

RENEWING QUAKER COMMUNITY

With Ben Pink Dandelion, Devizes, 14-01-2023

Lin Patterson writes: *This is an attempt to relay the gist of this inspiring and instructive all-day talk with interactive exercises. I was not able to record everything, including much of the light humour and colourful examples. Words in parentheses are explanatory, filling in gaps in my notes or uncertain information. Italics are mine.*

Introductions

Ben said he loved being here and welcomed travelling to meetings anywhere, anytime, after the seclusion of Covid lockdown. He asked us to each say our name, meeting and simply the number of years with Quakers. It was striking how long most of the Friends in the room had been Quakers.

Personal background

He introduced himself. Both parents were atheists. He became a young anarchist, living with a group intent on changing their names, to avoid collusion with the patriarchal system. After he found Quakers he was given a bursary to study in the Philadelphia Quaker libraries.

Spiritual experience

As part of his stay in the US, he took a bus trip to San Francisco, then Denver. It was Labour Day, a national holiday when everything closes, the bus schedule was changed and he would be unable to reach New York for his plane. With no money, he was reduced to begging in order to buy a ticket with another bus company, which he finally did, but had no money for food or anything else.

On the second night of that journey, he had the life-changing experience. It was as if he was lifted and held. "I am with you." That sense of accompaniment has lasted ever since, and there is an answer for any question.

Quaker work and local meeting

By now Ben has spent thirty odd years working in yearly meeting and Woodbrooke. In 2001 he moved to Clitheroe in Lancashire, where he's been for 22 years. They have a small meeting there. and sold their 1778 small, isolated meeting house to move to a small building in the city. During the pandemic members were lost. Last week there were ten, the previous week 15 attending. Zoom was tricky. There is not as much emotional energy now.

Small group exercise - In groups of three, he gave us three questions, one at a time.

1. How are you doing now?
2. How is your worshipping community?
3. How is your Area Meeting doing? We had to choose only two words to describe AM now. Words that came from the whole group were: exhausted, bloody awful, (this was from someone from another AM); staid; fragmented; dissipated; a chore; lifeless; managing? connected? mundane; essential; don't know; better and stable; friendly; distant; flux; disconnected; ageing; recovering; don't know; not sure; remote; fragmented; missing; challenging. Ben said these offered a sense of challenge, typical of Quakers in Yearly Meeting and Canada. Things are unclear.

The Essentials of Quakerism

He said, "If you look in the letter pages of the Friend, which admittedly are not necessarily representative of Quakers, you find both/and." Rebuilding is nothing new. We talk about a spiritual journey. We're never 'here'. We speak of not having the whole truth, only partial, provisional. Only since 1931 have we said "Be open to new light." We're about 'perhaps' in our theology. Even our lovely red book is being revised—for new light, like a bus timetable, is out of date the minute it's published. So those who are 'clear' are out of step. We're certain about our uncertainty. We want to be on the move because there's a mismatch between word and experience, so we're dogmatic about uncertainty. So Christians and non-theists find they're at odds because of their certainty. It's always unknown, going to a new place. So feel reassured. It's what we take on, being "on the move".

Looking back, we've changed so much. We used to have no music, no pictures, no marrying outside Quakers... By the end of the day, anything can happen. We are channels for hope beyond our imagination. We never know where we'll be led.

We've had six distinct historic periods. We're now in a very liberal, permissive period. But since 1999 we've had surveys. In October we'll be having our next one. And *everyone* will be invited when previously only 17 out of 50 meetings were covered. 90% of Quakers have come in as adults. Amazing! We've never recruited so well since the 1600s! The average age is 48, previously 64... In a secular nation it was easy for us to move onto Zoom compared to other religious groups. Very portable.

But there's a challenge with 90% recruited, because those people have to be inducted. That's what gave rise to pastors, which quickly developed into programmed meetings. We're unique among churches with no way to induct. Since 1998(?) there's no one to coordinate adult learning apart from Woodbrooke. It's up to the individual. What is the way to do it? We're unsure at saying what Quakerism is. We're left to our own devices—we can read our way, or go on a course, talk to someone. So we get different versions. For instance, I know of someone who thought one wasn't allowed to give ministry in the first half hour! He'd been told by someone. There's no clear way of letting people know.

What do you say to the butcher when he asks, "What's a Quaker then?" So we had a series of sessions on "What would you say to the butcher?" I heard of someone who went asking three or four Quakers and they couldn't say what Quakers believed. Finally a Quaker at a stall said for him to come back later and he'd tell him. When he did, he was told Quakers believed there was that of God in everyone. That's all.

Ben said "I focus on a behavioural creed. That holds us together, but it's still a challenge. There's a funny story about advice on how to leave Friends: one way is to run in saying "I've got the truth!" The other way is to say "I've had it with this silence. Let's sing for an hour, bring in a keyboard..." That flies in the face of 'perhapsness', or our way of practice. That's our way to the *experience* of the spirit. It's not evading...

