

'Living our Faith Daily: the practice of testimony'

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Our Quaker faith appears paradoxical in its simplicity and its fluidity. We enjoy both an unadorned faith stripped of outward form and doctrinal prescription but also a constantly dynamic space for the interpretation and reinterpretation of our spiritual experience. This fluidity makes it difficult to describe, to teach, and thus to understand, and also for us to know or talk about as Quakers what a Quaker *life* looks like.

I want to try and lay out how I understand Quakerism, the ways we have understood testimony, reflect on some of the challenges that face us as we try and inhabit a place of authentic spirituality in everyday life and suggest some tools and approaches that may help us along the way.

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So, first, what is Quakerism?

I see it in terms of four elements:

- a) that at the basis of all Quakerism is the claim that we can encounter the divine directly without any text or priest. That was the foundational insight for George Fox, that there was one, *even* Christ Jesus, that could speak to his condition, and it continues to underpin all we do, and indeed the way that we do it. We worship as we do because we experience often enough that connection.
- b) That we have developed ways of worship to nurture this sense of encounter.
- c) that, and this is crucial for a group led directly by God, we have developed trusted systems of discernment to differentiate between this experience of encounter and our imagination or reason.

- d) that this experience does not leave us alone but nudges and shoves us, takes us by the scruff of the neck, to practice our faith in the world, to live our lives as testimony to our spiritual experience.

I have three additional reflections about this list: a) that within our Quaker way, a detailed corporate theology is not central but rather we follow our own ‘belief-stories’ as part of a spiritual journey, b) that this list of four elements is highly and necessarily collective or communal in its focus: all of these things are true as individual Friends, but we have found over the centuries that they all work better when we come together. So we nurture our sense of divine encounter by intentional moments of worship, by collective discernment and through collective witness. We are priests one to another, helping each other understand, find, and foster an authentic faith. c) we cannot be touched by the divine and stay as we were, that this kind of encounter is essentially and necessarily transforming. We are spiritually transformed in order to go out into the world to help transform it. Our daily life is our testimony to our experience of spiritual encounter.

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Thus, our transformed and transforming life is testimony to our experience of spiritual encounter. It includes what we cannot but do, but it also reflects our faith and at times our lack of it. It is the whole of our life, the public resonance of our spiritual state. We often think of testimony as an integral part of Quaker tradition but we can also see that over time we have thought of this aspect of our faith in different ways and I want to rehearse some of this history to help us see our present situation more clearly.

Looking back at Friends from previous centuries, we can see that they were clearer and more prescriptive about how the Quaker way infiltrated just about every aspect of life. If you were a Quaker you acted in a particular way and your Meeting helped ensure this.

The first Quakers, in their fantastical intimacy with God, their sense of new covenant with God (Jeremiah 31: 31) immediately started behaving differently from non-Quakers as a consequence of their convincement, their conviction. They refused to pay tithes, swear an oath in court, use the pagan-derived names for days of the week or months of the year, use the deferential form

'you' or take their hats off unless someone was in prayer. Fox was wary even of 'outward talk' and wanted all his speech to be 'from God', as vocal ministry. As it was, God gave him plenty to say! However, it didn't make for easy small talk: coming into Sedbergh with his Midlands accent, he was asked 'where are you from?'. He didn't say Fenny Drayton but replied instead 'From the Lord!'.

Very early on, we start to see advice too on dress: no unnecessary buttons or lapels that are too wide, and quickly the Quakers become a recognisable group, distinct from 'the world'. We can think of Thomas Ellwood meeting his friends in Oxford and on not returning their greeting being recognised as a Quaker. One scholar has even identified a Quaker gait or way of walking.

The challenge for Friends came with the second generation, a group who were born into the true church but who were awaiting their salvation experience. For these Quakers, Quaker 'peculiarity' or particularity, the mark of being the purified people of God (Titus 2: 1), was adopted as a marker of what an authentic spiritual life would look like in spite of Margaret Fell's protest that peculiarity was a 'silly poor gospel.' The form of a Quaker life became symbolic of the aspiration to holiness and perfection. And consequences became rules as the sense of the spiritual life became less one of confident intimacy and more one of spiritual anxiety, aspiring to the spiritual realm whilst hemmed in by a corrupt and corrupting world. Quakers could only marry other Quakers or face the possibility of disownment. Quakers couldn't print without permission, own a piano, or have a picture on the wall. In the eighteenth early nineteenth centuries, Quaker energies became focused on the preservation and presentation of purity rather than mission. The true church became the gathered remnant (Jeremiah 23: 3).

In the nineteenth century Quakers started to see themselves as part of the true church and encouraged by the less restrictive forms of Christianity practiced by others, became more confident about living a less prescribed and proscribed life. Why, one asked, did the spiritual journey need to start in the tailor's shop? In general, by the 1860s, Quakers were open to the possibility of marrying non-Quakers, and of making plain speech and plain dress optional. The list of distinct Quaker forms dwindled and after this time it would be possible to leave the Meeting House, be inaudible and invisible in the street and head home to, say, your Methodist spouse. In the fifty years that

followed, there was also a dropping off of the way in which the Quaker life was seen to be wholly accountable to the Meeting. What we had in our houses and how we conducted our business affairs became seen to be a personal matter rather than the business of the meeting. The unexpected visit from the Elders became an anachronism. From the 1860s we get the possibility and then the reality and even requirement of a 'private life'.

Testimony has maintained its aspirational role but in a far more fluid and permissive way. Disownment is far less common now and a Quaker life is one to be interpreted, as the ways in which we describe Quaker faith has become more diffuse. We have moved for example at the end of the nineteenth century from talking about being against war to being 'for peace' but peace is a far less defined term. What does it mean and how far does it extend? Does peace necessarily include vegetarianism? In the nineteenth century, we moved from plainness to talking about simplicity but what does a simple life look like? Is it about going everywhere by bicycle or buying a car that doesn't break down? We have also moved from a single understanding of our life as testimony to a list of testimonies. This idea of a list was first devised in the 1950s to help teach non-Quakers about the Quaker way but all of us new Quakers then took and developed the idea of this list so that since the 1990s we have acronyms like STEP (Simplicity, truth, equality and peace) and SPICE (simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality) or now SPICES or STEPS to add 'sustainability' to the list. The difficulty with lists is that they take away the sense of all of our life as a single act of faith, and that we can get into individualistic habits of, for example, saying we are strong on peace but low on simplicity, or big on truth but troubled by pacifism. So we can get into the habit of a 'pick and mix' Quaker faith. This is not surprising however given how much we are asked to decide for ourselves. We live in challenging times in terms of interpreting what is and is not Quaker.

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The growth of the private life since the 1860s means a) we need to decide what is and is not Quaker and also b) when and when not to share those intimations, or indeed c) find a way to share the struggle to live up to those intimations with our Meetings. However, as Meetings we have not offered any replacement to the unexpected visits of the elders. Indeed, we are rather shy

to get involved in lives outside of the Meeting House as we no longer know what is appropriate support and what is intrusion. Many Friends going through personal crisis say they have felt unsupported by their Meetings but it may be more that we have become unpractised at knowing how to help in situations that are centred outside of the Meeting House.

When do we come to the Meeting and say we have bought the big car or the air flight or that we want to? It is not easy to share our struggles and our shortcomings in a community which has no structures to share, hear and redeem our personal hopes and failures. How do we help each other along through the week when we may not even know what others in our Meetings are struggling with?

Only in the strongest and deepest of our Quaker communities are we getting that right, or, as happened in my Meeting, when a Meeting has undergone a crisis that has laid bare the consequences of human temptation. Our very humanity was exposed amidst the hurt and discomfort of mess or the hours of patching up and helping out. We saw that we are like everyone else, that none of us have polished and perfected lives. We saw that, after all, Quakers are human, that we are Quakers not because we are goof enough to be but because we are not good enough, because we need each other. Our unrealistic expectations of one another fell away and our ability to really know and support each other was nourished.

