

Quakers: Spiritual Principles for Everyday Life

UU Talk, April 21, 2013

Introduction

The Religious Society of Friends holds as the basis of its faith the belief that God endows each human being with a measure of the Divine Spirit. The gift of God's presence and the light of God's truth have been available to all people in all ages. The Society of Friends has no formal creed. We are a religious fellowship based on common religious ideals and experiences rather than on creed or liturgy. (From Baltimore Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice)

There are many aspects of Quakers that could be shared today. In the interest of time and to be consistent with this year's theme for our UU Fellowship, Gary Senier and Georgia Foster will talk about spiritual principles and practices from Quakerism that they seek to apply to their everyday lives. Gary will speak first. After Georgia finishes her presentation, we will give you an opportunity to experience 10 minutes of silent worship.

Experience is the Quaker's starting-point. This light must be my light, this truth must be my truth, this faith must be my very own faith. The key that unlocks the door to the spiritual life belongs not to Peter, or some other person, as an official. It belongs to the individual soul, that finds the light, discovers the truth, that sees the revelation of God and goes on living in the demonstration and power of it.

Rufus M. Jones, 1927

(Presentation by Gary Senier)

Applying Quaker Principles in My Daily Life

Through some counseling for alcohol abuse I was challenged to explore my spiritual beliefs. I made up my mind I was going to start from square-one. No preconceived notions, only facts, no old emotional attachments or loyalties left over from previous religious organizations, no social or cultural pressures from family or peers. While searching the internet I came across a web site called beliefnet. After taking the "Belief-o-matic" survey they matched me with liberal Christianity and Quakerism. After further research I found that the Quaker origin started in the 1640's by a fellow named George Fox who, like many others was unsatisfied with the church of England. He traveled around seeking an understanding from clergy, professors, and others of knowledge. One advised him to take tobacco (which Fox disliked) and sing psalms; another, lost his temper when Fox accidentally stood on a flower in his garden; a third suggested bloodletting. He hoped to find among the "English Dissenters" a spiritual understanding absent from the established church but fell out with one group, because he maintained that women had souls. After that was unproductive, for about a year he became somewhat reclusive. Contemplating in his room, walks in the fields, and reading the bible. Then when he had exhausted all possibilities it came to him. Jesus was there living inside each of us. All we need to do is look inside ourselves. This was revolutionary for the time. He came to believe there were certain truths.

- *we are guided by an inner light rather than by any scriptural teachings.**
- *rituals themselves have no real power**
- *god dwells in the heart as opposed to churches**
- *ministry can come from anyone not just clergy**
- *No clear distinction between father, son, and holy spirit**

From these realizations there came to be what is termed the testimonies. These probably grabbed me as much or more than anything. They just seemed so pure and simple.

**Integrity
Equality
Simple living
Peace**

I could relate to George Fox's sincere honest open search for spirituality and the divine. That's what I was trying to do. These 4 simple testimonies

are my guide posts for daily living. Some of the other Quakers have adopted 5 or 6 additional testimonies. These 4 were the ones that I came across on my initial research of Quakerism. They are simple which works for me being a simpleton myself by nature. I could relate to George Fox's sincere, honest search for spirituality and the divine. This is the roots of Quakerism. For me it is essential to have the basis of my spiritual organization in line with what I believe deep down inside rather than my spiritual organization trying to dictate how I should feel.

And now for the part of Quakers that sets us apart from other spiritual organizations, "meeting for worship". That is the time that we sit in unobstructed quietness. To listen to, to converse with that sacred inner voice. Thankfulness tends to be a common awareness. When I have something troubling me, it is the time I listen for solutions.

The simplicity of Quakers is what gives me a working, functional path for me to walk. For me simple necessary. If my spiritual bearings are too involved, my brain drowns in the volumes of dogma. I don't have the time for studying all the scriptures, or all the teachings of the world's religions. These teachings require endless amounts of time and effort. I don't think one's spiritual path should be that hard to nail down. The truths that these teachings point to, I believe, as George Fox believed, are for the most part in our hearts. Most religions tend to make everything right or wrong, good or evil, and black or white. Life from my perspective seems to have a fair amount of gray. Abortion for example. I know some feel abortion is murder. I can clearly see their logic. It is taking of a potential life. Then there is another perspective. Would it be better to take that life early on instead of allowing it to continue and be destined to a life of starvation and disease as might be found in some parts of the world. Or to be born of a substance abusing mother and would most likely be born with physical and or mental problems as well as horrible living conditions. I sympathize with both views and would by no means say that one was right or wrong. Today I tend more towards the abortion side of things, but admittedly feel an uneasiness about it. Tomorrow life's journey may reveal a different voice that speaks to my heart. For me the Quaker principles suggest that we can only be responsible for earnestly listening to that inner voice and live our lives accordingly.

