The Sacred in the Everyday

Exploring the Quaker understanding that all times, places and people can be sacred and how this affects our everyday lives.



This unit invites you to find out more about the Quaker approach to sacredness and living 'in the light'. Quakers believe that all of life is sacred and that we can be in touch with the Divine in any time or place without the need for external sacraments. This leads Friends to see our faith as an integral part of everyday life and not just something we do on Sundays.



The Sacred in the Everyday unit aims

This unit aims to help you:

- explore the Quaker understanding of the sacramental nature of life
- find out how Quakers try to live in the light of this understanding
- reflect on your own experience of sacredness in everyday life

Overview

Early Friends had a clear understanding that this moment, now, is 'God's time' and that the whole of life is sacramental. This means actively looking for the sacred in every person, place and time, and living 'in the power of God', as George Fox put it.

This approach led to the development of a Quaker testimony about sacraments: since we are living 'heaven on earth' now, we do not need outward forms and symbols of our connectedness with God, but can experience this oneness at any time, without the special intervention of a sacramental ritual or priest. Rather than abolishing sacraments, Quakers claim that all is sacrament. As one early 20th century Friend said,

It is a bold and colossal claim ... that the whole of life is sacramental, that there are innumerable 'means of grace' by which God is revealed and communicated...

Quaker faith & practice 27.43

Can we live up to this claim by honouring the sacred dimension of all that we experience?

Seeing all times as sacred also led to a testimony among Friends of refusing to celebrate special 'times and seasons' such as Christmas, since every day could be experienced as Christmas (*Quaker faith & practice* 27.42). Many modern British Quakers, however, are less strict about this; it is not unusual to see Christmas trees and Easter eggs in Quaker homes, and many Friends experience a deep connection with the sacred in nature and the turning of the seasons. The fundamental idea of finding the sacred in all the ordinary experiences of life, however, and of being one with God in the present moment, is still central to the Quaker faith.

This insight of Quakerism is not a notion but a way. We are called to live out our faith in the challenges and joys of our everyday lives, in our daily decisions and relationships. It means that we have to pay attention to the apparently unimportant details as well as the big things; it means being the change we want to see in the world. So our lives 'speak' on our behalf about what really matters (*Advices & queries* 27 in *Quaker faith & practice* 1.02), whether it is in our decisions about what to buy, where to shop, how to spend and save our money or what job we do and how we conduct our relationships.

In order to embody this approach to the best of our ability, we must use careful discernment about the choices in our lives. Discernment has been described as 'seeking a graced awareness of how we are to respond to God's invitation

in a concrete situation," and Quakers try to make this an ongoing discipline. For some Friends this will form part of a regular spiritual practice, or informal conversations with friends and family, but there are also specific Quaker methods which have been developed over the years to help with discernment about life's bigger decisions: these include meetings for clearness and threshing meetings (see Distinctives 3).

In our demanding 21st-century lives, it is as important as ever to take time to connect with the sacredness of life, to experience our oneness with all that is, and to hear the invitation from God to live faithful lives. Taking time for 'inward stillness' (*Advices & queries* 3 in *Quaker faith & practice* 1.02) or developing our own spiritual discipline, prayer or meditation practice is an essential part of living with an awareness of 'the spirit of God at work in the ordinary activities and experience of...daily life.' (*Advices & queries* 7 in *Quaker faith & practice* 1.02).

^{*} Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well; feminist perspectives on spiritual direction*, SPCK Publishing 1989, page 123. Reproduced by permission of SPCK publishing.

Quaker distinctives

Distinctives 1

The sacramental nature of life

The following sections of *Quaker faith & practice* give an overview of the Quaker understanding that all of life is sacred:

- inward life of the spirit: *Qf&p* 27.37
- centrality of ordinary experience: *Qf&p* 27.38
- the whole of life as sacramental: *Qf&p* 27.39
- 'a bold claim': *Qf&p* 27.43

You could also read the following extracts, which explore the Quaker approach to specific sacraments such as baptism and communion:

- baptism: *Qf&p* 27.40
- eucharist: *Qf&p* 27.41 and 26.15
- a sacramental meal: *Qf&p* 10.08

Distinctives 2

How does being a Quaker affect everyday life?

