

JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURE

1998

EMBRACED BY OTHER SELVES

**Enriching personal nature
through group interaction.**

Charles Stevenson.

The James Backhouse Lectures

This is one of a series of Lectures instituted by Australia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends on the occasion of the establishment of that Yearly Meeting in 1964.

It was delivered in Perth on 13 January 1998, during the annual meeting of the Society.

James Backhouse was an English Friend who visited Australia from 1832 to 1838. He and his companion, George Washington Walker, travelled widely but spent most of their time in Tasmania. It was through their visit that Quaker Meetings were first established in Australia.

The two men had access to individual people with authority in the young colonies, and had influence in the British Parliament and social reform movement. In painstaking reports and personal letters to such people, they made practical suggestions and urged legislative action on penal reform, on land rights, and the treatment of Aborigines, and on the rum trade. James Backhouse was a botanist and naturalist. He made careful observations and published full accounts of what he saw, in addition to encouraging Friends and following deep concern for the convicts and the Aborigines that had brought him to Australia.

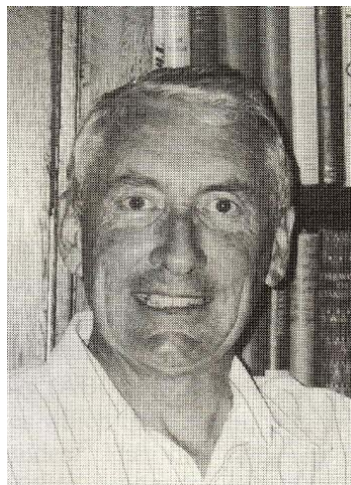
Australian Friends hope that this series of Lectures will bring fresh insights into truth, often with reference to the needs and aspirations of Australian Quakerism.

Patricia Firkin
Presiding, Clerk
Australia Yearly Meeting

About the Author

Charles Stevenson began attending Quaker Meetings in Melbourne during that city's festive Olympic year of 1956. He was a high school teacher by profession. He has written two histories: *With Unhurried Pace* about Friends in Australia, and *The Millionth Snowflake* about Friends in South Australia. He edited *As the Seed Grows, Essays in Australian Quaker Thought*.

Having moved to South Australia he has twice served as Regional Meeting clerk. Together with his wife, Elizabeth, whom he married in 1970, he was joint Editor of *the Australian Friend* 1989-1995. He attends the Eastern Suburbs Meeting in Adelaide and believes it is an ideal Quaker Meeting.



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ISBN 0-646-34473-0

Produced by Australia Yearly Meeting of
The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Australia Incorporated

Published by the Backhouse Lecture Committee
Box 119, North Hobart, Tasmania 7002

Printed by K.B. Printing Services Pty Ltd., Edwardstown, S.A.

FOR THE MYSTERY OF HUMAN LIFE IS NOT
ONLY IN LIVING, BUT IN KNOWING WHY
ONE LIVES.

The Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*
by Dostoyevski.

NOTE.

Society at large is one of the main preoccupations of Quakers. They are and always have been engaged in efforts to improve- society: in efforts to avert war, to help others to help themselves, to treat all human beings with respect. Friends 'Holy Experiment', the establishment of Pennsylvania, recognised a diversity of culture within the State.

The word *community* has been used in this lecture in the sense of a body of people who together with other communities make up society at large. The word *group* is used as a portion of people within a given community. We are not referring to an utopian or intentional community which has separated from the world to remain untainted.

About this lecture

We are reminded in this lecture that our group structure, while strong and vital in its central core, is also, like our precious Earth, fragile and vulnerable and must be carefully tended and nurtured. The warring claims of the individual and the group can bring about damage to the whole fabric. Potential threats to harmony are canvassed. Resources unique to Quakers are emphasised - our precious, age-old heritage of silent worship, both individual and corporate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

**The woodcut on page 11 is by Max Raupach,
especially designed for this lecture.**

BACKGROUND

*Dear Tax Computer, I am tax file number XXB2397,
otherwise known as Daniel Charles Stevenson ...*

yours truly,

XXB2397

- a protest against depersonalisation, this note was written by my son to the Australian Taxation Office, signing himself by his tax file number. As we all know, Australian society is in danger of reducing individuals to a statistic. Even a school child is now 'a client' according to the Education Department. In a bureaucratic dominated environment, communities such as the Religious Society of Friends are all the more urgently needed, for a basic human need is for a community where each individual person is a living part of the group. A Friend in our Meeting, Barbara. Whitney, said in meeting for worship: "I am so happy to be coming to Meeting this morning - to be amongst Friends whom I love and revere. The Meeting is my family."

This evening I want to talk about those things that bind us together "in the things that are eternal," those things that make us so happy to come to Meeting. I want to talk about how the group enhances individuality: that a community such as the Religious Society of Friends, which esteems every human being as having 'that of God' within, particularly enriches the individual through a corporate identity, especially in the meeting for worship. I shall say something about the bewilderment of our present age, the yearning to belong, the need to look both inwardly at ourselves, and outwardly, and about our individual responsibility. I want to talk about how the Quaker rediscovery of silence gives a deeper meaning to our interaction. I need to talk, too, about when the axewielder comes to the beautiful tree of our Quaker community and destroys its symmetry - when things fall apart.

Fundamentally we are social beings. Gregarious much more than we are aware, our belonging to social groups is an inescapable and fulfilling part of life. We must come to terms with this need for community and learn how to cope in

group inter-relationships before we can vitalise our personal nature. I am the vine, ye are the branches," said Jesus.

I want to use the ancient oak tree at the bottom of Doongalla Road where I lived as a boy as a metaphor to describe society. Like a sovereign nation-state the oak tree consists of many branches - like our human communities whether they be social, political, sporting ... or religious. On the twigs we individuals are the leaves - every one different, unrepeatable, yet, paradoxically, very similar. I want to emphasise that each part is entirely different - the leaf, the branch and the tree with its sturdy trunk. Yet, all parts are essential to the whole. A tree represents endurance, security, beauty and strength. And the quiet water of Dandenong Creek that flowed beside the oak tree was the source of the consciousness necessary for the whole structure to survive.

What I am saying about the intertwining of the group community and the individual was aptly written by John Donne (and let us not stumble on the sexist language of 1624):

*No man is an Island, entire of it self.
Any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in Mankind;
And therefore never send to know
for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee*¹

I can best explain what I want to say by my childhood experience. We lived on the edge of the forest where the side of Mount Dandenong towered blue and sometimes lilac, where boronia scented the bush. One knew instinctively what Isaiah meant when he wrote about God "Who hath ... weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance." It was marvellously beautiful everywhere. On a sunny day peace dwelt in our valley. Yet, the forest was only reached after negotiating the oozing cow dung by the '70 acre' paddock gates, and tearing one's legs against huge blackberry brambles. Sometimes the beauty was transformed into the fury of bushfire, and once the bush showed its treachery: on a day before Christmas a falling branch killed a young father. The bush shadows, where delicate orchids nestled, looked sinister that day.

The condition of the human world was encapsulated here at this juvenile detention centre at Bayswater, run by Christians - where my parents worked, and

where we lived. Humanity was exactly like the bush, with its beauty but also its tragedy - when nobility of idea was wrecked by human frailty. It was not so much the delinquency of Melbourne's teenage boy criminals who were sentenced to Bayswater that troubled me - there was something more pathetic about those children of a rather deprived population. What troubled me deeply was those Christians, dedicated to a professed life of service and devotion to God, who had appalling difficulty in practising their high ideals. I saw their religion usurped by the pretender, the would-be sincere Christian overwhelmed by the savagery lurking within his or her own nature. These Christians, individually fine men and women, squabbled dreadfully among themselves. I witnessed their obsession with punishment, both physical and verbal. Living the Christian life was as difficult indeed as the camel going through 'the Eye of the Needle' gate into Jerusalem. You couldn't reach the beauty without passing through the dung.

