Many Paths, One Mountaintop

The Life of the Spirit in a Religiously Diverse Retirement Community with Quaker Roots

The human enterprise can be likened to a journey. In some senses it is a collective journey, a journey of communities, of nations and of cultures. But we also can think of each individual human life as a journey, an external journey through childhood, youth, marriage family, career, and retirement; or an internal journey of spiritual development and growth.

Regarding humankind as a whole, our most obvious journey has been an external, physical one -- beginning with our origin somewhere in the Middle East or East Africa and proceeding over a period of millions of years to the north, east, south and west until, ultimately, our species has inhabited the far reaches of this planet.

But there are other interesting journeys. Journeys which, although they may have an outward expression, are essentially inner or spiritual journeys. Such journeys are chartered in Homer's Odyssey or in the Biblical account of the wanderings of the people of Israel in search of the Promised Land -- a land visualized not only as a place overflowing with milk and honey, but more importantly, as a place of special closeness to God.

Some of these pilgrimages are entirely spiritual such as that which Dante depicts for us in his progression from the inferno to paradise.

Other pilgrimages are carried out in both the spiritual and the physical realms. The ancient Chinese sage Lao Tzu wandered from kingdom to kingdom seeking a

prince wise enough to govern in accordance with the way of Truth. Failing to find any, he ultimately retired to a cave hermitage and there wrote a concise scripture of a mere five thousand Chinese characters, the scripture we know as the *Tao Te Ching,* which subsequently became the basis of a great civilization.

The Indian prince Gautama Siddhartha, now known as the Buddha, was raised within an artificial paradise fashioned by his parents so as to protect him from all experience of evil. Upon reaching the early years of adulthood, Prince Gautama strayed from the palace enclosure and for the first time encountered victims of poverty, sickness and death. Sorely troubled in spirit, he left his protected paradise and wandered across the face of India in the most strenuous of spiritual searches. Finally he was enlightened by a great Truth and thereafter gave of himself unceasingly to yet further journeys, challenging and uplifting multitudes with the power of his teaching. After the Buddha's death, in a gentle way, without militant crusades, the faith he taught traveled southward and westward, and later to the east by way of the legendary silk routes, until today fully one sixth of the human race lives according to his teaching.

Two thousand years ago a young itinerant Rabbi in Galilee, one who was what we could be, miraculously transformed sinners into saints, social outcasts into public benefactors, common fisher folk into fishers of women and men. How many spiritual journeys were set into motion by faith in the Truth which Jesus of Nazareth revealed to humankind! A mere handful of disciples in Galilee, Jericho and Jerusalem spread to Egypt, to India, to Corinth, to Ephesus, to Rome, and to the entire world. One thinks of the peregrinations of Saint Francis of Assisi and his followers who traveled the earth to spread the Good News; or we remember Saint Augustine's *Confessions* in which the author frequently likens the course of his life to a journey from darkness to light. Nor must we forget travels in ministry under Christian inspiration of more recent times, such as those undertaken by George Fox, John Woolman and Lucretia Mott.

The metaphor of the pilgrimage or journey as a symbol of spiritual life is particularly compatible to the Quaker approach. For Friends, our devotion to spiritual Truth is not like clinging to a shrine. Rather, it is more like an endless pilgrimage of the heart, based on our awareness that God's Truth is always beyond our secure apprehension. We know that the faith which must sustain us is not a static thing, not something that has already been fully revealed for all time. We expect that God will speak to us now, just as God did to the prophets and the apostles in days of old. We expect our journey to be characterized by a continuing revelation. But our journey in response to this revelation, while involving motion, does always involve *orderly* motion. It is not chaotic or random or discontinuous. Traveling in the ministry in response to a leading and with the support and approval of one's monthly meeting is a beautiful tradition of Quaker Truth-seeking and Truth-sharing involving both individual inspiration and the testing by and sanction of the community. Much of the tradition we inherit as Friends comes to us through the journals of traveling ministers, written records in which they share with us the openings to Truth which they have received. In sum, Friends are not a spiritual fellowship which values stasis or rigidity; Friends are spiritual pilgrims.

A community like Medford Leas might seem to be a settled thing, but I would like to use the metaphor of a journey to explore two aspects of Medford Leas life: 1) its existence as a community which is inspired by Quaker faith and practice but which is nevertheless ecumenical and diverse in its spiritual nature and its constituency, i.e., how we can be both Quaker and non-sectarian at the same time, and 2) the relationship between a community of elders, such as Medford Leas is, and the broader society from which such a community springs and in which it is rooted.

