

The Seed and the Society

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In one of His parables, Jesus likens the Kingdom of Heaven to a treasure buried in a field. This is something of great value, He says, since the finder, for sheer joy, goes and sells everything he has and buys that field. He was speaking out of His own experience -- describing the discovery of the reality of God.

The Friends have another way of putting it. George Fox called this treasure the Seed. He also called It by many other names: The Inner Light, The Christ Within, The Bread of Life, and so on. But the term Seed is especially apt.

We are all familiar with seeds. We know that there is great potential in a seed but that it is of no value as long as it is dormant -- that until the fertility of the soil, the addition of sunlight and moisture awaken it and cause it to begin to grow, it might as well be dead, except that it always retains the possibility of great promise. For from these tiny seeds can develop beautiful flowers and towering trees, and in this growth they can split rocks in their inexorable response to fulfill their divine nature.

Each one of us has a divine Seed within himself. It is the treasure beyond price. It is a Center around which one can focus his life; find direction and meaning, support when the way gets rough, assurance that behind all that takes place there is ultimate purpose and goodness.

Symbols

The simile here, no doubt, is obvious. It is a simple statement of what Quakerism is all about. It was the culmination of a search that brought this truth in vivid reality to George Fox. It cost the early Friends dearly to stand in the Light that they found to be more precious than life. We are the inheritors of the symbols of this faith but not necessarily of the truths they embody.

There is great danger that we will rob our symbols of their meaning. By symbols, of course, I mean the words that we use to clothe the realities that give our religion its peculiar import. It is the danger of watering down the true significance of an expression, of equating that which is ordinary and conventional with that which is particular and precious. It is insidious and a more

effective way of destroying our heritage than direct denial or attack. The substitution of the common for the special takes away the goal.

There is, for example, that more familiar synonym for the Seed -- "That of God," usually followed by "in every man." This saying has become so commonplace that it carries no more impact than to say that every person has eyes or arms or legs. This kind of glibness steals from our understanding the sense of awe, of majesty, of reverence that it should evoke. The "that" referred to is not known naturally -- it usually breaks in as the result of a definite experience, always ineffable, called variously an awakening, opening, conversion, or rebirth -- and is recognized as being from God.

We have taken unto ourselves the name "seekers," a term rich in meaning when applied in its true sense. It does not equate with intellectual speculation, curiosity, or the reading of religious literature. It is concerned with a hunger that envelops the whole person, which galvanizes him into a search that will not rest until it finds its Object, an almost desperate drive for that completeness which is only satisfied when he knows that God is real and personal.

Thomas Kelly has used that delightful phrase "The Blessed Community" to describe what we like to think is the normal life of our Meetings. And, no doubt, these relationships are considerably deeper than the normal contacts of our lives. But organizational activities, satisfying and needful as they are, are not what Kelly had in mind. He describes it as the unique koinonia of those whose lives are bound together in the bonds of divine love -- a fellowship that is amazing, completely trusting, joyous, selfless, and rich beyond imagination.

It has been said of the non-pastoral Friends that we have not abolished the clergy, but that we have abolished the laity. In other words, each person becomes his own priest or minister. It might be more accurate, however, to state that all too often the attention given to spiritual matters tends to prove that we have indeed abolished the clergy.

Another of Friends' principles that has spoken to Friends through the years is that all of life is sacramental. That is, that all of life is sacred -- every act we perform, everyone we meet, every day of the week. But what is it that hallows the mundane? Must it not be a sense of vocation, of life lived in the presence of and for Him who gives life meaning? As faith has decreased, the lack of an ultimate standard has led to confusion, to a breakdown of morality, to a loosening of family ties and deterioration of our social fabric.

It may be true that these symbols have life and content in your life and in your Meeting. I truly hope so. But if they do not, the reason is that we have departed from the Source of life. We must learn again the truth of Rufus Jones' pungent observation, "He is the Great I Am, not a Great He Was."