The following extracts from *Quaker faith & practice* talk about the effect that our Quaker faith can have on our everyday lives and behaviour:

- it's about the whole of our humanity: *Qf&p* 20.20
- impact of our choices on people and the earth: Qf&p 25.11
- coping with everyday conflict: *Qf&p* 20.69
- the much loved story of William Penn's sword: *Qf&p* 19.47
- young Friends on our use of money: *Qf&p* 20.57
- tobacco and alcohol: *Qf&p* 20.40

For more about living faithfully according to our testimonies, see the Faith in Action unit.

Distinctives 3

Choices and discernment

Quakers try to make choices that reflect our understanding of the sacredness of life. To do this we must exercise discernment, both individually and as a community.

'Live adventurously'. You could read *Advices & queries* 17 (in *Quaker faith & practice* 1.02) which guides Quakers in everyday discernment.

Quaker faith & practice also gives guidance about specific Quaker discernment and support methods:

- Meetings for clearness: *Qf&p* 12.22–12.25
- Threshing meetings: *Qf&p* 12.26
- Support groups: *Qf&p* 12.27
- Guidance if you have a particular concern: *Qf&p* 13.08 (and for more about 'concerns', see the Faith in Action unit)

Distinctives 4

The confident Quaker voice

Speaking of our faith in everyday situations can be an important part of witnessing to the sacred aspect of life. This could be at work, with friends, or through 'outreach' activities such as Quaker Quest meetings or Quaker Week activities. You could:

- explore the websites of Quaker Quest: www.quakerquest.org or Quaker Week: www.quakerweek.org.uk
- read extracts about 'Coming Out as a Quaker' at work (you'll find these extracts on page 190)
- read Thomas Ellwood's account from 1659 of telling his friends he was a Quaker in *Qf&p* 19.16

Distinctives 5

Everyday spiritual practice

Quakers have found that making time each day for stillness or spiritual practice helps us become more deeply aware of the sacramental nature of life. The following extracts from *Quaker faith & practice* speak of this understanding:

• An exercise of the spirit: *Qf&p* 20.08

• love can break through: *Qf&p* 20.09

• love silence: *Qf&p* 20.11

• I had given up: *Qf&p* 20.12

For more on everyday spiritual practice, see the Deepening activities in this unit.

Discovery

Discovery 1

Discussion about Quaker approaches to everyday choices

You could consider the introductory questions below, then go to the Sacred in the Everyday unit forum and post your own thoughts on the issues raised. You might like to comment on other posts on this forum too.

Alternatively, you could discuss the forum's introductory questions with your Becoming Friends companion, or others in your meeting.

Introductory questions:

- What aspects of your everyday life might Quakerism affect, for example shopping choices, use of money and resources, relationships, holidays and travel?
- How do you live as a Quaker?

Discovery 2

Exploring Quaker discernment methods

To find out more about Quaker discernment methods, you might like to ask your Becoming Friends companion to arrange for you to talk to a Friend in your local or area meeting who has experience of any of these:

- a Quaker support group
- a meeting for clearness
- a threshing meeting
- the Experiment with Light practice
- informal help with discernment

You could ask the Friend what was involved and whether they found it helpful in making a choice in their life.

Discovery 3

How have local Friends spoken with a confident Quaker voice?

You could ask your Becoming Friends companion or an overseer in your meeting to discuss with you the approach to outreach in your local or area meeting.

- How have Friends communicated about themselves locally? Have they held special outreach activities such as Quaker Quest or Quaker Week?
- If so, what were the challenges or joys? If not, what are the reasons?

Or you could ask your Becoming Friends companion to talk to you about a time in their own life when they have talked about their faith or taken a stand as a result of it.

• What was this experience like? Did your companion feel 'led' to speak or take this action?

Discovery 4

How are you different since coming to Quaker meeting?

This question might be the focus for a small group session, to explore the effect of their Quaker faith on the lives of local Friends. You could ask your Becoming Friends companion or an elder in your meeting to help you set up this group, or you may simply prefer to discuss the question with your Becoming Friends companion.

You or your companion can share the question with the group as a starting point for reflection (it might be helpful to write or print out copies of the question):

How are you different since coming to Quaker meeting/becoming a Quaker?

After people have had a brief opportunity for personal reflection on the question, spend some time in worship-sharing mode as a group, sharing with one another any responses, insights, experiences or challenges relating to the questions.

Guidance for worship sharing is found in Appendix 2 – Guidance on pages 283–284.

Discovery 5

How do you experience the Spirit in the everyday?

You could ask your Becoming Friends companion (or another Friend in your meeting) to discuss with you their experience of the Spirit in the everyday.

Are there aspects of this experience that they find challenging, or welcome?

You could also discuss this question by making a post on a Quaker discussion forum:

- the Britain Yearly Meeting forum at: www.quakerweb.org.uk/forum
- www.friendlink.org.uk (aimed mainly at young Quakers)
- the Sacred in the Everyday unit forum

Deepening

Deepening 1

Drawing on practices from other spiritual traditions

You might like to spend time reflecting on *Advices & queries* 3 (in section 1.02 of *Quaker faith & practice*), which focuses on stillness and spiritual practice.

Many Friends find their spiritual life enriched by drawing on practices from other spiritual traditions.

- You might like to try one of the spiritual practices in Appendix 1 Spiritual Practices (page 265).
- You could explore other possibilities talk to Friends about what they have found helpful.

Deepening 2

Looking for the sacred by reviewing the day

It can be helpful to develop a deliberate habit of reviewing the day or week just gone to find points of growth, and times when we have been particularly aware of the sacred or the work of the Spirit in our life.

The 'review of the day' is a practice which gives us a structure for doing this: see Appendix 1 – Spiritual Practices (page 269).

You could also reflect on this experience with your Becoming Friends companion when you next meet.

Deepening 3

Responding creatively to the sacredness of life

We often experience the sacredness of life through our senses. You can read a reflection on this in *Quaker faith & practice* 21.24.

If you would like to take some time to reflect deeply on your own response to the sacredness of life, you could:

- respond by drawing, painting, or using another creative method
- respond in music, song or movement
- respond in writing
- go online and blog about your response
- discuss your response on a Quaker discussion forum:
 - > the Britain Yearly Meeting forum at: www.quakerweb.org.uk/forum
 - www.friendlink.org.uk (aimed mainly at young Quakers)
 - > the Sacred in the Everyday unit forum
- share some of your reflections with your Becoming Friends companion when you next meet.

Deepening 4

Mindfulness as a way to awareness of the sacred

Mindfulness practices have formed part of monastic traditions in East and West, and many Quakers find them very helpful in developing a deeper awareness of the sacramental nature of life. There are extracts about mindfulness by writers from both traditions on pages 191–193.

- You could read these and reflect on how you could become more mindful in your everyday life.
- You can also find guidance on mindfulness practices such as 'walking' or 'working' meditations online at:
 - www.plumvillage.org/practice.html
 - www.youtube.com try searching for 'Walking meditation with Thich Naht Hanh' or 'We Live Love Mindfully', also from Thich Naht Hanh's Plum Village community
- You could try eating a meal or doing a household chore mindfully.

You may wish to reflect on how you have got on with this exercise at a future meeting with your Becoming Friends companion.

Deepening 5

Reflecting with Your Becoming Friends companion

You might like to spend time with your Becoming Friends companion reflecting on your response to any of the following questions:

- How am I living differently since first walking into a Quaker meeting?
- Has my interest in Quakerism brought me into any interesting conversations, experiences or conflict with people?
- How do I live my life? How do I know the right course to take?

Alternatively, you might like to make a post in response to any of these questions on the Sacred in the Everyday unit forum.

Further exploration

If you would like to explore the subject of the sacred in the everyday further, here are some suggestions for reading, listening or viewing.

Advices & queries 1–7 and 21–30 (in *Quaker faith & practice* 1.02).

A faith to call our own: Quaker tradition in the light of contemporary movements of the *Spirit*, Alex Wildwood, Quaker Home Service, 1999 (Swarthmore Lecture).

A light that is shining: an introduction to the Quakers, Harvey Gillman, Quaker Books, 2003.

Light to live by, Rex Ambler, Quaker Books, 2002 (about 'Experiment with Light')

Listening spirituality 1: personal spiritual practices among Friends, Patricia Loring, Openings Press, 1997.

New light: 12 Quaker voices, edited by Jennifer Kavanagh, O Books, 2008. Individual themes such as Twelve Quakers and Worship, Twelve Quakers and Simplicity also available in the Twelve Quakers and... series, Quaker Quest 2004–2007.

