

A Quaker Meeting
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A reading from the 9th Guru of the Sikhs, Tegh Bahadur:
“Why do you go to the forest in search of the Divine?
God lives in all, and abides with you too.
As fragrance dwells in a flower, or reflection in a mirror,
So the Divine dwells inside everything;
Seek therefore in your own heart.”

“So what do you know about Quakers?” asked the Headmaster during my interview to teach at the Friend’s School.

My mind raced, and I chided myself on not doing my homework thoroughly. So I stumbled through, mumbling something about a great-grandmother I vaguely remembered who’d been a Quaker. She wore plain dresses, a small white prayer cap on her head, and used the old words, thee, thy, and thou.

I mentioned that Quakers didn’t have to go to war all the time thinking to myself, “I am so not going to get this job!” But I did and over the next 15 years I learned a lot about Friends. And no, Quakers don’t make oatmeal!

Quakerism grew out of a very turbulent period in England’s history. The 17th century experienced a Civil War in which the monarchy was overturned, a Commonwealth with a Lord Protector, and the Restoration of the monarchy.

There was also great dissent among religious groups with many splinter groups forming to satisfy the spiritual needs of their members. To many, the Church of England was too Catholic.

A group was formed within the church in an attempt to “purify” it of the Roman influence. The Puritans as they came to be called were eventually expelled from the church and grew in numbers. They painted a grim picture of faith – stressing judgment and the wrath of God.

People had begun to read the Bible for themselves and weren’t satisfied with either the Anglicans or the Puritans. One in particular was a young man named George Fox who had read

the Bible and saw that neither the clergy or their churches reflected the Christian life. He began searching for inward peace and a group of people that consistently practiced the Christian faith.

His travels took him many places and one day as he sought rest on a hillside under a tree, he had a revelation that Christ was the Inward Light and was the only guide one needed - that Christ/God dwelled within each person. One had no need for churches or ministers, but needed only to look within.

As an aside, I chose today's reading, because it reflected the same teaching – that God dwells within everyone. On further research, I discovered that Bahadur and Fox were contemporaries having been born within three years of each other. Was it simply coincidence that led them to the same belief?

Fox went from town to town, preaching this new idea and attracted thousands of followers. What relief and joy to be freed from the yoke of power the churches had exerted.

They called themselves “Friends” following Christ's example of calling his followers the same.

At times, believers would tremble as they felt the presence of God within. Observers coined the term “Quakers” to belittle them. But many accepted the term and both Quakers and Friends are used interchangeably.

They dressed simply and lived simply as did the early Christians. And following Christ's example of treating everyone equally, Friends refused to tip their hats, curtsy, or address the gentry as “sir” or “Ma'am”, using plain speech (thee, thou, and thy) instead.

Their disdain of organized religion was indeed strange and threatening to the establishment. This led to imprisonment for many including Fox himself and his wife Margaret. For their safety, Friends met in each other's homes and, without clergy, waited in silence upon the Light within to speak through them.

The persecution continued and the settlement of the New World attracted many Friends. The earliest, were two women who made the mistake of going to Massachusetts where they were harassed and finally deported to the Caribbean Islands.

More followed, some repeating the mistake of trying to join the Puritans who were enraged by those they perceived to be heretics. They eventually rid themselves of the Quakers by expelling all but three who refused to go. These three were hanged for their effort.

The outcasts found refuge in Rhode Island which was more tolerant of Friends. Quakers could also be found in New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Virginia. George Fox himself, travelled to these fledgling settlements preaching up and down the coast.

Meanwhile, back in England, William Penn, the son of a wealthy nobleman, had become a Friend much to the dismay of his family. The British Commonwealth had ended, the monarchy was restored and King Charles owed Penn's father a favor.

A sizable land grant in the New World solved the problem for all concerned. Penn founded the colony Pennsylvania in 1682 to begin his "Holy Experiment" that would not only provide a safe haven for Friends but also for those of other faiths.

Quakers can be found all over the United States now, including here in New Mexico, as well as in other countries throughout the world. Some Quakers retain the radical Christianity of the 17th century and others have moved beyond theism - but all believe that there is an inner light in everyone.

George Fox called it "that of God". Friends believe that one's life should be lived accordingly in the spirit of love, truth, and peace, acknowledging the sacred in everyone.

Friends have no creeds or professions of faith. Rather there are 'testimonies' – ways of living that arise from Friends' basic beliefs. They aren't written in stone nor are they imposed in any way.

The testimony of TRUTH says that in order to be faithful to the Light within, one must live a life of integrity from day-to-day. It means being authentic and having consistency between one's values and one's actions.

Quakers try to live according to the deepest truth they know, which they believe comes from the Inner Light within. This means speaking the truth to all, including people in positions of power. Friends do not take oaths when appearing in a court of law. They tell the truth because it's the right thing to do.

Friends hold that all people are equal in the eyes of God and have equal access to the “inner Light.” The testimony of EQUALITY leads Friends to treat each person with respect, looking for "that of God" in everyone.

It was reflected in the practice of early Quakers, who granted equal spiritual authority to women, refused to recognize social distinctions, supported religious freedom, and worked to abolish slavery.

