THE WORK OF THE MIND

A Reflection on the Role of Thinking in Spiritual Experience

by Daniel A. Seeger

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When Janet Shepherd asked me to share a few thoughts about "The Work of the Mind" in order to start a discussion about it at orientation time for the Resident Program, I readily enough agreed. Her concept of devoting separate orientation sessions to the work of the heart, the work of the hands, and the work of the mind seemed very beautiful to me, and I responded enthusiastically to her invitation to offer a discussion-starting reflection for the session on the work of the mind. But, when I actually set about the task of preparing, I quickly discovered that the assignment which Janet gave us for this session is not as easy as at first blush it might appear.

I suppose if we are going to explore this topic in any coherent way we would first have to begin with a discussion of what we mean by the term "mind." There are obviously a fairly wide range of loose concepts which float around attached to the word. In the broadest and most general sense, we sometimes use the term "mind" to designate *any* aspect of human consciousness, including thought, perception, feeling, will, memory and imagination. But we are also inclined to use the word in a more restrictive sense to refer to those aspects of conscious thought which might be distinguished from the emotions or from the will. And, in an even more restricted sense, the term "mind" is apt to be used to designate rationality -- that capacity of our intellect which functions through the rules and principles of inductive and deductive reasoning.

Since it is not our goal here to develop a minutely reasoned dissertation about the role of the mind in spiritual experience, I am going to suggest that we settle for a somewhat informal definition. When I speak about the mind, I am going to be talking about the processes of conscious thought and awareness. This includes, but is not limited to, logical reasoning. Our conscious contemplation of the Sermon on

the Mount may not use very much deductive logic, but I will include it in my definition of the work of the mind. We will, then, be exploring the role of conscious thought in our religious experience.

But even as we proceed, we have to be aware that almost any definition of mind which we might decide to use will be an artificial construct. Different aspects of our consciousness tend to blur into each other without sharp borders. When have we ever had a *feeling* without the slightest play or engagement of the mind, for example? When have we ever had a *thought* without the slightest hint of interest, excitement or distaste in the area of the emotions? It is certainly reasonable to identify a certain aspect of our experience and to give it attention in the interest of gaining a fuller understanding of it. This is useful, good and productive to do, so long as we do not loose track of the fact that there is an artificiality to this isolation of some aspects of our consciousness from the others.

Even the dichotomy so sacred to Western culture, the distinction between mind and body, between the spiritual and the physical, is increasingly being understood as an artifice. We now know, for example, that people really can "worry themselves sick," and they can really "die of a broken heart." The expectation buried in centuries of Christian thought that someday we will discard our bodies like suits of clothes and live throughout all eternity as non-corporeal consciousnesses seems increasingly unlikely indeed.

All this does not mean that when speaking about mind, even in the conventional sense that I will proceed to use, that we are speaking of something which is unreal. Indeed, what we are about to discuss is both quite real, quite valuable, and quite necessary as a human capacity. It only means that drawing too many sharp-edged boundaries, or treating the matter in too artificial an isolation, can be misleading.

For this reason I felt it necessary to proceed to draw a sort of typography of the spiritual life, that is, to sketch the fuller context in which the work of the mind takes its place.

But before proceeding with this typography, I think it is useful to be aware that the mind, or at least the significant part of it we know as reason or intellect, has fallen into disrepute in recent times. The reasons for this are almost too numerous to mention. But let us take a quick survey of some of them.

Part of the reason that intellect has fallen into disrepute stems simply from a revulsion at the excesses of the twentieth century, which has brought us world wars, several holocausts, nuclear weapons, and unparalleled exploitation and misery while claiming to be an age of rationalism and science.

But aside from all the social events mentioned above, there is a reaction to the over-reaching of the culture of the European Enlightenment, a philosophy or world view which started in the eighteenth century and which seems to have claimed to be able to construct the truths by which human beings could live, both individually and socially, out of pure logical reason alone, or at least out of logical reason drawing rigorous inferences from non-subjective facts. Yet for reasons that it would be too much of a digression to enter into here, this Enlightenment project is clearly a failure and has led, it seems, only to a kind of culture war within Western societies.