Let us consider the first of these issues, the nature of Medford Leas as a Spirit-led, Quaker-inspired community which is nevertheless ecumenical or diverse in incorporating into its life people of many faiths and backgrounds.

The first thing that should be said is that although the founders and the present supporters of Medford Leas regard it as an expression of Quaker faith, like all expressions of Quaker faith it tends to rely on understated invitation rather than on any sort of loudly proclaimed religiosity. It is true that in standard Quaker fashion there are seventy-five committees at Medford Leas which one could join, but one will never be arm-twisted into activism. They are there quietly in the background in case participation seems fitting. The same is true for the ecumenical vesper services at Medford Leas which one of our residents, Reverend Don Killian, helps us by organizing, for the Roman Catholic masses celebrated here when Father Joseph Tedesco from Saint Mary of the Lakes Parish in Medford visits regularly, for the Quaker meetings for worship which take place here on First Day mornings, and for all the car pool arrangements to off -campus religious services. These are available, but if one wants to retire in quietness and solitude, such a wish will be respected. This is not due to lukewarmness, not due to lack of enthusiasm or commitment. It is due to a profound respect for the way the Holy Spirit moves. Those who are committed to a particular path on the spiritual journey are willing to be available to any who might want to join their pilgrimage, but they are also determined not to be an imposition on others.

So we find here at Medford Leas a religious spirit which is vibrant yet subtle, always available, but also always non-intrusive.

I would like to return to the travel or pilgrimage metaphor as a way of describing the rich but quiet flavor of spiritual life in a community like Medford Leas. We know that the image of a mountain is often used in connection with the metaphor of the spiritual journey or pilgrimage. According to this image, an individual's spiritual journey is like climbing a mountain. Some struggle and effort is involved, but as one advances toward the top one draws closer to the divine presence. In his book *The Religious Philosophy of Quakerism*, Howard Brinton uses this image of a mountain journey to describe the connection among different religious faiths. The

image shows the connection without making the false or naive assumption that all religions are essentially alike. According to this image people of different faiths are all climbing the same mountain, but by different means. People who follow their respective religious paths up the mountain with faithfulness not only all draw closer to the celestial regions, closer to the presence of God, but as they near the top of the mountain they also come closer to each other. According to Howard Brinton, although different religious paths are in many respects dissimilar, at their highest levels they become more alike. They are like persons who climb a mountain starting from different sides only to find that the higher they climb the closer they get to one another.

One might spin the metaphor out a little bit further. Perhaps on one side of our mountain there is a rainforest, on another side there is a treeless steppe, and yet from still another direction the landscape is characterized by a rugged but arid terrain. People who climb this mountain from the direction of the rainforest may perhaps find that an elephant is a suitable vehicle for making the journey. Those who start toward the mountain from the treeless steppe may ride a horse, while those approaching from the rugged but arid territory may best advance on the back of a mule. Each vehicle, or each religious tradition, is suitable to the environment through which the spiritual pilgrim must travel -- the historical, cultural and even natural environment in which their pilgrimage starts out and must take place. Different religions fit the cultural, spiritual and historical landscape in which they grow. They are each God's way of working among people of faith in different circumstances.

At the lower levels of the mountain people, should they catch a glimpse of another vehicle far away in the distance, may regard it as freakish or bizarre. Yet upon drawing closer together near the summit they may come to appreciate the strange animal's effectiveness in bearing people toward the summit. Near the summit the terrain is uniform enough that the unique adaptations of each vehicle

seem less significant. Yet each pilgrim loves his own vehicle nevertheless, continues to nurture it with affection, and would scarcely think of trying to make the remainder of the journey on a horse if acclimated to an elephant, or vice versa. It would make little sense for a Roman Catholic to become a Presbyterian or for a Jew to become a Buddhist. Nevertheless the pilgrims converse easily with one another from their respective vehicles as they draw together near the heights. Here at Medford Leas one can find community with people who love the journeys they have made in their respective spiritual traditions, and who can both share generously out of this own experience while savoring and appreciating the beauty and truth of the experience of others. I think this spirit is manifest in various ways at Medford Leas; one which comes to mind is the way many non-Jewish residents of Medford Leas actively support residents of Jewish background in celebrating the richness of Jewish spiritual traditions as part of Medford Leas life.