The Four things we believe

There are four things to say to the butcher.

1. We believe everyone can have an encounter with the spirit, call it God, Life, the divine or 'Whatever' with a capital W. We call it different things and have to translate to understand.
2. An encounter can happen anytime. Any place can have equal sacramental potential. But we've developed a way of worship that helps nurture that encounter: silence. It's an absence which can evoke presence. We worship together to hear each other.
3. Because we're led by this sense of encounter to be guided, then Discernment becomes really important. For instance, I love wheels, anything with wheels, cars,

etc. One day I can see a car with the license plate BPD (his initials) and think “It’s a sign!” Is it? We can test it to see.

4. The Life comes out of this encounter. Early Friends left their farms. We are transformed in order to transform. The world, social justice, peace. To get a Quaker fired up, show them a marginalised population. We’re not left alone by our spiritual encounter. I’ve been changed through my encounter, I can work with others...it’s called Testimony.

Caveat

Quakers are light on specific theology. But our worship has a theology. Ministry. Social justice is coming from a spiritual place. All of these aspects are for everybody, collectively...it’s a do-it-together religion. We’re not just doing our own thing. “Think that you may be mistaken.”

That’s why we’re doing revision of the red book, in the past too much was assumed. We do have the Hearts and Minds Prepared (programme) and Quaker Quest, which are ways of teaching. But our worship is a public space so we don’t want to pressure people to learn.

We don’t often explain what we’re doing in meeting for newcomers. They did in Seattle because they were *expecting* newcomers, but it can be a reminder for all of us if we narrated the meeting. For example, we do this in a business meeting. The clerk says “the matter is before the meeting”. We can give a single contribution, then listen and the clerk can finally say “I am getting a sense of the meeting. I’m now going to draft a minute.” That’s what a welcoming introduction to a meeting for worship could do.

Question from audience paraphrased/condensed: We need to talk about personal experience!

Ben: But it’s also a group experience. Margaret Fell, when she first was becoming Quaker said “We’ve been thieves, just thieves, we’ve stolen Christianity!” [see note 1]

In Texas a man in a supermarket queue asked me “When did you give your life to Christ?” So I translated and talked about the experience on the bus. We’re a seeker society. Christianity is a history of prophets. George Fox said this experience is available to everybody, old and young people are equal. It’s incredibly radical. We’ve rediscovered the early Christian way and *we need to help each other*. We

need to hold onto it. We're not alone, thinking our mystical experience is all we need— (Quakerism is) simple, powerful, amazing.

Worship, Ministry and Discernment

Experience is the basis, but we worship together. Naylor left the plough (to gather worshippers). We're drawn to worship together. Everyone is a minister. You might think we could have a rota, or designate someone with gifts, but no, we have a very special *liturgy of silence*. Our liturgy is: that our response to God is silence and stillness. It's practical and portable.

In the 1660's the Valiant Sixty (actually 66), went out in 33 pairs to bring the nation to God. It was about a direct relationship to God. They were sure everyone else was wrong. Now we're not so sure. But the stakes were high. Calvin had the elect, including even the poor, but only the elected. Quakers felt everyone was included, women, children. The religious revolution came from the North. It could spread easily, didn't need a church or training. You could be saved in this life. One per cent of England became Quaker, and ten per cent in Bristol. There is a choice to just do "nothing" to reach God.

But meetings have got shorter by a half hour each century. Some are experimenting with longer meetings now. Ben's meeting are trying two hour meetings (at intervals).

In the past they recorded people who had a special gift for ministry. There was a raised bench for them. Darlington has a sounding board. And below was the elders' bench. The minister would shake hands, not the whole group. In (the 1950s) they abolished it because it discouraged others from ministering. Now all sit together, they moved to chairs away from benches, now with a table with books and flowers. In the 70s we started all shaking hands at the end of meeting. We don't teach it very well. But it works.

Different ways of coming to meeting

How do you come with heart and mind prepared? We can have strategies to set ourselves aside and quieten into a deeper silence, with strategies to 'centre down.' Or there can be a reading from *Advices and Queries* or *Quaker Faith and Practice*, which might set a theme. But once someone stood to say "I've been thinking--" and an elder said, "I hope thee have not, Friend."

If someone has a medical condition and needs to drink during meeting that is one thing, but in one meeting people brought coffee in and it had to be asked, would you do that in mass? What about reading in meeting? If someone were reading the

whole meeting long, you would wonder how open they would be. For some neuro-divergent people perhaps reading first may help, or they (might be helped) by coming in late, or for someone with a back condition. But I heard of someone texting all during meeting and that's not OK.

All gifts are equally important. The person who moves the chairs or brings the milk is just as important.

Ministry

One should test their ministry inwardly. Is my message cream or scum? Everyone should ask questions of their (potential) ministry, being cautious about words. Is it going to add to the meeting? Is it a message from God? Is it for this meeting? Is it for this meeting to share? Is it for this meeting to share today?

