

As The Way Opens-- An Experience of Faith

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Ada is in the painting class I teach. She is black, burdened, and she has a keen, perceptive mind.

When Ada painted people, the eyes were always angry. She tried to copy the model, but always the eyes would come out angry, accusing. One time we painted a still life of a potted amaryllis plant with a beautiful scarlet blossom. As I went from easel to easel examining student work, I found that Ada had painted the yellow flower pot, solid and cylindrical, and the black earth in the pot. But that was all.

"I never could grow flowers," she said. I urged her to try to paint the flower, or at least a sprout of green coming out of the pot's black earth. She was sorry, but she couldn't do it.

"Guess I haven't got a green thumb," Ada said.

Months passed. I worried about Ada of the angry eyes and the infertile flower pot. I encouraged her to paint the way she felt, not to be ashamed of angry eyes. Then one evening Ada came to class with a kind of suppressed excitement.

"Do you remember the flower pot I painted?" she asked me. "I have a story to tell you about it."

"I've had Demetrius staying with me this week while his mother's in the hospital. He's six. Demetrius saw my painting of the flower pot. 'Ada, I love your flower pot with the black dirt in it,' he told me. 'Whatever for?' I laughed at him.

"And then Demetrius said, 'Every time I look at that yellow pot with the black dirt in it, I think about the little seeds that are buried in the black dirt, and how they're going to sprout. And pretty soon there'll be a green thing growing there.'"

Anything I know of faith comes from experiences like this one.

I am burdened with the awareness that today Friends seek for faith, but seldom find it. Why is it so hard for us to find?

Most of us are practicing Quakers. We are members of families, respected community members, workers in a myriad of worthy causes. We are sensitive to the hypocrisies of middle class, white America of which most of us are a part. Our eyes are opened to our country's conduct of the Vietnam war. In recent months some of us have experienced rejection by members of the black community, our friends and fellow workers, because our skins are white. This is a new experience. Our children challenge us to live our Quaker testimonies, or stop preaching them.

We are searching, struggling people, oh so busy with our causes and committees. But when the meeting is over at last and we drag our weary bones to bed, we feel helpless, hopeless, sometimes guilty. The burdens of the world lie on our shoulders. It is almost more than we can bear.

I hold the experience of Ada and her flower pot close to me because in it I have found a precious insight. Ada was a seeker, not a finder, until the leading of a little child helped her find faith.

The New English Bible tells the story of Jesus and the children this way:

They brought children for him to touch; and the disciples scolded them for it. But when Jesus saw this he was indignant, and said to them, 'Let the children come to me; do not try to stop them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you, whosoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.' And he put his arms round them, laid his hands upon them and blessed them." ¹

We are our own worst enemies. We analyze, evaluate and despair. We try to bear the whole world's burden on our shoulders. We leave no room for God.

The little child draws with a certainty. "Draw a whale," we say, or "Draw a turtle." And the child does. Wonder of wonder to the adult mind, Johnny produces an unmistakable turtle.

Then the child grows older -- nine or ten, perhaps -- and he no longer is able to draw a turtle. We say he has become "self-conscious." He discovers that he is very small and impotent and that the world is very big. He learns how complicated the world is, how complicated is the anatomy of a turtle. "I don't know how to draw a turtle," Johnny cries.

Webster defines "self-conscious" as "excessively conscious of one's self as an object of observation to others" or "conscious of one's self or one's own thoughts."

Self-consciousness seems to block the free flow of creative expression. Yet self awareness is a vital stage of our development.

Self awareness. Who am I? The young person asks this question. The black person asks this question. The worker pushing buttons asks this question. The forty year old mother of children nearly grown asks this same question. At some time each of us has asked the question: Who am I?

It is vital that emerging personalities and emerging nations find an answer to their search for self identity. But we cannot stop there. For it is an individualistic, adolescent, competitive state that we are in. *My* self versus another self. This is the point of conflict in human relations. *My* group versus another group. *My* country versus another country. And like the boy who knows he cannot draw a turtle, we *know* that we are inadequate. Our individual, human strength is not enough.

Eventually self-searching brings an answer to our loneliness. As we plumb our inward depths, we find that quiet center where "That of God" dwells in us. "That of God" in me is part of who I am! "That of God" in me can reach to "That of God" in you and make us know that we are brothers.

I would like to try to share with you a personal experience of growing from self-centeredness to something higher. After twenty-six years of a fulfilling marriage, Hans and I became aware that each of us had individual needs that were not known to the other and which our marriage had not satisfied. He had a need deep in his soma for a well planned, smoothly ordered life. He found peace and beauty in the order. I, on the other hand, was spontaneous, impulsive in my habits. I valued the freedom to immerse myself completely in my painting or in relationships with people.

