(The following is an approximate recapitulation of a talk given at Stony Run Monthly Meeting on Sunday, April 18, 1993. The topic assigned was "The Origins of the Testimonies." The gathering was the first in a series the Meeting was sponsoring on the testimonies. Approximately sixty people were present.)

All of us carry within us a great question. In fact, our very life is a quest, a search. Sometimes we are more acutely aware of this than at other times. Sometimes this question is sharply etched, sometimes it is vague and unformulated. When Jesus said that we cannot live by bread alone, he was speaking of this great question and of our hunger for a great answer.

This great answer which we seek is indeed given to us. Sometimes it is given to a person in a blinding flash, suddenly, in an instant. To other people it comes slowly and gradually over time. But, however it arrives, there comes upon us a great experience of absolute Spirit and a leading to transform the way we live out our life in the world. Thus, the answer comes both as *experience* and as *praxis*. It comes both as new knowledge and as a transformed way of being, of acting. This great answer is available not only to saints and sages, but potentially it is available to everyone. Not everyone, however, finds the grace to pause, to become silent and still long enough to hear it.

Those who do have this experience of absolute Spirit always insist that it is indescribable. George Fox speaks of it as being "beyond what words can utter." Yet, paradoxically, those who have this experience often seem unable to refrain from trying to communicate, however imperfectly, something of its essence. Obviously, descriptions of the indescribable will vary! Nevertheless, some useful generalizations can be made about these experiences which are associated with people's finding of this great answer.

One thing that usually characterizes these mystical experiences is that persons will, paradoxically, both lose themselves and yet feel more fully themselves than at any other time. They often use expressions like, "I came completely out of myself," or "I was carried away." Yet, while the persons' sense of their own selfhood is diminished, they somehow feel more fully than ever to be whom they were really meant to be.

The second attribute of these peak experiences is a combination of aloneness and community. These mystical visions sometimes occur in the solitude of a natural setting, but they can also happen in the midst of a crowd. Nevertheless, there is a particular sense that people have during such a spiritual peak experience that they are alone without being lonely. In fact, not only are they not lonely, but they feel themselves to be at one with all that exists. They feel intimately involved with a reality greater than themselves.

The third characteristic of such a spiritual peak experience is that the mystery of life seems somehow to be solved. People find the great answer, even though they cannot express it. This great answer is not likely to be an elaborate philosophy explaining the riddles of good and evil, or of life and death. Rather, it is apt to take the form of a kind of joyful reconciliation with the existence of ultimate mystery.

People who have experienced this sense of belonging, of release from spiritual restlessness, of at-home-ness, of unity with the cosmos, are usually overcome with a boundless joy, with an impulse to express gratitude.

Humankind's religious life, if it is at all genuine, flows out of such peak experiences. Theology, morals and ritual give expression to an on-going religious life based upon, and growing out of, mystical experiences of absolute Spirit.

The exercise of theology is the attempt to penetrate the unnameable mystery. It is natural that human beings, having had an experience that is deeply moving and totally involving, will think about it, reflect on it, seek to understand it, and try to come to know it better. People will try to summarize, for handy use in daily life, truths which can be fully grasped only during towering moments of wordless spiritual experience. As long as the theological enterprise is regarded as a series of hints, rather than as an absolute grasp of the Ultimate Reality, it can be useful. If it pretends to define, rather than merely to suggest, it flaunts and fails. As Gregg Lamm, an Evangelical Friends pastor said when he visited Pendle Hill recently, "All theology is heresy."

Springing from the profound sense of belonging and of unity is a concept of a way of living, a system of morals. Moral rightness consists of behaving as people behave when they know they belong together. We behave as members of one universal household. Ethics is our willingness to behave as one behaves towards those with whom one is united by a strong bond of belonging.

Finally, ritual gives expression to our feelings of gratitude for ultimate belonging, for the gift of the great answer. Mindfully conducted, liturgies and rituals can re-vivify our awareness of the great answer and can re-elicit the sense of beauty and gratitude which the great answer inspires.