Service

Howard Brinton points out that the present period of Quaker history -- which he calls the Modernist Period -- is characterized by the increased emphasis on rationalism and humanitarianism at the expense of mysticism and evangelicalism. These four traits have been

present throughout our history. While all four elements are essential, Brinton emphasizes that they are not equal in rank -- the mystical is basic. "The Light Within occasions the acceptance or rejection of a particular authority, reason or service."

We misread the history of Quakerism if we put anything else in the center other than the quest for and obedience to the Light. The story of George Fox is one of seeking and finding, of living under a higher loyalty, of the growth within him of the divine Seed, and of leading others to the Inward Teacher. Similarly, John Woolman and Rufus Jones were mystics of the first order. One of the best known Friends today, another mystic, is Thomas Kelly, whose "Testament of Devotion" continues to be a best seller as a classic of religious literature. These men are also, and often better, known to us for their action, but their service was always a response to a divine imperative.

Douglas Steere makes this clear in his work on Woolman's Journal. He notes that "there is always in the background this sense of his being at the disposal of God. The regular Quaker practice of corporate worship and of private prayer furnished a means of bringing him 'close to the root' as he expressed it. But more important still was this constant attempt on his part to live close to the root, close to the Inward Teacher, close to the tendering presence that he had known and felt." And then as his concerns were expressed, Steere further observes that "the specific social reforms which Woolman advocated and the methods by which he advanced them never exhausted, and were secondary to, the witness for the availability of the divine presence and power here and now in this life, and to the connection of that presence with specific practice in this world. Woolman's reforms were only applications of this deeper power and they drew their strength and validity exclusively from it. This prevented him from ever falling the victim of any narrow doctrinaire reformer mentality with two or three 'idees fixes' and kept his means of advancing these concerns continually purified."

William Penn put it succinctly. "They were changed men themselves before they went about to change others. Their hearts were rent as well as their garments, and they knew the power and will of God upon them."

One of the most vivid statements of the relation of worship and service is made by Gilbert Kilpack in his Pendle Hill pamphlet "The Idea of a Retreat." In it he says, "We must be open to the vision of service, but, strangely enough, we must be served before we can serve. Simon Peter was willing to humble himself by kneeling and bathing his Lord's feet, but he was not willing to permit that awful humiliation of seeing his Lord kneel to bathe his feet. Some of us are valiant to serve the Christ but are not patient enough to let the Christ serve us. To serve without being served is the awful heresy of our age. We must be humbled and brought low and filled with the truth before we can be trusted to serve the wide world. The world must be reformed, but the reform must start from within -- within ourselves.

Many of you will remember our beloved Clarence Pickett speaking to us in this room and quoting from the German mystic, Meister Eckhart, the truth that you can only spend in service what you earn in contemplation.

The Religious Society

We see reiterated in these quotations the common recognition that the mystic approach is basic. The act was born in the silence. These Friends are our heroes because they were what Fox called "established" men.

Yet we cannot stop here with the consideration of service, as important as that is. There is the need to minister to our own members and attenders. Friends do not seem to be exempt from the strains and demands of life. They, too, have times of personal crisis, frustration, distressing family situations, loss of loved ones. There are times of doubt about all that our best efforts can accomplish -- do they make any difference? Is there time in the life of our Meeting for consideration of personal need? Must we always come as stalwart, serene, weighty Friends? Or can we come as we are: sometimes up, sometimes down; in our strength, but also in our weakness. And, in times of great trial, is there the faith in a Greater than ourselves? We cannot take the mystery out of life -- questions regarding our purpose here, our ultimate destination, life after death, suffering.... These thoughts creep in upon us, and where do we take them? Do not Friends have something to offer here?

