

Session 3: June 24, 2018 – The Light Within

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

www.jacksonvillefriends.org/wp-content/uploads/21st-c_Quakerism/3.1_Light-Within.pdf

"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
www.jacksonvillefriends.org/wp-content/uploads/21st-c_Quakerism/4.1_God-shaped-Hole.pdf
 - Handout 4.2 – What now?
www.jacksonvillefriends.org/wp-content/uploads/21st-c_Quakerism/4.2_What-now.pdf