HEARING AND OBEYING

The Spiritual Roots of Quaker Witness

In recent times the American Friends Service Committee's New York Office, where I work, has suffered a series of burglaries. We have lost many typewriters and computers, and even, once, the auditor sent to us by Deloitte, Haskins and Sells had her fur coat stolen while she turned her back to check our books. In fact, the thefts we suffered from were only a part of the picture; other Quaker organizations in the building complex at 15 Rutherford Place, including Friends Seminary and the Quarterly and Yearly Meeting Offices, have been having similar experiences.

In response to all this a few colleagues and I were walking around the building trying to determine the "soft spots" in its defenses against those who would break in and enter for the purpose of carrying out thefts. As we were exploring the level just below ground where the Friends Seminary cafeteria is located, I encountered a door I had never noticed before and, upon opening it, found myself looking down a long dark tunnel which led directly away from the building out toward 15th Street. There was no light in the tunnel, and it seemed impossible to explore it at the moment, so I went to the Quarterly Meeting Office and asked the Property Administrator about it. I do not know the source of her information, but she explained to me that the tunnel, when it reaches 15th Street, turns right and continues until it is in front of a nearby residential building, whereupon it turns right again, proceeding to the basement of the other building. This connection between the residential building and the Meeting House has been blocked off, however, for many years. The Property Administrator mentioned that there is a similar tunnel in another part of the building which leads out to the middle of Stuyvesant Park. This egress from the building into the Park has also been sealed off. It was further explained that these tunnels were used when our Meetinghouse served as a waystation in the Underground Railroad, and people escaping from slavery were spirited from one place to another as the need might arise.

It was, needless to say, quite riveting to stumble upon these tangible remnants of the activities of Friends of an earlier era which addressed an issue of profound social dis-

tress, and to realize at the same time that that very same Meetinghouse still serves as a sanctuary for those in flight from oppression—this time, for Central American refugees. It was also interesting to reflect that the American Friends Service Committee, housed in the same building, has had extensive programs in New York City for refugees from oppression in Haiti and Cambodia.

Although many great-souled, well-intentioned and heroic people of different faiths and backgrounds were engaged in the Abolitionist movement which developed in response to the evil of slavery, and although, similarly, many diverse and wonderful people are engaged in the movement for justice in Central America today, Friends still offer a distinctive approach to such activities of service and social change. We hope we do not remain distinctive, because we are led to believe that much good would come if this approach became widespread. Nevertheless, as of the present, our approach remains somewhat unique.

This distinctive approach did not emerge full-blown at the time the Society of Friends originated. True, the roots of the this approach can be traced way back, but not in the same way as can many other things that we regard as charactertistic of the Quaker way. 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. But the sort of social activism we are now apt to regard as so characteristic of Quakerism did not emerge with its present day countours until considerably later than the 1660's, 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 toward 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 a utopian reordering 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 turned 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 was 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 will 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 in England.

On another front, the early Meeting for Sufferings in England 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 200 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 peacably 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 the 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 quietest 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 a 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 19th 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 subculture, and began to address issues in society as a whole.

It was in 1795, practically the beginning of the 19th 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 19th 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 systemmatic attempt to reform prisons through organizing and 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 19th century, at a time approaching the midway point in the 300 year history of our Religious Society.

The careers of George Cadbury in England and Rufus Jones in America each cover the late 19th century and early 20th century, and form the bridge between the service and activism of the 19th 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 the 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 their 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 introduction to the 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."[1].

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 of Spirit in a single sensitive soul, yet it ought never 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.

There are two important questions which any spiritual community asks of itself, and for which its members usually share answers. The first question is: "What do we

1. Douglas Steere, editor, Quaker Spirituality. (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), page 46.

know?"--what do we know about the meaning of human life, about the role of humankind in the destiny of Creation, and about how people ought to act in order to live in a fully human way?

The second question is: "How do we know?"--how do we know whatever it is we claim to know about the first question?