George Fox found, after his 'opening,' that all of creation had a new smell. He was seeing life about him as if for the first time and through eyes from which the scales had been removed. This same sense of wonder is shared by those who regain their sight after temporary blindness or who gain a reprieve after their lifetime was seemingly ended. Life is truly seen to be good. In my own experience, I discovered that a world that had heretofore been unfriendly, that demanded a "dog eat dog" attitude, no longer existed. It was all changed. The world was friendly, people were for me, and I knew that basically the world was good; and so were the people in it, but first I had to discover that of God within myself, or rather, respond to It -- to know that others, too, have this same precious essence within them, undiscovered perhaps, yet none the less real.

Rufus Jones saw the need of this experience for every man. He relates the experience of the Elders of the Tribes whom Moses took up to the mountain with him where they saw God. He then quotes the descriptive verse from Exodus, "they saw God and they did eat and drink." Jones said that "this action no doubt comes as a surprise. You expect some much more religious performance. They had their great experience and they came back to the normal, everyday business of life, no doubt on a new level of life and significance. I think they did just the right thing. Most of us are meant to be normal persons, living here in the world, carrying on a daily round of business and ordinary occupations. They are apt to grow dull and dreary. We especially, even more than the seers and prophets, need the lift of vision and the inspiration of contact with God. But the experience ought not to set us apart or take us out of the normal business of life. It ought rather to gird and equip us for the every day round of life."

He continues, "We want outstanding persons who are unique and peculiar in their leadership but we no less need to have the level of the rank and file raised to a new level of life and power. We need to have the persons in ordinary life, in the home and the offices and on the farms, touched with fresh inspiration and quickened with new vision."

There is a vital role that the members of a Meeting play in the development of a Quaker "saint" like John Woolman. Only in an established religious community, as Douglas Steere tells us, "where there are others who have lived or are living such a life of abandon, is there the encouragement, the expectation, the nurture that prunes away individualistic excess and yet helps give the setting for continual renewal. A man or woman must have this if at one and the same time they are to go beyond the customary compromises and mediocrity of the ordinary life and yet to retain such touch with the heart of the common life as to reveal it to itself for what it might become and to appeal to this common life as a saint has the power of doing. Without such a community or tradition the one who feels called to this deeper devotion may hesitate, falter, or stop short, or he may develop willful eccentricities or grievances which may end by making him only a queer enemy of the people and cut him off from the true life of full devotion."

We also have an obligation to those who come to our Meetings seeking to find whether the Quaker approach to worship and life has an answer. Some are drawn because of our service. Some have found themselves stirred by the journals of Fox and Woolman, by the writings of Rufus Jones, Thomas Kelly, and Douglas Steere. Others come because they have found no reality in their previous experience with other churches. While it is an opportunity, it is even more a responsibility that what they find be faithful to true Quakerism. Will they find us waiting upon the Lord, will there be a sense of expectation, will the tendering Presence be among us? We are expected to be expert in the creative use of silence, to know the interior life, and to have found a direct communication with the Eternal. Granted that this is a large order, it is the central message of Friends. And to whom are they to turn if not to us?

Trite as it may sound, it is no less true that the world today is desperately in need of the direct approach that Quakers have historically exemplified. Amid the noise, confusion, insecurity, and absence of integrity that characterize so much of society, the hope of an experiential faith with its inherent sense of authority and knowledge would find a ready response. The hunger for meaning manifests itself in many ways; one making the headlines today is the use of "pot" and LSD in an attempt to widen one's awareness. The end is good but the means not only cause only partly known damage to the user, but after "turning him on" he is led to "drop out" of society instead of working to change it. Drugs are another example of attempting to gain something without paying the cost. The mystical awareness that is sought is a life process, found through slow and unspectacular growth, like the natural development of the Seed everywhere in nature. As Dag Hammarskjöld said: "The longest journey is the journey inwards...(the) quest for the source of your being."

