

**ELDER:
SPIRITUAL NURTURER,
SAFE KEEPER OF THE MEETING FOR WORSHIP,
DOOR OPENER FOR THE SPIRIT**

Janet Means, 1999

All Friends, mind that which is eternal, which gathers your hearts together
up to the Lord, and lets you see that ye are written in one another's heart.
Meet together everywhere, growing up in the Spirit to the Lord, the Fountain
of Life, the head of all things.

-- George Fox, 1653, Epistle 24

Elders have been a fundamental component of The Religious Society of Friends through out its history. Over the past several decades the recognition of their presence has been diminished within my yearly meeting and among unprogrammed Friends in general. It is interesting to note that the index of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice, 1998, does not include the word *elder*. The functions that formerly would be conducted by such persons are placed under the Committee on Worship and Ministry.

There is a notable rise of interest among Friends to understand the role of elders and the acts of eldering as they function in our present lives. Discussions usually lead to more questions than answers. Friends seem to be caught up in a wind of desire to acknowledge the presence of elders. They are seeking to understand how elders function today. They seek to know who can be identified as elders. They are searching to understand how the act of eldering is conducted in its many forms.

The commitment of elders to provide spiritual nurture to individuals and the meeting, to provide support and guidance for ministry and the meeting for worship, and to provide opportunity for the Spirit to enter has not changed. The manner in which these commitments are fulfilled has been transformed over the years. I feel it is timely to look at our historical underpinnings and to attempt to discern the changes that have taken place in the elder and the acts of eldering.

When George Fox gathered together the group of persons known as "The Valiant Sixty" in or about 1652, ministers and elders were not distinguished from one another. The ministers spoke from the readings of The Spirit. The elders supported them. Their roles intermingled and they each supported the other as they were called to do.

As these "Publishers of the Truth" moved out into the larger world to expound their beliefs, great changes occurred. Within ten years there were 40,000 persons in the movement that was to become The Religious Society of Friends. To my mind, Margaret Fell lived the role of the first elder. She provided hospitality, a compassionate, listening ear, help for discernment, wrote letters to those in prison, and set up a fund for sufferings to care for families and individuals. With specific actions she kept this burgeoning, unwieldy, widely scattered body of persons together. Her eldership had its seed in the Spirit and provided the nurture needed for this fledgling movement to survive and grow in The Light.

The exact year for elders to be recognized is confusing to designate as my resources bring forth a variety of dates. Certainly we can be assured that they were established by the late 1650's or early 1670's. My earliest reference comes from Rosalind Priestman in her workbook, *Eldering*, where she states that "in 1653 William Dewsbury advised each meeting to choose one or two most grown in the Power and Life, in pure discerning of the Truth to take care of the flock."

- They were to take responsibility for regular meetings for worship in their area and see to it that Friends "walked orderly".
- They were to ensure that the families of those in prison were provided for.
- Keep registers of births, marriages, and deaths and ensure that marriages and funerals were conducted in a proper manner.

We can see that the role of overseers and elders carried many of the same responsibilities at this time. As years passed, the overseer became the caretaker of the well-being of the individual and the elder became the guardian of "right order" in the meeting. There are neither named overseers nor elders in Illinois Yearly Meeting.

Patricia Ann Brown in her paper, "The History of Recording Ministers in The Society of Friends," states:

In the early years of the Society, 'public Friends' were called either minister or elder. When the first generation passed away, the use of the term elder fell into disuse. The elders of later Quakerism were Friends appointed by the Monthly Meetings to sit with ministers, to consider the state of the ministry, to aid young ministers, and to have oversight of spiritual conditions. For many years the functions of elders were not clearly differentiated from overseers who were charged with oversight of the moral conduct of the members. In 1789 a clear distinction was made between these two roles when London Yearly Meeting decided that overseers were not allowed to sit in the meeting of Ministers and Elders.

In his paper, "The Rise of Elders Within Quakerism," Stephen W. Angell emphasizes that over the years of Fox's ministry he stated two approaches for eldering. In his 1656 epistle, he exhorts Friends,

Not to judge one another in meetings -- for your so doing hath hurt the people both within and without -- your judging one another in meetings hath embolden others to quarrel and judge you also in meetings. Now if you have anything to say, stay till the meeting is done and then speak to them in private between yourselves. For your judging in meetings hath almost destroyed some Friends and distracted them.

-- (Fox, VI 1, pp. 114-115)

As Fox moved forward in his later years to establish a religious order which would outlast his life span, he stated that elders should be able "by sound doctrines, both to exhort and to convince gain sayers." Their responsibilities included the power to "admonish, reprove, and would rebuke

such as went out from the Spirit of Christ; to cast out and purge that which is evil; to judge the angels, to judge the world, and to judge in outward matters of things that pertain to this life." (Fox, VI, 1 81, pp 78-79)

These variant views from Fox have provided grounds for tensions that are exhibited today in our Society. Angell perceives that, "One stresses the immediacy of the Living Christ, and toleration of different views arising from experience. The other stresses unity both in inward experience and outward testimonies under the supervision of the church." I am reminded of the differences in approaches of members of Friends General Conference and Friends United Meeting Friends as expressed in these divergent views so many years from their conception.

Rufus Jones tells us that,

"By a process of evolution, the stages of which can no longer be traced in detail, the Elder in a Quaker meeting came to be a person of silent but august authority. Little by little the elder-instinct -- a kind of infallible habit of mind -- was developed. They became the embodiment of unwritten traditions, the unuttered and slowly gestated customs and habits of this quiet people, and thus they formed the conserving, steadying force which kept the Society year after year always the same. Elders while meek and gentle to look at somehow acquired an extraordinary mastery over the membership. They appeared unmoved while the minister was preaching but if the minister made the slightest slip in quoting the scripture, or if he deviated from 'truth', or if his garb, or voice, or manner revealed he was not 'seasoned' or 'in the life' he would hear about it before he got home or in the very near future. Elders were guardians of custom and they used their position and authority to preserve plain speech and the type of garb which the fathers had honored. They were weak in historical knowledge and reflective judgment, but they were unerring in their sense of what was becoming for members of their beloved Society."

-- [Later Periods of Quakerism, Volume 1]

It seems that elders became guardians of tradition rather than the Word. We are all aware of the loss of Friends caused by being read out of meeting due to marrying persons of another religion. The strictness and judgmental attitudes of these persons caused a breaking in the fabric of Friends and in the august position held by elders within The Religious Society of Friends.

Our elders would have done well to remember the postscripts to the advices of the Elders of Balby:

Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all with the measure of light which is pure and holy may be guided, and so in the light walking and abiding these may be fulfilled in the Spirit not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.

The long-term consequence of this overly-rigid and overbearing action on the part of the elders is evidenced in my branch of unprogrammed Friends. Illinois Yearly Meeting has no named elders. We do however have elders. They rise up and are recognized in quiet. They are a source of wisdom and stability.

Most of my elders are younger than I am. Their thoughts and wisdom rise forth from depths of openings to the Spirit. It seems to me that an elder is a person who lives in The Spirit, finds time to be in prayer with God each day, and whose wisdom and actions rise not in the area of pure human intelligence, but from the depths and breadth of the One who is before, now and beyond.

To my way of thinking, the making of an elder is a process. We may find ourselves in the presence of a person who exhibits the qualities of an elder for days or moments of time only to have them lose that special quality and become ordinary, everyday humans again. I believe those treasured moments when a person acts or speaks with extraordinary wisdom are when the flutes of the person open and they become a conduit for the Spirit to flow through. This happens at all ages and stages of life. Often a child will speak and the words are beyond concepts of the Now. It seems the world is being inhabited by "old souls" in increasing number. They are needed in this time of chaos. We see the elder as love pours through in the care and concern given to others, in the listening with empathy, in helping way open for discernment, and in standing with love and firmness concerning the "right order" of the meeting.

The desire to be a door opener for the Spirit leads individuals to partake of the spiritual food and disciplines that form them into that rare person we recognize and respect as fully being an elder. We do not need to name them. We know them by their BEING.

When I joined The Religious Society of Friends twenty-six years ago, Lake Forest Meeting was blessed with a goodly number of elders. Their character, integrity, consistency and commitment to the Truth permeated the meeting. Over time these persons have died or moved away. The last such person was Blanche Frey. Blanche was well on the way in the process of becoming an elder when I arrived at meeting. I have had the gift of watching Blanche move on her journey from being an "elder in the making" to becoming fully an elder. Following her husband Darryl's death, she grew deeper and increasingly integrated in her core. She continued soft spoken and gentle but developed an inner strength that radiated her light to those around her. When Blanche spoke she was listened to. We did not question her authority or where it came from. We knew where it came from. She not only nurtured the Spirit in individuals but she stood up to concepts that she determined would keep the meeting a living home for The Light. She was able to enact the difficult task of admonishing with love. We have missed the presence of this elder since she moved to a Quaker retirement home on the east coast. However, we have other "elders in the making." Their lights shine forth and each one gives nurturance and guidance for the doors to open and the Spirit to come forth.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub, they put it on the lamp stand where it shines for every one in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of humans, so that seeing your good works they may give praise to

God.

-- Matt. 5:14-16