A third source of disrepute is the vague sense that while religious *experience* and religious *feelings* tend to unite, religious arguments tend only to divide. Reason is often seen to have imperialist pretensions, and a vitally felt religion can be seen to be under threat from the passion for law and order, for tidiness and clarity, which is a feature both in institutional power and philosophical reflection. Thus, anti-intellectualism in religious life is rooted in a fear of the death-dealing rigidity of institutional order and the divisiveness of intellectual debate.

With these preliminary reflections behind us, it is now time to turn to what I have described as a typography of spiritual life in order to establish the context in which the work of the mind takes place. I am going to consider this typography from two vantage points: the vantage point of the individual and the vantage point of the faith community.

As individuals, 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 corresponding 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. Some people never get this great answer, but it is not because the answer is unavailable, but only because they decline to seek it or perhaps unknowingly set up impediments to its realization. But to people drawn by natural inclination to an interest in the spiritual life, there does come a realization that there is a transcendent truth which we can somehow grasp and a transcendent goodness with which we can align ourselves in the way we live and act. This vision, or knowledge, or realization thus comes both as kind of awareness and as a transformation of our way of being. It is at once a transformation of consciousness and a transformation of behavior.

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 to be 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 finding this

great answer. Note that in making these generalizations we are already engaged in the work of the mind.

One thing that usually characterizes these mystical experiences or openings is that persons will, paradoxically, both loose 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 self-hood is diminished, they somehow feel more fully than ever to be whom they were really meant to be. So the first paradox which characterizes these openings, or mystical experiences, is a paradox of selflessness married to a realized self-hood.

A second attribute of these peak experiences, or mystical insights or openings, is a person's sense of both aloneness and community. These openings or visions sometimes occur in the solitude of a natural setting, but they can also happen in the midst of a crowd. I have heard at least one Friend speak of achieving such a realization in the middle of a crowded airport concourse. Nevertheless, there is a particular sense that people have as these spiritual peak experiences grow on them 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 far greater then themselves. So the second paradox which people testify to out of these sudden, or perhaps very gradual, openings to the divine is a paradox of solitude and community, of feeling a sense of their aloneness while at the same time feeling a profound sense of unity with all the Creation.

The third characteristic of these openings as testified to by those who have had them is that the mysteries of life somehow seem to be solved. People do find a kind of answer even though they cannot express it. The 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. And so the third paradoxical characteristic of this opening to divine things is a sense that the problems of life are somehow solved while also remaining ultimately mysterious.

People who have experienced this sense of belonging, this release from spiritual restlessness, this sense of at-home-ness, of unity with the cosmos, this sense of connectedness to an ultimate truth and this engagement with an ultimate goodness are usually overcome with a boundless joy and with an impulse to express gratitude, often through works of service to others.

Now, while we have been engaged in the work of the mind in this survey of the testimony of people of sanctity from many ages and spiritual traditions, and in drawing these three generalizations from them, in terms of the experiences themselves, mind has hardly entered into it at all! People rarely or never testify that they *thought* their way into these openings or mystical experiences. If anything, this higher state of spiritual consciousness or awareness, whether it comes upon people suddenly or gradually over time, seems to occur at points where the conscious mind reaches a kind of threshold or edge beyond which it seems unable to move. Often it occurs upon the collapse of mind after an exhaustive but fruitless struggle for knowledge or truth. And so, if we were to consider the individual only, it might be tempting to imagine that the mind played no essential part in our spiritual experience. But I think that we shall find that such a conclusion would be a great mistake; it is, in fact, one of the great mistakes which have become popular in modern times, both among religious radicals and religious conservatives. I hope eventually to make the case that while the work of the mind can never carry us into a beatific vision, conscientious mental work is a necessary preparation for achieving such a vision. I believe that those who neglect the life of the mind, who do not struggle with questions in the realm of thought, are not apt to achieve this mystical insight. In other words, authentic spiritual experience is not a reward for intellectual sloth.

We all know the story of St. Thomas of Aquinas, the great doctor of the church who sought to reconcile the life of reason with the life of faith, who sought to reconcile the insights of the great classical philosophers with the revelation of the Christian religion. His work presents a magnificent edifice comprised entirely of myriad steps of logically related thoughts. Yet, we also know that near the end of his life, when this titanic work was near completion, St. Thomas had a vision one day at mass which caused him to lay down his pen never to lift it up again. "I have had such a vision," he said, "that it makes everything I have ever written seem as so much straw."

