

Notes On Quaker Unity

The essay, "On Quaker Unity," appeared in *Friends Journal* (July, 2009, p. 5). It is a series of brief comments on the diversity of religious experience and the possibilities of unity among contemporary Friends. On the pages below are a few additional words of my own and excerpts from the writings of others. This is a series of notes, one for each paragraph in the original publication. The paragraphs from *Friends Journal* are in italics at the beginning of each note.

I hope these materials will help readers interact with and build on the essay. Your comments are welcome.

Os Cresson
1773 Louis Place
Iowa City, IA 52245-1583
oscresson@juno.com

Excerpts in italics reprinted with permission from *Friends Journal*, July 2009, 55(7), 5.

© Friends Publishing Corporation. For more information and to subscribe, see:
www.friendsjournal.org

Note #1:

Unity during meeting for worship for attention to business is familiar to Quakers. It is a commitment to move forward together and, significantly, it does not mean we have to hold the same views. This method of doing business has long been characteristic of Quakers. (Cresson, 2009)

In 1908 an unknown Friend rose in a Philadelphia meeting and called out,

Unity does not necessarily mean agreement; indeed, it is not inconsistent with wide difference in opinion, expression and purpose. Unity is love, not likeness. (quoted in Moore, 1981, p. 136)

Many authors have written eloquently on Quaker unity during meeting for business:

Since there is but one Light and one Truth, if the Light of Truth be faithfully followed, unity will result. 'The Light itself,' says Thomas Story, 'is not divided, but one and the same entire undivided Being continually.'...If serious differences of opinion appear, it may come about that by recourse to a period of silence a

basis for unity can be discovered. If a high degree of unity is not reached, action is postponed, provided an immediate decision is not necessary....It is, however, surprising how often real unity is reached, even though the discussion in its initial stages shows a wide variety of opinions, or a pronounced cleavage arising from strongly held convictions. As the consideration proceeds, unity gradually emerges and is finally reached. The decision may be along lines not even thought of at the beginning. This procedure takes more time and patience than the voting method, but the results are generally more satisfactory to all concerned. (Howard Brinton, 1952, pp. 106-8)

The Quaker method is likely to be successful in proportion as the members are acquainted with one another; better still if real affection exists among them. When differences and factions arose in the Corinthian Church its members wrote to ask Paul's advice. After making several concrete suggestions, he goes on to say in the famous 13th Chapter of his letter that love is really the only solution. In a similar situation John speaks in his first letter of love as essential. 'We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren.' (1 John 3:14) (Brinton, 1952, p. 111)

The attainment of unity within the meeting is not the same as the attainment of uniformity. Unity is spiritual, uniformity mechanical. Friends have never required their members assent to a religious or social creed, though not infrequently a body of Friends has issued a statement expressing their religious or social views at a particular time. There is, however, always the reservation that the spirit of Truth may lead to further insight. Differences within the group on the particular application of general principles are tolerated, provided they are being actively explored in a spirit of friendship and in a continued search for truth. Such differences are often of great value in helping new aspects of truth to emerge. The discovery of truth through differences of opinion is well illustrated in the history of science. 'A clash of doctrines is not a disaster – it is an opportunity,' says Whitehead. (Brinton, 1952, p. 114)

In our corporate search for truth, Friends use the worshipful Quaker process of decision making, a process for finding unity in all decisions that affect our communities. For Friends, unity is not usually unanimity, which is agreement without dissent. Unity is more often agreement that acknowledges dissent, staying together despite differences, and moving forward with guidance from our common values. To help achieve unity, a member of the meeting, appointed as clerk, listens for "a sense of the meeting." When the clerk has a sense of the meeting, he or she composes a minute that Friends agree with or modify. Achieving unity sometimes means that, occasionally, out of respect for the wisdom of the community, one or more dissenting members may "stand aside." Standing aside occurs when one allows a decision-with which one is not entirely comfortable but for which one has no *moral* misgivings-to go forward. On the other hand, the community knows that it must listen carefully to heartfelt dissent, as God's leading may come through any one of us. For Friends, staying together despite differences is an important aspect of community, and we

realize that the more differing opinions we consider, the more closely we may come to the truth. (Marsha D. Holliday, date?)

Unity can encompass differing views and emotions, so it is not the same as unanimity. A Friend may have a strong personal commitment to a preferred outcome, yet be in unity with the sense of the meeting that decides on a different path, because he or she recognises that the decision is the right way forward for the group as a whole at a particular time....'True leadings are reached when there is a unity of spirit regardless of difference in attitude or ideas.' [Handbook of Practice & Procedure, Australia Yearly Meeting, 1995] (Anonymous, date?)

