

THE JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURE

2005

PEACE IS A STRUGGLE

David Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

*Clothe with life the weak intent,
Let me be the thing I meant;
Let me find in thy employ
Peace that dearer is than joy;
Out of self to love be led
And to heaven acclimated ...¹*

[¹ lines from John Greenleaf Whittier (1863) ‘Andrew Rykman’s Prayer’.]

When I was asked to give this Backhouse Lecture on Peace, I had collected the mail from the post box, and was in Atherton to pick up a visitor and to attend a seminar at CSIRO on sediment discharge from rivers to the Great Barrier Reef. While walking down the street my first thought was: “Usually when you are asked to give a lecture, people ask you to talk on something you know a lot about. If I had been asked to talk on the Geology of Australia or the Origin of the Great Barrier Reef that would have been fine - I know quite a lot about both - but Peace!”

So it took a little while to be sure I had anything to say.

Peace can be tackled at many levels. My experience is mainly in working towards a world without weapons while most governments and several large corporations are working industriously to create a world full of weapons. My work has been especially against the arms trade, against the use of landmines, cluster munitions and small arms.

My other experience is seeking an internal peace. How do I gradually remove the janglings and discords, and bring my own life to reflect the leadings of the Spirit. For, even though I am a peace activist, I am not a really peaceful person. I try not to get too angry too often, but there is no way I feel at peace within myself nor do I seem to be someone who makes those around me feel at peace.

In fact I have come to accept that total world peace is simply not possible. We will not get there. There will always be human conflicts, and I may never

reach a saintly communion with God. Once I found all the war and helplessness so oppressive. I still feel the pain of all those people whose lives are destroyed by war, both in the immediate conflict and in the decades afterwards. It is not that I am insensitive or calculating, far from it. I feel the pain even more than I felt the intellectual disgust. However, one night the Spirit deliberately moved the load from me, and I felt released. It became clear that I am not responsible for solving all the mess. I am responsible for living my life fully in the leading of the Spirit. From that moment I was able to move on.

I want to spend a few minutes reflecting on the Quaker heritage, because that will explain why I say some of the things I do. How can we 'learn' from the early Quakers, and so make our efforts in peace work real and relevant?

Let the Spirit Run Our Lives

The early Friends were changed men and women. Many had been involved in the armies, and they lived in very unstable times when the need to defend yourself was real. There were some who were more insistent on change than others. In several areas George Fox or one of the other leaders had to exhort early Friends to travel fully the new path. I sense they were people of strong religious conviction who would probably make many of us uncomfortable with their insistent references to Christian beliefs. Many of us now want to hear none of this, especially where such teaching has been in our own lives linked to some very dogmatic, authoritarian or abusive behaviour by the Church.

I did not suffer that negative influence beyond, as a young man, becoming fed up with sermons which preached that I was full of sin and worthy of nothing. Fortunately I had the exaggerated confidence of the young so that I could decide that such preaching was rubbish, and that there was some good in me along with a few faults, and I went my own way.

It was during time in a Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka learning meditation that I became profoundly aware of the inner guide that was capable of pointing out errors within and gradually starting to erase them. My Christian upbringing had failed to give me any indication of this.

And that brings me to the point that while we may not like historical and modern Church behaviour, the early Friends drew enormous inspiration and support from Jesus' example and the Scriptures. They were amongst the first

generations of common people to have access to the Scriptures. In the 1500s the Bible in England had only been available in Latin and its interpretation was the preserve of the priesthood, who could manipulate the texts quoted to suit themselves. Bibles in English were originally printed in Europe, their production in England being outlawed. The first, officially sanctioned and widely available Christian Bible in English was published in England in 1611. George Fox was born in 1624.

I have always liked the title of a book written in South Africa by the Dominican priest Albert Nolan. It is *Jesus Before Christianity*. For me this title confirms there was an immensely important teaching before the establishment of the rituals of communion, the creeds, and the annual cycle of organised liturgies. Nolan invites readers “to take a serious and honest look at a man who lived in first century Palestine and try to see him through the eyes of his contemporaries.” (Nolan, 1989, p.1). Nolan dispenses with all the later belief systems and says essentially: judge the person by what he does, by the Way he follows. The evidence is that early Friends were the same. They were convinced they had rediscovered the direct spiritual experiences felt by the Apostles, those who walked and talked with Jesus, and who lived his Way into the future. I too have found great benefit from reading the Scripture in this manner, both Old and New Testaments. For me there is too much of value to throw it all out.

For the early Quakers, access to the guidance of the Spirit by each and every one of us, rather than depending on guidance from the pulpit, brought immense reassurance, though with it a personal opportunity and a responsibility. For if the Spirit was wholly accessible then there was not only the opportunity but also the responsibility to allow the Spirit to fully direct their lives. There was no priestly policy to hide behind. And it is clear that early Quakers accepted that change - they let the Spirit run their lives.

Deal with the Issues of our Time

Early Friends did not form a quiet reclusive sect, with their heads down to avoid detection. They were often deliberately public about their beliefs. For early Friends, the issues were unshackling the control of the church, protesting for religious and political freedom, opposition to violent conflict of any type, and later the opposition to slavery, and care for prisoners and the mentally unwell. In the mid-1600s there was a feeling that they were on the brink of the new

millennium, and a major change in how people lived was about to unfold, almost a utopian future. In this they were to be sorely disappointed.