It is interesting to reflect that Friends are skeptical of all three of these "derivative" dimensions of religious life--theology, moral codes, and ritual. Friends' spirituality, in effect, seeks to remain very close to the pristine primordial experience of absolute Spirit and to the associated transformation of living.

But while Friends tend to shy away from systematic theology, from a sharply etched code of ethics, and from the practice of rituals, there are four dimensions of Friends' life which perhaps serve somewhat similar functions. I am thinking of the

practices of simplicity, of service, and of silence, and of our traditional testimonies.

In the practice of simplicity, we find that to the extent that we are able to release self-centered grasping for the things of the world, to the extent that we can live in the world without clinging to or forming attachments to the dust of the world, we are overwhelmed by a feeling that the entire abundance of the creation is somehow available to be celebrated and enjoyed.

In the practice of service, we find that we are taken out of ourselves, carried away, as it were, and united not only with those with whom we are working, or those whose situation is addressed by the service, but also with the entire family of the creation, with its groanings and joys. Our hearts embrace the earth and the sky and all living creatures. We find when rendering service that we are more truly alive than at any other time.

And in our practice of silence, do we not discover again and again that everything makes sense, that meaningfulness strikes us and takes hold of us as soon as we are able to release the agitations of our hearts and minds? As soon as we stop making noise and actually practice listening, we see that the great answer has been quietly waiting for us but that our questions have drowned it out.

Our testimonies relate in a way to the second of the three "derivative" aspects of religious culture--an ethical code, or revised way of being. Our testimonies taken together do not necessarily represent an ethical system in the scholarly or philosophical sense, yet they do, nevertheless, hang together in a coherent way, and do hold up a vision of a code of conduct expressive of the great answer as Friends perceive it.

In offering a reflection about the "origins of the testimonies," one could interpret the matter of origins in two ways. It might be the origins of the testimonies in spiritual experience; or it might be the origins of the testimonies in history. I have tried thus far to establish a context for the testimonies in religious experience. I would like now, somewhat briefly, to discuss the history of the testimonies in Friends' experience, to suggest an evolution which has occurred, and to conclude with some of the dilemmas we face in contemporary Quakerism regarding the testimonies. I would like to see in the question and discussion period if you who are here also see some of these dilemmas, and to discuss what directions you might think we might move in to address these dilemmas.

Clearly, the testimonies, as we usually think of them, relate to our enthusiasm for social change activism. As a code of conduct, the testimonies imply a revised social order: the building up of a peaceable world, the elimination of sexism and racism; the advancement of a culture which is less materialistically-oriented than the one at present; the strengthening of democratic values and egalitarianism; the

liberation of people from enslavement to the use of addictive substances, and so forth. I would like to offer the suggestion that the very distinctive effort of modern Friends to promote change in the larger culture outside the Religious Society evolved over the three hundred years and looks somewhat different today than it did at the time of the Valiant Sixty, although concern about the particular issues which Friends are wont to address in contemporary times did certainly exist at the beginning of our Religious Society as well. For example, the practice of silent worship, the testimony of simplicity, the affirmation of the Inner Light, and the testimony against the use of outward weapons all date from the earliest days of Quakerism, from the time when the Religious Society of Friends was establishing its definition. Yet, the sort of social activism we are now apt to regard as so characteristic of Quakerism did not emerge with its present-day contours until considerably later than the 1660s, when the Society of Friends was first settled institutionally.

Even though much about the attitudes and activities of seventeenth century Friends remains obscure to us, it is perhaps not unreasonable to begin a discussion of this sort with at least an informal reflection about their approach to social change --in fact, regarding the earliest phases of the Quaker movement, perhaps it would be more fitting to talk about their attitude towards social revolution, rather than social change.