It was a bleak and frightening awakening to discover in our mature years that we were different, that that which satisfied one could not satisfy the other, and that probably all our lives this would be so.

In our lonely struggle there finally came a sense of quiet. And it happened to us both. We realized that stubborn pushing for our individual goals was a wastefulness. Quietly we sat together. Somehow we could let go of our selfishness. We found ourselves raised up to a new level of aware relationship where love and shared experience were all-important, where we could see a new road stretching out before us, different from that which either of us would have trod alone, and more fulfilling.

The Inward Light, the Christ Within, is the creative center of our being which links us to God and to each creature of God's universe. "Be still and know that I am God."² "Be still," the psalmist says. It is hard for us to still our minds and bodies, to put aside our hurrying, our plans and deadlines, our hopes, our fears, our feelings of responsibility. It is so hard to make room for a quiet center. But this is asked of us.

"Be still." We have no written guarantee. It is an act of faith that God will fill the stillness. We must come as children, unconscious of self, taking a first step into the unknown, blindly.

"As the way opens. . ." These words describe the faith of men like George Fox and John Woolman. "I will proceed on this undertaking as the way opens." This is old-time Quaker phraseology. It is based on deep faith. John Woolman did not have a road map or a guided tour when he visited with the Indians. He felt called to undertake the journey, and he started out. He believed that God would give him direction along the way, and the way would open before him.

I have both chuckled about and pondered over the letter written by John Woolman to his wife, while he was absent from home travelling in New England, in winter during a time of family

illness. I wonder how Sarah Woolman felt on receiving this missive: ". . . I have often an engaging love and affection toward thee and my daughter, and friends about home, and going out at this time when sickness is so great amongst you, is a trial upon me; yet I often remember there are many widows and fatherless, many who have poor tutors, many who have evil examples before them, and many whose minds are in captivity; for whose sake my heart is at times moved with compassion that I feel my mind resigned to leave you for a season to exercise that gift which the Lord hath bestowed on me which, though small compared with some, yet in this I rejoice, that I feel love unfeigned toward my fellow creatures. I recommend you to the Almighty, who I trust, cares for you, and under a sense of His heavenly love remain, Thy loving husband, J.W."³

Is this letter a great rationalization, or is it an example of a great faith in God? As the years proceed, I am moved to believe the latter.

The faith that a way will be opened to us lightens the burden that we carry in our daily lives. It strengthens our belief that we can find new ways to answer the problems of war and bigotry.

I am moved by the words of the reporter of the meeting for worship held at the time of the Washington Witness on June 28th, 1968, when Friends attending the Friends General Conference travelled to Washington to join the Poor People's Campaign:

After the first quarter of an hour, however, reporters and bystanders moved away, respectful of our worship. A deepening silence encompassed us. We felt drawn together in tenderness and faithfulness to wait upon the Lord and by His strength to go forward in our social witness before all men.⁴

Our community will long remember the visit of two young VISTA volunteers newly returned from service in Vietnam. But it was not so much what they said that impressed us, although this was of value. It was what they were that stays with us. This young man and young woman had lived with and suffered with the peasants in Vietnam. They had just returned from a country desecrated by a cruel war. Their faces were radiant with an expression of love and peace. Serving the victims of war with love had brought them peace. And their peace and love and joy were shared with all who met them.

It may be that this is the only kind of peace that we can know, an inner peace that is from God.

"And central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation."⁵ William Wordsworth said that. This is the quiet in the eye of the hurricane. This is the experience of peace and healing love we hunger for, in the midst of our busy-ness.

He's got you and me, brother, in his hands,
He's got you and me, sister, in his hands.⁶

Do we dare to have the faith to believe it, we Friends gathered here at Quaker Lane in August, 1968? to believe God holds the whole world in His Hands?

¹ *The New English Bible*, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, 1961, Mark 10: 13-16, pages 75 and 76.

² *The Holy Bible*, King James version, Psalm 46: 10.

³ *The Journal of John Woolman*, edited by Janet Whitney, Henry Regnery Co., 1950, page 97.

⁴ Bulletin of the Friends General Conference, July, 1968.

⁵ *The Quiet Eye*, by Sylvia Shaw Judson, Henry Regnery Co., 1954.

⁶ *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands*, Spiritual, copyright 1960, Consolidated Music Publishers, Inc.