Friends believe in simple living. This has historically meant simple dress, plain speech, and unadorned meeting houses for worship. Through the SIMPLICITY testimony, Friends encourage one another to look beyond the outward and to the inward.

In contemporary terms, Friends try to live lives in which activities and possessions do not get in the way of open communication with others and with one’s own spirituality. Clearing away the clutter makes it easier to hear the “still small voice” within.

Friends oppose and refuse to engage in war and violence. In pursuit of lasting, sustainable peace, they seek to eliminate causes of violent conflict, such as poverty, exploitation, and intolerance. This of course is the PEACE testimony.

In renouncing war and violence, Friends embrace the transforming power of love and the power of nonviolence, striving for peace in daily interactions with family, neighbors, fellow community members, and those from every corner of the world.

Through the testimony of STEWARDSHIP, Friends strive to use God’s gifts wisely. These include our talents and our possessions, as well as our natural environment. Friends believe that such gifts are not ours alone.

To Friends, good stewardship means taking care of what has been given, not just for ourselves, but for the people around us and for future generations as well.

I’m sure all of this sounds and feels familiar to Unitarians. And though our roots and religious practices may differ, we have similar beliefs. Both denominations reflect beliefs that range from conservative to liberal, from theism to post-modernism.

The Friends have a Peace testimony and Unitarians have worked tirelessly for peace and social justice.

Unitarians affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and equity in human relations. Quakers also affirm this as expressed in their testimony of equality.

Where we differ is in our practice of worship. Where Unitarians have an Order of Service with most the elements of a church service. Traditional Friends meet in a simple meetinghouse, with rows of benches facing each other. There is no altar, no minister, no sermon, and no music. If one is moved to speak, they simply rise and speak. There is no dialogue, no discourse, nor challenge to the speaker.

Today, particularly here in the West, there are Quaker churches whose worship practices differ little from Unitarians. They're called Programmed Meetings and we are experiencing something similar to that today. My experience and practice though has been of traditional Quakers who have unprogrammed Meetings for one hour of communal silence.

Every meeting, business meeting, classroom meeting and even a teacher's meeting, is considered a Meeting for Worship and begins in silence.

A personal aside here – our school had a half hour Meeting for Worship every week. Our first meeting of the year, and my first meeting ever was held on the second day of school.

Having been a teacher for 16 years, I couldn't imagine that young children could sit still that long without poking each other. And I also couldn't believe that middle school children would be anything but bored. They proved me wrong – every child was respectful of the silence.

In a Quaker school, children and their teachers share a mutual respect. Students have a say in many aspects of their school experience. For instance: playground rules.

I had lunch duty at the primary playground for my entire tenure at the Quaker school. Imagine my surprise when the teachers told me there were no rules...yet. "The students decide the rules in their class meetings, and by the end of the year, there are so many rules, that we start fresh every year." A remarkable concept which made playground duty fun for all of us.

Another problem-solving process took place when my 8th grade girls couldn't decide on the song they would sing for their graduation. They were divided in three camps all insisting that their particular song was better. When I sought advice from the headmaster, she suggested something called an active listening circle.

We'd start in silence, then each girl would have an opportunity to share why she felt so strongly about a particular song while everyone else listened. They couldn't argue a point, just state their own, and we'd finish in silence.

Our meetings took place once a week, and after a month they'd narrowed their choices down to two songs. Weeks went by with no change. Then one week they literally came to the meeting dancing with joy and sharing that they'd had a sleep over and decided on a song.

They'd been discussing the problem and decided to have an active listening circle. In the safety of the circle each girl shared that she really didn't want either song anymore. After the final silence, they came to consensus on another song. It worked!

Consensus is the manner in which Friends come to decisions about issues that affect their community. It's a slow process, but when it's achieved everyone can feel comfortable with the decision.

In 1997 the Chestnut Hill Meeting in suburban Philadelphia decided that their building was too small for the increasing size of their congregation.

It took six years to decide on a new building rather than to expand the old. A lot had been purchased and a design was needed. Finally, last year in 2012 construction was started on their new Meeting House. It took 15 years to reach consensus, but everyone was satisfied.

There are three types of congregants at a Meeting for Worship. Birthright Quakers are Friends because their parents are. Convinced Quakers are those who choose to become Friends. Attenders are what the name implies. I remained an attender for all those years even though I'd thought of becoming a Convinced Quaker.

Then I was introduced to the Unitarian Church and knew I'd found a home. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed structure in worship, and I particularly was glad to hear music again.

Today we have tried to integrate our Order of Service with a Quaker Meeting.

Now we'll conclude this part of our service with silence in the manner of a Friends' meeting. Settle into it, breathe slowly and as you feel the presence of those around you in communal silence, begin to meditate looking inward. Perhaps you'll hear the Inner Light, the still small voice that speaks to your heart.

You may feel moved to speak, take just a moment to think about it, then rise and do so. Keep it short maybe a sentence or two. And for those listening, respect what you have heard.

Our silence will be broken when our “Clerk of the Meeting” – Chuck, shakes hands with his neighbors. Then you’ll shake hands with your neighbors. The Extinguishing of the Chalice and the Postlude will follow and the service will be over.