Here are excerpts on unity in meeting for business from two yearly meeting Disciplines:

The presuppositions of the corporate meeting for worship have, from the very beginning, profoundly affected the method of decision-making in the meeting for business. In both, there is faith in the Guide. There is faith in a continuous revelation that is always open to produce fresh disclosures. And there is respect and affection for each other that cuts through all diversity and that helps to kindle a faith that, with patience and openness, the group can expect to come to clearness and to resolve the problems that come before it." (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997, p. 21)

A Meeting is a living spiritual entity which may encompass strong differences of opinion. It is like an individual who may have many conflicting inclinations but who still has a final sense of how to act. The sense of the meeting is not designed and fitted together, but is conceived, born, and nurtured. (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997, p. 23)

The unity we seek depends on the willingness of us all to seek the truth in each other's utterances; on our being open to persuasion; and in the last resort on a willingness to recognise and accept the sense of the meeting as recorded in the minute, knowing that our dissenting views have been heard and considered....We act as a community whose members love and trust each other. (The Yearly Meeting in Britain, 1995, #3.06)

Note #2:

To my surprise, the approach also applies to another kind of unity – that of the meeting community. The two senses of the word are fundamentally one: unity during meeting for business is the formation of a small community around a particular issue; unity of the meeting community is a commitment to each other and to our lives together. (Cresson, 2009)

When I found that unity can be the same concept wherever it appears in Quaker discourse, many parts of my Quaker experience came into relation with each other. Membership represents the unity of meeting and applicant. Membership decisions are taken during a meeting for worship for attention to business. Worship is a gathering into unity of the

meeting community when the participants become one with each other and the rest of the world.

Unity in whatever Quaker context is helpfully viewed as fundamentally the same concept. This includes unity during meeting for worship (a gathered meeting), and during meeting for worship for attention to business (when we seek the sense of the meeting), and in the meeting community, and during the membership process (unity of the applicant and the meeting, and unity of the applicant with principles and aspirations of Friends), and of Friends in larger groups (such as yearly meetings and Friends organizations, and groups made up of Friends from various branches of our Society), and in the definition of a Quaker identity (unity in our self description). All these are varieties of the same experience and what we know from one of these contexts can help us in another.

Note #3:

There are many implications of applying what we know of unity in meeting for business to the life of the meeting community. One is that we do not need to agree. We can differ – in fact, we need to know when we differ and acknowledge it. Unity based on silence about our differences is not unity. (Cresson, 2009)

When I write that during Quaker business procedure “we do not need to agree,” I mean we do not need to agree on all issues, and the reasons we join in unity, and how we talk about them. Some agreement is necessary in order to participate in the process and move forward together in unity, but it is not agreement in the usual sense of being convinced of the other person’s views or of giving up and letting the others have their way. It is the agreement of people dancing together, or the agreement of the ecological embrace of the wasp and fig tree.

Note #4:

At first it struck me as remarkable that the concerted action of a faith community does not require agreement on faith, but we all know people who disagree and still love each other and act together. We see this in families that embrace different faiths. We also see it when we worship with those with whom we disagree – something we do every week. And this is not new: looking back through history we see people manifesting excellent values accompanied by different faiths. (Cresson, 2009)

Henry Cadbury repeatedly stressed that faith and action are not related in the way Friends usually assume.

There is an assumption abroad that religion comes first and social action after, as shown in the title of a recent conference in Philadelphia, “Beliefs into Action.” By religion is understood something inward, perhaps mystical, perhaps theological – but not very extrovert. Now historically Quakerism has both aspects: we have been social pioneers, also quietists. How did the first derive from the second? It seems an unlikely origin. My answer would be that the

alleged relation, 'basis,' is not the whole truth. The two aspects are complementary. And I am impressed how much inner religion is fostered by social concern. If social work can be an escape from inner religion, as is sometimes suggested, is not the opposite also true? Action, often incoherent and inarticulate, leads to thought, and can also lead to spiritual growth. (Cadbury, 1964)

“(S)ound religion is not limited to certain beliefs, ethics doesn’t rest on orthodoxy... (I have) been very free to leave certain questions unanswered 1) Don’t think we have or likely to have evidence 2) Don’t believe men’s actions depend nearly so much on doctrinal absolutes as is commonly thought 3) Very suspicious of those who think only one form or emphasis in religion is valid” (Cadbury, 1944, p. 1)

Note #5:

There have been many varieties of Quakers and there still are, even within individual meetings. Differences in religious experience do not prevent cooperation. Shared practice does not require a shared explanation of the practice; we just have to love each other as we love those who believe as we do. Common purposes do not require a common religious language; we can each speak and write as we are moved, responding to the essence of what we hear and read rather than to its specific form. (Cresson, 2009)

In our own lives and in our reading of Quaker history we encounter people living Quaker lives accompanied by a wide variety of personal religious experience. There are Quakers who are Christian, Buddhist and Jewish; evangelical, universalist, nontheist and nonChristian. There are Quakers who are quiet, active, rational, mystical, emotional, idealistic, wise and childlike. For me this is a joy to experience and a benefit to our Society.

Early Friends noticed the unity behind our apparent diversity:

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion, and when death takes off the mask, they will know one another though the diverse liveries they wear here make them strangers. (William Penn, 1693/2003)

And oh, how sweet and pleasant it is to the truly spiritual eye to see several sorts of believers, several forms of Christians in the school of Christ, every one learning their own lesson, performing their own peculiar service, and knowing, owning, and loving one another in their several places and different performances to their Master... For this is the true ground of love and unity, not that such a man walks and does just as I do, but because I feel the same Spirit and Life in him, not that such a man walks and does just as I do, but because I feel the same Spirit and Life in him, and that he walks in his rank, in his own order, in his proper way and place of subjection to that; and this is far more pleasing to me than if he walked just in that track wherein I walk. (Isaac Penington, 1681/1995)

Passionate literature about the variety of Friends was produced at the time of the reconciliation of the two Philadelphia Yearly Meetings, after 128 years of separation.

A new conviction is gaining ground nowadays regarding variety in religious faith and thought. In the nineteenth century devout people feared heresy and sought precise theological definitions...By the middle of the twentieth century a new approach to diversity in religious thought and practice appeared among devout worshipers of God....Differences serve a useful purpose in the economy of God. They teach men to love, to lay aside self-centered judgment, to approach opponents in the humility that characterized Jesus. Differences come to appear less important than imagined....‘the hour has come when God asks of Christians not an ecclesiastical or doctrinal uniformity, which is neither possible nor desirable, but unity in obedience and love.’ (George A. Walton, 1955)

Love, patience, and the sound Quaker determination to respect and appreciate each person and his contribution to the service of the Master can do much to dissolve conflicts for which no verbal solution is immediately apparent. It will help, in avoiding a greater schism following the reuniting of Friends in Philadelphia, if Friends in Philadelphia will manifest an appreciative awareness of other Friends who may express some essential truths in words other than those used in Philadelphia or who may contribute to the message of Quakerism some important emphases not adequately stressed in Philadelphia. (Richard R. Wood, 1955)

Henry Cadbury started trying to heal divisions in our Society as a Young Friend in 1913, and he continued doing so for 61 years. He left us several powerful statements about the beauty and challenge of Friends’ diversity. Here are two examples:

Some people suppose a certain religious faith – like belief in God, in future life, in the role of Jesus is essential. Experience shows devotion, sincerity, even saintliness can go along with more than one type of theological position. This is much like what Oliver Tomkins said at Oxford in '52 speaking on behalf of the World Council. ‘You Friends are a standing perplexity to other Christians, you enjoy the spirit of Christian life without the forms...that we have supposed essential.’ (Cadbury, 1962, p.4)

(P)resent-day Quakerism owes a special debt to those interpreters who do justice to more than one of its multiple strands, the mystical, the evangelical, the rational and the social....It would be a pity if the natural variety in Quakerism were artificially restrained. Even unconsciously we are subject to powerful tendencies to conform to a single standard in religion as well as in other ideologies and practices. If the role of Quakerism among the denominations is precisely one of enriching the variety and challenging their standards of uniformity, we ought by the same token to welcome variety within our own small body and ought to object to the impoverishing effect of attempting to get ourselves and our fellow Quakers into one mould. (Cadbury, 1957, pp. 47-8)

Is unity amidst theological diversity a departure from Quaker tradition? Yes and no. The approach described here fits well with much of what has gone before, and differs from some of it. Friends have always been changing and not changing. What were central tenets have given way for some Friends, tenets such as immortality, the Trinity, prohibitions against certain behavior, limits on whom we may marry – all this changed and yet the essentials of Quaker life continue. Our Society is specifically designed to allow change, for instance in the balance between the individual and the meeting community, participation of all in the ministry, the injunction to interpret what one reads and hears, continuing revelation, caution about words that divide what is whole, rejection of creeds, speaking with one's life, and control of the Society by monthly meetings rather than larger groups. The spirit of our Quaker message remains strong even as the letters change.

Unity can be based on shared practices. This isn't setting aside our beliefs, it is setting aside our concern about the differences in our beliefs. Uniting in practice means that by practicing together we become united. We learn to worship together. Clerks learn to sense oneness in the community even when it is produced by dissimilar individuals. The test is the song we sing together.

In the Religious Society of Friends we commit ourselves not to words but to a way. (The Yearly Meeting in Britain, 1995, p. 17)

After a long and difficult search for a path of one's own, it is hard to trust that other paths also serve, but with love in our hearts we discover that what we seek has many gates.

