seminary. He was profoundly convinced of his Christian faith, but he was also certain that God did not condemn his gayness.

### **Pretensions of the Ego**

Ego is our self as we think of ourselves, our sense of identity. For the purposes of this group, the key is to recognize when our egos interfere with our awareness. This recognition is an on-going process.

"[To early Quakers] the self was indeed stubborn, but its assertiveness 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 its mysterious origins with God. But it cannot see this because it has identified with an image, an idea." (Ambler 26)

"The 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, two things happen: the assertive self begins to subside, and "another kind of awareness will arise, quite different from our normal wordy ideas." (Ambler 22)

"It is possible to go on this journey only when there is the light which comes through the understanding of yourself, and that light cannot be given to you by another; No Master, no guru can give it to you, now will you find it in the Gita or any other book. You have to find that light within yourself and this inquiry is hard work. No one can lead you, no one can teach you how to inquire into yourself. One can point out such inquiry is essential, but the actual process of inquiring must begin with your own self-observation." – Jiddu Krishnamurti

### **Homework**

- *Practice* – Try 5-10 minutes of silent waiting practice each day.
- *Readings* –
  - Chapter 2 of *The Quaker Way*
  - Handout 3.1 – The Light Within  
[www.jacksonvillefriends.org/wp-content/uploads/21st-c\\_Quakerism/3.1\\_Light-Within.pdf](http://www.jacksonvillefriends.org/wp-content/uploads/21st-c_Quakerism/3.1_Light-Within.pdf)

## Session 3: June 24, 2018 – The Light Within

Mike, Elaine, Richelle, Willie, Holly, Sean

### Sharing of individual responses

The group makeup was so different from Sessions 1 and 2 that Mike and Elaine set aside the outline they had prepared for Session 3. Instead, we started with what group members had come prepared to do.

All of us had read *The Quaker Way* at least through Chapter 2. Most had also reviewed earlier handouts and session summaries. This allowed us to begin with an unstructured period of sharing the reactions and insights we have experienced to date.

What follows is a very brief summary of themes from that discussion:

There was a do-it-yourself nature to Quakerism's roots among the farm communities of 17th century England. Some of the people could read the King James Bible to the others, but they were all basically pragmatic hands-on folk. Our modern, intellectual and ideological Quakerism may be leading us astray.

Quakers focus on *experience* rather than on *authority figures*. Ambler's book invites us go even further, temporarily setting aside Quaker "authorities" to explore Quakerism "for the rest of us." This exploration challenges us both to engage the mind in the inward process and to communicate that experience to others.

Some of us experience tension during silent worship between the desire to center down and the compelling need to take action on concerns. We discussed at some length the challenge of welcoming rather than fighting that tension. How can we use this tension to lead us to more clarity about *which* actions would be most effective at the individual (and group) levels?

In the Quaker way there is a core question for each of us: "Is the Light making changes in me?"

We revisited and continued Session 2's discussion of how the *ego* (what earlier Quakers called "self-will") interferes with our attempts to open to the Light's work within us. We all need healthy egos to be successful creatures and social animals, yet ego tends to believe that it is "the whole show."

How do we nurture healthy ego yet also help it feel safe enough to stand aside while we explore?

### 3. What does happen in the silence? – Group members shared various personal observations.

During silent worship the energies and objects of attention moving around like the colored pieces in the end of a kaleidoscope. At some point the pieces all fall together into a mysteriously coherent pattern that one can contemplate.

Some of us notice how rare silence is in our daily lives. Silence lets us become able to get below things that happen to reach deeper truths, what's really important.

Our thoughts are always running, and silent waiting can make us very aware of this. The practice calls for not attaching to the thoughts, but just seeing and acknowledging them, just being present and observing. That's when we can feel inward "leadings."

When entering silent waiting, the mind can seem full of fireworks. One practice is to focus on a Bible or other written passage. Attention naturally wanders, and each time it comes back the words may take on added meaning. Sometimes this process hooks onto something else one has been dealing with. One may become silent—like being in a blank space—left with something to chew on later, with answers coming out of the blue.

### Handout 3.1 – The Light Within

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"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." – *Quakerism 101* (19-21)

This recalled Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God." We can take this as assurance from God—that is, from whatever it is inside of us that we awaken to.

We tend to focus on how we are each different and have unique experiences of the light with. *But how are our experiences similar?* To explore this question, we took turns reading from the list of characteristics of the Light in the handout, adding comments if what we read moved us to.

#### 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.

#### Homework

- *Practice* – Continue the experiment of silent waiting each day.
- *Readings* –
  - Chapter 3 of *The Quaker Way*
  - Handout 4.1 – The God-shaped hole  
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  - Handout 4.2 – What now?  
[www.jacksonvillefriends.org/wp-content/uploads/21st-c\\_Quakerism/4.2\\_What-now.pdf](http://www.jacksonvillefriends.org/wp-content/uploads/21st-c_Quakerism/4.2_What-now.pdf)

**Session 4: July 15, 2018 – Looking for God**

Mike, Bettie, Amanda, Willie, Wendy, Josh, Mary, Bruce, Tammy