Also, another huge aspect of Quakerism in my life is I can feel good about about myself. All the good things on earth are here for our enjoyment and we don't need to feel guilt about enjoying them. For example food, relaxing, a drink and sex. My point is I don't have to go through life feeling like I am an unworthy sinner. I shouldn't live a life denying myself worldly pleasures in hopes it might put me in good graces with the almighty. Quakerism let's me feel good about myself and encourages me to take seriously my responsibility of fallowing the inner light that guides my spiritual life.

Quakers: Spiritual Principles for Everyday Life

UU Talk, April 21, 2013 – Georgia Foster

I told the Kalamazoo College chaplain, a Baptist minister, that I thought anyone could be a Jesus. His reply was a question, “Do you know anything about Quakers?” That led me to my first forays exploring Quakerism in the middle 1960’s. Then, in the early 1980’s, Bob Murphy, my late husband reintroduced me to Quakers, otherwise known as The Religious Society of Friends, or Friends, for short.

The Friends worship groups in Wyoming as well as Montana are of the liberal, unprogrammed variety, where people gather in silence or stillness, to worship together. Another variety is the programmed Quakers who are conservative, evangelical, have a pastor and conduct services more typical of Protestant Christians. Their place of worship is often called a Friends church. I have only participated in unprogrammed, silent Quaker meetings.

Several aspects drew me to Quakers, but the strongest was personal. I was struck by how real the people seemed. In their presence, I felt I was most authentically myself. (I hasten to say that this is a feature of our Unitarian community, too.) At my first Montana Gathering of Friends, as at most weekend gatherings of Quakers, participants had an opportunity to meet in small worship sharing groups – my favorite activity. These groups met for 1½ hours twice in the weekend to ponder queries, that is, deep questions. Out of the silence, each individual could share experiences from his/her own life related to these queries. In this time of focused contemplation, one has a chance to sift out one’s own thoughts, feelings and attitudes, as well as hearing those of the others present. It’s a means by which even newcomers can feel intimately connected. I felt as if I had found my spiritual home amongst Quakers.

What do we do during a silent meeting for worship? At best, we sit in expectant listening, hoping to hear some truth from the still, small voice within – the inner teacher. Sometimes, the hour gets filled with random thoughts, like making a grocery list, or sleeping! But when I’m alert, I contemplate the week past and the week ahead, or the people I’m blessed to have in my life. I may hold someone or something in the

Light. This means I focus, either in concern or thanksgiving, desiring that a person, situation, problem, or my attitude be illuminated by divine grace.

As an aside, I want to share two experiences of holding something in the Light in my life. One occasion related to preparing this talk. About a month ago, I was awakening from a dream, feeling happy and strong. Then, I thought about having to prepare this talk and my heart sank. It occurred to me I was looking upon it like a term paper due in a required college class! I mentally stepped back, realizing I didn't need to think of it in this way. Spirit reframed it as an opportunity to share with my beloved UU friends things I care deeply about. I was energized and got started writing notes for the talk. Another occasion was before Bob Murphy, my late husband and I were married. I was still living in Worland. He and I had spent a day hiking in the Bighorns and had just finished dinner at The Pines Restaurant. We were about to make an offer to buy a house. Before parting, Bob suggested we take "quiet time," that is, hold this decision in the Light. We sat in the grass, cross-legged, facing each other and closed our eyes. Within 3 to 5 minutes, we simultaneously opened our eyes, each knowing it was wrong to buy that house!

Back to the silent meeting for worship -- During the hour of contemplation, I may have an insight that feels important. Maybe it's just for me. Or, perhaps it feels like something I should share. If my heart starts to pound. I know that I should break the silence and speak. Our Quaker meetings in Sheridan may be silent throughout, or perhaps one or two people speak. Like Gary, I often feel full of gratitude at the end of worship.

This style of worship is an expression of the principle belief of Quakers that there is "that of God in everyone." There is a spark of the Divine in me, and in each of you. Silent worship gives me an opportunity to pay attention to that essence of myself. As Parker Palmer observed, philosophers dicker about what to call this core of our humanity. Thomas Merton called it true self. Buddhists call it original nature or big self. Quakers call it the Inner Teacher or the Inner Light. Humanists call it identity and integrity. Many people today refer to it as soul. For me, I usually call it my Spirit.

