# EDUCATION AS SELF-DISCOVERY

## A Reflection on the Spirituality of a Quaker School

By Daniel A. Seeger

Offered at the
Conference for Trustees of Quaker Schools
Sponsored by the Friends Council on Education
November 1-3, 1991

Some time ago when I was visiting Quaker Meetings on the island of Jamaica, a little girl who was a member of one of the families which offered me home hospitality asked me to read a bedtime story to her.

She brought me a book entitled *The Shaggy, Baggy Elephant*. The story told of a baby elephant wandering around in the forest who became worried because his hide was baggy and wrinkled. He asked a monkey how he managed to have such tight skin. The monkey explained that because he swung in the trees, he got lots of exercise, and this kept his skin taut. So, the shaggy, baggy little elephant expended much energy swinging around in the trees, a very unnatural act for him, and even though he did this to the limit of his endurance, it was to no avail. The little elephant then spotted a hippopotamus which, although it was very fat, had very smooth, tight skin. He asked the hippo how he avoided having sags and wrinkles. The hippo explained that because he sat in the water all day his skin shrank and became smooth and tight. And so, for many, many days the shaggy, baggy elephant soaked himself in water, but this, too, proved to be futile.

Finally, the baby elephant met a herd of adult elephants, and when he saw how big and beautiful they were with their shaggy, baggy hides, he was filled with joy and lived with them happily ever after.

This children's story brought to me by the little Jamaican girl reminded me of an old Hindu parable about a pregnant tiger which, one day when seeking dinner, attacked a herd of goats. As she charged, she accidentally hit a rock and was killed. However, being close to term, her cub was born anyway, and this orphaned tiger cub took his place in the herd of goats. The goats raised him as one of their own, teaching him how to bleat and how to eat grass. Indeed, the little tiger assumed he was a goat.

One day another tiger seeking a meal charged the herd of goats. The young tiger who thought he was a goat felt no fear, for some reason that he could not explain, and he stood fast as the other goats fled in panic. As the charging tiger went past the cub, the cub let out a bleating sound at it. The hungry tiger was so stunned by this that he forgot about dinner, turned to the cub who had bleated at him, and said: "What is wrong with you? You shouldn't be making sounds like that! Don't you know you are a tiger?" With that he grabbed the young tiger by the scruff of the neck and brought him to a pool where he could see his reflection. As he saw his image, the tiger let out his first real roar, a roar of joy and of recognition, and he lived happily ever after, chasing and eating goats.

I do not know exactly why a vegetarian religion has a parable like this, but there it is!

The little girl's bedtime story and this ancient Hindu parable both suggest still another legend, a legend from contemporary culture--the story of Tarzan, one of the best-known and durable figures of popular fiction. Tarzan first appeared in a magazine story in 1912, and has since been the subject of nearly thirty novels and dozens of motion pictures.

In the Tarzan legend we have the development of an idea very similar to the idea of the shaggy, baggy elephant and the tiger who thought he was a goat. In the case of Tarzan, a human child--indeed the child is actually the heir to an English peerage--is orphaned in the jungle when only a few weeks old. He is brought up by apes, thinking he is an ape. He makes the same sounds as apes make and lives as they do in every respect.

One might wonder, as Tarzan lives in this fashion year after year, if there are not moments when he is alone in the silence of the forest and when, perhaps, the mental accoutrements of apedom might fall away, and when he might get a glimmering from some deep and pure inner principle that something is not quite right--indeed that something is very terribly wrong. If this happens, the stories presented to us do not disclose it. Ultimately, however, after many years and when he is already a young adult, Tarzan is rescued from the jungle and brought back to the great manor house which is his birthright as an English lord.

Now most of us might imagine that if we were plucked out of our present position and established in a stately home of this sort we would experience the same kind of joyful and instantaneous recognition that the tiger cub and the baby elephant experienced. "Yes, of course, this is where I belong!" But here the legend of Tarzan differs, for this joyful recognition of his own true nature does not occur in Tarzan's case. His accommodation with human society is only a very tentative and uneasy one. He is inclined to careen about the parapets of his great manor house in the moonlight, and to give vent to odd jungle sounds when he is trying to dine with the other lords and ladies. Ultimately, after a series of misadventures, Tarzan gives up on human society and returns to his life in the jungle.