Certainly George Fox's radical egalitarianism in refusing hat honor and the use of honorifics, his testimony against oath-taking, his objection to tithes, and his general antipathy to what might be termed the ecclesiastical-aristocratic complex, implied an utopian re-ordering of political and social arrangements. It would take somewhat more data about the history of early Friends than is presently available to a non-historian like myself really to know, but tentatively I would speculate that early Friends, to the extent that they anticipated actually seeing radical, social and political changes come about, expected that this would occur as more and more people turn to the Inward Teacher and became as Adam was before the Fall, an experience Fox thought of himself as having had. One gains the impression from popular histories about early Friends that such social changes as they expected were to come about not through any strategies of organization, rebellion, overthrow or revolution other than a kind of evangelism which led both individual souls and entire communities to a new spirituality and its consequent new behavior. While this may seem quaint from the point of view of secular social change activists of our own day, and although it differs in some respects as well from most contemporary Quaker social activism and witness, it also bears elements of similarity to what twentieth century Quaker social activism at its best ought to be than may be apparent at first glance, as I hope to make clear a little later.

At any rate, additional early glimmerings of what was ultimately to become a vigorous kind of social change activism among Friends was given in 1671 when George Fox, during a visit to the Barbados, advised Friends to release their slaves

after a certain length of time, and not to send them away empty-handed. Quakers in Germantown, Pennsylvania, first protested against slavery as early as 1688. In 1711, the Quaker Assembly of Pennsylvania forbade the importation of negroes, but this action was vetoed by the Royal Council back in England.

On another front, the early Meeting for Sufferings provided relief from Quaker to Quaker in a time of persecution, something a little different from what we think of as contemporary outreach from the Society of Friends to the larger world outside of Friends.

William Penn, in 1681, began a "Holy Experiment" when he accepted an enormous tract of land on the west bank of the Delaware River and instituted a government based on Quaker ideals. All in Penn's colony were guaranteed political freedom and the right to worship. The right to vote and eligibility to hold public office were extended to all "such as profess faith in Jesus Christ," a great extension of democracy over what was commonplace in those times. The death penalty, habitually invoked for over two hundred different offenses, in William Penn's colony was restricted in its application to those convicted of two offenses--treason and murder. Most importantly, the colony dealt fairly and peaceably with Native Americans.

In any event, while the Holy Experiment was an attempt to establish a polity based on Quaker principles, a kind of very large intentional community, if you will, this again was not exactly the same thing as a social activism of Friends in modern times. Indeed, with the demise of William Penn's Holy Experiment, and with the passing of the first generation of Friends with their special charismatic gifts, our Religious Society entered a time we now designate as the Quietist Period, characterized by a turning inward, a detectable drying-up of the gifts of the Spirit, and a preoccupation with the rules and regulations of being Quaker. It is true that during this period John Woolman carried out his extraordinary ministry, which significantly contributed to the ultimate *freeing of the Society of Friends* from the practice of slave-holding, but it was not until the beginning of the nineteenth century, partly as a result of the infusion of evangelism into Quakerism, that Friends began to look outward from what was, by this time, their own very highly refined sub-culture, and began to address issues in society as a whole.

It was 1795, practically the beginning of the nineteenth century, when yearly meetings first began to appoint committees on Indian affairs. Societies for the abolition of slavery began to multiply in the early years of the nineteenth century. Such figures as Lucretia Mott, Levi Coffin, and John Greenleaf Whittier came into their own as activists in the cause not only of emancipation, but also of women's rights and the fair treatment of Native Americans. The first systematic attempt to reform prisons through organizing an advocacy was initiated by Elizabeth Fry in 1813, although, once again, the Holy Experiment had anticipated this by itself

establishing prisons which were considered by all at the time to be the most advanced and humane conceivable.

Thus, Friends' social activism, as we know it, first became operative in the early years of the nineteenth century at a time approaching the midway point in the three hundred year history of our Religious Society.

The careers of George Cadbury in England, and Rufus Jones in America, each cover the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, and form the bridge between the service and activism of the nineteenth century and that of modern times.

Often in Friends' experience, the *impulse* to witness, to service, or to social activism is exactly that--it is an impulse. It is not something to which Friends are led by an elaborate, rational process through which they convince themselves that something ought to be done. The best Quaker activism often has the characteristic of an instinctive response of an open, compassionate heart.