Rex Ambler pointed to the path to unity found by an emphasis on Quaker life:

I would suggest that Quakers ... try to define themselves and the movement of which they are a part in terms of their own distinctive way of speaking and way of doing things. They have started something new, which had not in this form existed before. And this new way of life, though it draws on many sources and influences, has an integrity of its own. As we know, or should know, from our own experience of the Society, it is held together in practice by a discipline of communal life. We have a discipline of silence, of collective decision-making, of attending to ministry and concern, of acting together, of simple and nonviolent lifestyle – and these different aspects of the discipline mutually support one another. It is this distinctive practice, I would say, that early Friends bequeathed to us, and which still now gives the clearest indication of what Quakerism is. (Ambler, 1994/2004)

I want to make a proposal. It will not provide us with all we need to say, but it will, I think, give us a starting point and it will point us in the right direction. My proposal is that we *recover the meaning of our distinctive practices*. If we have largely lost a distinctive way of speaking, we at least still have a distinctive set of practices. We still meet together in silence, we listen to one another without criticism, we wait for discernment in important decisions we make, we seek a common mind when we have decisions to make together, we act against violence without using violence ourselves, we refuse to give in to cynicism when we seek to make changes in the world. And we accept responsibility for one

another. These are all disciplines, or rather, aspects of one discipline for the conduct of our lives. And as a discipline these practices indicate more clearly than anything else what distinguishes Quakers from other religious groups, and they suggest, though not very clearly, what Quakers are positively committed to. Our first task, I want to suggest, is to find a way of *saying* what those practices mean. This at least gives us a focus and a basis in experience for saying what we have to say. But it is not just a practical convenience to focus on our practice. It is clear from our history that Quakers have chosen to express their faith mainly in a way of life. Their spirituality has always been a practical discipline, one that can be lived in the everyday world. So we can be thankful that this practical discipline has survived, at least in its formal structure. This no doubt is what in practice holds our meetings and Society together. It is also – whether we recognize it or not – what gives us our identity. But of course, without an account of what the discipline means, it can only be a vague and confused identity.” (Ambler, 1997, p. 373)

Richard Barnes, clerk of the Quaker Universalist Fellowship, called for unity based on our common practices:

Universalist Friends do not have a creed or uniform set of beliefs, but we do have a set of unique corporate spiritual practices for discerning spiritual guidance—silent meetings for worship and unprogrammed ministry, meetings for business, meetings for learning, worship sharing, clearness committees for personal concerns, and the personal and corporate responding to Queries. Now the question is not 'Are you faithful in your belief?' but 'Are you faithful in your spiritual practice?' (Barnes, 2003)

Unity comes about when we collectively commit ourselves to each other and to our common aspirations. We can disagree in our central religious beliefs and experience, even as we engage in religious practices that move us toward our common purposes. Our purposes are what we work for, and the purpose of a Quaker practice is the life it leads us to. Jesse Holmes, a founder of AFSC and clerk of the Progressive Friends Meeting at Longwood, Pennsylvania, wrote:

It is a Society of *Friends*. Friends claim no authority but owe each other friendliness...Our unity consists in having a common purpose, not a common creed." (Holmes, 1928/1992, p. 22)

Within our Society different meetings have adopted different practices. We differ in how we worship, and conduct business, and accept members and so on. An array of religious experience is demonstrated across the branches of our Society. This is good. Variety of practice across the Society is consistent with cooperation in practice within particular meetings.

Unity is learned, and we need to become better at it. One issue we need to consider is how we talk with each other. Let speakers speak and listeners translate. There is no need to bite ones tongue to avoid offending each other. We can be enthusiastic in expressing ourselves in our own particular religious languages without seeming to proselytize because

we encourage others to do likewise. Political correctness is important outside the meeting community but inside, we rely on trust. (There are a few exceptions as with young people and visitors who don't know about translation.) It helps to respond to where the message comes from and where it is going. We need to support each other when we disagree just as we do when we agree.

Being comfortable with our diversity allows each of us to speak as we are moved without concern that it will be viewed as criticizing the views of others or as proselytizing for one's own views.

Note #6:

Lives can stand in for beliefs. To find our collective identity as Quakers we can look to our shared lives. Membership does not have to signify that we hold the same beliefs but can simply be a recognition of the place of the meeting in the life of the individual, and of the individual in the life of the meeting. (Cresson, 2009)

Let your lives speak! (George Fox, 1652; quoted in Bacon, 1987, p. 218)

Men are to be judged by their likeness to Christ, rather than their notions of Christ. (William Penn, quoted by Lucretia Mott in Bacon, 1999, p. 43)

(T)he best way of advertising any ideal is to wrap it up in a person, to incarnate it. Vocal or verbal Quakerism cannot compete with incarnate Quakerism. (Cadbury, 1964, p. 3)

What they are describing is a religion of daily life:

“(M)y own religion, as nearly as I can tell,...is mainly neither emotional nor rational but expresses itself habitually or occasionally in action. I need not retail the reasons that have led me to this emphasis in religion. It is one part of our Quaker tradition that ‘religion is a way of life.’ We think sometimes that the best way to know religion is to see a religious personality in action. The latest and best form of the Discipline of the Society of Friends consists not of a statement of faith but merely of quotations of different individuals about their own religious experience. If you know John Woolman’s *Journal* you will know what I mean by a religious personality in action...(T)he amazing revelation which he gives is that of a sensitive conscience feeling its course in a series of soul-searching problems – public problems that he felt must be personally decided. Such forms of religion do not often get recorded, but they are none the less real and important. As we observe such people we see that their behavior both habitual and in conscious crises is the natural expression of a character. And perhaps what they do speaks louder than any words.” (Cadbury, 1936/2000, pp. 27-28)

To call the set of a man's life his religion no doubt seems a great comedown. But when a man deals religiously with issues that others settle in other ways, in

fact takes seriously the religious implications of behavior both individual and collective, tries to practice fully the standards that conventional religion officially endorses, and to make his whole life consistent if not conscious, he is in my opinion practicing religion as much as the one who skillfully builds the dialectic structure of a well rounded theology or as the man who through public and private devotion lives in that mystical drama of the religious imagination. (Cadbury, 1936/2000, pp. 28-29)

Our identity will be found in the life we share. It may seem unlikely at first that a group of dissimilar people can be united. Isn't the word "identical" the root of the word "identity"? Identity of belief is the usual path to religious unity, birds of a feather flocking together. Quaker unity, however, is not so limited. David Boulton addressed this:

What I am saying is this: The search for doctrinal unity, for Truth with a capital T, is pointless because it will be fruitless. If earlier Quaker generations cobbled together a one Truth they could witness to, it was a Truth which could be maintained only by discipline, and which changed subtly from generation to generation. Quakers today are, or should be, free from the tyranny of that kind of Truth: true doctrine. The spirit leads us in different directions, because our faith is experiential, and our experiences, backgrounds, temperaments, capacities differ widely. The spirit which leads us into all truths – there are a lot of them, and they never stay the same – has itself become diverse, experimental, exploratory, for we have begun to understand that this spirit is not some independent entity, external to ourselves, but one that lives and moves and has its being in the infinite diversity of our human consciousness.

Does this mean, then that there can never be any basis whatever for any kind of Quaker unity? Surely not. It simply means that we do not need doctrinal unity or faith in a doctrinal Truth. Our unity, our group or subculture identity, depends on something different. I believe that the 'something different' is the shared sense of belonging to a particular tradition, focused on the manner in which Quakers choose to meet for worship, meditation or contemplation – call it what we will. Quakers in Britain are people who choose to meet in this particular unprogrammed way, people whose current needs, preferences, temperaments lead them to get something out of, and hopefully put something into, this particular (and rather arcane) ritual. That, and nothing more (but nothing less), is the basis of our unity. That is our bottom line. (Boulton, 1998)

The Quaker membership process can be an effort to reach clearness about whether the step is appropriate for the applicant and the meeting. The test can be how we are doing together. Surprisingly, this was the practice of early Friends:

At a recent lecture on William Penn even the Friends who were present were surprised to hear it said that Penn's name is not found on any list of Monthly Meeting members. This is strictly true, for the simple reason that membership in the Society of Friends as we know it today was not recorded until 1737. For all early friends membership consisted in something other than being on the Meeting's books. Births, deaths, and marriages were early recorded, for the sake

of the individual, not of the Meeting; but there was no listing of members. For many years most Friends were convinced Friends, not birthright; but there was no application for membership or admission of members. Of course, the reality of their Quakerism showed in their life and character.” (Cadbury, 1957/1972)

I feel a great nostalgia for the days when there was no such thing as formal membership in the Society of Friends, (and) no terms of admission to haggle about: you either were or were not a Friend, and whether you were or were not depended on what you did.” (Cadbury, 1966, p. 5)

This approach is seen in the membership sections of the following yearly meeting Disciplines:

Are you comfortable with a Society whose unity of spirit coexists with a diversity of beliefs? Are you prepared to join a Meeting family which includes people whose perspectives may differ considerably from yours? (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997/2001, p. 36)

Friends accept into active membership those whose declarations and ways of life manifest such unity with Friends’ views and practices that they may be expected to enter fully into religious fellowship with the meeting. (New York Yearly Meeting, 1998, p. 82)

Membership includes a willingness to live in spiritual unity with other members of the Religious Society of Friends. Members are expected to participate in communal worship, to share in the work and service of the Society, and to live in harmony with its basic beliefs and practices. (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997/2001, p. 34)

Remember that moral and spiritual achievement is not what is required in an applicant: sincerity of purpose is. Complete agreement with all our testimonies is not necessary. It is important for the life of the Society that the applicant is broadly in unity with the views and practices of Friends. (The Yearly Meeting in Britain, 1995, #11.17)

Membership in the Society of Friends should be an outward sign of an inward commitment to the Gospel of Love and of a fundamental unity with the aspirations of the Society. (Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends (Conservative), 1974, p. 33)

The word “unity” in each of these statements shows that unity is at the heart of membership. I expect Friends who wrote these passages appreciated the similarity of unity in the context of Quaker membership and unity in the context of Quaker business, but it was a long time before I saw it.