Here are three myths--one drawn from children's literature, one from Hindu culture, and one from modern fiction--which pose a series of questions to us. Are we not all Tarzans? Are we not afflicted with the same problem

that he faced? Having been raised in a kind of jungle, are we not estranged from our own true nature?

In thinking about this some words I once read by Mohandas K. Gandhi, the great leader of the non-violent Indian independence movement, came to mind. Gandhi wrote that "People tend to become what they think themselves to be."

This sentence of Gandhi's underscores the importance of the conceptions about our human nature that we carry about with us in our minds and hearts. It calls our attention to the dangers of the many false images of human nature that are thrust upon us by contemporary culture, from the worlds of advertising and entertainment in particular. The other day I read that an *average* American child who watches an *average* amount of television sees the depiction of 3,000 murders by the time he or she is twelve years old. From everywhere, it seems, we are bombarded with the idea that human nature is innately violent, that our main preoccupation is with our sexuality, and that our chief purpose is the consumption of ever more nifty possessions.

The fundamental purpose of a Friends school is to provide an opportunity for students to discover their true nature. A Friends school is a place where they can find that they are not bound by the accidental circumstances of their lives, not defined by the world of advertisements, not determined by history, nor by some mythical idea of "human nature." It is a place where they can find that the need not be molded by the flaws and faults of the spiritual landscape in which we live.

Now it is true that this is a somewhat different agenda then the one which people usually take to be the most obvious purpose of a school. Most people see it as the essential purpose of education to give those taught the skills necessary for their future economic survival. In teaching children and young people basic skills we are seeking to ensure that they will be able, some day, to provide the fundamental necessities for themselves and their families--food, clothing, and shelter. In one sense, this educational goal comes prior to all others in that our students will scarcely survive at all unless their future needs for basic physical necessities are met. Often parents' demands for "academic excellence," whatever high minded cast they may want to give such demands, are rooted in concern, and even anxiety, about this fundamental and very legitimate objective of schooling.

But when concern about this is carried to an extreme we can wind up conceiving of a school solely as a training ground for the college market or the job market, solely as a place for the development of careerists--upwardly mobile transients, predators upon the human community and the natural environment in a relentless search for their own economic advancement. Invariably, in the extreme, it involves conforming to the jungle landscape in which we live.

A truly Quaker school incorporates a larger conception of education. It is a school not only of technical skills, but also a school of meaning and purpose. It seeds to provide an environment in which young and developing people gradually come to a full appreciation of what it means to live in an authentically human way. The school is the place where students develop the habits and the insights which form their character and which will affect the quality of their contribution to their families, their work associates and their communities in the future. In some sense they are meant to gain, while in a Friends school, an idea of how to face the ultimate questions of life, questions about the meaning of human existence, about how we ought to behave in order to lie in a fully human way, and about the proper relationship of the human being to the Creator.

In this undertaking of spiritual development and character formation, a project which is at once great and subtle, much occurs by indirection, rather than by lectures on the good life. In the students' total learning environment, the environment in which this character formation is carried out, there are many key elements, and we can scarcely cover all of them this morning. But perhaps you will permit me to reflect with you about three of these elements which make up a good Quaker school: the faculty, the community service program, and the meeting for worship.

As for faculty, to say that we expect more of them than professional competence is not to denigrate professional competence. Obviously, the first thing we want from a teacher is a thorough grasp of his or her field of study, and the ability to organize and articulate it coherently so that students might reasonably be expected to advance in the learning of it.

We also hope that the teachers will be able to infect their students in some mysterious way with an enthusiasm for the material they are teaching them. This quality of being able to project a spirit of enchantment with a field of knowledge is not easy to describe, but we know it when we experience it, whether we are at the giving or the receiving end.

But in addition to all this we hope that each and every faculty member, in addition to presenting students with specific subject matter in a well-organized and engaging manner, will contribute to the school's deeper spiritual task. They do this mainly by simply being who they are.

Most Friends schools are diverse, and there is no codified or catechetical set of "official" values, as there might be in other religiously affiliated schools. Instead, each faculty member can offer to the students his or her own wholeness and humanity, no matter what the particular spiritual tradition it is that has nourished and formed them. I believe it was Ralph Waldo Emerson who observed that what we are, we teach, in spite of ourselves. Thus, every teacher can image the value of a spiritual nature that upholds coherence and wholeness.

The danger of pluralism and diversity in the environment of spiritual development is that young people may be tempted to lead a life based on a loose amalgam of spiritual and cultural fragments borrowed from different traditions. Or they might fail to understand that one could have "correct" political or philosophical views about ecology, feminism, foreign policy or social justice and still lead narrow, self-centered lives. But the strength of diversity is that young people can see that wholeness can be achieved through any one of many different paths. Excellent faculty members, in addition to teaching particular subjects as such, hold up for students the good possibilities of our human nature, showing them their nobility and attractiveness, drawing students to the idea of developing these possibilities within themselves.

A Quaker school should provide opportunities, outside a strictly academic setting, where students and faculty members can engage in searching dialogue--where members of the school community can speak the truth about these deeper issues as they understand them, and where all can practice listening as others share the truth that is given to them. When love performs these two offices--speaking and listening--education in the deepest sense happens. A truly valuable teacher at a Friends school is one who, in addition to sharing expertise in a particular subject, is also willing to enter into the kind of searching dialogue which makes it clear that the school is a place where this deeper kind of truth is revered and sought.

A community service program is a second important element in a Friends School's spiritual learning environment.

The jungle we call modern life constantly invites one to view reality through the prism of his or her own ego and its immediate needs. True religion, on the other hand, always begins with the realization that there are ends which are in need of us. True religion engenders the understanding that something is asked of us. A Quaker education, therefore, is rooted in some sense that unless a person grows in awareness of something beyond his or her own needs, whether these personal needs be survival needs or the imagined needs for luxuries, one's life will become a dismal business.

The great historian Arnold Toynbee saw humankind's various spiritual movements, or religions, as one of the great driving mechanisms behind historical processes. He generalized about humankind's spiritual experience by saying that most people recognize a lawfulness, a presence, a Creative Principle, or an Absolute Reality, in and or behind the cosmos, a Reality which expresses a truth of which human beings can become aware, and which also expresses a good for which they thirst. People seek, therefore, not only to experience this Reality or Creative Principle, but to live in harmony with it. In order to live in harmony with it, says Toynbee, humankind's religious quest to be rid of the curse of self-centeredness has taken many forms in different religious cultures during the long residence of our species on the planet earth.

In seeking the release from self-centeredness we are dealing both with the mind and with the heart. While our intellectual knowledge cannot be limited to the sphere of our direct experience, the wisdom of the heart is developed best through experiential learning. The community service program in a Quaker school provides a learning environment in which the education of the heart can take place.

In the spring of this year, shortly after the Persian Gulf War had ended, and while I was still working at the New York Office of the American Friends Service Committee, there occurred the tragic migration of the Kurdish people who feared the wrath of the Iraqi government's army. During that period many people called the AFSC out of concern for the plight of these Kurdish people who seemed trapped in frigid and barren mountains. One call which I picked was from a woman, apparently quite elderly, who wanted to know what she could do to help, and where she could send money. And as seems so frequently to be the case for those of us who work in the AFSC, as the conversation developed it turned out that I was speaking with a woman who had herself been a refugee after the First World War, and that she had been helped by the Quakers. And from her anxious tone I could tell that the video images of people scrambling for their survival in the barren and cold

mountains had vividly revived the memory of her own refugee experience of so many years ago, and her first thought was: How can I help now?