To escape the shouting, the anger, the punishments that shattered the beauty of the valley, I sometimes wandered deep into the forest on the side of Mount Dandenong to Sir Matthew Davies' long overgrown and forgotten garden of blue and pink hydrangeas, wild red and white camellia trees, where a lyrebird might dash out of the tangles.

I can only speak with compassion for those Christians because in my own journey through life, despite their cautionary example, I wonder whether I fared much better, in dealing with those primitive instincts that lie behind respectability. 'Today thou confessest thy, sins wad tomorrow thou committest the very same,' wrote Thomas A Kempis six hundred years ago. Oh! the slowness by which we become wise.

This boyhood experience has caused me long to ponder the relationship of the individual and the community. How extraordinarily like the bush was the human condition: beauty abounded everywhere; but the furious storm brought destruction. Yet, there are always new green and delicate shoots.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his play *Huis Clos* offers one explanation.. *L'enfer, c'est les autres* - "Hell is other people," he says - in the sense that others inflict agony and soul-searching cri the individual. Others are a mirror of our self. the other person "reveals to me an aspect of myself of which I can have no knowledge without the other person's judgment".² We can only truly know ourselves by perceiving what others think of us. Sartre highlights the fact that society has a powerful and covert influence in shaping the individual. Society is integral to our individuality. It is an inescapable circumstance of life.

BEWILDERED AND LOST

As individuals we are easily bewildered and lost in our late twentieth century society. We are trapped: society bestows many benefits; yet it can crush our humanity. The individual is respected and laws have been enacted to assure that this is so, but nevertheless we are dehumanised - by economic rationalism, by the trauma of ostracism. We are burdened by fragmented loyalties, and by straining after perfection in a world of muddle. We face continual change. We become different beings in the mass group, and we all belong to subcultures of communities each with its flaws as well as its strengths. Perhaps this has always been the case. It seems to have been for Matthew Arnold:

*And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*³

For a time the postmodern social trend reinforced individualisation. Tolerance, and liberal attitudes, replaced old prohibitions such as 'six o'clock closing' (of hotels), and 'Sunday observance' (which meant no entertainment). The State has been increasingly aware of the rights of the individual especially in social security areas, harassment and domestic violence issues. There is the office of the Commissioner for Equal Opportunity, Consumer Protection, Crisis Counselling, Anti -Discrimination Acts, various appeal tribunals, assault reporting units, mortgage relief . . . the list goes on. Certainly our life styles have increasingly come to terms with a wide diversity of behaviour and tolerance of a variety of values. Society is much more sensitive to feminist issues, to the rights of lesbians and gays, and the rights of children. A program has been established in schools called the 'Protective Behaviour Program'. its lynch pin is the statement: "Everyone has a right to feel safe all the time." *Everyone* - children. . . adults.

Yet, in this apparently enlightened environment how is it that violent anti-racial attitudes have surfaced so menacingly? How is it that the unemployed are supposed to owe a debt to society?

Let's do a somersault and view our Australian society from a different perspective. We live in an era of the new simplistic god of economic rationalism which has swept the Western World in the past two decades - some say we live no longer in a society, but in an Economy. While we enjoy civil liberties, there is chilling dehumanisation by cost-effectiveness, strategic plans, performance indicators, and profits. Economic rationalism has savaged the public sector with its restructuring, separation packages, and privatisation. The private sector has also suffered. How much is unemployment the outcome of greed for profits and dividends? In conditions of gross material inequality equality of opportunity is a sham: real opportunities remain starkly unequal," says Jonathan Dale, the 1996 Swarthmore Lecturer.⁴ Ours is an increasingly aggressive society, full of distrust. Individuals have been made so aware of their fights that service-providers, especially doctors, school teachers and the police, are increasingly vulnerable to court action and investigation. How safe does this make our society? Can the human being continue to evolve in such an environment? A Melbourne Friend psychiatrist has said that the two most stressed groups of people that he meets in his profession are members of the police force and school teachers.⁵ Organisation is still with us, and still pervasive in its demands.

Ostracism remains one of the most potent assaults on an individual - nothing so numbs the mind and deadens natural fervour for life. With the disappearance of trust, or love, what was once hallowed and satisfying, can become sterile and sour. The savour goes from the taste. To be rejected, to be regarded as a second rate citizen reduces one's self-esteem and self-confidence, and it can create traumas that trick our judgment. I have heard many Friends speak with thankfulness for the warmth and friendship awaiting them in the Society of Friends, a community which believes in the dignity and worth of every individual. Whatever their race or sexual orientation, these Friends found a secure haven of respect for them as *persons*.

Equally as serious as ostracism is industrialised urban society's contempt for the environment. The implications of this alienation from the environment are beyond the scope of this lecture; but it needs brief mention. Love for the earth cannot be neglected for it fulfils a basic human need: "Dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return," A longing for the outback wilderness invariably sweeps over us amid the fumes and congestion of traffic pile-ups, electricity wires and tiled roofs our only panorama. In the air-conditioned office, far from any window, we sigh for the fresh air of the wilderness and the breezes of the ocean. We find solace in our backyard gardens from the frenzy of lurid advertising in supermarkets and shopping 'cities'. From our ordinariness in jostling crowds we sense our true

identity among the trees, the wildlife, and the earth itself. Some connectedness pulses through our veins. I have seen this happen at Bayswater amongst delinquent boys sent from the courts. Removal from the narrow streets and squalid housing of an inner suburb where every aspect of life is human-created, these youths have found purpose in working among the pigs, in the stables, with the dairy herd, and especially in gathering hay onto carts on long summer evenings.

One of the most intractable difficulties of life is change: the accustomed things are not going to be there forever. Relationships, routine, the *status quo* will not always be the same, nor viewed from the same perspective. In my daughter's room hangs a crystal, angled to catch the light. Depending on the moment, one may view a flash of red light, or blue, or green – but it also depends on the angle of the observer: a different stand, a different coloured light. This crystal encapsulates the whole paradox of change.

I like the attitude expressed by Peter Robinson:

*Embrace this moment and move on. We can only live in this moment. It is in this moment that God is with us, whether it is a moment of joy or a moment of agony; a moment of light or darkness; whether at rest, work or play, alone or in company.*⁶

I became strikingly aware of the fleeting aspect of life on the occasion of our 25th wedding anniversary. On looking at our wedding cards, found deep in an old tin trunk, we were startled to realise how very few of those Friends who made up the Adelaide Friends Meeting 25 years ago are left now. The Meeting is largely peopled by newer members. Yet, it is still the same Friends Meeting. It still holds to the same assumptions and truth that inspired those who went before. It has also been influenced by events, both internally within the group, and in society at large. We adapt to change constantly, subtly, and much more frequently than we are aware.

I have changed. I am not the same person that I was when I married. I have been enlarged by new ideas, new inspiration, more experience, and, hopefully, more wisdom. Yet, I am biologically the same person, though physically 25 years older. I have been shaped by time, and shaken into place by circumstances: the joys and the sorrows, the successes and mistakes, by love and forgiveness, by friendship and hate.



The world is not the same place that it was 25 years ago. It has changed its perceptions and priorities. It is governed by new insights. Nations are now outspokenly anti-nuclear bomb testing. The cold war confrontation has collapsed. We have AIDS. Domestic violence is no longer something that we pretended did not exist. Like our Australian kangaroo, which cannot jump backwards, the world can only have meaning if it goes forward.

We continually discard outworn conceptions. We know what George Fox meant when he said "This I knew experimentally". My son startled me when he told me that our 25 years of marriage represented roughly one-eighth of the history of European settlement in Australia! Put into a fraction, this puts 25 years into stark reality. How much extraordinary change occurs in so short a time!

Some change is almost more than one can bear and there are those who cannot adapt to change. They want the world and everyone of us to accept their rigidity. We all know that such people are in a crisis situation and can cause untold difficulties for a community group. Instead of meeting the challenge, they are frightened. . . bewildered and lost.