I would like to reflect for a few minutes on the life of the well-known writer, Thomas Merton, as a way of illustrating the potential for a community of spiritual pilgrims at a place like Medford Leas.

You will remember that Thomas Merton converted to Roman Catholicism in his youth while a student at Columbia University, and a few short years later he entered a Trappist monastery, one of the most rigorous spiritual communities in Christendom and one in which the practice of silence is central. His first major publication as a Trappist monk was a book entitled *The Seven Story Mountain,* which became a best seller and which has been translated into scores of languages. Those of you who have read it perhaps share my view that *The Seven Story Mountain* is a somewhat disturbing book. On the one hand there is evident in it of a towering spirituality about which there can be no doubt. On the other hand there is an unmistakable condescension toward anything which is not Roman Catholic. Even high church Anglicanism is treated witheringly by Merton's pen. On one occasion Merton actually participated in Quaker worship at Flushing Monthly Meeting. It

was, if his account in *The Seven Story Mountain* is accurate, not one of Quakerism's better first days, but he took it as being typical. So it is a rather skeptical view of Quakerism which is immortalized in this great work. In short Merton's attitude in *The Seven Story Mountain* reflects the intolerant enthusiasm of the newly converted.

With the passage of years in the practice of inner silence, and in the disciplined rigors of monastic life, Thomas Merton's perspective gradually changed. He produced volume after volume of devotional literature in which the old harshness and chauvinism gradually disappeared and was replaced by a more genuine sort of Christian charity. In spite of his strict isolation he wrote with stunning insight on the great political and social issues of our time. Even more surprising, he eventually translated into English the writings of Chuang Tzu, one of the authors of Taoist scripture. He also developed an insightful introduction to a new translation of the *Bhavagad Gita*, and he wrote a perceptive study of Gandhi and of Gandhi's spiritual roots in Hinduism. He came to disown *The Seven Story Mountain* and claimed to be struggling to live it down. Finally, near the end of his life, he was granted temporary leave from the Abbey of Gethsemane and he made a joyous pilgrimage to the great spiritual masters of the Far East, including the Dalai Lama, with whom he held loving and brotherly dialogues. As we know, Merton met an accidental death while attending a conference on the eremetical life held in Bangkok, Thailand which threw together monks from both Eastern and Western religious communities.

On his way to Bangkok Thomas Merton visited the great Buddhist shrine at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka. Many of you have probably seen pictures of this shrine, where several huge images of the Buddha, one of them reclining, have been carved out of a mountainside. Let us consider these words which Thomas Merton entered in his *Asian Journal* upon visiting the shrine at Polonnaruwa:

> "I am able to approach the Buddhas barefoot and undisturbed, my feet in wet grass and in wet sand. Then the silence of the extraordinary faces. The great

smiles. Huge yet subtle. Filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, knowing everything, rejecting nothing, the peace. . . that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything -- *without refutation* -- without establishing some other argument. For the doctrinaire, the mind that needs well established positions, such peace, such silence, can be frightening . . .

"Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no mystery. All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life is charged with *dharmakaya* . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with . . . Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage had become clear and had purified itself ." (page 233)

One of the spiritual experiences of aging is that as they advance on the spiritual path people become more comfortable with paradoxes. The characteristics of the Buddhas which Thomas Merton describes could easily, it seems to me, be applied as well to anyone who has become wise with the passage of years. For with the passage of years, people begin to appreciate that what at first seems like a clash of irreconcilable opposites is actually an opportunity to see the light of Truth beyond each side of the paradox. During the busy part of their lives, paradox touches people only lightly. But as one ages, it comes more and more to the fore. Failure is success; loss is gain; defeat is victory; losing one's life is finding it; in my end is my beginning; in my beginning is my end. We hear many of these great themes expressed as paradoxes through our lives. In old age one actually begins not only to

hear them, but to experience them.[1] (See Mary Morrison, Pendle Hill pamphlet 311, page 6.) People of more advanced years have had an opportunity to learn to love the great questions of life, and have also learned to live along gradually and gracefully into the answers.

Our experience of Truth, of the Divine, is nourished through many things -- a formula of Einstein's, the music of Beethoven, a beautiful sunset, the death of a loved one, the theology of Thomas Aquinas, the devotional reading of the scriptures, our own spiritual community at worship. Increasingly it is possible to see that one can be nourished as well by spiritual traditions other than one's own. Is there any need to assume that Thomas Merton's Catholicism was in any measure diluted by his response to the great shrine at Polonnaruwa?