The situation of so many refugees brings to mind Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan helped someone by the side of the road who was in need. It was no particular person, not a friend, not a member of the same clan or tribe, not a prominent individual, but simply a person. Love, Jesus seems to be saying, involves helping whomever you happen to encounter who is in need. Interestingly, the Samaritan and the roadside victim remain strangers to each other, and the Samaritan goes his way without ever really knowing the outcome of his efforts. This way of doing good without seeking to reward the ego with gratifying results is an important aspect of the practice of love. When the American Friends Service Committee and the British Friends Service Council received the Nobel Prize, the prize committee cited the help provided "from the nameless to the nameless." What touches our hearts deeply about any single caring act, or about any life given wholly to service, is that, in spite of the namelessness and anonymity, they give expression to the underlying unity of all things.

One of the first goals of a Quaker school's community service program, it seems to me, is to allow students to become aware, as the Samaritan was made aware by chance, that there are indeed roadside victims, and to permit them to encounter them. Video images do not necessarily mean much to people unless they can connect them with something in their immediate experience. In fact, the effect of the welter of stark video images of poverty and suffering, together with the mass marketing of entertainment which presents war and violence as an opportunity for thrills, is to desensitize, rather than to enliven us, to the realities behind the image. The woman I spoke to on the telephone connected the images to something quite concrete in her own experience. Obviously, we do not want our students to become refugees. But in some sense we want them to break out of the shell which life the suburbs can erect around them.

I think we all know the story of the Buddha, the founder of the great community of faith which has flourished in Asia for twenty five centuries. The Buddha was the son of a king and queen whose parents resolved to protect him from any knowledge which might disturb his happiness. He was confined to a pleasure palace and its associated pleasure garden and actually grew to manhood, married and became a father without seeing anything ugly in life. Then one day, accidentally, in spite of all the pains taken by his parents to protect him, he caught sight of someone who was impoverished, of someone

who was ill, and of a corpse. So disturbing did he find this new knowledge that he was launched on a strenuous spiritual search to find the meaning of it all, ultimately achieving a spiritual enlightenment which has illumined the lives of countless people ever since.

In many senses our students can be as artificially protected as was the young Buddha. But it does not follow that our exposing them to those in need will result automatically in a Buddha-like enlightenment. Indeed, the Buddha's own enlightenment was not easily come by. Our students will have need of searching dialogues about their experiences in order to put them into perspective. We ought not to be in the business of starting a new Weather Underground, for example. Nor would it be a happy outcome if students became cynical or angry because they could not see any way swiftly to banish the ills they observed, or if they come to feel that their efforts were merely the proverbial "drop in the bucket" not worth the trouble required. While many of us have had the experience of seeing young people blossom and grow almost automatically, in response, at least partly, to the service experiences they have had in our school's programs, such easy growth cannot be taken for granted.

In part the goal of the service activity's follow-up program of reflection, searching dialogue and worship might be to undo some of the motivations and expectations with which young people entered the programs. Many of these initial service impulses may have been based on self-interest: school credit, good records for college entrance, feeling proud and good about oneself, meeting new friends, going along with the crowd. There is nothing necessarily bad about these initial motivations. Probably all who begin a spiritual quest are in some sense self-seeking, seeking their own inner consolation, happiness or peace of mind.

Meister (Johannes) Eckhart was a great Christian mystic who lived in the thirteenth century, at a time when the cities of Europe were undergoing phenomenal growth in response to the new spirit of mercantilism and the newly developing world of commerce. Eckhart reacted to the commercialism he saw infecting culture and spiritual life. He wrote:

> (Some people) want to love God the way that they love a cow. You love a cow for the milk and the cheese and for your own profit. So do all people who love God for the sake of outward riches or inward consolation. But they do not love God correctly, for they merely love their own advantage.

How do we love God? Do we love God as we would a cow? How do we love our friends? If one has a friend and loves him or her for the good one wishes to come to oneself through the friend, then one would not love one's friend but would merely love oneself.

Do our students undertake service for what they can "get out of it," or for what they can give? In the long run we have to recognize that truly authentic service can only be rendered to the extent that we release all that is stubborn and grasping within our own hearts. Otherwise, we are imposing an agenda of our own on the needs of the situation: we may be seeking the expiation of our own guilt; we may want to appear powerful and effective in the eyes of others; we may want a feeling of self-righteousness. All of these extraneous agendas are impositions on the service situation. To be dispassionate, not to let our own needs and desires, emotions and prejudices, color our actions is to become qualified to respond to the needs of the situation in and of itself. This is what Friends mean when they speak of rendering service rooted in inner silence, in an inner stillness of the heart and mind.