Yet, though the initial impulse to a particular service may be as spontaneous as breathing, it nevertheless deserves to be checked through a constant process of worship, contemplation, and experience. Friends do, therefore, even though there is a characteristic of spontaneity about this service and social activism, also give careful attention to processes of review and clearness. Again, such processes usually do not hinge on debates or on theories about social change, but on group worship which presumes that the Spirit speaks more reliably through a gathered community than through an individual only. Douglas Steere writes in his anthology entitled *Quaker Spirituality*: "It would be hard to exaggerate the patience, the humility, the purging and the costly transformation that may have to take place, not only before clarity is reached as to the form in which the concern is meant to be realized, but equally in the person and in the community before they are suitable instruments to assist in its realization."

It is interesting that so wise and kind and great a Friend as John Woolman, in undertaking his labors and travels out of concern for the institution of slavery, and the need for the humane and just treatment of Native Americans, rarely ventured forth without seeking clearness in his monthly meeting, and without usually being accompanied by some Friend from the monthly meeting whose counsel he sought as he proceeded. The best Quaker activism often grows out of the movement of the Spirit in a single sensitive soul, yet it ought never to have the flavor of a "tour-de-force" by an individual. There is always the evidence that a particular mind and body are being used by an agent that is not merely human, and that this quality of obedience to divine leading is affirmed by a worshipping community. When the American Friends Service Committee received the Nobel Peace Prize, the citation by the Nobel Committee spoke insightfully of service rendered by the nameless to the nameless.

As we regard our situation as members of the Society of Friends in modern times, I believe there are several dilemmas we face which are associated with our testimonies and with the evolution regarding them which has occurred.

1. Lamentation and Judgmentalism. As was mentioned earlier, it is characteristic of humankind's spiritual experience that getting in touch with the great answer is a joyful experience which finds expression in a revised way of living, in service given as an expression of gratitude. George Fox spoke of walking cheerfully over the earth speaking to that of God in everyone. Is there a danger that modern Quaker activists lose touch with this animating joy and gratitude? Are we overwhelmed by long catalogs of social ills which remain unaddressed, by a sense that we face overwhelming odds in our witness, by a tendency to judge large categories of people--the military industrial complex, the establishment--as "enemies?" Are the testimonies misused as they become occasions for long catalogs of ills in the world, ills caused by people who are insufficiently like unto ourselves? I know of no serious school of spirituality in either the east or the west which would commend a constant literation of what is wrong with everything about one as an appropriate path to spiritual advancement. As Friends, is there something about our modern approach to the testimonies which tempts us into this trap?

2. Communal Schizophrenia. Do we not detect a dualism developing between "devotional Friends" and "activist Friends?" Am I correct in the assumption that in times past such a dualism would not be obvious? Personalities like Lucretia Mott, Rufus Jones and John Woolman were not notably devotional as opposed to activist, or vice versa. Today I see Friends so caught up in social activism that they do, in effect, become "drop-outs" from the Religious Society of Friends, perhaps occasionally showing up for First Day meeting for worship but in no other respect taking a serious part in the Religious Society. Similarly, I see many Friends who esteem meeting for worship and other aspects of the life of the Religious Society of Friends--yearly meeting, adult First Day School classes, Bible study groups, and so forth--but who almost never participate in public witness or social activism. Is it not true that this dualism represents both an impoverishment of, and a danger to, each of the poles represented?

3. Uncenteredness. Have our testimonies somehow become an invitation to anti-simplicity and anti-centeredness, to a guilt-driven compulsion to try to fix everything up by joining enough well-intentioned committees? Not only are we apt, like our fellow Americans, to be trapped in the rat race of acquiring money and meeting family and business obligations, but we also scramble through an endless series of good works, bowed down under a burden of committees, hurriedly panting through a never-ending program of meetings, appointments and benevolent projects. While the most common spiritual malady in the face of the worsening world situation is, on the part of most people, sloth and apathy, the Achilles' heel of Quakers seems to be the opposite: our proneness to being driven into relentless super-activism. We

practice a consumerism of causes and committees, and somehow are apt to wind up in a same spiritual state as those who exhaust themselves keeping up with the Joneses.