Nor is this all. There are also the demands, twisted logic, anomalies and paradoxes of life. As if doubts and uncertainty were not enough, institutionalised society demands divided loyalties. Society is something bigger than the sum of its atomised human individual parts. It creates a clash of fragmented loyalties, compromise with 'the' world, yet rejecting so many of 'the' world's values: aggression, greed, economic inequality ...

The confusion caused by society's conflicts is especially distressing if we strain after perfection, if we are burdened by management obsession for 'performance' and 'results'. Our tidy minds like and expect organised routine. Yet, society isn't so tidily organised. In her Boyer Lectures Eva Cox mentions 'muddling through' as a theory of social change.⁷ Such a theory immediately explains some national issues where competing ideologies kindle new directions. It is all clouded by the media out for a sensational headline, and political embellishment. History contains muddle. Yet, in the overview of centuries, society works itself out of the morass of confusion towards something better.

Muddling through also explains the individual experience. In his novel *Maurice* where a main theme is the muddle of the individual mind, E.M. Forster says: "He seemed a bundle of voices ... and now he could hear them quarrelling inside him." ⁸ Isn't this the universal experience? There are undercurrents always working just under the surface of our mind. We remember only snippets. So-called trivial happenings, we find, like seedlings, suddenly emerge as flowers to make a bright new garden of bloom. It is not always the one clear message that stimulates our vision. Something - our spiritual nature, perhaps - lies dormant within, waiting to be set off, and when it does it can charge our lives with new passion or a new outlook, like George Fox: "When I heard it my heart did leap for joy." Through long and tortuous questioning and appraisal of life's vicissitudes, we suddenly arrive.

We are bewildered and lost no more. We have found that quality missing in our lives. Innately we have known that there is something else: solace in spiritual things. We find deliverance from the bondage of society's confusions and paradoxes, and we seek strength from the Promised Land of 'the unseen world' of the spirit. Some of us read religious writings, we find ourselves at church, or temple, or, for some very few of us, at a Quaker meeting for worship: troubled, taunted, muddled: "There was something better in life than this rubbish, if only he could get it - love - nobility - big spaces where passion clasped peace, spaces no science could reach . . ." ⁹ E. M. Forster finds what his soul has been searching for, so for us it is in the silence that we sense deliverance from a world that has encroached on the private domain of our deeper needs, our hopes, and our spiritual intuitions.

* *Has the shift for greater individuality over the past few decades increased vulnerability, stress and psychological problems?*

* *Do we genuinely accept others, or do we go on treating the newcomer as a guest, ten years later?*

THE YEARNING TO BELONG

The yearning to belong is a fundamental human instinct that overrides all the bewilderments of society. However much we safeguard our individuality we remain tribal. Within dominant Western culture we belong to subcultures: our churches, professional organisations, leisure groups. They are necessary to our well-being. We cannot exist without the many advantages that a group provides: "the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine."

An example from literature illustrates this point. By focusing on an issue not yet fully shaped in our thinking, great literature can inform and enlarge our views of society. John Steinbeck does this in his novel *In Dubious Battle* where the hero, Jim, says "My old man used to fight alone. When he got licked, he was licked. But I'm not lonely any more, and I can't be licked, because I'm more than myself."¹⁰ This is plainly put; but it expresses the universal experience of the strength that fires the individual who has something to believe in, some cause to work for, and to which to give his or her energies. Steinbeck's Jim had been a loner, but now, having joined the Communist Party, he was helping to organise a strike, and as a consequence had something to live for. "You get a hell of a drive out of something that has some meaning to it."¹¹

We need to have something to live for. It helps give meaning to life; but caution is needed. Arthur Koestler in *Janus* points out a startling paradox: that our human tragedy is not an excess of aggression but an excess of devotion! "The soldier is not so much out to annihilate the enemy but has rallied to the flag to defend a cause."¹² In the religious persuasion of my upbringing the highest calling in life was to do 'the Lord's work'. That meant self-sacrifice, devotion, service: "to suffer, live, or die, for my Lord crucified." I well remember my astonishment at finding devotion is not the monopoly of Christianity. Exactly this same self-sacrifice and devotion existed in the Communist Party, the supposed antithesis of the church. John Senny, my father's cousin, endured public booing, and together with his comrades was smeared in the daily press and persecuted by the Crimes Act. Yet, he writes, "Many young Communists considered they could

only save the cause to which they adhered so passionately by devoting their whole lives to it, unfettered and uninhibited by having to earn a living." ¹³

Loyalty and self-sacrifice to all sorts of causes from Christianity to Communism, from a sports team to an ethnic group make sense if one considers the loyalty and self-sacrifice as though we belonged to a clan. Koestler describes this as being another being, in which individuality is submerged and the individual takes on a new identity. The obvious example which he cites is the conscript "who as an individual is forbidden to kill, as a disciplined member of his unit is in duty bound to do so."¹⁴ The group is not the synthesis of all the individuals, but what John Steinbeck has called the group man (sic): "It was like all of them disappeared, and it was just one big - animal, going down the road. Just all one animal,' says his character Jim, about a mob of strikers off to break a barricade across the road. ". . . and it's stronger than all the men put together. It doesn't want the same things men want ... it's as different from men as dogs are."¹⁵

How much do we change our individuality according to whether we are for the moment the school teacher, the sales representative, the peace activist, or the Friend? We all wear masks upon our faces which hide inner feelings. We have all witnessed the extreme example of the mask of swaggering bravado in the group, yet he same person as an individual may be insecure and frightened.

Unfortunately, the present day media feed upon and nourish this 'group-human' so that those within it quickly lose their identity, their sense of purpose and belief in the value of the individual. So fragile is the individual mind that it all too easily slides down the embankment into the brutish realms of the mob mentality. "Killer allowed to keep her baby" - a sensationalist headline inciting mob response; totally at variance with the considered processes of the law. 'Surveys' make astonishing revelations: "60% of all men and women support capital punishment." Which 60%? And is the uninformed, ill-considered opinion off the street sufficient reason for society to take action? Talk-back radio feeds on prejudice and uninformed opinion, its anonymity means that there is no accountability for what is said.

Sobering sagas about mob prejudice and how it creates demons and witches was the Alger Hiss case during irrational anti-Communism in the United States,¹⁶ and the Lindy Chamberlain affair in the Northern Territory. Individuals in public office, politicians especially, are vulnerable to mob indictment.

While the press believes it has a duty to expose the wrongs of society, the stones are thrown willy-nilly. But who has no shame in his or her own life? Who has not found that failure has brought with it 'a sense of all conditions' by which we are enabled to be more understanding, to give more sympathetic service to others? And let us not forget that it was the revolutionised Saul, he who gave tacit support to the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who went on to write some of the most magnificent words in the *New Testament*. Paul's stirring words come from one who knew guilt, but who had experienced daring forgiveness by the Christians whom he had once persecuted.¹⁷

There is another perhaps less serious manifestation of Steinbeck's 'group human'. This is the sense of mass hysteria produced by the excitement of a football match. The crowd cheers and boos with the spectators caught up in frenzy, the barracker yelling witty comment much like the lead singer in a chant. Pop groups are a further spectacle. The rhythmic music vibrates some hidden inner chord and the crowd swoons in a sort of tribal sense of being something more than its individual selves. Once again this group mesmerism gives new strength to the individual. Badges of identification on T shirts, or bearing the colours of the football team, witness to the individual's allegiance and give fleeting purpose to life. Perhaps we Friends are rather demonstratively restrained individuals. We tend to regard with suspicion the charismatic Christian crusade, disbelieving the claims that mass hysteria is 'the moving of the Holy Spirit'. We search for a more authentic base, and thus are inclined to question, and to be resistant to the movement of the mob. We search for something deeper than all this: we find it in the silence of our meetings for worship.

At the dawn of civilisation, when life was precarious, unquestioning submission was necessary for survival. Each individual had a crucial task, especially in and areas, be it hunting or gathering. Even in the Middle Ages the serf belonged to the lord. It was only with the enlightenment that the individual became important. The Society of Friends was part of that development, for, believing in the intrinsic worth of every individual. Friends placed the importance of the individual above the demands of group society. Freedom, not as a synonym for self-will, but responsible freedom, was at the heart of the liberalism that arose out of the period of the Enlightenment.

One afternoon I walked through Standley Chasm out from Alice Springs. Immense cliff faces rose on either side, fifty times the height of a human. Those overpowering cliffs confined the individual to a narrow space in which to roam, a narrow sandy floor about six metres wide. The atmosphere of awe created by

those sheer cliffs was a sharp reminder of our relative insignificance as individuals on this earth. This Chasm illustrates the restraints of necessary discipline within society. It is a discipline that strengthens freedom. The analogy of Standley Chasm suggests the liberation that we finally achieve through having been contained; for, on reaching the end of the Chasm, one is inspired by the sunlight on stark nature. The sun beams onto white-trunked gums, making their foliage a most vivid green, and where the sun lights the ochre cliff face, one is thrilled by the delicate deep red hues.

The changing light in the Chasm says something about a fundamental tension in the Society of Friends, and indeed in any movement that survives through generations. We must have change. We need, sometimes desperately, the vitality of new people. On the other hand, we must not neglect the wisdom of the experienced Friends. There are certain constancies to maintain if we are to preserve our unique method of worship, our way of conducting business and our distinctive testimonies. I have heard it suggested that a positive outcome of the Society of Friends having been a rather closed group in previous centuries is the preservation of our identity and way of life. Being open to new truth, yet preserving our identity at the same time, is finely balanced. Those cliffs of Standley Chasm are solid and huge; but they have been gauged through millennia of abrasion by floodwaters. Now, we don't want change to take millions of years, but we do want change that is steady and creative.

Yet, as we approach the third millennium A.D., we recognise that a certain discipline is essential for individual freedom. We know that there can be fatal flaws within organisations. But most human organisations have acceptable obligations. Society at large has moral demands encoded in the law. Moreover, there is a workable balance between the demands of the group and the rights of the individual. Change is possible. Real democracy means discussion, compromise and conciliation. There will always be petty friction but rewards will come if one can outlast disappointment, frustration and the humiliations that seem to be an unavoidable price of belonging to a group. Organisations also provide the opportunity to 'answer that of God' in others. Of course, the organisation itself has legitimate rights and expectations. On the advantage side the organisation provides livelihood, security, excitement, and interaction with others, all of which nurture and sustain a healthy and active mind. The challenge of working towards eliminating obstruction and dead wood can be a worthwhile struggle, requiring coolness and self-control, the adventure of bold judgment perhaps, and quickness to seize opportunities. Indeed, a difficult person within a group may provide a rallying point to worthwhile opportunity.

We all have a yearning to belong but we must remember that each of us is unique and, while a group, we are not a mob. An organisation is very like a tree: the beauty of the tree consists in the whole cluster of all the leaves turning to autumn tints, new shoots all delicately emerging at the same time, yet each leaf is distinct from the others.

* *Making decisions, choices and changes can cause panic and apprehension. Do we automatically reject change?*

* *How do we cope with our duality as a private individual, and as a citizen of society? Group hysteria is profoundly strong. Our own culture pulses strongly through our veins. How do we cope with this?*

* *Do we act because it is expected of us, to please, or because we are afraid of somebody else? Or do we act from authentic self-motivation?*

THE FRIENDS MEETING

... AS A COMMUNITY

The Society of Friends is as democratic as any organisation can be. It is a community in which the individual can feel his or her worth. For that reason I want to discuss the Religious Society of Friends as a community that is genuinely an individualistic organisation, where we can find solace from the bewilderments of life.

Alfred North Whitehead in *Adventures of Ideas* says:

*The apostles of modern tolerance - in so far as it exists - are Erasmus, the Quakers, and John Locke. They should be commemorated in every laboratory, in every church, and in every court of law.*¹⁸

Sometimes it is difficult for newcomers to Friends to grasp fully that there is no authoritarian figurehead person in charge. Occasionally a newcomer may even try to fill this 'lack'! In the Religious Society of Friends leadership is distributed - all are potential leaders, so that there is no hierarchy, only that some are more involved than others. Friends are indifferent to status and self-glorification. There are no set rules and no imposed discipline but there are conventions. Discipline is self-motivated - from the 'light' within. This is the crucial issue which prevents an overbearing attitude - by the group to the individual or the by individual on the group. This is a safety valve to stop fanaticism and intolerance.

These things we do not lay before you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all, with the measure of light which is pure and holy, may be guided; and sq in the light walking and abiding, these things may be

*fulfilled in the spirit, not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.*¹⁹

It is the touchstone of the Quaker approach to life: this *Light* within. It is the inner spirit of love and truth which we believe guides us into right relationship not only with God, with our individual self, but also with others in our community. Thus, Friends are encouraged to determine for themselves how they will respond to the pressures of society. There is no official stand on issues such as abortion, alcohol, gambling, euthanasia . . . We are only *advised* to consider certain action. While the Religious Society of Friends stands officially against all war, and preparation for war, individual Friends decide for themselves what degree of conscientious objection they will adopt, according to their individual conscience, never according to any imposed rule. That Friends are like-minded is the closest we can come to the usual society at large understanding of group rides.

In such an environment there is no place for grandstanding, there is no pecking order of importance. Put downs and gossip are absent. Those who give us hope are neither self-appointed moralisers, nor preachers, and still less those who patronise or want to improve and reform us. It is the quiet *undergirders*, those who show compassion, give nonjudgmental support, those who offer the heart of friendship. This is true community. In his *Epistle*, James described the essence of it:

*the wisdom that is from above is first pure, the peaceable, gentle and easy to be intreated full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.*²⁰

Let me reiterate: as a religious community it is from the *Light* within that Friends seek inspiration to cope with all aspects of life. By *Light* is meant a spiritual *Source* that is found in the silent recesses of our own minds. By reaching the *Self* within the self, we transcend the self. How beautifully this is expressed in the Hindu statement: "Myself within my heart, smaller than a grain of rice; my self within my heart, greater than the earth, greater than heaven." Lost in the realms of something greater than ourselves we see the transient things of life in the wider perspective. We find "eternity in the midst of time."

From the experience of the meeting for worship comes a refreshed consciousness of right relationships. Once again we are "*re clothed in our rightful mind*" There comes a sense of our oneness with creation, a realisation of the unity of life. The meeting for worship gives us strength with which to face the

anomalies, injustices and frenzies of society at large. A Quaker meeting should reflect the Jewish *shalom* which Eva Pinthus describes as "wholeness, healing, justice, righteousness, equality, unity, freedom and community. ' . It is a vision of all the people whole, well and one, and of all nature whole, well and one".²¹ The Quaker meeting for worship has its strong introspective elements, yet the Society of Friends is not given to that brooding introspection that haunts us with personal sins and self-condemnation. Rather the Society of Friends is like Walt Whitman's observation of the animals:

*They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins.
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God.*²²

While inward-looking, Quakerism is an outgoing religion. Consider the significance of the word *everyone* in that basic Quaker statement "Answering that of God in *everyone*." It immediately thrusts us into relationships with others - cheerfully finding 'that of God' in the other: "to walk cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone." This has always been the source of Friends outlook. Friends basic assumption is positive, happy and tempered by thoughtfulness for others, an attitude that should help tremendously in enhancing our individuality while being responsible members of the group. This is the finding of Peggy Heeks who studied twelve Quaker meetings in Britain in 1993 and 1994. In her report *Reaching to Community* she writes: "The results indicate that people matter most." In answers to her questionnaire about what people like about a Quaker meeting Peggy Heeks found that "Friendliness came next in frequency, with spiritual matters." One Friend answered her questionnaire by saying that I appreciate the strength of others, and through them the strength of God. There is a great feeling of trust in one another and in God."²³

Quakerism is a religious outlook concerned about the here and now. It puts into proper perspective the obfuscation of the past - what God said to another people in another civilisation's thought system of thousands of years ago. To Friends, ideas enshrined in creeds are as beautiful as the dead tree with its grey branches soaring upwards to the skies, but no longer with any *life*. The kingdom of God is not in some strange place of ritual, liturgy or even in any hyped-up ecstasy, but is found in the commonplace things of daily life. As Francis Thompson said:

*The angels keep their ancient places;
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,*

*That miss the many-splendoured thing.*²⁴

Because Friends are concerned about the present and how we relate to God, they are only too aware of human imperfection. We are all fallible. Consequently condemnation of this innate human handicap is not seen as productive by Friends. Indeed, more than any other generation it behoves us to be understanding. Compassion rather than condemnation is Friends' hallmark.

Quakerism has a long tradition of scepticism, of questioning authority, and exposing pretensions. Far from the peevish discontent of the pedantic nitpicker, this questioning stems from the same rigour and impartiality of scientific investigation, accepting only what is verifiable. It means a humble and detached *surrender* of preconceived notions that wants a certain thing to be true. One of the most insidious difficulties that faces human behaviour is the inability to see our own prejudices dispassionately.

*O wad some power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion.*²⁵

Quakerism's freedom from rigid creed and ritual, and from deadening authority offers something else. Individuals are accepted for what they are, rather than sensing they are being moulded into something that they are not. Quakerism provides a spiritual home where an undiscovered Self may blossom so that the individual no longer feels bewildered and lost.

In a survey of why many attenders never seek membership in the Society of Friends, Alastair Heron discovered that "despite the esteem in which the meeting for worship is held, worship as such . . . [does] not constitute the principal reason for continuing to attend a Quaker meeting'. What takes pride of place is an appreciation of the accepting, caring, tolerant friendliness experienced by attenders."²⁶

The Quaker meeting provides for our individuality, but at the same time it provides for the community. "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it." Profound ancient Hebrew wisdom. We cannot build anything that will endure unless we are inspired by a proper spirit, unless we have a sound mind, a right attitude and a healthy psychological outlook.

In a Quaker meeting, as in any other community, it is in the variety of human relationships that we grow, both individually and together. Not only do we have the wisdom and acceptance of life by the aged; but we have the young with their happy freshness and wonderment. We not only meet persons of different ages and interests, but from a variety of backgrounds. As we rely on one another our stature grows. This Friend can handle money, that Friend the meal arrangements. This Friend can talk effectively, make a good clerk, others are outgoing, erudite, practical. That Friend's love of fun compliments the tart humour of the more reserved. The communal expertise is like an incandescent light that radiates over our individual inadequacies. None of us is self-sufficient. Strangely, it seems, it is in the little things that community is enhanced: a shared meal before, or after, a committee meeting, a working bee, weekend camp, even a picnic. The recently established Meeting for Learning and programs such as AVP (Alternatives to Violence Program) all deepen our community life and understanding of one another. Inviting each other to our homes for the evening is another important enrichment of our community life. The supreme genius, of course, for community solidarity as far as Friends are concerned is the annual Yearly Meeting when Friends from all over Australia, as well as from overseas, come together residentially to worship, to further the business of the Society of Friends, and, equally importantly.. to mingle together informally.

"As I have loved you, so you must love one another." This is the key to the function of any religious community. It was announced at that crucial Christian event, the Last Supper, when Jesus was about to leave the disciples to their own sufficiency. How significant that the Last Supper was not in a church but in a house. It was a social meal. Does this fact not emphasise friendship, 'community' and caring for one another, 'washing one another's feet'. Every act, say Quakers, should be a sacramental act - an impossible ideal perhaps, but it does affirm that our relations with each other must spring from that love of which Jesus spoke at the Last Supper.

Why then is such love one of the most difficult things to translate into practice? We must devote some time to the consideration of this question.

THE FRIENDS MEETING

... AND INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

This indeed is one of the great paradoxes - always there in any human community - why loving one another is so difficult.

It is the *light* interwoven with the shadows as it filters through the foliage of the tree that produces subtle charm. On a day of 42 degrees I was reading Isaac Penington's beautiful description of a Friends meeting: "a heap of fresh and living coals, warming one another" In a state of perspiration I suddenly realised that this is also a perfect description of what hell is supposed to be like - in the traditional sense, if one changes the word 'warming' to 'burning'. It is painful to acknowledge that even a Quaker meeting could be a hell for some. "We are gravely mistaken," said Jocelyn Burnell, "to think that Christianity protects us from the pain and agony of mortal existence."²⁷ She goes on to say in her Swarthmore Lecture: "The crucifixion shows that not always soft options are available." We must be prepared to take risks. Again, I find what Eva Cox has said is very relevant to a Quaker meeting: "plenty of robust goodwill to sustain difference and debate" is necessary in a civil society, and she also says 'learning some of the rough and tumble of group process also has the advantage of connecting us with others.'²⁸ Is not each one of us guilty of betrayal of others? Yet, we are also betrayed. Wherever we stand we cast a shadow.

Life is full of ambiguity, suffering and misjudgment. But it is an adventure! The very uncertainty of its diversity quickens our passion for it. In even the most loving environment we can feel hurt, either imagined or otherwise, either through bland self-absorption or sheer thoughtlessness. And here is one of life's anomalies: have we not all found that long term positive results emerge out of our very hurt?

Each of us as a human being is responsible for strife in society - even for war. It is inescapable. Our very natures contain the seeds of destruction: our aggressiveness, our anger, our greed, our selfishness. Worse, often these traits are unwitting. Life is twisted: what may seem our prejudices to some are to us our ideals. What may seem selfishness to others, to us are our rights. A glaring example of this, at national level, was the French President's decision in 1995 to resume nuclear testing on the Pacific Island of Mururoa. Along with other nations of the Pacific region, the Australian Government protested strongly about the dangers of radiation to the area. To the French this Australian attitude was prejudice - against the French presence in the region. Australian motives were seen as a selfish aim to dominate the Pacific for trading purposes. Our ideal (of a safe environment) was seen as greed. If this is reasoning at a national level, how much more it behoves us in our daily lives to be forgiving, understanding, and strong in our tenderness, so that we wipe away resentment and hostility, so that we "take away the occasion of all wars."

It is easy to realise that the other person has his or her emotional blind spots. We are afflicted by that strange human phenomenon: we each look out on the world with our own self with all its hidden prejudices and inhibitions as the very centre of this whole vast world. There is also that very difficult business of illusions - what in others we call 'wishful thinking'. Sometimes our illusions grip us so cunningly that we do not recognise them. We can go on for years unwittingly deluded - perhaps about someone we cherish, clinging to some romantic past, or to some lost place. In its worse manifestation illusion puts us out of touch with reality. Shakespeare gives the great example of illusion in King Lear. The old king accepts what his insincere daughters say, rejecting Cordelia because she speaks without guile. It is tragedy on a large scale, but it reinforces the consequences of fantasy and delusion. We sense our own folly in Lear's larger than life folly that broke up his kingdom in needless civil war because of his refusal to see fault in himself, and hence in his judgments. The great torment of Lear leads him to realise, belatedly, that he "hath ever but slenderly known himself." Our own James Nayler is a cautionary example of a man who suffered severely from illusion; yet, through it all, he gave Friends one of their greatest statements: "There is a spirit which I feel that delights to do no evil. . ."

Shakespeare possessed an inspired knowledge of the human character. It is never all bad, or all good. His characters are universal characters because they are supremely what we all are: half saint and half knave, our better side wrestling with the shadow side of our personality.

We meet a variety of different types as we progress through life. As well as those we honour and long to emulate, we also meet the person who takes pride in being feared, the person of routine graciousness who never allows any deep personal encounter, the person who loves change and wants to reform everything, the aggressor, the ambitious, the scorner, the whiner . . . What a challenge for a community! It must accept individual differences, be aware that each has a different vision, a different background which has shaped that person's condition, aware that each may have different moral and intellectual standards. Furthermore, the group has to recognise that each has his or her own baggage from past philosophy and experience, his or her own agendas.

Indispensable to a study of the individual and group interaction is the findings of the social psychologists. They have some lucid commentaries about our human behaviour – why rational individuals can be manipulated like the animals in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. Self-justification, the importance of self-esteem, human aggression, prejudice and propaganda are all areas of social psychology. In the 1954 Swarthmore Lecture *From Loneliness to Fellowship*, Wilhelm Aarek discusses an experiment by two social psychologists (Ronald Lippitt and Ralph K. White) on leadership and group life.²⁹ Initiative came from the leader in the *authoritarian* group, while in the *laissez-faire* group the leader remained passive, allowing complete freedom to the children. The leader of the *democratic* group let activities spring from group discussion and always promoted cooperation between himself and the group. The findings of the experiment showed that group atmosphere largely depended on the leader. The *authoritarian* group became dependent on the leader, they were generally passive, although some children became aggressive. The *laissez-faire* group suffered from lack of guidance. In the *democratic* group "the children often came with wholly spontaneous confidences . . . The child's need for status was satisfied within a social framework, and the possibilities of aggressive eruptions, inwardly and outwardly, were reduced. Freedom and self-discipline seemed, under democratic group-leadership, to find each other in a harmonious synthesis."³⁰

This self-discipline is vital for a community to function successfully. No organisation or community can exist without commitment and some accountability. The Religious Society of Friends does not require blind loyalty, but an adherence to Friends well-tried ways, participation in the affairs of the Society, and reasonably close upholding of Quaker belief as expressed in *Quaker Faith and Practice and the Advices and Queries*. Presumably one would not otherwise want to join. Commitment also requires some knowledge of the historical reasons for the existence of various conventions. Commitment means a

knowledge of the wider perspective of the Religious Society of Friends beyond one's local meeting. There is the Regional Meeting, the Yearly Meeting, and the world body of Friends under the umbrella of the Friends World Committee for Consultation.

One of the great nurturing experiences for me when I came amongst Friends was getting to know some wonderful Friends, wonderful because they simply *loved*. Do you remember being nurtured as a new Friend? One of the first things I learnt from them was that laughter and humour were far more effective than criticising, which is so easy to do, but so irreparably damaging. I learnt from them that I had to try to understand what inner needs the other person is fulfilling in him or herself, to refrain from speaking my perceived opinion, (or probably prejudice) unless it is utterly essential, to invite others home for a relaxing evening. Like the surging creek after a deluge, a loving friendship will flush out our fault-finding, and the sun will sparkle so that we only see good and beauty where before we disapproved of what we saw. "In love", said Rabindranath Tagore, "all life's contradictions dissolve and disappear."

- * Is a smaller meeting more suited to the Quaker situation, more nurturing, than a larger meeting?
- * What is the heart of Quakerism for you?
 - friendship and acceptance
 - a framework for spiritual growth
 - trust and openness
 - the meeting for worship
 - caring for one another
- * What do children mean to your Quaker community?

LOOKING INWARD

And yet - still the question must be asked again: why is love so difficult to achieve? What goes wrong - in families, at our place of work, in meetings, that this wonderful nurturing experience is not the experience of all? Why is it that a group which acknowledges the different visions, backgrounds, philosophies, experience and agendas of each individual within it nevertheless, from time to time, faces grave difficulties in functioning as a group?

The reasons are undoubtedly complex, but I would like to suggest that there are three main reasons. Firstly, there are those reasons which I have already mentioned, that make us feel bewildered, lost and trapped: those dehumanising processes, and the fact that we can become different beings in the mass group. Secondly, there is the destructive potential of being in love with one's dream of community. In his valuable Pendle Hill Pamphlet *A Place Called Community* Parker Palmer writes:

*This . . . utopian myth must be denied For those who come into community with only that dream will soon leave, hurt, resentful, and probably lost to the cause of community-building. But those who can survive the failure of their dream and the abrasion of their egos will find that the reality of community is richer and more supportive than the fantasy can ever be.*³¹

The third reason is the mythology in our particular community, that is, the Religious Society of Friends, that we can heal all troubles and difficulties that arise because we believe in love as the driving force of humankind. The natural inclination is to close one's eyes and pretend animosity does not exist, or to hope it will vanish, to say "Peace, peace when there is no peace." An inbuilt human consciousness expects things to be perfect. I believe that any vision of human perfection is flawed, because it represses our dark side, our hurts and anger. We have already noted that it is light interwoven with shadow that shows up the beauty and strength of the tree.

Let us not be under any illusions. Even in that most select group, that of Jesus and his disciples, there was human frailty that caused division within the group. There was jostling for position among the disciples - and, of course, there was Judas; Judas who caused such agitation among the disciples whilst he remained in the upper room just before his betrayal of Jesus. Was Judas one of those misguided persons within a group who, because of his own background and experience, was trapped in his vision - unable to see beyond it? Though so tragically wrong, were his intentions good?

*And Caiaphas was in his own Mind
A benefactor to Mankind.*³²

Blake's profound statement is so simple but nevertheless startling. We never stop to consider Caiaphas's point of view, which was that Jesus was really a disturber of the comfortable peace and order. On the whole we Friends like stirrers - the right sort of stirrer! As long as it does not disturb our *own* peace and order. Yet, sometimes what is being exposed is our blind habits, some blemish in our assumptions. Truth can be harsh. In this case all that may be necessary for healing is allowance of time for a new point of view to be accepted. Perhaps there is need to talk about one's problems to another person who will *listen*, not distractedly, but purposefully, not intoxicated with their own ego-tripping, but projecting empathy into our needs.

Let us return to Judas. If not of good intentions, was his purpose to destroy the group because his own needs and vision had not been recognised and met? Unfortunately we do meet individuals in communities with human flaws, (even, at times, in the Society of Friends), who are warped by some psychological need to wreak havoc. Even the most magnificent trees are consumed in a bushfire. Similarly a group may be consumed if such antagonism is allowed to go unchecked. Commonly an antagonist projects on to other individuals the very deviousness with which he or she operates. Loudspeaker diplomacy is adopted, broadcasting publicly what should be a pastoral matter of confidentiality. It is not unknown for a sincere minister of religion to have a nervous breakdown, and to resign his or her 'calling' because of the tremendous ill will generated by the spread of false rumours and innuendo. It may then be discovered that the next incumbent is being similarly maligned. It is often hard to believe that this is happening, and we go on listening, accommodating, pretending that the problem doesn't exist. We might even blame the innocent and bewildered person who is the object of the crippling attack for allowing confrontation. If it means

unsubstantiated innuendo, I believe that one must not yield to the clamour for misplaced attention of the antagonist. It is demoralising for those entrusted with responsibility to be undermined.

In a close look at tolerance in the Quaker tradition, David Thomas found it did have a boundary:

*Tolerance becomes a strong, active concept only when you see that tolerance must have limits, when you know where these limits are and why they are there.*³³

But try to define tolerance! Try to know the limits! In Northern Ireland? Islamic law? Tolerance in our own Australian Parliament? Both tolerance and intolerance are ultimately undefinable. Richard Ullmann believed that something greater than tolerance was eventually necessary: "Ye must leave the outer court of tolerance and enter the sanctuary of love." In his 1961 Swarthmore Lecture *Tolerance and the Intolerable*, having found it impossible to define both tolerance and intolerance, Ullmann concluded that

*Christ has emerged as the supreme example of meeting the intolerable with something far greater than tolerance. Wherever the cross has been seen, understood and experienced in this way, it has redeemed and fitted human beings to take upon themselves the loving struggle for truth, at whatever cost.*³⁴

What then can be done? If there is tension the first person to reform is oneself - "To take upon [oneself] the loving struggle for truth." We are all capable of hurting, of marginalising, or of inhibiting, through blissful self-centredness. We must look beyond the petty irritations to see the eternal soul. But what is to be done if after long and patient listening and support, a person will not yield their stubborn persistence, only seeing conspiracies where they do not exist? How hard it is to be firm for those of us whose natural inclination is to be supportive, constructive and helpful. This must be weighed against the subtle sabotage of the group brought about by the antagonist, and the undue time which must be devoted to the trouble, only to gratify his or her ego by the attention. For damaged persons in need of counselling, beyond our untrained but well-intentioned Quaker love, we need to know where professional consultation is available. Divorce is not achieved without pain. Squabbles are uncreative and unconstructive. Yet, the

Christian church has always been disconcertingly troubled by these sort of difficulties. Even at its birth, on the day of Pentecost, there was incipient trouble: speaking in tongues led to disunity. Soon came the "murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected."³⁵ Antagonism can darken the life of all social organisations.