It was a disturbing comment to have some acquaintances of mine, who had attended Quaker Meeting for some months, ask: "We like everything we read about the Friends. This is what we are seeking, but where can we find Meetings like that?" The "that" were those described in our literature where the symbols I mentioned earlier were representative of the life of the Meeting. This may seem a harsh judgment, but I welcomed the frankness which was offered in confidence. It revealed that we are not speaking to the condition of some and the weakness that inevitably results when the spiritual life is neglected. We have been thinking of the use of advertising to attract new attenders to Meeting, but I suggest we are starting at the wrong place to revitalize our Society -- it is not to gain the attenders, but to foster the life of the Spirit at the center.

My concern is that the four elements which are necessary to a religious society are not only not in balance, but that the trend seems to be to neglect the most basic element -- the mystical. Howard Brinton describes the type of religion that results from too exclusive an emphasis on any one of them: the mystical, the evangelical, the rational, and the social. As mentioned earlier, our present period is dominated by the two latter elements. Too great an emphasis on rationalism, he says, results in a cold, intellectual religion which appeals only to the few; too engrossing a devotion to the social gospel results in a religion which, in improving the outer environment, ignores defects of the inner life which cause the outer disorder. You can judge from your own observations whether this description rightly reflects the condition of Quakerism today.

It is my view that we have over-reacted. In our efforts to avoid the empty creed, sentimental emotionalism, Biblical idolatry, and religion unrelated to our daily lives, we have strayed so far away from the waters of life that we are heading further into an arid wasteland devoid of faith, prayer, transcendence, and the wisdom of scripture. The peril is not only that we may outrun our Guide but also that we may feel that we no longer need Him.

You may, of course, question the validity of my concern. Yet I would ask you to consider the time allotted in conferences such as this one to the life of the Spirit; review the literature on the booktable, especially the current writings of Friends; look for the opportunities for assistance in the deeper search for truth -- do you find any significant portion of our efforts and attention focused here? Do we really count on God as being a factor either in the events of our lives or as a determinant in choosing a course of action? Too often, I fear, the inner life is dismissed as not being practical or relevant.

There are reasons why we shy away from such subjects, of course. The deeper experiences of our lives are extremely personal and precious, and an easy sharing of them is just not possible. There is also the concern that to claim direct experience with the Creator smacks of sanctimoniousness, a sort of spiritual snobbery. Would it not be strange, however, for a Society with so much seeking to not have more finding? Nor are there any grounds for claims of any personal accomplishment in our finding -- rather it is an objective report on what has been done to and for and through us by an Other, where our part was a need and a response, nothing of personal merit. There is another fear that may bind us from speaking -- that anyone who claims such knowledge is expected to measure up to the saints of old, to a John Woolman, for instance. Yet the direct awareness of the Presence should be the norm, an essential (as the quotation from Rufus Jones quoted earlier emphasized) for the daily round of life. The fact that any ordinary person can have this sensitivity is an earnest of its availability to all, not just to peculiar or other worldly individuals. And, after all, isn't this what the unique Quaker message is all about?

Equality

There is a further unique function that we serve as a religious society that relates to our testimony of equality. It is our witness to the intrinsic value of every person. Only a religious society, I believe, can say this. Man is only equal in the sight of God -- we are not equally endowed with talent, intellect, personality, background, physical attributes, or whatever. In order for us to see men as equal, to truly believe it, to treat them with a basic respect demands a

spiritual sight. This is why the First Commandment "to love God" precedes the Second which is to love your neighbor as yourself -- you aren't capable of it by yourself.

Furthermore, if the kingdom of heaven, "the peaceable kingdom," is ever to become a reality it must be built on the firm faith that there is that Seed in every one which can respond to love and grow. Everywhere about us are signs that this is not the case. Human efforts at betterment, without the divine potential, would be a mockery, a tragedy foredoomed to failure and frustration. We need this lively hope in others that spurs us on to the inevitable victory, a hope that is born and sustained by the discovery and working of the Seed in ourselves.