Note #7:

All this seems paradoxical because we have thought of unity of belief as the path to unity of action, but Quakers know that unity does not require unanimity. Quaker unity is larger than that. (Cresson, 2009)

In the early years of our Society, beliefs often were not the source of action. Instead, faith derived from action that Friends were powerfully called to take.

Ever since its earliest days Quakerism has...not depended on definition and formulation. These have followed *ex post facto*. They are not blueprints of a course of development to be recommended. They are analysis of the deposits of experience. (Cadbury, 1959, p. 7)

The real roots of Quaker concern are psychological rather than logical. This is only another way of saying they are religious rather than theological. They involve a sense of the relevance of religion to all life. (Cadbury, 1954, p. 5)

I realized that in trying to understand what (early Friends) said and did I had to give up the idea that what held it all together was some *idea*! I had been unable to find any belief that early Quakers held in common as the basis for their faith, not even the belief that there was 'that of God' in everyone. To them 'that of God' in people represented not a belief but an experience, the experience of light within themselves in the first instance, and then an experience of the divine source in others as they opened their hearts to them. So the basis of early Quaker faith and life was something very immediate, personal and practical. They turned in meditation to the divine source of life within them and then lived their lives simply in response to that. This was not a belief but a practice, and it was surprisingly simple." (Rex Ambler, 2002, pp. 14-15)

When the two Philadelphia Yearly Meetings came into unity after so many years apart, Howard Brinton, founder of the Pendle Hill Quaker Study Center, wrote about worship when people differ:

The history of all religions indicates that religion is more what it does than what it thinks. People who differ in their thinking can worship together in harmony, if the manner of worship is congenial to all. At the time of Christ, for example, a Jew might be an atheist; he might be a Platonist; he might have one of many types of religious philosophy. But as a Jew his membership was defined by his practices rather than by his opinions. This seems to be true in most religions....Religion is more a matter of experience and practice than of thought. Religion begins in experience; systematic thought comes later....So there is no need for us to feel baffled by the variety of opinions among us." (Brinton, 1954)

Douglas Steere described four ways opposing religions can interact, and his words also apply in other contexts:

(The) first relation could be that of attempting to collapse or to destroy the rival religion...The second is to merge with it in some form of syncretism. The third is a relationship of coexistence in which each religion agrees to honor the other and so respect its integrity that it will make no attempt whatever to challenge it or to seek to alter the allegiance of its members. The fourth is a relationship of what I would call 'mutual irradiation' in which each is willing to expose itself with great openness to the inward message of the other, as well as to share its own experience, and to trust that whatever is the truth in each experience will irradiate and deepen the experience of the other. (Steere, 1971, pp. 7-8)

The approach to unity I seek is relevant in any situation where people of different beliefs come together. This can be in a family or meeting, in larger Quaker groups such as yearly meetings, between branches of our Society, and between different religions. All these are relations between people and unity among people can be based on the lives they share when they come together. This will vary according to the circumstance: sharing membership in a meeting is not the same as sharing attendance at a conference, and so on.

Faith based action does not require identical faiths. Many faiths can support the same action, and they often do. In any case, who is to say whether our faiths really are significantly different? Is God limited to giving messages to those who proclaim particular beliefs? The call to action can take many forms, and we are fortunate this is so.

Friends' decision-making is rooted in the spiritual oneness of a religious community....Our search is for unity, not unanimity. (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997, p. 21-2)

We [in Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative)] have a long tradition of differences, and we know they do not preclude our finding unity with the Divine Spirit, which we call God. It is not necessary that we all agree, and we do not push for that agreement. Kindness, our tradition of making room for others, and a tendency to avoid potentially divisive issues restrain us. We take what we have to meeting for worship, offering it as best we can as part of our corporate gift to the Spirit. We are who we are, without need for everyone to be the same. Our unity is with God, and in our efforts to be in that unity, we hold the differences among us as gently as we can. Some days we do better than others. This is what our Yearly Meeting and its history give us. We are grateful. (Marsh, 2008, p. 150)

Note #8:

The embrace of religious diversity in our midst can be our gift to the world around us where differences in belief matter so much. Let us be patterns of living together and loving each other, differences and all. Let us openly and joyfully celebrate our peculiar combination of Quaker diversity and Quaker unity. (Cresson, 2009)

Many groups are passionately united and yet religiously diverse, such as families and musical ensembles and social action coalitions – and friendships. Most of us have

experienced such unity outside the Quaker world and within it to, as in a meeting for worship at a time when our meeting was fundamentally divided over an important issue. Love does overcome differences.