In answering these questions, the Religious Society of Friends has always tended to avoid laboring over specific doctrines about God, Jesus, or Redemption, but has sought to focus on the kind of feelings and behavior that should characterize someone who genuinely experiences God's activity in her or his life. Early Friends emphasized the spiritual knowledge they gained "experimentally" and "experientially"--both words were commonly used. To admit that God was once known by people in their own experience, but that now God can only be known by second-hand reports such as are handed down to us in Scripture, is to cast a pall of doubt upon all that is reported of the divine.

Friends not only trust experience more than Scripture, but they also trust experience more than philosophy. Many theologians have imagined that logic can show us the way to God, or that it can at least be used to prove the existence of God. The argument from first cause is a famous attempt of this sort. According to this line of reasoning, since every object and event we experience is caused by something, there must be a great chain of causality leading back to a First Cause. Among the many objections to this line of reasoning is that, if applied consistently, the theory implies an infinite chain of causes, not a first cause; it implies that if you do reach God by going back far enough you must still ask the question "What causes God?"

Rufus Jones, in his book Pathways to the Reality of God, observes that for Friends, the monumental evidence of God is the fact of spiritual personalities through which divine traits of character are revealed. Stars and mountains and ordered processes of nature reveal law and mathematics and beauty, but they can reveal no traits of character, no intentionality, no compassion, no warmth and intimacy of heart and mind. If we are ever to be convinced that self-giving love is a reality of life, of God's nature, we shall be convinced by seeing this love break through by means of some human agency of the Divine Spirit.[2] Simone Weil (who was not a Friend) expressed a kindred approach when she said, "I know that anything my mind can conceive of as God cannot possibly exist; but I know that God exists because of the love in my heart which can have no

other source."

It is through their service and social activism that Friends come to know God as a resident presence cooperating vitally with them, rather than as a remote sovereign somewhere in the sky. Our service is a kind of curriculum through which an endless series of questions about the meaning and purpose of life, about our own nature, and about 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.

Quakerism has been described as a contemplative, mystical and inward religion. This is a true description, provided one quickly adds that it has always avoided the heresy of treating religion as a withdrawal from the world. It has always understood that to withdraw from the human press and struggle and to seek only the selfish thrill of individual salvation or personal inward solace is a way of great spiritual danger, not one of spiritual power. Douglas Steere points out, in his essay Dimensions of Prayer, that true worship seldom fails to give us an intimation that there is work to be done in the world[3].

It is our insistence on the practice of silence that gives people the impression that we are contemplatives, even in the midst of our social activism. This silence is essential to an authentic Quaker spirituality of social activism for several reasons.

First, Fox, Barclay and Penington are all quite clear that in order to hear the Divine voice we need to be still. Another Friend, Caroline Stephen, has written: "The silence we value is not the mere outward silence of the lips. It is a deep quiteness of heart and mind, a laying aside of all preoccupation with passing things — yes, even with the workings of our own minds; a resolute fixing of the heart upon that which is unchangeable and eternal." Isaac Pennington encourages us to still what he called, "the wanderings and rovings of mind." Robert Barclay commends to us that we repair to that

2. Paraphrased from Rufus Jones, Pathways to the Reality of God. (New York: Macmillan Company, 1933), page 246.

3. For a fuller discussion of this see Douglas V. Steere, Dimensions of Prayer. (New York: United Methodist Church, 1962 — reprinted in 1977 and 1984), pages 95-116.

measure of grace within ourselves which can be sensed if we refrain not only from outward words, but also from inward thoughts and desires. George Fox advises: "Be still and silent from thy own wisdom, wit, craft, subtlety, or policy that would arise in thee, but stand single to the Lord, without any end to thyself." Elsewhere Fox writes: "Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit, and from thy own thought, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God." Indeed, to the extent that we can lay down our preoccupations with cravings, with transient concerns, with our businesses, with our special likes and dislikes, with all the accidental and passing things which preoccupy us, we begin to make a space within ourselves where universal and eternal things can be heard. Thus through inner silence we become poor in spirit, and becoming poor in spirit brings us closer to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Or, as it is written in the Tao Te Ching: "The truth awaits eyes unclouded by longing."

The concept of silence is familiar to us, even though we sometimes mistake it for a time of daydreaming, or an opportunity for enjoying inner mental movies and imaginings. But another concept closely linked with silence in the minds of early Friends is apt to be very much out of fashion nowadays. This closely linked concept is the concept of obedience. Douglas Steere has reminded us, again in his Introduction to Quaker Spirituality, that when early Friends referred to Meeting for Worship as being based on silence and obedience, the word obedience was not added merely as an ornament. Fox thought that the Spirit that moved so fiercly in his heart did not stop at giving him some sort of bracing feeling of spiritual uplift. It went further and laid upon him things that were to be done. As Pennington says, "There is that near you which will guide you; wait for it, and be sure ye keep to it." Here attention and obedience are linked. The silence is not only a releasing, a letting go, a centering down, but it is always an opening to the Guide which lays upon us changes in our priorities, and tells us of things to be done, and done promptly. A leading that grows out of obedience is not the same as an all-too-human impulse which may grow out of agitation, out of "politically correct" reflexes, or out of the anxiety of outrage which follows upon the reading of the latest issue of the New York Times. It is very important to keep this in mind.

About two years ago I was on Long Island where I had been invited to bring a message to a gathering sponsored by a local peace group. After I had spoken, during the

period of questions and discussion from the floor, one man in the audience said that every worthwhile action he had ever undertaken in the social change field had been motivated by a sense of outrage.

It occurs to me that if what the man on Long Island said is true, either his social activism must be very intermittent, or he must be endangering his health by being in a state of anger much of the time. One of the problems with anger as a motivating dynamic is that by the time a situation becomes egregious enough to stimulate anger, probably all the really valuable opportunities to do something useful to avert calamity have been allowed to pass by. When we are finally aroused to it, the responses which anger calls forth from us are often designed more for our own catharsis than to address the true needs of the situation of concern. Finally, if we believe that there is any reality to the intangible world of the spirit, we know that the spiritual foundation out of which our actions spring does much to determine the character of the results of what we do. Actions springing from anger and hostility are apt to produce anger and hostility. Can a truly healing service grow out of perpetual outrage?

While I have used the example of anger, the general point is that we must attend very carefully to the source of our impulses to serve or to act. Friends are humbly aware that movements for social reform can often play host to a wide diversity of dubious motives — motives which, in an atmosphere characterized by an unfaltering confidence on the part of reformers in their own righteousness, can often go completely unchecked. Anger, fear, the need to feel ourselves powerful or effective, the need to assuage a feeling of guilt, the need to have our own way with the unfolding drama of the Creation, are all examples of spiritual states which are alien to the obedience which grows from inner silence.

If there is a great natural disaster, like an earthquake or a typhoon, a calamity in which thousands of innocent people may be killed, our being outraged and agitated would do nothing to help the situation. We usually know that in such a circumstance it is useless to carry on about Fate, or about the absence of God. Nor is it of much use if we are so overcome at the sights of affliction and injury that we become immobilized or ill rather than being able to assist. We do our best when we lay aside our personal agitation and as calmly and effeciently as possible address the service that it is laid before us to do.

It makes little sense to respond any differently to man-made calamities such as war, poverty or injustice. Human groaning and misery did not begin with this morning's headlines. Just as great physical forces build up to cause an earthquake, so too are humanly generated calamities the result of enormous pressures which have been built up in the spiritual realm by too much false living. We are often ready to forgive the crimes committed by those in the inner city because of the poverty and other social illnesses which have led up to them. Seldom do we realize that to be brought up in highly favored circumstances may be as inimical to balanced judgement; privileged living, however enviable in material terms, can be as disabling in the realm of the spirit as poverty sometimes is. Remember Jesus' saying about the camel and the needle's eye. The point is that as Quaker social activists we must have compassion for the satisfied as well as for the hungry.

The true basis of all useful social change activism, of all truly reconciling work for peace, is a sense of connectedness. What touches our hearts deeply about any single, caring act, or about any life given entirely to service, is the way they give expression to the underlying unity of all things. One of the things we have come to realize as a result of the Vietnam war experience is that it is wrong to be angry with the women and men of the armed forces. But we must also learn that we should not be angry with the officers, the generals and the Pentagon staff members who lead them. Nor should we be angry with Saddam Hussein or George Bush. We must struggle ceaselessly to build peace and to organize the machinery of justice, but it is through our inner silence, and through the quietude of our hearts and minds, through being "poor in spirit," that we allow the hope that our limited and time-bound efforts will shine forth with the beautiful light of eternal things.

It is especially vital that the link between silence and obedience be kept intact, and that busy-ness and activity not begin to be carried along by their own momentum, a momentum which may seem to allow little time for the cultivation of the still, small voice of calm and quietness. Whenever we feel that we are such totally committed activists that there is not time for corporate meeting for worship, for periods of silent meditation each day, and for devotional reading, we know that we are in trouble. As it has been so well said, if you are too busy to pray, you are too busy.

In this sense peace making is a matter of <u>spiritual</u> economics. In economics we

know that over the long run income must balance expenditure. This economic principle is true on every level: the emotional, the intellectual, the physical, and the spiritual. We cannot put forth physical energy unless we stoke our body with food and give it rest. We cannot hope to utter anything worth saying unless we digest inwardly the words of prophecy which have come to us through our spiritual traditions. We cannot act rightly or effectively unless we are in the habit of pausing, of stopping our activity, and of laying ourselves open to the leadings of the Spirit which comes out of stillness.

This inner silence has the quality of "presence," of being where we are, as our bodies and our minds are united upon the release of the wandering thoughts which take our spirits elsewhere. This present-centeredness is vital for the non-violent character of Quaker service and social activism. We know that as we sow, so shall we reap, that a better future will be built solely by right action in the present, that means and ends must be kept consistent. This consistency of means and ends with truth and right can only be maintained through present-centeredness, since means take place in the present. Gandhi correctly observed that if you take any instance of untruth or of violence and analyze it, you will find at its root a desire to do something distasteful now in order to attain some cherished aim in the future. And in our own experience, we know that the process of betraying the future always begins with a search for the best means to achieve some predetermined goals, proceeds with the choosing of lesser evils, and concludes with last resorts, like nuclear weapons.

There at times comes into vogue a simple epicurean faith which posits that we must "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." This is not a very noble, nor even a very realistic, kind of morality. But it would seem to make a good deal more sense than many versions of the ethic of violence: "Die (and kill) so that tomorrow someone else will eat, drink and be merry." The prospect of such future merriment is extremely unlikely, for the process of wholesale dying and killing creates spiritual conditions that practically guarantee that a revolution or a social change movement will not achieve the benefits it seeks in the end.

Thus, the Quaker spirituality of service and social activism steadfastly renounces a calculus which weighs the absolutes of death and destruction in the present against the uncertain promise of relative social advancement sometime in the future. It understands that the very commonplace act of entering into such a calculus is the cause of the tragic

disorders that we face in the contemporary world. It finds eternity in each present moment by seeking joyfully to give expression to those timeless and eternal truths upon which all right-living and true peace is based. Rufus Jones correctly observes that one of the most imperative commands that utters itself out of the silence within us is: "Thou shalt not do evil to bring about good."[4.]

As was mentioned at the outset, in discussing Quaker service and social activism it is tempting to see similarities between what we do and the activities of other social change movements and service groups. But although these similarities are real, it is also important to keep the differences in mind. One of the key points has to do with the matter of practicality. Americans in general pride themselves in being practical, in getting things done, in having an effect. Quakers, too, are interested in practicality. They do not want merely to salve their own consciences by distributing alms to the poor. They do not want to reinforce the delusion that the evils resulting from an unjust social order and from a political economy which routinely impoverishes people on a massive scale will be adequately ameliorated by the decent impulses of American voluntarism—that the bad effects of institutionalized Reaganomics, for example, will be undone by ordinary Americans rolling up their sleeves and constituting a thousand points of light in their spare time. This would be a very unequal contest, indeed. Friends genuinely seek social change.