Nor is it enough that the society be religious in the narrow sense. There is present within nations, within society, and often unfortunately in religions, what I call a "sheep and goats" philosophy. It divides people into those who belong and those who do not, those who are with us and those who are against us, and -- in the so-called religious sense -- those who will make it and those who won't, or the elect and the lost. As a corollary, there usually are different rules that govern the behavior towards those in the respective groups -- kindness and understanding towards those who belong, but license toward the outsider. This warped thinking has been responsible for much of the ills of history, past and present.

This is a luxury that the Friends cannot afford. In the area of ministering to the underprivileged, the needy and distressed, I believe our caring has been outstanding. But what of those with whom we differ, seriously or fundamentally, on principles which are most dear to us? What of the racist, the militarist? John Woolman's "method was one that always deeply respected those he visited. It presupposed a divine center in them that was open to approach. His task was to answer to that of God in them. Each visit was personal and was carried on in love, but it went to the point. He declares, 'It was my concern from day to day to say neither more nor less than what the spirit of truth opened in me, being jealous over myself lest I should say anything to make my testimony look agreeable to that mind in people which is not in pure obedience to the cross of Christ.'" The times in which we live also demand that we live close to that same Root from which Woolman drew his leading and love.

Mysticism

I would also urge you to embrace the mystical approach, not only as essential to the life and future of the Society of Friends, but also as essential to your own life.

It has been estimated that we normally use only a fraction of our mental capacity, something on the order of about fifteen per cent, I believe. Like an iceberg, most of the mind remains at rest. Similarly, but in a more profound sense, we often neglect an entire dimension of our being -- its essence, actually. This is our true Self, the Inner Man, the Spirit, the divine Spark, with infinite possibilities and possessed of the secret of our existence. It is what I called the Seed. Names are unimportant since we speak of that which we can only dimly understand -- through a glass, darkly, Paul says -- but to which it is vital that we do respond. Not only is it necessary to our well being but our birthright, the answer to all our striving and searching. It is only in the fulfillment of this destiny, the awakening and nurture and growth of the Seed to maturity, that we find rest from the wheel of frenzied activity.

Evelyn Underhill, in the classic book on the subject of mysticism, says that in all creative acts, the larger share of the work is done subconsciously: its emergence is in a sense automatic. This is equally true of mystics, artists, philosophers, discoverers, and rulers of men. This is inspiration. "The truth, then," she says, "seems to be that those powers which are in contact with the Transcendental Order, and which constitute at the lowest estimate half the self, are dormant in ordinary men, whose time and interest are wholly occupied in responding to the stimuli of the world of sense." "To let oneself go, be quiet, receptive, appears to be the condition under which such contact with the Cosmic Life may be obtained." She then, in a most competent and comprehensive volume, describes the mystic life. Included, of course, is George Fox, whom she calls "a great active" of the first rank, and the Quaker movement, which is described as "an outbreak of genuine mysticism."

This life is the only one, in my experience, that offers a challenge that continues to demand all that a man is (and can be), a goal that continues to be outside his grasp yet always within his current reach, a destiny outstanding in possibility yet with a present certainty of acceptance as you are. It is a never ending adventure, keeping you on tiptoe, yet measured to your present stature. Life begins to have unusual coincidences, at the most opportune times, when you are following directions and stay in the Light. This is in no way to imply that you are exempt from the tests and strains of life; there is a stepping up of sensitivity to the depth of need, and an overwhelming impulse to right things -- but here also you must learn to follow your leadings. As Thomas Kelly says, "you cannot die on every cross," but you are to find the cross that is yours and carry it, not counting cost, wherever the Light leads.

There are great possibilities buried within each of us, hidden away like buried treasure, that are unlocked and come to bloom as the Seed takes root and develops. It also opens the door to the one task that each of us is peculiarly able to perform. We have a unique talent, one that our whole life has been preparing us for, a calling no one else can answer, that will be revealed to us as we learn to listen with all of our being both to find and to perform.

Our young Friends are concerned with moral standards, as well they might be. The search of the moral being for some authority that will guide him in the conduct of his life is one of the basic interests that have led me to the higher religious consciousness. This type of mysticism is both active and ethical. Josiah Royce in "The Spirit of Modern Philosophy" describes the attitude as "I don't ask so much who the Lord is, as what his will is. . . God wants me to work, he asks service of me, not comprehension. . . my faith is an assurance that the right will somehow conquer." Rufus Jones says, "The individual soul feels invaded, vitalized with new energy, merged with an enfolding presence, liberated and exalted with a sense of having found what it has always sought and flooded with joy." Another author defines it as "practical mysticism in which sacrificial service prompted by love is the ruling characteristic." These definitions are illustrated in the lives of the Quaker mystics whom I mentioned earlier. With this relationship also comes the morality which often triggered the search. There is a promise in Paul's Letter to the Hebrews in which the Lord says, "I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts," but this is conditioned, as Biblical promises usually are, in this case that He is to be the God of the people. This is the same rule as that of St. Augustine: to love God and do as you please -- the condition here being to put your first love and loyalty to God. While the conditions are dear, the morality is

there to be found. The moral standards may be no different from those you were taught (usually they go far beyond the conventional) but they will be yours.

Because his life so beautifully illustrates the active side of the mystic, I would like to quote from Dag Hammarskjöld's "Markings." The discovery of "Markings" was surprising, and disconcerting to some, because of the depth of the devotional life they revealed. The absence of such a rich interior life, however, would have been more surprising in this sensitive, selfless, international public servant. The turning point in his life he describes this way: "I don't know Who -- or what -- put the question; I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone -- or Something -- and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal. From that moment I have known what it means 'not to look back' and 'to take no thought for the morrow.'" His perspective is revealed in the quotation used earlier, that the longest journey is the journey inwards. . . in the quest for the source of its being. Finally, he expresses his own credo in the aphorism: "In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action." As those of any particular religious persuasion often say of those whom they greatly admire, "He would have been a good Quaker."

Conclusion

It is incumbent upon me, after having made a diagnosis, to also prescribe treatment. Here I can only point the direction, but this is all that is required, since movements in this direction will inherently bring further leading. Basically, the suggestions are offered to restore primary emphasis upon the mystical element in Quakerism -- the source of our faith and the reason for whatever greatness our Society has merited.

This can be done, first, by providing at our conferences and yearly meetings time for serious study of the life of the Spirit, using as resource persons those individuals -- both in and out of our Society -- who can speak from their own experience on the subject.

Second, that research, writing, publishing, circularizing, and study of authentic literature on the spiritual life be encouraged.

Third, that small groups of concerned Friends within each Meeting meet together regularly (at times other than Meeting for Worship) in a joint disciplined exploration of the spiritual frontier.

Fourth, that retreats of a day to a week be fostered where silence can be practiced and patterns of meaningful learning be developed.

In all of this, there is the hope that we can look forward to the opportunity -- beyond the revitalizing of our own Society -- of becoming as a seed to society as a whole.

You could observe that these are not new ideas, and I would agree, except that any idea becomes new when it is taken seriously. The power that the early Friends had was not new either -- it was present in First Century Christianity -- but it turned the world upside down. It is my sincere belief that it can be ours, too.

Charles Steinmetz, the eminent scientist and inventor, predicted that the greatest discoveries of the second half of the Twentieth Century would be spiritual. The world needs such breakthroughs now, it seems, even to survive. This is an opportunity that Friends, walking in the footsteps of their forebears, could well pioneer.

Each one of us is a personal walking laboratory in which spiritual truth can be discovered, tested, and lived. The Seed within you can become a tower of strength, a source of joy, a guide and companion throughout life. You can know that God is -- if you really want to.