Happily, the search for unity during meeting for worship for attention to business is a practice widely accepted in our Society. But will we find unity? The best way to find out whether people who differ in religious views can unite in a practice is to try and see. Let our best efforts answer our questions.

I am eager to see Friends meetings actively embrace diversity rather than simply accept it. Let us ask each other about our religious experiences, and study how to better support each other and learn from each other. I hope meetings will study the possibilities of Quaker unity based on our traditional understanding of that word, and I hope some will be moved to declare what they find to the world.

Arthur Morgan wanted us to reach out from our meetings. He was concerned about relations between religions but his words apply to relations among members of a meeting or a family, or in schools or work situations or anywhere else. In 1953 he wrote:

In the original sense of the word we should be evangelists, carriers of the good news. And what is the 'good news'? Is it not that we are brothers and sisters, with an equality of status in our search for a good way of life, and that none of us can claim to have 'the only true faith' which others must accept in order to enter into that fellowship of life and hope? It seems to me that the term 'quietism' would be more appropriate to those who would withdraw or remain withdrawn in limited associations of belief while the world is anxiously searching for the grounds of unity. Should Quakers receive the Good Samaritan into membership? Yes, if his or her life is consistent with the action in the parable. And in many cases the life is consistent, whether it be the life of Samaritan, Moslem, Buddhist, Confucian or 'pagan' animist in Africa. (Morgan, 1954/1998)

Could some units of the Society of Friends, such as the Lake Erie Association, take the position that they wish to be a fellowship of sincere searchers for the truth, including those of any compatible religious fellowship? I suggest the adoption of a minute or a resolution of the following import...: Many men and women of many faiths have shared in the search for truth and love and human brotherhood. Each faith has helped its sincere followers in that search. Each faith has something to learn from the others, and something to give. The Lake Erie Association of Friends desires to be a unit of such a brotherhood, and welcomes into its membership and to its meetings all sincere, concerned seekers whose ways of life and ethical standards and practices are compatible with its own. Also, the Lake Erie Association of Friends would welcome affiliation with other fellowships of sincere seekers, whatever may be their religious origin or affiliation. (Morgan, 1953, p. 564)

Tim Miles called on us to go beyond what we have accomplished so far, to ensure that all are positively welcomed in our meetings, and to do this explicitly rather than just

implicitly. He foresaw a new stage in the Quaker journey, a stage in which a variety of views are present and the variety is celebrated. He wrote:

In effect, then, I am suggesting to Friends that they should move further in the direction of universalism by being open to images and parables of all kinds. I would emphasize that this is not to propose a novelty. It is rather to invite Friends to take account explicitly of ideas which are already implicit in their present practices....A particular strength of Quakerism has been its ability to adapt to changing times without losing the insights which it has gained from the past. One of the striking changes that has taken place over the last century is that there is now vastly more opportunity for people with different backgrounds to meet and exchange ideas; and, this being so, it would be sad if those brought up in Jewish, Buddhist, Moslem or other traditions – and indeed those with no religious upbringing of any kind – were excluded at the outset from full participation in the affairs of the Society. I would suggest that further thought be given to ways of ensuring that such people are positively *welcomed* into the Society. No one is being asked to *give up* any cherished conviction: those who wish to retain traditional Christian beliefs are in no way being discouraged from doing so; and, indeed, for many people this may be the right and only road to travel. I hope, however, that such people will be willing to worship *alongside* those who – if they break the silence at all – might choose to use somewhat different forms of language. One could perhaps say that, in an important sense, universalism comes 'not to destroy...but to fulfil' [Matthew v, 17]. We should see it not as an -ism which asserts that rival -isms are false but rather as a way of life in which there is commitment to take seriously religious beliefs of all kinds. The commitment is not to exclusiveness but to willingness to listen. As the other -isms, the name is relatively unimportant; what is important is the willingness to make this kind of commitment." (Miles, 1985/1994)

In 1991 Dan Seeger called our attention to the way opening before us:

Perhaps it is given to us to show how a great people can be gathered into a unified and loving community while respecting, and even celebrating, its individual members' distinctiveness. But one thing is certain – we Friends cannot preach reconciliation in the world at large unless we ourselves are reconciled. (Seeger, 1991, p. 7)

We can end our study of unity where George Fox began:

Therefore, in the Light wait, where unity is. (George Fox quoted in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997/2001)

References

Anonymous (date?). *Quaker Business Method: An Introduction*, Australia. On the internet at http://www.quakers.org.au/files/pamphlets/qBusinessMethod1_draft.pdf

Ambler, Rex (1994). *The End of Words*, London: Quaker Home Service. Reprinted as *The End of Words: Issues in Contemporary Quaker Theology, with Creeds and the Search for Unity*. London: Quaker Books, 2004.

..... (2002). *Light to live by: an exploration in Quaker spirituality*, London: Quaker Books.

..... (1997). "Quaker Identity: Anything Goes?", *The Friends Quarterly* 31(8) October 1997, pp. 371-380.