We are also poor at dealing with disharmony. Helping others sort out conflicts is far easier than dealing with disputes in our own communities. We want them to go away so we pretend they are not there. We see mediation as the way forward when actually someone on one side may have simply overstepped the Quaker mark and needs telling so. Indeed, it amazes me a) how uncivil we can be to and about each other (and e-mail seems to nurture this disregard and we have learnt in my meeting to stop using it when conflict arises) and b) how as role-holders we often lack the confidence to fulfil the role discerned for us by our Meetings. We may need to simply say' we do not talk to one another like that' or 'You have a point but we don't go about things like that here': 'we love you but No.'

In these situations of conflict, we might easily experience the disappointment we expect, feel the friction we fear, create our own catastrophe. We may find ourselves stepping back from that central space of the gathered meeting into our own beliefs and positions set over and against those of others who then also step back to defend their viewpoint. As one Friend suggested to me, it is as if there is a line in the middle where we gather and hold each other in love. Stepping back from that line means leaving the Spirit-led and grace-filled space and getting into ideas of our own sense of right and wrong, of no longer giving the problem up to God, but becoming our own agents. When we lose our sense of being a worshipping community, when we lose our spiritual connection, nothing works as it should. We are left with reason, fear and mistrust. We become contractual and not covenantal. We develop fortified lines and stop listening or hearing. We need to try and hold to the line of Spirit-led space, and continually keep moving towards it. Always we need to see our worshipping community as our central focus and resource which supports all else, rather than see Meeting as the optional add-on to a personal spiritual life, if we are to avoid the destructive singularities of individualism.

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And yet we need also to try to live as Quakers in the days between our next experience of community. Our faith is not limited to one morning a week. We aspire to *be Quaker* all of the time. We are impelled to live our faith daily, but do so without many of the guides other religions have in place to help folk along the way. No weekly sermons, no daily mass, no confession, no liturgical calendar, no released minister to talk to, just, as George Gorman put it, 'the amazing fact of Quaker worship', the way we can find without a word being spoken or without any great knowledge, as Francis Howgill said, the experience of the Lord appearing to us daily, a place to stand in and what to wait in.

Our discernment becomes central and yet often we are without the community in which our practice is grounded. We need 24 hour clearness committees just over our shoulders but we are often in places where we are physically alone, accompanied only by the sense of presence which as Quakers we claim to be near at hand. So, the practice of testimony is the realisation of a discerning life, the dynamic relationship with a God who gathers, guides and orders. It is about the asking and the finding of the holy sense of the what, the

when, and the how. It is about living in the space of humble unknowing with a readiness to learn. It is about, as it is in our Quaker meetings for worship for business, of setting self aside. It is about having our feet in the stream of the living waters of Spirit. For me, every moment matters, every decision is to be offered up to ideally be blown through, winnowed, with the winds of the holy spirit, for the wheat to settle, the truth to be found. Indeed the decision itself may be less important than being in the space from which the decision can be made. It is about bringing the rarefied mountain top experience into the daily life of the valley, 'the valley of love and delight' as the Shakers wrote.

How do we stay in that space of an accompanied life, listening to divine advice and instruction? How do we know when we are being faithful and not just following our own imagination? Well, we might look for the signs of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), or feel something as 'simply right': perhaps everything just slots into place and energy flows freely. I know that is one measure I use. Do the dominoes fall down or are there so many impediments that it feels as if the decision is not rightly ordered? The dominoes went down and continue to go down over our decision to sell a seventeenth century Meeting House in the country and move to a more modern building in town, but were also helped by asking a question that took our own preferences out of the picture. Asking whether we should move or not put the focus on us, on our preferences and dreams in the here and now, and we couldn't find unity. When we asked what was best for the future of the Quaker community in the area, we experienced a truly gathered meeting a deep sense of unity that it was right to move. We were more easily able to put self aside and keep close to the line of the Spirit-led community, rather than retreat into fortified and reasoned positions. So often getting the question right can ease discernment.

I have also been helped by the Amish test: 'Does this action build community?' We may think of the Amish as living a seventeenth century life and in some way they do but they also innovate. They put innovation 'on probation' and they see whether the change builds community. Does giving the children baseball strips build community or hinder it? I have been able to say no to classic cars that were just for me but which would also put our family into debt and say yes to say a computer or a phone that helps me stay in touch when I

am travelling. I have learnt to come forward into family life, the greater good, the bigger aspiration, and out of my personal preferences.