Waiting: In the 18th century one woman waited 23 years before she was sure. A man saw a woman which prompted a feeling "more than natural" and two years later told her so. Six years later, they were married.

Ministry is very uncomfortable. Resist it until there is no choice. One woman counted to 20, then 40, then 80, then ministered and forgot afterwards what she had said. In conservative New England they still say, "Thank you for being faithful to the words you were given." We don't minister lightly, but we need to be obedient to the call to speak. Some meetings have introduced "Afterwords" maybe in pairs or small groups to be able to speak of thoughts arising out of meeting but not ministered. But for ministry we need to discern or maybe we are called in spite of ourselves, *setting self aside*.

Amazingly, rarely does something go wrong. Like in Brighton, when someone stood up four times. It's the job of elders to suggest, "Maybe we can consider this in silence." So to interrupt or stop someone is not easy. Like the person texting needs to be stopped to protect the meeting. Ben gave a weekend course on ministry, when someone stood during meeting and gave an advert for a video he'd done on bereavement. It enraged him, but actually led to a real chain of ministry.

Length of ministry: three minutes may be OK, but longer may need eldering. An example of John Woolman's stuck out. [see note 2]

Elizabeth Fry's daughters married non-Quakers. Maybe we should listen to people who are particularly awkward! There are unwritten rules, such as not ministering at the beginning of meeting, keep it brief, don't minister more than once. But now we can have singing, or ministry in another language.

Discernment - Exercise in groups of 3 from the same meeting with three questions:

1. Why are you a Quaker?
2. What would be the one thing you would want to say about your meeting in one year's time?
3. What is your next step? (This was a very productive exercise!)

Asking the right question is important in reaching constructive decisions. Ben gave an example of a big, complicated situation about deciding whether to move from their former old, isolated meeting house. They couldn't agree. Then they re-framed the question: What would be best for the future of the Quaker community in this area? Answer: We want to be where the people are. Then, rather than bring all the detailed decisions back to the whole meeting to discern, they appointed three trusted Friends to organise everything. If we're really discerning, it does not matter how many people or who's there. We never know where we will be led.

Ideas for change

Question, paraphrased, from the group: What if you think your meeting needs to have more fun?

Yes! Ask 'What would be adventurous for us?' A breakfast before meeting, a trip? Walks? Go to the zoo? Something to bring joy. Reducing roles. Keep sharing your visions for the meeting. We can change whatever we want to change. Everything is do-able. Use the local development worker. A group meal in restaurant or pub, funding everybody, not just the poor, letting those who can pay donate afterwards. Advertise so newcomers can come for the first time, provide for disabilities and families with children preferably every week, one meeting prohibited committee chat after meeting for worship, don't meet too early, consider public transport difficulty on a Sunday, so consider other days.

The session ended with a silence before cake and departure.

Lin Patterson, Bath meeting

Notes - explanatory historical notes added by Lin Patterson

1* The Margaret Fell “Thieves” quote:

“In 1652, when she first heard George Fox, Margaret Fell was 38, the wife of Judge Thomas Fell of Swarthmore Hall, and mother of nine children. The first words Margaret Fell heard Fox say were: “He is not a Jew that is one outward...but he is a Jew that is one inward, and that is circumcision which is of the heart.’ And so he went on, she writes, “and said, ‘How that Christ was the light of the world and that lighteth every man that cometh into the world; and that by this Light they might be gathered to God, etc.’ And I stood up in my pew and I wondered at his doctrine...And then he went on...’The scriptures were the prophets’ words and Christ’s...and what they spoke they enjoyed and possessed...You will say, Christ saith this and the apostles say this, but what canst thou say? Art thou a Child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?’ This opened me so that it cut me to the heart; and then I saw clearly we were all wrong. So I set me down in my pew again and cried bitterly. And I cried in my spirit to the Lord, ‘We are all thieves, we are all thieves, we have taken the Scriptures in words and know nothing of them in ourselves.’”

From *The Quaker Reader*, Selected and Introduced by Jessamyn West, pub. The Viking Press, New York, 1962

2* ...John Woolman on ministry: A quote from his Journal

“One day, being under a strong Exercise of Spirit, I stood up, and said some words in a Meeting; but not keeping close to the divine Opening I said more than was required of me; and being soon sensible of my Error, I was afflicted in Mind some Weeks, without any Light or Comfort, even to that degree that I could not take Satisfaction in any Thing: I remembered God, and was troubled, and, in the Depth of my Distress, he had Pity upon me, and sent the Comforter: I then felt Forgiveness for my Offence, and my Mind became calm and quiet... ..my Understanding became more strengthened to distinguish the pure Spirit, which inwardly moves upon the Heart, and taught me to wait in Silence sometimes many weeks together, until I felt that rise which prepares the Creature.”

From the same source as above.