Thus the sense of community which is possible among people of different religious faiths is not one of doctrine, nor of manner of worship, even though many similarities in these areas can be identified. Rather the essential point of convergence is the quality of the human person, the quality of spirit, which the sincere and selfless devotion to any of these spiritual paths can produce. Thus it is the people who live and who work at Medford Leas who make it what it is as a spiritual community, at once subtle and very rich.

I do not want to overstate the situation or to oversell Medford Leas by implying that to live here is to enjoy a perpetual mountain-top experience. But I think it is reasonable to look forward when coming here to joining a community of people whose faith is the fruit of seeds planted in the depth of their lifetimes, people who can share with each other out of the rich diversity of their spiritual experiences, people sensitive to the fragrance which the holy can bestow upon all of life.

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[1] See *Without Nightfall Upon the Spirit* by Mary Morrison. (Pendle Hill Pamphlet Number 311, page 6)

Let us turn to the second aspect of a community of spiritual pilgrims such as we find at Medford Leas. You remember that I wanted to reflect upon spiritual life at Medford Leas not only in terms of its internal life, that is, in terms of its residents and staff, but also in terms of its relationship to the larger community outside of itself.

Let me begin this part of our reflection together with another travel metaphor. One day while I was having dinner with my parents and some of their friends in the Colonial Room here at Medford Leas one person in the group said to me, "Dan, living here at Medford Leas is like being on a long cruise, but without fear of drowning." Now I thought that this was an interesting travel metaphor, and to some extent it is certainly true. Living in Medford Leas is like being on a cruise. There is shuffleboard, there is a swimming pool, there is lots of very good food. But like all metaphors this one has its limitations. In particular one thinks of a cruise ship as remote and isolated in the sea, a kind of island unto itself. And here is where the metaphor breaks down because Medford Leas is not at all an island unto itself, but is very much a part of the larger stream of life. In fact, it is its rootedness in the mainland, its non-isolation, which it seems to me is a very crucial aspect of a community like this designed for people of advancing years. The carports which are so significant a part of the landscape and architecture of Medford Leas symbolize for me the fact that this place is not a cloister in which people hibernate. The fact that Medford Leas organizes its own form of public transportation for those who do not drive so that they can get out into the community is another symbol of this rootedness in the mainstream of life which makes us different from anything that might be thought of simply as a dry cruise ship. The same might be said for the flowing into Medford Leas of a wide range of people to give concerts and lectures, to lead worship services, to exhibit their art, to visit relatives, and simply to use the facilities we make available to the larger community.

Every community is defined by some mixture of separateness from, and

interaction with, the surrounding environment. If there was no boundary and no distinctiveness the community simply would not exist; it would just be an indistinguishable part of the culture as a whole. At the same time even the most special sorts of communities, such as the Amish, the Hasidim, or Catholic monastics maintain, also interact with the outside world in significant and meaningful ways. For the purpose of today's reflection, I do not want to discuss all the obvious ways that Medford Leas is part of the community around it -- the involvement of staff, the getting of supplies, the going forth of residents to concerts, civic events, church and temple activities, and so forth -- rather, I would like to think in a more general way about the importance of the role of elders in the spiritual life of the wider community.

Some people have expressed skepticism about a community organized for a single age group and have advanced the idea that inter-generational living is more authentic. This point of view is a respectable one, but I myself am inclined to agree more with another thought. People in similar circumstances can be reinforced and can be of mutual help by being together. They understand each others needs, sustain each other, and if older can find a richness and quality of life which younger generations do not conceive of as being possible for elders simply because those who are younger have never experienced what it is like to be a senior. In the Pendle Hill pamphlet *Without Nightfall Upon the Spirit* the author, Mary Morrison, quotes Gabriel Garcia Marquez as saying, "The old are younger in one another's company." Mary Morrison goes on to say that as older people live together they find out that this aphorism of Marquez is right. They can support and encourage one another, live at their own tempo, and find together the strength they need to reach out into the large community in ways that are suitable to their gifts. Living in a community like Medford Leas, the older generation stops being a problem because they have acted together to solve the problem and to free themselves to bring into today's crises and needs some of the wisdom and patience of their years.