But Friends avoid involvement in grand schemes for social change which envisage some sort of rearrangement of the same morally tired human material. Friends look for a change of heart more than for a change of systems. This is not because Friends do not understand the need to change systems, but because they realize that people can never create a system -- a family, a community, a nation or a world order which exceeds in wisdom and goodness the wisdom and goodness they have a grasp of in their own hearts. We understand that there are no grand designs for the perfect society which cannot be outwitted by their own creators' inclination to selfishness and pride. A deepening of spiritual perception is the key to social change; the rearrangement of society will follow naturally enough when a new spiritual culture takes root. Here, it seems to me, is where

4. See Rufus Jones Speaks to Our Time, edited by Harry Emerson Fosdick. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), page 211.

modern Friends and George Fox are in resonance.

From the time of Plato, Lao-Tzu and the Buddha up until the modern era and the efforts of such thinkers as Nietzsche and Marx, people have sought a way to design a good society. As Friends, in bravely setting out to translate our deepest religious convictions into practical action in the theatre of social change, we are entering a field which has vexed the human spirit for all of recorded history, a field which still remains in a profoundly unsettled state. Behind this unsettlement is the question of whether or not a perfectly just society is a feasible prospect for humankind, a question which in turn quickly leads us to the paradox of the simultaneous fallenness and exaltedness of human nature itself.

Today we see all about us evidence of the universal disaster of revolution. Most, perhaps all, efforts in our time to produce immediate and sweeping change have ended in tyrannies, the most extreme of which result in such unspeakable tragedies as we have witnessed in Cambodia. Modern revolutionaries, while in general wishing liberty and equality for everyone, have actually created despotism and terror.

Even with respect to societies where there has been a slow evolution which seems directed towards an approximate kind of justice, we observe prosperous industrial nations in which life can be totally vulgar, morally degraded, and spiritually vacuous. Certainly social reformers in the United States were never aiming at the great Federal bureaucracy or at the pervasive dedication to superficial forms of entertainment and pleasure which characterize the welfare state they have brought into existence.

Behind these various maladies lies a tendency in humankind to believe that we can exalt ourselves without the help of a divine source. Leaving God out of the equation, we come to worship various substitute idols of human design. We make idols out of ideologies, such as Marxism, out of groups, such as the Aryan race, or out of secular saviors, such as Hitler, Stalin or Mao. At one time it was thought that it was the world's Christian people who were to rescue everyone else from their benighted state; this idea later evolved into something called the "white man's burden"; still more recently Americans were supposed to save the world from demonic Communism. For their part, the Soviets have regarded the Proletariat as a world-redeeming class. Marx claims for the proletariat qualities much like those attributed in the Old Testament to God: omniscience, righteousness, and historical sovereignty, all devoted to avenging past

wrongs and to transfiguring human existence. Even when among Friends, or when in an organization like the American Friends Service Committee, it is not uncommon to hear similar redemptive powers attributed to whatever oppressed class of people happens to have caught attention at the moment.

What both liberal reformers and radical revolutionaries have in common, as has been mentioned, is a tendency to believe that human beings can be exalted through their own self-creating acts, without the aid of a divine source. Pride can thus assume grandiose and enthralling proportions, yet seem selfless.

A reflection of the scope possible in a single evening's lecture cannot fully elucidate how Quaker practice and Friends' testimonies can provide a way forward in the face of these dilemmas. My colleague John Anderson, Dean of Program here at Pendle Hill, and the other staff members who are organizing and teaching courses, will be offering in the 1991/92 term a curriculum which explores the spiritual basis for Friends work in the world and for a social witness appropriate to the conditions of the Twenty-First Century. I hope many of you will register for these courses. But let me just say in summary fashion here that at the core of Quaker practice is our acknowledgement of our dependence upon God for guidance in our social activism, a willingness worshipfully to wait for such guidance until clarity and unity is achieved, and a discipline of dealing with particular injustices out of our direct observation of them, or experience of them, rather than worshipping a humanly generated grand and abstract design. We struggle against particular injustices, rather than committing ourselves to a blueprint for a totally just society. This piecemeal approach exasperates some of our cohorts in the larger social change movement, but it is not a failing or a quaint befuddlement; it is part and parcel of the Quaker approach. We wait in silence as a <u>preparation</u> for communication and action, rather than as a way of avoiding them. We prudently watch for leadings as to what, in existing circumstances, must unfailingly be done. We thus adopt a prophetic stance which is present-centered and characterized by a modest hopefulness. Douglas Steere points out, in <u>Dimensions of Prayer</u>, that, in spite of a fierce realism about human propensity for sin, Christians experience a steadying sense that in whatever they are called upon to do they do not work alone. Quoting G. K. Chesterton, Douglas notes that such genuinely Spirit-led social reformers, even in the midst of overwhelming odds, practice an "asceticism of cheerfulness in contrast to the easier asceticism of melancholy."[5].