4. Confusion. One of the big dilemmas of contemporary times is simply knowing what our testimonies are. Do we pay war taxes? Do we use alcoholic beverages? Do we take oaths in court? The peace testimony, the testimony of gender equality, and the testimony on racial equality seem to have survived intact, at least among unprogrammed Friends, with the Religious Society tolerating some philosophical disagreements or practical lapses in the realization of these testimonies, but nevertheless remaining clear that Quaker culture in general ought to be expressive of them. Nevertheless, the replacement of the bipolar capitalist/communist Cold War with a multiplicity of bloody ethnic and religious conflicts, and with many decent people calling upon the United States Armed Forces to serve as a world policeman and provider of humanitarian aid, presents Friends with some dilemmas regarding how appropriately to give witness to our testimony on peace. Issues like abortion, same gender unions, the ecological crisis, and the economic crisis seem to demand the invention of new testimonies, testimonies which would not have any clear antecedents in the early history of the Religious Society of Friends as do our more traditional testimonies, such as the ones on peace and race relations. There are also issues such as the significance of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ in the spiritual perspective of contemporary Friends, our attitudes towards goddess spirituality, universalism, leadership, and the place of emotions in spiritual life and practical affairs, where it would seem Friends need to clarify their testimonies if they are going to move forward in a powerful way. Finally, there is the importation into the Religious Society of Friends of certain pseudo-testimonies taken from modern life: the tendency to replace the search for unity under the guidance of the Holy Spirit with a secular-like consensus process; the replacement of the tradition of being cool and still in our own thoughts and free from our own wit with a kind of modernist expressive individualism; the replacement of the sense that in our service we are seeking to attune to ourselves to a divine creative process or creative plan with the modernist notion that human beings can be exalted by their own self-creating acts. Until some wide and deep reflection about these issues leading to unity among the generality of Friends occurs, it would seem that we are likely to remain "off our stride" in terms of rendering the service, and realizing the potential for healing, which the Quaker message does indeed have, and which society in general would seem very much to be in need of at the present juncture of history.

5. Anarchy. George Fox spoke of that of God within us as being also that which brings us into unity with each other. Yet often in modern Quaker life, Friends tear off to undertake some action, witness or testimony on their own with scant regard to whether or not there is any corporate sense that what they propose doing ought to be done in the name of Friends. There is an impatience with the testing and the corporate clearness that was once taken for granted. The result is a scatteration

of the energies of the Religious Society of Friends as people take off on enterprises two or three people at a time. Announcements after meeting for worship become a series of importunings as people with special axes to grind try to recruit the membership into support for or participation in their pet project. There seems to be little sense or desire to build a communal center of gravity around which all could rally. Even with respect to matters where a great task would seem to require financial resources, practical involvement and spiritual support from the length and breadth of the Religious Society of Friends, often nothing is induced but a sense of frustration because individual Friends start out in many directions before the body as a whole can gain clearness.

The Quaker activist, whose witness to the traditional testimonies of the Religious Society of Friends grows out an authentic grasp of the great answer, cultivates a true stillness and simplicity of heart. Such a Quaker activist stops to listen, to pay attention and to be aware. She or he knows that there is no truly beneficial, liberating or healing action which is not rooted in simplicity and centeredness. Imbued with the joy and the gratitude which the great answer elicits, they find they are not torn and fragmented between this or that agenda or among multiple special projects, but rather become devotees of life itself. By releasing ourselves to divine guidance, we discover our own true self, a self that has been searched and known by the Lord, a self whose days were formed in the divine book, even when they had not as yet come to pass. Getting even just a glimpse of this true self drawn by the Lord out of our unformed substance, we find our lives seized with meaning and with peace. Out of this calm we do not vegetate. We are not passive. Quite the contrary. But whether we take to the wings of the morning, or dwell in the utmost parts of the sea, whether we find ourselves caught up in what is wholly necessary, or whether we have the advantage of holy leisure, we find the grace to leave in our wake a trail of goodness and mercy all of the days of our lives.

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