I know that when things are difficult with colleagues or friends, I need not to retreat to indignation or needing not to hold on to my certainty that I am right but to keep coming forward. To think myself right means I judge the other to be wrong, but when I am truly back at that place, I do not care who was right or wrong. I am prepared to be wholly responsible because that judgment is as nought to the sense of love I have for the person I argued with. I am back with God and out of my own stuff.

Susan Robson, in her book on Quakers and conflict *Living with Conflict: a challenge to a peace church*, tells the story of two Pennsylvania Quaker farmers whose land shared a boundary and a stream, Richard Barnard and Isaac Bailey. Richard refused to pay war taxes whilst Isaac was a supporter of the Revolutionary war. Indeed Isaac was known as a contentious Friend and over a land dispute, dammed up the waterway. Richard, the fervent and upright Quaker, went to talk to Isaac, took other Quakers with him and even tried to settle the dispute using arbitration. But Isaac would not budge. Richard was very frustrated by the situation, by the problem with the water, by the dispute itself, by the example it presented to others and by the fact that it was clear that he was in the right. One day travelling minister listened to Richard's frustration and reflected back that 'there is more required by some than others'. But what more could Richard do? He sat in prayer and realised he had to give up the idea of being 'right' and go to his neighbour in love and humility and ask for forgiveness. He felt called to go and wash his neighbour's feet, such an unusual idea that he kept trying to push it away. But the leading was persistent. So he filled a bowl with water and went to his neighbour's house. Isaac was still in bed and Richard explained why he was there and how hurt and saddened he had been by the dispute. Isaac didn't want to know but Richard persisted and ended up washing Isaac's feet. Isaac then got up, got dressed and accompanied Richard to the door. Later that day, Isaac took a shovel to the dam, and later paid a family visit to Richard's family, the first for many years. The two maintained a deep friendship.

We are asked to do what love requires.

We need to go further than just our own sense of the line to maintain community. We need to go right up to those who may have considered adversaries and enwrap them in the love of God. **Let us always imagine that we are the ones that more is required of.**

This is a lesson for our Quaker communities but also a lesson for our lives outside of Meeting. It is about living as a Quaker. It is about how we can be in the world as we engage with all those we wish to labour with. It is interesting that the early Quaker women were far less into spiritual warfare than Quaker men and far more about sowing those they disagreed with a sense of love alongside their reprimands.

It is also about how we can be with ourselves. On our own, as we try and discern what to do when and how, we can practice keep coming forward to God. It may mean sitting with decisions longer, delaying decisions until we are clear, to share the decision and ask for help more often from Meeting (perhaps asking for a clearness meeting), to share our lives more fully with each other and to recultivate that sense that we are a spiritual community and not a social club: to find our lives run through with the Divine in and out of Meeting.

Thomas Kelly wrote:

How, then, shall we lay hold of that Life and Power, and live the life of prayer without ceasing? By quiet, persistent practice in turning all our being, day and night, in prayer and inward worship and surrender, towards Him who calls in the deeps of our souls . . . Walk and talk and work and laugh with your friends. But behind the scenes keep up the life of simple prayer and inward worship. Keep it up throughout the day. Let inward prayer be your last act before you fall asleep and the first act when you awake. And in time you will find, as did Brother Lawrence, that 'those who have the gale of the Holy Spirit go forward even in sleep'. (Thomas Kelly 1941)

Practise forms our life into a practice, a discipline or a life of discipleship, and it becomes easier to find that space inside where we connect with God, feel spiritually authentic, know the answers in heart as well as head,

I feel am a better Quaker today than I was a decade ago. I am more practised, but also my practice has developed with my understanding of self and of my mistakes. I have needed to wash my own feet as it were to help forgive myself for past stupidities. How are we to live our faith daily? We are to be priests one to another, continually coming forward to each other, washing each other's feet: if that motion of love is the heart of our practice of testimony, the living of our daily faith, our inhabitation of being Quaker in the world (our testimony), shall come all the more easily.