Inner Light refers to the presence of God (Spirit) in our hearts and lives, a reality which guides us and directs us, which gives us strength to act on this guidance, and thus brings us into unity with (Spirit.) Inner Light is different from conscience, which is developed awareness of the merits or faults of our conduct, intentions or character. Conscience is the sense of obligation to do right. My Inner Light, or soul, or Spirit guides me to be true to myself, integrated, to be Whole.... Not to be Good! Wholeness honors all of me – my flaws and limitations as well as my talents or gifts. If I follow my Spirit’s guidance, my needs are considered and my boundaries kept. (That is not necessarily so with following my conscience!) Parker Palmer talks about “aligning soul with role” in his book, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*. When I pay attention to Spirit, aligning soul with role, life flows better for me.

The challenge is discriminating what **is** the voice or impulse of Spirit from what **is not**. The words in my head – sometimes referred to as “monkey mind” - come from many sources: pride, self-righteousness, guilt, envy, shame, anger, arrogance, fear, unworthiness -- with the ego in charge. My Spirit has trouble competing with these other voices. I need to be quiet a while, and have the intent to hear my true self, to discern it.

Patricia Loring, in her Pendle Hill Pamphlet entitled *Spiritual Discernment*, begins by pointing out, “Spiritual Discernment lies at the heart of Quaker spirituality and practice. It’s grounded in the central Quaker conviction of the availability to every person of the experience and guidance of God...” Spiritual discernment is the capacity we can use in deciding whether or not to speak in Meeting for Worship. When conducting a meeting for worship for business, at our best, we rely on spiritual discernment to sense the right course of action to follow. A special practice of Quakers where the community helps an individual find the right path is called a Clearness Committee.

A Clearness Committee is a gathering of a small group of concerned people focused on someone who has a question, a problem, or a situation about which he or she wants to get clarity. The process was devised by early Quakers in the mid 17th century. Since they chose to do

without the benefit of ordained clergy, those early Quakers needed a structure to help members deal with personal issues that people in other religious groups would take to their pastor or priest. That structure embraced two key Quaker convictions:

1. Our guidance comes, not from external authority, but from the inner teacher, and
2. We can use community to help us clarify and amplify the inner teacher's voice.

I have had the good fortune to be a focus person in several Clearness Committees, as well as a participant. One such committee was offered to Bob and me by Montana Quakers, when they observed him declining, requiring more assistance from me. At one of the meetings, I told them that I was worried about Bob's physical status because he didn't go on walks anymore. I feared if he didn't "use it" he'd "lose it." Someone turned to Bob and asked him how he felt about going on walks. He said, "I don't want to." I burst into tears and cried. I guess I hadn't asked him. He had been very active in his earlier life and had loved to walk. Now, in his 90s, having some mobility problems, he didn't want to walk, understandably. With the tears came my acceptance that it was his body, his life, and ultimately, no business of mine whether he was fit. I also accepted, at a deeper level, that he was on his way to dying. This was very important. I let go of trying to entice him to go walking. After a month or two, he actually started to initiate walks again. It probably helped that I wasn't expecting him to do so anymore. Even if you are not nagging, a person can tell if you want them to do something!

In conclusion, I now understand why Quakers seemed to be such real people. As Quakers, they were trying to live a life true to themselves. Their authenticity freed them to welcome my own. Spiritual discernment, listening to the Inner Teacher, was the practice that they modeled for me – a spiritual practice I now work at using in my daily life.

Now I invite you to settle into silent worship for about 10 minutes, as you contemplate one of the queries on the insert of your program. After, I welcome you to share thoughts that came to you in response to the queries.

Queries

1. Some might think “living from our spiritual center” suggests being good all the time or always being nice, cheerful, sweet. Rather, it intends that we be true, that we live authentically. Thomas Merton claimed that “there is in all things...a hidden wholeness.” Parker Palmer observes, “Wholeness does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.” Do these quotes resonate with you? Comment.
2. Have you ever been a part of a community, group, or relationship that “invaded or threatened your soul” or sent your soul into hiding? What can you say about the experience that violated your inner life?
3. Have you been part of a community, group, or relationship that was hospitable to your soul? What was it about that experience that worked for you, that allowed your soul to show up?

Resources

Faith and Practice of Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

Faith and Practice of Intermountain Yearly Meeting

Faith and Practice of North Pacific Yearly Meeting

Brinton, Howard H. ***Friends for 300 Years***. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1964.

Loring, Patricia. *Spiritual Discernment: the context and goal of clearness committees*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 305. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992.

Palmer, Parker J. ***A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life – Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community in a Wounded World***. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, a Wiley Imprint, 2004.