Right now I am engaged with Pendle Hill, where I work, and with the

American Friends Service Committee, where I serve on the Board of Directors. Both organizations are immeasureably enriched by the full and active participation of people from places like Medford Leas, Kendal and Foulkeways. People from these retirement communities participate as program participants, as volunteers, as committee members and as Board members.

This engagement with the larger community is of critical importance for the larger community itself, for elders have a significant and indispensable role to play there. I spoke earlier of a pilgrim people in search of a continuing revelation. God is not silent, and there are always moments when there is a lifting of a veil at the horizon of what is known so that our sight reaches something that is eternal. Thus, authentic faith is more than an echo of tradition. Authentic faith is actually a creative situation, an event, something that happens in the present. But the coherence of our faith depends upon the memory of such events. Memory therefore is a source of faith. To have faith in some sense is to remember. The older generation is a repository of memory. Now I do not mean that we senior citizens need to be able to remember what we ate for lunch last Thursday! The older generation need not be encyclopedias of memory. They need not necessarily teach or preach. In fact, that might be counterproductive. But they are witnesses to the value of memory and they are symbols of memory. They display the gifts of people for whom it is a holy joy to remember, an overwhelming thrill to be grateful. The only things valuable in our experiences are those which are worth remembering. The older generation personifies accumulated memory, or wisdom, and prevents a pilgrim people from becoming merely a scattered people.

We may lament the passing of the days when everyone lived in multi-generational, extended families. Modern life seems to have made that impossible as the imperatives of careers take different members of families to the far ends of the earth. A place like Medford Leas takes away one of the risks of aging inherent in modern life -- isolation. We can see that there is the potential of an entirely new

power in communities of elders like Medford Leas, where the older generation can achieve a new visibility and a new kind of place in the unfolding drama of ages and generations. But the crucial element is to be rooted in the mainland and not to be isolated like a cloister, an island, or a ship.

Before I took up my present work at Pendle Hill I lived in New York City. One of the magnificent presences in our City was the great rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who taught at Jewish Theological Seminary up on West 123rd Street. He died in 1972 but he is certainly one of the outstanding spirits of the modern age. I would like to close by quoting a short passage from Rabbi Heschel's writings:

> "Piety, finally, is allegiance to the will of God. Whether that will is understood or not, it is accepted as good and holy, and is obeyed in faith. Life is a mandate, not the enjoyment of an annuity; a task, not a game; a command, not a favor. So to the pious person life never appears as a fatal chain of events following necessarily one on another, but comes as a voice with an appeal. It is a flow of opportunity for service, every experience giving a clue to a new duty, so that all that enters life is . . . a means for showing renewed devotion. Piety is, thus, not a excess of enthusiasm, but implies a resolve to follow a definite course of life in pursuit of the will of God."[2]

When we think of the spirit of service here at Medford Leas we of course think of the wise and able leadership of Lois Forrest, Tak Moriuchi and the Estaugh Board, and we think of all the wonderful, sensitive and able staff members Lois and the Board have assembled to operate so amazing a place. But when we think of the spirit of service at Medford Leas we also must think of the residents. It is true that the rhythm of service for elders is different than it is for those at earlier stages of life, but it certainly does not diminish in importance.

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[2] See *Man is Not Alone* by Abraham Joshua Heschel, page 294. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1951.

There is not a soul on this earth which, however vaguely or rarely, has not realized that life is a dismal thing if it does not give expression to values which are lasting. There is a tract land allocated to every life which we call time. And in that tract there is planted a seed which we call the soul which then we seek to nourish so that it grows beyond itself. Religion begins with the certainty that something is asked of us; that there are ends which are in need of us; that our own egos alone are not a sufficient basis around which to organize our existence. A person is what he or she aspires after. In order truly to know myself I ask what are the ends I am trying to attain? What are the values I care for most? What are great yearnings I am moved by? What are the great yearnings I ought to be moved by? These are the great issues of human experience. The older generation has lived the answers to these questions, and need not preach about them. But they do give witness to them in the natural course of their participation in the wider community. So at a place like Medford Leas, in addition to the various practical benefits which come and which have been described in the previous two days, we can also gather to weave the threads of time into the fabric of eternity, and to accomplish the ultimate self-dedication to the Divine. In doing this in a way firmly engaged in the mainstream of life the older generation can render a genuine service, for they can be for the younger generations which follow a source both of faith and of hope.

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