Quaker identity and the heart of our faith, Quaker Life Study Materials, Quaker Life, 2008. Includes 'Nurturing the spiritual life' by Deborah Rowlands (page 64). Available online at www.quaker.org.uk/sites/default/files/Faith-and-practice-proceeding.pdf or in hard copy by contacting Quaker Life on 020 7663 1140 or email: ql@

quaker.org.uk quaker.org.uk *Women at the well: feminist perspectives on spiritual direction,* Kathleen Fischer,

Woodbrooke's website or brochure for details of courses about discernment, spiritual practice and living faithful lives: www.woodbrooke.org.uk

Many of these titles are available from the Quaker Centre bookshop:

Friends House 173 Euston Road London NW1 2BJ

SPCK Publishing, 1989.

Tel: 020 7663 1030 Fax: 020 7663 1001

Website: www.quaker.org.uk/bookshop Email: quakercentre@quaker.org.uk

Many of them will also be in your local meeting house library. You could ask your Becoming Friends companion to help you track down titles that interest you.

Closing activity

As you finish your exploration of the Quaker understanding of the sacred in the everyday, you are invited to reflect on what you have gained through this unit, how your understanding of both yourself and Quakerism has changed, and what areas you would like to explore further.

This closing reflection can be a very good opportunity for sharing with your Becoming Friends companion, or you may prefer to write in a journal or book of spiritual discipline (there's guidance for journalling in Appendix 2 – Guidance on page 282), or to reflect using creative methods such as drawing, collage, modelmaking or working with materials such as textiles or wood.

You may like to use one or more of the following questions as a focus for your reflection:

- What have you gained from your work on this unit, whether as a result of positive or more challenging experiences?
- In what ways has your understanding changed as a result of your work on this unit?
- Are there areas that you would like to explore further either as part of your own spiritual journey or relating to Quakerism?
- Has anything arisen that you would find it helpful to reflect on with your Becoming Friends companion?



Coming out as a Quaker

Friend 1

I work in a Day Care setting and it seemed really important to me to come out straight away to my colleagues because we work so closely together.

No-one really knew much about Quakers but they did ask, at first as a kind of joke and later more seriously, about what it meant. I don't go on about it but if anyone asks me what I am doing on a particular weekend and it happens to be Quaker activity then I always tell them. They are used to it now.

We also have a Jehovah's Witness among the staff and one or two who are interested in Buddhism and being open about my faith life means that conversations about these things are possible.

I feel happy about being able to say 'I am a Quaker' and so I say it whenever the occasion arises.

Friend 2

'Coming out' has been an important activity for those of us who don't fit into the general assumption that everyone is, or would like to be, heterosexual. For me it has been about naming and accepting a truth about who I am, and then facing up to telling people that I just don't fit a particular image. It goes against the grain of the prevailing culture in society. It's about correcting people's false assumptions and expectations about me; perhaps most painfully, when they are trying to be kind and welcoming.

When I started attending Quaker Meeting seriously, I realised that I would have to start coming out all over again, but that this time I had to come out to my rational, sceptical friends as a Quaker. In many ways, this second process has been just as hard as coming out as a lesbian. Being Quaker goes against the grain in so many ways today, just as it has always done. It goes against the grain of the anti-religious, rational-scientific approach to life. It goes against the grain of religion based on rules, creeds and dogma. It goes against the grain of a life based on appearances and a primary focus on personal pleasure-seeking. There's a well-loved story of a 17th-century Quaker who started wearing plain clothes and refusing to take part in the elaborate and meaningless social rituals of his friends: eventually the truth dawned on them that he had become a Quaker. The testimonies we hold to may not be quite so visible for our generation, and they challenge us to speak up and 'come out' against false assumptions. In what ways will you be 'coming out'?



Extract for Deepening 4: Mindfulness as a way to awareness of the sacred

Extracts on mindfulness

Walking

I leave the bedroom...I begin walking through my house. I will traverse it many times today like a creature covering her turf. It is a journey that zigzags and returns upon itself... a circumambulation...a re-remembering of 'place.' I know this is the way many ancients prayed – circling a holy site to deepen their devotion. I wonder if animals offer their speechless prayers to You by scudding over their well-known ground? My foot rises. Before it falls there is a tiny moment when neither of my feet are really carrying weight a suspension, a moment of physical trust. Something in me knows that the ground will still be there. Let me return to this innate knowledge this ancient confidence. The floor in this house is wood...wide, old boards. When I walk I am walking on the wood and in the woods. I am walking on the life of these trees. They have been cut and planed...offered up for this sheltering. Let me remember to offer myself to be shelter for something in Your world. My foot falls. The ground rises to meet it. A holy, ordinary moment is repeating itself. All the time I am meeting and being met like this. Your whole creation is ground. Help me to remember that in this mutuality we can become home for each other. You are asking us slowly to become Your holy site.