Hard as it may be in these difficult circumstances, our task is to deal with our own anger and refuse to be judgmental. We must acknowledge that we are blinkered by prejudices, emotions, and temperaments, by the influences of upbringing, by our culture and the times in which we live. We must recognise that the nature of the world is anomaly, injustice, uncertainty and hurt. The Hebrew poets expressed openly - no harbouring of it - exactly what they felt about their enemies; *but they did then leave their enemy to be dealt with by God*. Psalm I09 is an example. The writer accuses his adversary of lies, hatred and deceit, and prays:

*Let his days be few ...
let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. . .
let this be the reward of mine adversaries from the Lord.*³⁶

To reject this Psalm as self-righteous Old Testament vengeance is superficial. It is self-righteous; but who cannot be accused of self-righteousness - it lurks behind every bush along the path of life. Is not the Psalmist human? If we are honest, have we not secretly wished just this on our adversary? Christopher Holdsworth says in his Swarthmore Lecture *Steps in a Large Room*.

*The vengeance psalms have a real use. They help to
bring to the surface feelings which all humans have,
and which need like everything else, to be offered to
God for transformation.*³⁷

What better example for us to adopt - that we should offer our hates and prejudices to God for transformation. Only by the transformation of our anger and fear can we be liberated. Only by recognising imperfection in others and weaknesses in ourselves as part of life can we, give love, affection and respect, and can we use tact and understanding. In so doing we come closer to discovering our own soul, and who we are. In so doing the group comes to discover its own soul and what it is.

The tree, so dark and sinister in the black of night is transfigured in the light of dawn. Without darkness light loses its impact. The dawn means life,

warmth, beauty, replacing the mystery, foreboding and chill of night. Without the roots that are nourished in the darkness of the earth, there can be no majestic tree. So accepting our human imperfections, our shadow side, may be necessary before we can appreciate the light.

- * *How does your worshipping community strengthen*
 - *your individual sense of identity?*
 - *your responsibility to do your own seeking?*
 - *your efforts to find and accept each other's gifts?*

- * *Often it is not the big problems or conflicts but the little ones that defeat us. Do you agree? Why?*

LOOKING OUTWARD

Once we have come closer to knowing our individual self, and the group has discovered its identity, we can face society at large with more confidence. Secure in the support and trust of one's community, one has courage to face the world with compassion, and with love. In her 1995 Boyer lectures about society in general in Australia, Eva Cox said: "Trust is a prerequisite for healthy risk taking ... Sticking your neck out requires a level of social trust".³⁸ T. S. Eliot asks: "Do I dare disturb the universe?"³⁹

For Friends, a community with a long history of individuals who have been willing to 'stick their necks out', this social trust comes from the backing of the Quaker meeting. The Quaker movement early learnt the importance of bringing a 'concern' before the group. It is the business of a Friends' meeting to listen, encourage, check, amend ... and, if 'in right ordering', to take forward the concern. As individuals it is important that we submit to this discipline - to testing by the Meeting, and to being accountable to it. In sharing our insights and inspiration *in the group* we can be sure that they are indeed authentic divine promptings and not disguised self-interest.

The very nature of Quakerism, following 'the inner light' and responding to 'that of God in everyone', has meant that Friends are strongly motivated with a social conscience to challenge social inequalities ideologically-driven intimidation and political distortion of truth. To 'dare to disturb the universe' is not about grand but futile stands - such as refusing to sell raffle tickets or drink a glass of wine with dinner. It is about dealing with the roots of an evil, with *causes* (in these cases addictions which can affect not only the individual but entire families). It is about - in Quaker parlance - 'speaking truth to power'. It may mean daring to confront exploitation by "the brazen self-interest of today's wealthy" as Jonathan Dale says.⁴⁰ "True godliness doesn't turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavours to mend it," said William Penn.⁴¹

To disturb the universe one needs determination, valour, humility and some hidden inner strength. Many men and women have been ostracised in their day, yet venerated by subsequent generations, simply because they dared. Jesus remains the supreme Christian example. He shook the universe of His time. Our own George Fox was treated to scorn by the general populace of his day. Conscientious objectors (particularly of the first world war), condemned to harsh jail sentences, became in many cases highly respected in later life. Lucretia Mott who influenced American attitudes to slavery and the equality of women had her meetings broken up by mobs from the drinking saloons, yet this calm Quaker woman was eventually venerated in 19th century America. We are not all possessed of such moral courage, nor do we have the disposition of the crusader, and many are not in a position to act. Discretion and tact show wisdom. Dare I go against the crowd? If we ripple the conventions of 'the system', if the gust of wind shakes the tree too wildly, our personal well-being can become endangered by ostracism and alienation.

How universal is T.S. Eliot's experience! It is so much easier not to be involved.

In looking outwards from the security of the group at social injustice, it is wise to remember that it does not necessarily call for shouting from the mountaintops. Frequently such work may need to be done quietly - again in Quaker parlance - by being 'present where you are'.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the experience of Friends in Nazi Germany. Brenda Bailey, in her book *A Quaker Couple in Nazi Germany* makes one strikingly aware of this. How do you dare to disturb the universe of Gestapo interrogation and imprisonment? Do you resist the 'call up' to military service if that means you are immediately shot? The need to be discreet in expressing opposition was important. Quaker teachers lost their jobs under Hitler. Having been closely questioned by the Gestapo, the clerk of the Yearly Meeting feared that the Society of Friends could be proscribed. It was not advisable to involve too many Friends in decision-making, nor to record detailed minutes, because unidentified Gestapo officials were present at business meetings. How did Friends react to this intimidating atmosphere? The Germany Yearly Meeting executive committee wrote, with great wisdom:

We beg our members to think calmly and carefully before taking action. Actions invariably have consequences which must be considered responsibly

*by each member. Do not feel you have to bear witness as Quakers, nor that as a Quaker you should shoulder burdens that are greater than you have the strength to carry on your own.*⁴²

That, it seems to me, is wise advice for us, too. It answers T. S. Eliot's question "Do I dare disturb the universe". The strength of this attitude of German Friends is borne out by Douglas Steere's observation about them: "they know they can survive, because they lived through the previous [war] ... There is a calmness about them, and a sense that they are ready for what may come."⁴³ It was wiser for German Friends to go on quietly helping Jews escape Nazi persecution than to make public pronouncements about issues that could be seen to be political.

I believe this attitude is very relevant for us as we grapple with our individuality within the national situation. In our Australian society we are not burdened by the desperation that a totalitarian regime produces; but, nevertheless, we, too, must make our own individual choices about how far we will conform to what we believe is intolerable - if we are not lulled into an euphoria of indifference. We need to be certain about what we are called to do, if it is to mean 'rocking the boat'. There is no room for smugness. In Australia we see ideologically-driven governments engaging in a war on community institutions: unions, education, health, universities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. It goes beyond any perceived good house-keeping policy. Critics can be intimidated or removed.

We must be ready with a spiritual response to those forces which attack the social order, whether economically or socially. Spirituality is not only a search for personal serenity, it is also the struggle for justice in society. As individuals we cannot escape the responsibility of being part of human society. "Never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee."