Since this story is recounted even by Thomas Aquinas' greatest admirers, we must assume it is not apocryphal. But what is the meaning, in terms of the role of the mind, of this story?

One could take either one of two approaches to this turn of events in the great saint's life. One could assume that a great mind had simply been broken by the extent of its labors, dismiss the vision at mass, and devote oneself to the understanding and admiration of the great edifice which had been built by the life of reason. Or, on the other hand, one could say that this turn of events in the life of Thomas shows the futility of the life of the mind in the spiritual realm, a futility which the great saint himself, even after a lifelong labor, finally had to admit to, and we, too, could say that this great edifice is just as so much straw and neglect it. But I think a true understanding would be that it is the work of our minds, as it was the work of St. Thomas's life, to bring us to a place where we can leap beyond its boundaries into a realm where the mind itself may indeed seem irrelevant. But I would maintain that we will not get there by assuming that we do not need to do the work of the mind.

In particular, the work of the mind comes most sharply into play as soon as we realize that human beings are social animals and in our spiritual life, no less than

in other aspects of our life, we are far from being self-sufficient.

A peak experience or mystical opening such as George Fox describes can scarcely have meaning unless it is shared. The very effort to comprehend what one has experienced involves communication with fellow seekers. Three essential aspects of humankind's spiritual life, considered from a community perspective, derive, if they are genuine at all, from peak experiences such as have been described. The three aspects of corporate spiritual life I am referring to are the practice of theology, the definition and operation of moral codes, and the development of rituals.

The exercise of theology is an attempt to communicate about 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 upon it, seek to understand it, try to come to know it better, and most especially, to share with each other their understanding of its meaning and significance. 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. We might say to ourselves, "Well, Friends do not practice theology." In fact, our desire to remain as closely as possible in the thrall of the primordial experience itself does cause us to be wary of the practice of theology. Yet, as Friends, we are subject to the same social principles to which all flesh is heir. If we think about it we see that we do practice theology. George Fox's Journal, while unorthodox in a academic sense, is nothing other than a lengthy reflection on his spiritual experience. In the very earliest days of Quakerism, as we know, Robert Barclay felt impelled to develop a clear and thoughtful exposition of Quaker faith. Every yearly meeting engages in the exercise of developing a Faith and Practice statement. Candidate members of the Religious Society of Friends, before they are admitted into membership, are usually expected to familiarize themselves with, and to indicate an inclination to adhere to, a set of attitudes and even of beliefs rooted in the historical experience of the Religious Society of Friends. Friends have even gone so far as to establish an academy of theology known as the Earlham School

of Religion.

Friends' attitude toward this theologising is apt to be a little bit different than is conventionally the case in other Christian denominations. But our attitudes about this are, by and large shared by those few people in other Christian denominations who are sensitive to the true import of spiritual experience. Perceptive people understand that the theological enterprise can be regarded mainly as a set of hints, rather than as an absolute grasp of the Ultimate Reality. If theological speculation pretends to define, rather than merely to suggest, it tends to flaunt and fail. But as a series of hints it is most useful, even essential.

Similarly, springing from the profound sense of belonging and of unity comes a concept of a way of living, a system of morals. 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. An ethical code or an ethical system is a community's attempt to define the kinds of behavior which are expressive of this alignment with an absolute good which we know as the goodness of God. We may say that Friends tend to eschew moral codes and all the legalism and literalism which go along with them. Here again, however, the situation is actually nuanced, and Friends' attitude toward moral codes tends to blur into the attitudes of other people to the extent that they, too, are sensitive to the nature of humankind's spiritual path. Friends develop testimonies: a Testimony on Simplicity, a Testimony on Racial and Gender Equality, a Peace Testimony; and sets of queries upon which to base reflection about the testimonies. This practice of articulating testimonies and asking ourselves about them indicates our awareness that an approach to an ethical or moral system for the community ought to have a certain resilience. It ought to avoid the automatonism inherent in an approach to a moral code applied much the way the laws of physics might apply in the material world. But this does not mean that we fail to have a moral system, or to engage in the important work of the mind which defining a moral system entails. Indeed, the

current struggles within the Religious Society of Friends (and within other faith communities) about issues such as abortion and same gender unions indicate the difficulty and the dedication involved as the community struggles toward an updating of its ethical system to meet the challenges posed by changing times and circumstances.

Now, thus far we have proceeded by considering spiritual experience from the point of view of the individual and proceeded from there to the consideration of the community of the faithful. We see that it is the work of the mind to assemble the experience of individuals into a community tradition. It might be assumed from this analytic approach that the work of the mind has little to do with the spiritual experience of individuals and that it only comes into play as individuals seek to coalesce into faith-sustaining communities. But this would actually be a wrong understanding of the situation. I began the analysis with the consideration of the individual because it was necessary to begin somewhere in a system which is actually a closed circle. For the life of the community is essential to the nourishment of the faith experiences of individuals. While one does not dare place any limitations or restrictions on the operation of divine Providence, and one must allow that it is perfectly possible for the Holy Spirit to visit any human being without regard to his or her place in an ordered faith community, the weight of experience would seem to indicate that the movements of the Spirit are most accessible to those who have been in some way made tender by communal experience. If we think about it, whether they achieve some sort of spiritual realization suddenly, as St. Paul, St. Francis of Assisi, and George Fox apparently did, or whether something comes to them gradually over time, as perhaps was the case with Thomas Merton, the people involved were already intensely engaged with a community of faith, even if it was in a conflicted manner.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a religious experience which is not in some sense derived from or extrapolated from an inherited tradition. We may think of

George Fox as a radical or revolutionary who had spiritual openings of a highly individualist sort. Yet, we can scarcely believe that the idea, "Christ is the light of every person that cometh into the world," was simply a direct inspiration from the living God to the living Fox, discovered only later by Fox to have also been given by God to the writer of the prologue of the Gospel of John seventeen centuries before.

One of the great mistakes of modern times is to exalt a purely personal religion of individual feeling and emotion and to set it totally in contrast to thought and organization; to cherish individual states of mind or emotion at the expense of the outer world of structures and arguments, which are perceived as a threat to the purity of the personal. But true religion takes spiritual integrity and maturity to be the fragile fruit of an interplay among the forces and factors of thinking, feeling and emotion in the private and the public realms. Humankind's spiritual health involves a carefully maintained relationship among personal experience, intellectual inquiry, and the good ordering of a movement or an institution. It is true that rational thought and institutionalism can be corrupted by an unfeeling and an oppressively unreal rigidity, but a personal devotion or piety, unshaped and unconstrained by public dialogue and by the illumination of the critical intellect, is no less disastrously corrupted. Unchecked religious feeling or an overheated religious imagination can play host to a variety of spiritual maladies, including self-indulgence, idolatries of various sorts, meaningless revolt, and fanaticism. The spiritual health of individuals and communities grows out of the continual, costly, practical quest for an appropriate balance and harmony among all the constituent elements of the spiritual life, both public and private, both of the mind and of feeling.

So one primary object of the work of the mind is the mediation of the public and private realms in the experience of individuals and the faith community. But, there is yet another objective of the work of the mind which has to do with the relationship of the faith community itself to the wider culture. Let us remember the statement of William Penn: "True godliness does not turn people out of the world but

enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it." In the Quaker view, and indeed in the view of people of any faith who take religion seriously, spirituality cannot be thought of merely as something that is personal and private. To do so drastically diminishes it and even trivializes it. The notion that we can be related to God and not to the world and to history, either as individuals or as a faith community, that we can practice a spirituality that is not political, is, at least in the Quaker view of things, totally illusory. Let us face it: if our faith is to be relevant, if we are to engage at all in the gradual, painful effort to move the human community towards the City of God in temporal affairs, our faith has to confront the whole spectrum of modern learning, including economics, political science, literary criticism, historical inquiry, philosophical studies, linguistics, natural science, social theory and the arts. To the extent that people of faith are willing to live in their own ghetto, the movement of culture is simply captured and dominated by Marx, Darwin and Freud.