A vital service program in our school can be a kind of curriculum through which the ultimate questions about our own nature and our relationship to God and to our fellow human beings finds answers again and again. "For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was." (James I:23,24).

Finally, our schools' meeting for worship is key to the realization of their mission. But for this to be so, the students must gradually come to understand that the silence we seek in meeting is not merely a physical silence, but a shared internal silence, a silence of the heart and of the mind. In true silence, circling thoughts, inner conversations, and imaginings are laid aside. The great Quaker leader Isaac Penington encouraged us to still what he called "the wanderings and rovings of mind." Such inner silence is known by the quality of "presence;" to be inwardly silent is to bring ourselves wholly to where our bodies are, by stopping the circling thoughts which take our minds elsewhere. Inner silence has the quality of being thoroughly present here and now.

Most of us carry habitual sounds around with us in our heads and our hearts. These sounds may never be precisely articulated as thoughts, but they are there, nevertheless, coloring our world. Particularly among young people, these sounds are apt to be imported from the mass media. "I am not a complete person unless I am attached to a member of the opposite sex," or

"Mathematics is very difficult and I cannot learn it," or "I am a wise guy and everywhere I go I have to put on a show to attract attention," or "Smoking cigarettes is adult and sophisticated," or "Only the tangible is real." These examples are admittedly both trivial and extreme, but it is important to recognize that they symbolize the tendencies of mind which do so much to structure the quality of the experience we have of the world.

Through the practice of inner silence we let false images of our human nature and of reality fall away; we make a space where the seed of eternal things which is already within us can begin to be heard. The more profound possibilities of our human nature become visible to us, and gradually we are enabled to grow into what we know we are meant to be.

The inner silence that we practice is the calming of our hearts and minds of all that is stubborn and grasping and is essentially an expression of the love of Truth. To be dispassionate, not to let one's own needs, emotions or prejudices color one's actions, is essentially to put Truth before everything else. To love Truth in this way is to love God, who is Truth. Thus, the practice of inner silence is the same as the love of God. To practice it successfully, if we can, means that we can participate in political and social life in the fullest sense without demanding anything for ourselves, without there being any pettiness or narrowness to poison our work. It is to establish an inner peace an inner harmony which will allow us authentically to contribute to an outer peace and an outer harmony in the world at large.

Thus, the practice of worship and of inner silence in our schools is essential to their mission of helping our students to find their own true nature, to find what it means to be truly human, to locate and to respond to that of God within them. To be fully human is to know that the eternal Word which was in the beginning, before all things were made, exists also within us and within every human being ever called to life. Thus, to be fully human is to love, to be creative, to be fruitful out of the very same source from which the Creator utters the eternal Word. It is to know that it is of no use for this Word to have become flesh in Galilee if it is not begotten unceasingly within ourselves. It is to seek a true simplicity of heart which can know at any given moment if we are acting so as to be one with the great Creative Principle of the universe, or if we are not. If we are, then each present moment becomes "the fullness of time," the time when we ourselves, like Mary the mother of Jesus, serve as the bearers of the highest and most divine energies of the cosmos.

Each of us either serves what coheres and endures in life, or we promote what destroys and disintegrates. To know the difference between these two things is to know good from evil, and to know good from evil is to be prepared for life. It is not necessarily the task of a Friends school to decide for its students what is good and what is evil, but it is our task to cultivate in them a concern to ponder the question themselves. It is to nourish in them a capacity to see beyond appearances to hidden realities. It is to help them understand that there is no such thing as a private island of safety int he midst of public calamity. It is, therefore, to prepare them to serve, that is, to be leaders in the true sense.

Thus, the thing being made in a Quaker school is humanity itself. Through our organization of an excellent faculty, through our community service programs, and through our silent worship we express our faith that good work, good citizenship and good leadership are the inevitable by-products of the making of a good human being.