Bacon, Margaret Hope (1987). *Let This Life Speak: The Legacy of Henry Joel Cadbury*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

..... (1999). *Valiant Friend: The Life of Lucretia Mott*, 2nd Ed. Philadelphia: Friends General Conference.

Barnes, Richard (2003). "From the Clerk." *Universalist Friends*, Fall-Winter, #39.

Boulton, David (1998). "The Diversity of Truth" in *Searching the Depths: Essays on Being a Quaker Today* by Harvey Gillman and Alastair Heron. London: Quaker Home Service, pp. 27-33.

Brinton, Howard (1952). *Friends for 300 Years*. NY: Harper & Brothers.

..... (1954). "The Kind of Paper We Want." *The Friend*, December 23, 1954, p. 197.

Cadbury, Henry J. (1936/2000). "My Personal Religion" (Talk at the Harvard Divinity School). *Universalist Friends*, No. 35 (Fall-Winter 2000): 22-31, with corrections in No. 36: 18.

..... (1944). *My Personal Religious Convictions And Their Relation To My Work*. (Notes for talk at Harvard Divinity School). Unpublished manuscript.

..... (1954). *The Basis of Quaker Political Concern* (Notes for talk at FCNL in Washington). Unpublished manuscript. Published version (1954): *The Basis of Quaker Political Concern*. Washington DC: Friends Committee on National Legislation.

..... (1957). *Quakerism and Early Christianity* (Swarthmore Lecture). London: Allen & Unwin.

..... (1957/1972). "Evidence of Membership, Then and Now." *Friends Journal*, 3 (10), 150-151; reprinted in *Quaker Heritage: Letters from the Quaker Past*. Norwalk, CN: Silvermine Publishers, 1972, pp.223-4).

..... (1959). *The Character of A Quaker* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet #103). Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill.

..... (1962). *(Untitled)*. (Notes for talk at Doylestown Monthly Meeting). Unpublished manuscript.

..... (1964). "Vital Issues for Friends Today." *Canadian Friend*, 60, June-July, (3): 3-4; quoted in *Friends Journal* (January 2001), 47(1), back cover.

..... (1966). "Quakerism and/or Christianity." *Friends Bulletin*, 35(4), 1-10.

Cresson, Os (2009). "On Quaker Unity." *Friends Journal*, July, 55(7): 5.

Holliday, Marsha D. () *Silent Worship and Quaker Values*, pamphlet.

Holmes, Jesse (1928/1992). "To the Scientifically-Minded." *Friends Intelligencer*, 85(6): 103-104; reprinted in *Friends Journal*, (1992) 38(6): 22-23.

Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends (Conservative) (1974). *Discipline*. Des Moines IA: (author).

Marsh, Caroline S. (2008). *Friends of Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative): Who We Are and What That Might Mean*. Unpublished thesis, Earlham School of Religion, Richmond, Indiana.

- Miles, Tim (1985/1994). *Towards Universalism*. Quaker Universalist Group pamphlet #7, London: QUG, 1985, reprinted 1994; on the web at www.qug.org.uk/MILES.pdf .
- Moore, John M., ed. (1981). *Friends in the Delaware Valley: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 1681-1981*. Haverford, PA: Friends Historical Association.
- Morgan, Arthur (1953). "Universal Brotherhood in Religion." *Friends Intelligencer*, Tenth Month 17, pp. 558 & 564.
- (1954/1998). *Should Quakers Receive the Good Samaritan Into Their Membership?* Talk given at Shrewsbury and Plainfield Half-Yearly Meeting, March 27, 1954; published by Quaker Universalist Fellowship, 1998).
- New York Yearly Meeting (1998). *Faith and Practice*. New York: (author).
- Penington, Isaac (1681, 1995). *The Works of Isaac Penington: A Minister of the Gospel in the Society of Friends: Including His Collected Letters*, Vol. 1. Glenside PA: Quaker Heritage Press.
- Penn, William (1693/2003). *Some Fruits of Solitude: Wise Sayings on the Conduct of Human Life*. Ed. By Eric K. Taylor. Scottdale PA: Herald Press.
- Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (1997/2001). *Faith and Practice*. Philadelphia: (author).
- Seeger, Daniel A. (1991). *Sharing Our Faith: Christian and Universalist Aspects of Friends Spiritual Experience*. Philadelphia: Friends General Conference.
- Steele, Douglas (1971). *Mutual Irradiation: A Quaker View of Ecumenism*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #175, Wallingford PA: Pendle Hill Publications.
- Walton, George A. (1955). "The Twentieth-Century Attitude toward Diversity in Religion," *Friends Journal*, August 27, pp. 132-3.
- Wood, Richard R. (1955). "After Merger," *The Friend*, February 17, p. 265.
- The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain (1995). *Quaker Faith and Practice: The book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*. London: (author).