The ultimate irony is that those who neglect the work of the mind wind up, unbeknownst even to themselves, coopted by whatever social trends happen to prevail. It is one of the paradoxes of current history that the anti-intellectualism of the religious right and the anti-intellectualism of the religious left has had the same impact on both these spiritual communities. For without the resources of clear thought which an intellectual tradition and the work of the mind can provide, each of these communities has wound up being absorbed into and coopted by social trends without themselves realizing it. And so on the right we see the ridiculous spectacle of so-called Christian people being coopted by the economic theories of Ronald Reagan, as if capitalism were expressive of Gospel values, while on the left, spiritual communities are absorbed by the attitudes of cynicism about the possibility of knowing truth, and the exaltation of expressive egotism, extravagant self-centeredness and individualism, and even anarchy, in a way which is also totally contradictory to Gospel values and to any sort of Quaker authenticity. The shabby state of spiritual communities at the right and the left end of the spectrum is due

almost entirely to a neglect of the work of the mind. Both movements are vulnerable to attractive and powerful slogans. Being prejudiced against reasoned discourse, they are notoriously vulnerable to captivation by the glittering catch phrases and satisfying patterns of imagery which, in the name of relevance, slide over the surface of things, mask everything that is true, and hide everything that is authentic. People engaged in the culture of anti-intellectualism inevitably bounce meaninglessly from one facet of a dark and broken world to another.

Let us be clear that when in a Quaker context we speak of the work of the mind we are not talking of the sort of arid intellectual debates which tend to lead to polarization and disunity, and in the face of which most sensitive people see true godliness withdrawing. A Quaker Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business is a way for bringing into view all aspects of a given question, but of doing so with a reverence and a tenderness which builds towards convergence rather than disunity. In order for this to work, each and every person involved must practice the virtues described by Isaac Penington as essential for participation in a Quaker discernment process:

> First is the pure fear of the Lord. This poises and guards the mind, keeping down fleshly confidence and conceitedness, making it wary and considerate either of what it receives or rejects; of what it practices or forebears practicing. This causes it to wait much, try much and consult much with the Lord and with His ministers and people, and preserves out of suddenness and inconsiderateness of spirit. For truth is weighty and will bear trial; and the more it is tried in the balance the more manifest its nature and ways appear.
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> (Another) . . . great help . . . is sobriety of judgement. Not to value or to set up my own judgement, or that which I account the judgement of life in me, above the judgement of others, or that which is indeed life in others. For the Lord has appeared to others as well as to me . . . there are others who are in the growth of His Truth, and in the purity and dominion of His life, far beyond me.

The last is tenderness, meekness, coolness and stillness of Spirit. These are of a uniting, preserving nature.

There is a sense in which intellectual arguments can be said to "compel." A good argument does this not by terrorizing, nor by manipulating the emotions, but only through what we conventionally call the "force" of the argument. Such arguments compel not by steam-rollering, but by eliciting from people responsible and free acts of evaluation, judgement, and decision.

As Friends we know very well that in all responsible human labor, including the labor of the mind, there is a necessary discipline. This discipline imposes upon our patterns of speech, not doubt and hesitation, but a certain kind of reverence and reticence. This is why Quaker dialogue and Quaker search for truth differs in form, pattern, and diction from an academic exercise or a parliamentary debate. Quakers understand that serious and responsible theological speech will be characterized by a kind of courtesy dictated by the incomprehensible mystery upon which it seeks to reflect. Such argument is inquiring rather than dogmatic, and avoids setting down formulas as final and inflexible embodiments of Truth.

Mass society and fascism are both examples of what is likely to happen when nations become populated by people incapable of reasoned discourse, the first duty of true citizenship. As people of religion we should always do honor to the work of the mind. For there can at last be no decent politics or community unless there is a body of citizens who are communicative and responsible and disposed to join with others in the reasoned and reasonable consideration of and management of common affairs. By trying much, waiting much and loving much, even when momentous issues are laid before us, we demonstrate that it is possible to have enough religion to overcome brokenness and fragmentation with reconciliation, to grow, to change, to love, to know Truth, to live in peace, and to build justice.

Daniel A. Seeger
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