The portion of the Sermon on the Mount which we know as the Beatitudes expresses the spirituality which underlies Quaker service and social activism. The blessedness proclaimed in the Beatitudes is not a final reward for a certain kind of accomplishment; rather it is something which attaches by the inherent nature of things to a way of living, to a new spirit, to a new type of person. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right, not those who succeed in transforming vast social empires. Those who hunger and thirst for justice, who are merciful, who are pure in heart, who are peacemakers, who are gentle, bring the realm of God into full sight. The beatitude lies not in the successful attainment of external goals, but in the way, in the spirit, and in the search.

Howard Brinton, when he was its director, described Pendle Hill as a Quaker study center seeking to make possible within itself the kind of life which should prevail throughout the world. He acknowledged that this small-scale solution to large-scale social problems might appear too limited in scope to be effective, but he also insisted that it should be borne in mind that the history of life on this planet shows that all real beginnings have been small. Arnold Toynbee, in his study of history, finds that the creative minority is the mainspring of progress. It seems universally a characteristic of the things of God that they begin on the scale of a mustard seed.

Of course, we do wish to help others and to contribute to the establishment of justice through all that we do. But we must be very careful not to become shrill and compulsive with grandiose plans and projects which imply that we must save the world all by ourselves. At the deepest level, we help through the kind of people we are, and through our direct experience of the Kingdom of God as we establish a beloved community among ourselves, as we are trying to do here at Pendle Hill. We contribute to others best by appreciating the connection between the service we do and our own progress on the journey of spiritual awakening. We work on ourselves in order to help others, and we help others as a curriculum for working on ourselves. This in no way diminishes the need for special skills, for experience, or for vision, but all these will be of little use if we do not have at the center of our being, and among us in our Quaker community, a deep sense of reconciliation and peace. Rufus Jones correctly insisted that the first step in the render-

5. Douglas V. Steere, Dimensions of Prayer, page 107.

ing of service is the spiritual preparation of those who would serve.

On the inner spiritual level, the Quaker social activist conceives of her or his service as the giving of a gift. In personal affairs, a gift is impure if it is offered in the hope of currying favor, or in the expectation that the person to whom the gift is given will alter her or his behavior in a way favorable to the giver. We readily recognize such a gift as flawed; indeed, it is not an act of generosity, but is more akin to a bribe. That gift in personal affairs is pure which is given without expectation of results, but which is given because of the fitness of the gift at the time, in the place, and to the person involved. Such a pure gift does not corrupt either the recipient or the giver, and is consistent in every way with the beauty of ultimate things. Quaker service and social activism has the character of such a gift, offered because of its fitness as an expression of truth, and not as a stratagem for having one's own way with the unfolding drama of the Creation.

Knowing that there is no time but this present, the Quaker activist stops to listen, to pay attention, and to be aware. The Quaker activist understands that there is no truly beneficial, liberating or healing service which is not spiritual in quality. To such a Quaker activist, the tyranny of past, present and future gives way to a joyful awareness of the Eternal Now, of how universal and eternal things are revealed and can be fully apprehended in the present moment. While Friends genuinely want to help others and to change society, we do not look for results like a merchant expecting payment. Rather, we have an unshakable commitment to make of ourselves a free gift to that Spirit, that Inner Light, which, always abiding within ourselves and others, patiently awaits our discovery of its power and beauty.

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