Gunilla Norris

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Tangerine Meditation

If I offer you a freshly picked tangerine to enjoy, I think the degree to which you enjoy it will depend on your mindfulness. If you are free of worries and anxiety, you will enjoy it more. If you are possessed by anger and fear, the tangerine may not be very real to you.

One day, I offered a number of children a basket filled with tangerines. The basket was passed around, and each child took one tangerine and put it in his or her palm. We each looked at our tangerine, and the children were invited to meditate on its origins. They saw not only their tangerine, but also its mother, the tangerine tree. With some guidance, they began to visualize the blossoms in the sunshine and in the rain. Then they saw petals falling down and the tiny green fruit appear. The sunshine and the rain continued, and the tiny tangerine grew. Now someone has picked it, and the tangerine is here. After seeing this, each child was invited to peel the tangerine slowly, noticing the mist and the fragrance of the tangerine, and then bring it up to his or her mouth and have a mindful bite, in full awareness of the texture and taste of the fruit and the juice coming out. We ate slowly like that.

Each time you look at a tangerine, you can see deeply into it. You can see everything in the universe in one tangerine. When you peel it and smell it, it's wonderful. You can take your time eating a tangerine and be very happy.

Washing Dishes

To my mind, the idea that doing dishes is unpleasant can occur only when you aren't doing them. Once you are standing in front of the sink with your sleeves rolled up and your hands in the warm water, it is really quite pleasant. I enjoy taking my time with each dish, being fully aware of the dish, the water, and each movement of my hands. I know that if I hurry in order to eat dessert sooner, the time of washing dishes will be unpleasant and not worth living. That would be a pity, for each minute, each second of life is a miracle. The dishes themselves and the fact that I am here washing them are miracles!

If I am incapable of washing dishes joyfully, if I want to finish them quickly so I can go and have dessert, I will be equally incapable of enjoying my dessert. With the fork in my hand, I will be thinking about what to do next, and the texture and the flavor of the dessert, together with the pleasure of eating it, will be lost. I will always be dragged into the future, never able to live in the present moment.

Each thought, each action in the sunlight of awareness becomes sacred. In this light, no boundary exists between the sacred and the profane. I must confess it takes me a bit longer to do the dishes, but I live fully in every moment, and I am happy. Washing the dishes is at the same time a means and an end – that is, not only do we do the dishes in order to have clean dishes, we also do the dishes just to do the dishes, to live fully in each moment while washing them.

Thich Nhat Hanh

^{*} from *Peace is Every Step: the Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* by Thich Nhat Hanh, published by Rider. Reprinted by permission of The Random House Group Ltd.

Taking Out the Trash

The trash bin is overflowing under the sink. It's time to feed the big outdoor garbage can again. How quickly it happens...how astonishing that every week my bins are full to the brim with the wastes of my daily existence. Here I am dumping everything from carrot peelings to junk mail. What a mess I make! I try to remember that You planned waste as an essential part of life. It, too, is holy. I want to keep in mind the pine tree by the front door and how it keeps dropping its numberless needles - a tall and humble prayer. I want to shed my waste with quiet reverence like the pine. I want somehow to have a conscience, a responsibility, for what it means personally, socially, and ecologically to have this much trash EVERY WEEK. Help me to stop this hurry to get my psychological and actual trash out of sight and out of mind and learn instead. This task is a kind of surrender... surrender to the knowledge that by being alive and human I do make a human mess as a pine tree makes its kind of mess. Let me surrender any fake and pristine sense of not affecting my fellow beings and my environment with my waste. Let me own my part of the landfill... the one outside of town with the bulldozer and the psychological one we all share. Keep me mindful of what I take into my home, the items bought to substitute for real living – the food and drink I consume instead of examining my feelings. Help me slowly to surrender all excess.

Gunilla Norris

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