Some people have commented that the present time is very different to that of the 1600s in England, and while the Peace Testimony was suitable then, it may not be for us in these modern times. I do not believe that. Both early Friends and Jesus before them had to work out their testimony in extremely difficult times, far more difficult than in a secure Australia or USA. It is worth remembering that between the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 and the Toleration Act in 1689, some 15,000 Quakers were imprisoned or suffered other punishments and 450 died as a result of their imprisonment (see discussion in O'Shea, 1993, p.38). Yet they held fast to their testimonies.

What are the issues of our time? To what extent are we willing to seriously engage them? A prominent Quaker scientist of the last century, Kathleen Lonsdale, wrote a book published in 1957 *Is Peace Possible?* In 1943 she had been sent to prison as a conscientious objector against civil defence duties. She felt the social and spiritual impact of the first atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, and then lived and debated peace issues through the Cold War. Two important issues dominate her book: nuclear disarmament and population growth. They are still global issues for us, though for many not as important as the continued killing by conventional weapons and small arms, the abuse of human rights, or the dangers of environmental collapse on the planet.

It is not my role to declare what are the most important issues for our time. Those priorities will come from the concerns of us all. What does seem important to me is that if, as Quakers, we want to contribute to peace we have to engage in the struggle.

In this lecture I want explain why I have been led to work against the arms trade and how I see the development of the Quaker testimony against violence. In the second part of the lecture I want to discuss the inner struggle, my experience that the loss of Self is critical, and the ways we can allow the Spirit more rein in our lives.

I believe we have been led to this point on our spiritual and worldly journey, not just to be onlookers and book learners. We have been brought this far to be participants, to live a life in the Spirit with all the uncertainties that entails. We have each been given the opportunity to live faith in action.

THE WASTE OF WAR

My own impetus came in 1991 after several years of peripheral activism. I flew with my family to the UK on the day the Gulf War started, and I was so angry. Who sold all these weapons to Saddam in the first place? So I contacted the Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT) in the UK, and during the next six months developed a commitment to work on a similar project in Australia. My involvement with the campaign to ban landmines showed me just how terrible the damage of war is, and that this devastation can last for years and years afterwards.

So I feel, as I know do many others who do this work, we are the voices of those who are already dead, of those parents and wives who have lost children, or mothers or husbands. They cannot speak loudly enough from rural villages in Asia, or Africa to be heard. Overwhelmingly we hear the voices of presidents, prime ministers and corporate leaders who think they can profit electorally or economically from war. And it is not just those past, but also for those in the future we have to speak and act now.

As a person who finds it relatively easy to write and to speak, my first impulse was to prepare reliable information on the arms trade so that others who were similarly upset would have some facts with which to write to governments. Then later I became involved in work to support victims. Now I see my life as a journey into nonviolence.

I am convinced that war is a complete waste of money and resources and human spirit. War is: financially irresponsible, pragmatically stupid, spiritually wrong.

War is Financially Irresponsible

War is financially irresponsible given the many problems faced by the planet. In 2002 the world spent nearly US\$800 billion on military purposes. The US Pentagon military budget exceeds US\$400 billion, half of the world expenditure. In fact total US military expenditure is close to US\$790 billion a

year when other aid and export credit programs are added to the Pentagon spending.

In Australia alone we spend some A\$21 billion annually on military matters, that is about US\$14 billion. Yet restoration of the damage by land degradation and salination of valuable farm and pastoral lands in Australia will cost A\$54 billion, according to a study jointly undertaken by the Australian Conservation Foundation and the National Farmers Federation (The Australian Financial Review, 13-14 May 2000, p.3). In Australia we face a much greater risk from environmental damage than from military invasion.

Globally the money spent on military purposes is sometimes justified as an investment. Economically it is not investment, it is consumption (Thorsen and others, 1982), and “in the long term, the totality of adverse socio-economic consequences of sizeable military outlays outweigh any immediate spin-offs.” (Thorsen and others, 1982, p.159). Military expenditure produces very few spin-offs which are economically valuable in terms of generating new industries. Much of the money is wasted on weapons which are soon out of date and then have to be replaced at greater expense, or on munitions which explode leaving no benefit, or worse leave damage which then has to be paid for. Almost none of this is productive investment – the funds and their results have just consumed people, consumed wealth, and consumed the environment. These funds could have been spent on a vast array of projects which would take away the reason for so much misery and discord in the world.

Even if there is no war at hand, this vast military spending is making war an institution in our societies. It feeds and maintains a belief that violence and war are necessary, and justifiable.

War is Pragmatically Stupid

War is pragmatically stupid because there are much better ways to deal with problems which avoid the horrifying side effects of war, and which do not propagate the violence, sideways and down the generations. How many examples do we have to quote where the provision of weapons and the making of war have led to ongoing suffering? Those countries which spend excessively on weapons instead of social development penalise their peoples for decades (Control Arms Campaign, 2004). War making is, in pragmatic terms, an incredible waste.

Productive farmland can be made unusable for generations. Poisonous residues from explosives pollute the ground. