

# I Saw It Shine Through All

Tom Stabnicki

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## Biography of Tom Stabnicki

Tom Stabnicki was born in Detroit in 1949. He was raised in a Roman Catholic family and attended seminary in high school and college. In 1969 Tom left seminary and joined VISTA. VISTA sent him to Decatur Illinois. There he became a member of Decatur Monthly Meeting in 1973.

After earning his BA at Earlham (1975), Tom settled in Chicago, got a job with the Department of Children and Family Services, and transferred his membership to Northside Meeting. About that time Tom met Barry Friedman, his life companion. They were together 16 years until Barry's death from AIDS in 1994.

Tom and Barry were trade union leaders in the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME.) Tom has also been involved at Northside Meeting, the AFSC and various community organizations. Currently he serves on the board of the Test Positive Aware Network, and AIDS service organization.

Tom left DCFS in 1994. He traveled the world, attended the Earlham School of Religion and graduated from the Chicago Theological Seminary in 1998.

## I Saw It Shine Through All

One night, back in the 17th century, a Quaker farmer heard an intruder in his farmhouse. The Quaker grabbed his shotgun, crept down the stairs and confronted the intruder. "Friend Thief," he said, "for all the world I would not harm thee but thee is standing where I am about to shoot." I feel a little like that farmer this morning. I want to give fair warning: Friends, thee is standing where I am about to speak!

A year ago I was in the hospital with pneumonia. I was pretty sick. I took serious comfort and strength from the knowledge that Friends were gathered for Yearly Meeting. Last March in Richmond, my immune system failed; I had no t-cells left. My old medications had ceased to be effective. I was having problems getting used to my new drug regimen. The thought of being

with you, dear Friends, at IYM sustained me. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Friends, not only to Friends in Decatur who took me into membership, not only to Friends at Northside who have been my teachers and my family for these many years but also to the Friends who gather year after year in McNabb at Yearly. The spiritual work of the Yearly Meeting creates a kind of love that supports its members even when they are far away. I thank you for that support.

I am acutely aware of the honor accorded me by this invitation to speak to you this morning. I am acutely aware of my responsibility to share a special measure of light with you.

But how? There were so many directions I could go. I could speak of my experiences as a gay Quaker-of how I've seen the Society evolve on this issue in the period of twenty years. The journey from those early sometimes acrimonious discussions of sexuality at IYM to your invitation to me today seems remarkable. It is a credit to our process and to the commitment of Friends to seek the Light in all things.

I could speak as a Friend with AIDS. The response of the Society of Friends to this epidemic has been both encouraging and disappointing in my view. Disappointing because I don't think we have exercised our remarkable corporate social witness in response to this issue. Encouraging because in community, in those one to one or one to few interactions individual Friends and Friends Meetings have been most generous in their willingness to bear another concern: To reach out and offer true support of the heart. I, myself, have benefited from this kind concern of Friends.

(Let me digress a moment and say a word about the current state of the AIDS epidemic. No doubt you have read of the progress being made with a new generation of anti-HIV drugs. The protease inhibitors when used in combination appear to halt the production of the AIDS causing virus in the body. I, myself, am on one such cocktail: my condition is almost miraculously improved. But it is a mistake to think the crisis is over. Not only do infection rates remain high but the benefits of the new drugs are limited to those few who have good insurance. This leaves out many in our own country. It excludes nearly all of the People Living With AIDS outside of America and Europe.

More than ever AIDS must be considered in the context of Friends' testimony of equality and justice. We must continue to work for systems of health care delivery based on need and for universal access to the new life saving medicines throughout the world.)

I even considered not sharing my spiritual journey at all. If you can believe it, as ego-centric as I am, I got tired of myself as a subject. I thought that it would be far more edifying to present the life of Jonathan Plummer. Unfortunately when I began my explorations of Plummer's life I found no biography. And, alas, the job of digging through the archives was too daunting to me.

The work of doing a biography of Plummer remains to be done: I recommend it to any of you who are of a historical bent.

Also I recommend that we all try to reclaim in some fashion that old Quaker practice of journal keeping or the spiritual autobiography. What a great thing it would be for us to explore the

inward experience of Friend Plummer. But that opportunity is lost to us. Similarly, in the next century Friends may crave insight on our experiences with the Truth. We should see this task less as an opportunity for self aggrandizement than as an opportunity to testify to the Power of the Light in our lives. After all, one of the earliest names for Quakers was "Publishers of Truth".

Well, having explored the options, I decided to stay on familiar ground for this talk and draw on what I'd learned at Earlham School of Religion this year.

As some of you know, in 1994 I lost both my lover of sixteen years, Barry Friedman, and my job at the Department of Children and Family Services, both to AIDS. Being a widow, and a disabled one at that I cast about for a project. Instead of taking up crochet or good works which probably would have been the better options, I decided to travel around the world on a luxury liner. The trip was fabulous! But returning in apparently good health, I perceived the drawback of travel as a solution for life's challenges: the trip was over and I still needed a project.

About that time I felt a leading to return to seminary. To study about things Divine and our Religious Society seemed like a genuine opportunity. But there was a problem: my doctor had just informed me that my t-cells had dropped to a very low level, signaling an alarming reduction in immune functioning. I shelved the idea of seminary as one too unwell to do the work.

Then one day I was driving to visit a friend in Columbus, Ohio down I-70. I passed the Richmond exit and decided to spend the night there and visit Earlham for old times' sake. (You know how sentimental Earlhamites are about the place.) And what a night that was! As I tossed and turned sleeplessly in my bed I was haunted by the words "Tolle Lege" - "Take the Book and Read It." These were the very words St. Augustine had heard prior to his conversion and the imperative that effected his conversion. I was convinced that I ought to follow this leading to study.

In the morning I visited ESR. I was candid about my health and lifestyle concerns. I was interviewed by faculty and staff. And found myself accepted by the afternoon. By six, I had even found a place to live for the term! It seemed clear that the leading was true.

It is difficult to express how rich my season at the Earlham School of Religion and at Bethany Theological has been. I learned things in my mind and in my heart which have changed my life for the better. This is an unalloyed endorsement of ESR/Bethany. If you find yourself with some time for study: consider this place. It is part of the wonder there that the instructors are able to free even the most abstract theological concepts from mere notionalty-remember how Fox railed against notions-and ground these concepts in the Deepest Ground of Being.

It is my desire in the remainder of this talk to approach three questions which I have frequently visited in the past year.

1. What is the state of our Society these days?
2. How did we get to this point?
3. Is there a way to improve the quality of our Meetings?

From the state of the Meeting reports, it appears that Meetings within IYM are doing very well indeed. The number of Meetings is growing, there is an active pastoral ministry to members and attenders, our Meetings are genuine communities. But if we look a little closer we will find a number of concerns about the life of the Meetings shared almost universally: spoken ministry is often shallow or nonexistent; new attenders float through our Meeting, often they decide not to make a home with us; we can't seem to center down; we seem to have reached a plateau in our capacity to grow, spiritually and in number.

I believe that these problems are quite common among us. They are symptoms of a crucial crisis in our fellowship: we are without a shared understanding of who we are as a religious society.

Much good can be said for the diversity we find within our Meetings. Some of us are universalists, others are Christ-centered but that's just the beginning. There are Jewish Friends, Buddhist Friends, Wiccan Friends, Humanist Friends who are important parts of our communities. I will say this again: They are precious members of our Meeting communities.

And yet, how do we understand our worship with so many orientations vying, as it were, for the heart of the Meeting? I have heard expressed the wish that if we could just return to those remarkable Spirit-filled days of the 17th century when our movement was inventing itself, we would reclaim the power that Fox, Fell, Penn, Penington, and Nayler possessed.

But the 17th Century was a very different time from ours. Indeed, 17th Century England might well have been on a different planet entirely. It would be impossible to duplicate the conditions which created the Society of Friends in our contemporary world. And frankly, I'm not sure it would be a useful exercise even to try.

One of the main concerns for Seekers like Fox was certainty. He wanted to know the one genuine path to Truth. It was out of intense desperation, even despair, that he discovered the path that we follow today. We all know the famous quote from his journal:

*When all my hopes...in all men were gone, ... Oh then, I heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thine condition", and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.*

Nowadays certainty seems an almost impossible goal. Indeed, it doesn't seem to be a value at all. Tolerance and genuine seeking has taken its' place. At least apparently. But people still search for certainty. Though not perhaps the certainty of the mind: ideologies and creeds are almost immediately suspect; rather we are looking for certainties of the heart that sustain us through the vicissitudes of life.

And that is why I think we find so much diversity of approach to belief in our Meeting. As a Society, we are extremely open to a variety of these certainties. We are truly spiritual democrats. If your answer works for you, well then, who are we to complain?

But this diversity has repercussions in the worshipping community. There is an enormous amount of self censorship even in the spoken ministry over what may or may not be offered

without giving offense to others in the Meeting. I have known Meetings here in Illinois where the mere mention of Jesus and his ministry, much less his salvific role, was essentially ruled out! It cuts the other way too: feminist Friends are often extremely frustrated in worship because they feel they cannot share the concerns and love which flow from their experience of the Mother.

The very nature of our spiritual practice demands total honesty, openness, and spontaneity. Without these elements can the lack of depth we feel in worship come as a surprise?

How did we get to this point? Some history here is important. It is neither helpful nor good to accept total responsibility for such problems in our Meetings. The Society of Friends is not the same for us as it was for Fox. Friends in those early days were inevitably Christian. Their belief was built on the inward experience of the Christ buttressed as it were by Biblical understanding. In the eighteenth century Friends cast about for responses to the challenges of the Enlightenment. They found that the Light was not inconsistent with reason and concerned themselves with maintaining the Society and developing testimonies which answered the problems of living in the world. By the nineteenth century we see that previous understandings of the Quaker experience no longer held. Some Friends-the Orthodox-wanted to reclaim a more enthusiastic Quakerism based more explicitly on Jesus Christ and the Bible record. Others-the Hicksites-desired to stay close to the Inward Christ. Silent worship, continuing revelation were the cornerstones of this approach. Both sides of the schism claimed the correct understanding of Quaker Faith and Practice. And now we can say with justice that both sides attempted to meet the challenge of new times with integrity to their understandings of historical Quakerism and, more importantly, fidelity to the Light.

In the twentieth century things got even more complicated at least for liberal friends, those Friends who like us follow the Hicksite understanding. Rufus Jones placed Quakerism for the first time among mystical religions. This change of gears, as it were, had profound effects on the life of our Meetings. On one hand, it opened for many the doorway to the direct experience of the Divine without the obstacle of discipline or credo. On the other, it complicated for many Friends' traditional association of Jesus Christ with the experience of the Inner Light. The way was wide open for a variety of understandings of our corporate mysticism, within or without the Christian tradition. This development inevitably eroded the firm foundation that Friends had hitherto built on.

Over time our beliefs became diluted. Today it can honestly be asked whether we as a Society can profess to any common belief at all!

This brings us to the thesis of an English Friend, Ben Pink Dandelion. Friend Dandelion in his doctoral dissertation examined a number of English Meetings. He found, not surprisingly, that one of the key characteristics of these Friends was a non-creedal belief system: you could be a Friend no matter what you believed. His other finding is more surprising but rings true in my experience of American Friends. He found that what drew Friends together was a behavioral creed! Although Friends were skittish about naming the source of their practice, the practice itself had become central to their definition of who they were as individuals and who they were corporately as a Society. Hence the testimonies, silent worship, business process, the language of light and leading became central in establishing cohesion among Friends.

You can see the problem of this approach. It leaves us with a very pretty shell, a rather quaint rendition of the Quaker experience but without a heart. We are Quakers not because of the peace testimony or the testimony of equality, certainly not because of our forms of doing business or even worship. We are Friends because we can testify to the world that we have personally met the Inward Teacher. We can witness to the reality that the Teacher is creating the true commonwealth of God/dess in the world and we are part of that creation. All of our practice must emanate from this central experience. Our practice cannot endure without the illuminating experience of the Divine Light in our lives and God/dess's actions in our Meetings. This is my belief.

Having said this, what are we to do? Certainly we cannot propose another schism to enforce a single discipline—a schism between the humanist and spiritual Friends. I think we love each other too much for that. Besides we have learned the hard way that schisms once lightly undertaken harden into obdurate chasms of distrust. We still sadly live with the consequences of those 19th century separations.

Early Quakers were fond of the expression, "Dig deep, Dear Friends. Dig Deep." They knew that true spiritual riches were not to be found on the surface. We receive our testimonies out of their rejection of society's easy answers. They saw society's answers as being essentially untrue to peoples' fundamental nature as children of the Most High. They discovered these insights by digging deep within themselves, by putting themselves constantly in communication with the Divine Teacher. These Friends were in constant prayer.

It is in prayer we will find a new center for our life together.

Let us examine some fundamentals of prayer. At its most basic level prayer is simply putting oneself in connection with the Ground of All Being. Of placing oneself in the Light. Shortly before his death Thomas Merton had this to say about prayer:

*The great thing is prayer. Prayer itself. If you want a life of prayer, the way to get it is by praying. We were indoctrinated so much into means and ends that we don't realize there is a different dimension in the life of prayer... In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have. We already have everything, but we don't know it and we don't experience it. Everything has been given to us...All we need is to experience what we already possess. The trouble is we aren't taking time to do so.*

When we begin to speak about our experiences in prayer, we find words very important (and ironically seem not very important at all). Because each seeker comes to the Divine from their own place in life, it will certainly be true that there will be many vocabularies of prayer. Some will describe their experience as a walk with Jesus, others will talk about the comforting arms of the Mother, some will say that their experience is simply to rest in the Now, to connect with the Great All, or to rationally focus on ethical truths. All of these approaches must be admitted. Indeed, all these ways of speaking are saying something true about the True. The eminent twentieth century theologian Rudolf Bultmann said: "...everything in time and space has become at some time in the history of religion a symbol for the Holy...because everything that is in the

world we encounter rests on the ultimate ground of being." It is this understanding which makes all our attempts to communicate our Divine valuable, no matter what the metaphor we use!

If we are willing to let ourselves stand in the ineffable Power of the Light, this Power will transform the challenge of our diversity into a great blessing.

We Friends delight in the habitual use of the marvelous metaphor of the Light. We all use it all the time. We say walk in the Light. We talk about the Light of God within. We even sing that George Fox song, "there's a Light that is shining in the Turk and the Jew..."

We have experienced the Light shining directly into our hearts. We know experientially that the Light is the Divine element which informs our lives and which fills the universe with its radiance. We hold that the experience of the Light is universally available. We recognize there are not many lights but there is but One Light. We affirm that Light is Divine. We can say with the psalmist: "By your light we see light."

There are two traditional approaches to this Light. The first are the more familiar forms of prayer based on an appreciation of the senses. Spoken prayer of all types falls into this tradition as does spontaneous exclamations at the beauty of art, or the magnificence of nature, or the beguiling charm of a child's smile, or the touch of a friend's hand, or any of the pleasures of the senses. Since everything is rooted in the Divine Ground, then all that is can bring one to the experience of the Divine Love. Martin Buber's "I-Thou Experience" points in this direction. The basic principle here is that you actively seek to put yourself in the Divine Presence in every moment. This takes practice but it is precisely this practice that our ancestors enjoined on us with the injunction to walk in the Light.

The other path to the Light is also traditional but seemingly more abstruse. Certainly for me it requires greater discipline. The idea is to dig deeper and deeper inward, to completely empty oneself, to avoid the stimulation of the senses, to abandon preconceptions, worldly distractions and finally self in order to give one's whole being to the Only One. This is the genuine mystical way. We Friends maintain this approach in the silence of our Meetings. Thus it has been said of us that we use the silence of our Meetings better to hear the still small voice of the God/dess within. It might also be said of us that we empty ourselves in silent worship in order to be filled by the Divine Spirit.

These two approaches are by no means exclusive. We constantly go back and forth between the participation in the activity of the senses and the rest of withdrawal deep within. Neither should one approach be considered superior to the other. Both are necessary. In fact, it is through this dynamic exchange within the individual and in the community that true revelation is discovered.

Francis Howgill, an early Friend, writing about the experience of a Meeting in 1654 where George Fox preached, demonstrates powerfully this dynamic relationship between the sensational, the hearing and analysis of the message, and the mystical descent into formless worship. Fox's message, Howgill writes:

*... reached into all our consciences and entered into the inmost part of our hearts, which drove us to a narrow search and to a diligent inquisition concerning our state, through the Light of Christ Jesus ... and as we waited ... in pure silence, our minds out of all things, his heavenly presence appeared in our assemblies, when there was no language, tongue, nor speech from any creature.*

Prayer in all its forms is a very powerful thing, indeed. If we find ourselves much in prayer then we will find ourselves much out of contention with each other. We will find it easier to withstand the temptations of the world. We will find that we actually can speak truth to power. We will come to stand in the transforming power of the Light all our days. And thus, we will find ourselves formed by the Holy One as a people for witness in our generation.

Let our Meetings then become schools of prayer. Let us each be persistent in its practice. And let us learn from one another fresh approaches and vocabularies of addressing the One whose Name is above every name in Heaven and Earth.

Amen

The title [of this talk] is from George Fox, in *London Christian Faith and Practice*, 1960, #163.