* *Psychological tyranny of the mind can be so powerful that we are not aware of it. How do we deal with this tyranny?*

* *How can we be sure that our divine promptings are indeed authentic and not disguised self-interest?*

* *Do you agree with the advice of Germany Yearly Meeting*

that, as Quakers, we should not shoulder burdens that are greater than we have the strength to carry on our own?

THE DISCOVERY OF SILENCE

The message of this lecture has been that we humans are social beings, strongly gregarious, with a deep need to belong. Thus we have community groups which make up society at large. It is an inescapable part of life. One cannot be a completed man or a completed woman until one has come to terms with one's social nature, without which our individuality would not be revealed, as Sartre said; or, as Eva Cox has said: "without our social base we cannot be fully human."⁴⁴ The pressures of bureaucratic organisation in our postmodern era are so bewildering that we seek deeper meaning in life for our individuality - in what we call spirituality. This conflict between individuality and group participation is the cause of more neurosis than we are aware. Yet, we must come to terms with this before we can redeem our personal nature. A community such as the Religious Society of Friends provides the means of achieving all this, particularly because it values the worth of every individual. People matter before anything else! We are accepted as we are. Through this spirituality of divine promptings within the heart we come to a proper relationship, so that the leaves, the twigs, the branches and the trunk all become integral to the tree.

There is another reason why the Religious Society of Friends provides an answer. The birth of Quakerism brought with it the rediscovery of a neglected Christian strength: the rediscovery of silence. Isaiah went to the heart of worship when he said "Be still and know that I am God." This presupposes silence as the necessary condition to 'be still'. One of George Fox's most beautiful statements said

*Be still and cool in thy own mind and the spirit from
thine own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the
principle of God and turn thy mind to the Lord God.*⁴⁵

The same is expressed in the secular sense, too. Shakespeare wrote:

*And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,*

*Sermons in stones and good in every thing.
I would not change it.*⁴⁶

So much of life is waiting, and learning patience. To let the waves of events wash over us rather than always trying to control things, is a sign of spiritual maturity. In this age that approaches a new millennium humanity seems to be losing the gift of patient waiting.

Through silent *waiting* we can transcend our finite, temporal, visible being, to reach the infinite, the eternal and the invisible 'silence of eternity'. We sometimes sense this in the hush of the bush, but we can find it by stilling our minds even in those inevitable moments of frantic busyness. Our imperfections are swallowed up in some immensity beyond the self. The strange malaise of present day society loses its torment as we sense ourselves as part of the universal stream of consciousness. On the Monday morning after I had first attended a Quaker meeting, I felt an unforgettable surge of poise as I moved forward in the crowd along the subway of the Flinders Street railway station in Melbourne. It seemed that in my heart was a shrine of quietness amidst all the rush of trains and people, something like Francis Thompson's experience when the Thames Embankment was his home

*Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.*⁴⁷

This silence is not the absence of sound. Even in the depth of the bush there is always sound: a bird twittering, water running, leaves rustling. This silence is the focusing of our attention from frantic distractions to listen to the Inner Voice, the Inner Light, 'the promptings of love and truth in our hearts'. "The amazing thing is," said Marjorie Sykes, "that men and women *have* touched this spirit and power all over the world, in every race, in every part of history of which we have any record. For all of them the experience has been nameless something beyond all speech."⁴⁸

Through inward silence we descend further into the native land of our own individuality, but in so doing we are touched by some greater power beyond the self, beyond self-analysis, beyond the limitations of language, beyond the stereotyping of experience, and beyond deductive analysis. We strive for something indefinable: 'the cloud of unknowing', 'closer than the jugular vein' as the Sufis say. We can hear the leaf rustle but not see the wind. We can hear the bird sing but not see the singing.

Out of the silence of the nourishing earth a delicate orchid flowers. Out of the silence of the womb a baby is born. Out of the silence of our minds come our thoughts, our plans, and our creativity. We may become alive to a deeper intuition about the potentialities of our personhood, a deeper insight into our corporate identity. Isaac Pennington said:

*there is the life of the whole felt in every vessel that is turned to its measure; insomuch as the warmth of life in each vessel doth not on(y warm the particular, but they are like an heap of fresh and living coals, warming one another, insomuch as a great strength, freshness, and vigour of life flows into all.*⁴⁹

In the silence of a meeting for worship we are swept into something corporate. What began as an individual private experience - perhaps initially concerned about something as mundane as whether the electric jug was turned off – we experience something that arouses our individuality within the group meditation. We are touched by a force greater than the group, by something which some call the Holy Spirit, others call God, or Krishna, Buddha or Allah, and which still others define as the divine 'promptings of love and truth'. We are restored.

Silence possesses something that binds the spirit of individuality with the demands of the community group. Our feelings of separation dissolve. We rise from meeting for worship with a heightened sense of unity: with the Quaker community, with our family, with the wider society. It is the silence that was unshaken when Indian braves entered the Meeting House, or troopers were sent to break up the Quaker assembly. It is a sense of unity with our humankind as well as with the world of nature, In Whittier's inspired words it is "The silence of eternity interpreted by love."

We no longer feel depersonalised or intimidated by bureaucracy. We are no longer bewildered by divided loyalties, or dehumanised by economic rationalism, or lost because we do not belong, but are caught up in the wonder of something greater than ourselves. It is this that makes us "so happy" to come to Meeting, The writer of the Song of Songs knew this:

*Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away,
For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;*

*The flowers appear on the earth:
The time of the singing of birds is come. . .
And the vines with the tender grape give a good smell.*⁵⁰

In the final movement of the Beethoven Ninth Symphony there is a period of angry, disturbed, half sentences of music. Then there is a pause. Out of the pause arises the beautiful, simple theme of the *Song of Joy*. It is in that pause that we find represented for us that mystery which we call God when our individuality is swept up in a corporate identity.

- * *Do you find your individuality liberated by the meeting for worship? Can you find a relationship between humanity and the universe in which we move?*
- * *"Lost in wonder, love and praise " (John Wesley). Is this your experience of a Friends meeting?*
- * *Do you find meditation helpful in your daily life?*

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FURTHER READING

* The most important Quaker writing on this subject is Parker Palmer's *A Place Called Community*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 212. He deals with the resurgence of individualism and its dangers, and the urgent need for true community which he sees as a spiritual reality.

* There have been three Swarthmore Lectures more or less on this subject, each commendable: *Man, Society and Religion: an Essay in Bridge-building* by W. Russell

Brain, 1944; *From Loneliness to Fellowship* by Wilhelm Aarek, 1954; and *Being Together*, by Margaret Heathfield, 1994. Margaret Heathfield writes with insight about the high value we place on' our community life as Friends.

Other writing:

* Mike Yarrow, *Conciliation and Confrontation in the World and in the Meeting* (Canadian Quaker Pamphlet) 1980, looks at the Quaker commitment to persuasion and conciliation and examines the different moods and techniques of confrontation, both in the world and "perhaps in our own meeting affairs." He makes some pertinent comments.

* Peggy Heeks, *Reaching to Community* (Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, 1994). This is the report of a year amongst twelve Quaker Meetings in England. By means of a questionnaire and follow-up discussion she gathered the experience of members and attenders in a Quaker meeting as a community.

* Alastair Heron, *Caring Conviction Commitment. Dilemmas of Quaker Membership Today* (London: Quaker Home Service, and Birmingham: Woodbrooke College, 1992). This is a professional survey of 459 listed attenders of the forty meetings in Yorkshire. It surveys their attitudes to Quakerism and why only a small proportion of attenders become members. It also discusses the contemporary Society of Friends.

* *The Wounded Meeting* (Philadelphia: Friends General Conference, 1993). This relates some uproariously funny episodes as well as inappropriate behaviour.

* I also commend Bradford Smith's *Meditation: the Inward Art*, (Philadelphia: J.13. Lippincott Company, 1962). It contains much wisdom about personal meditation.

* Eva Cox, *A Truly Civil Society* (ABC, 1995). Friends will warm to these 1995 Boyer Lectures which have so much to say that is similar to Friends attitudes. The first chapter is particularly relevant for it deals with humankind as primarily a social being.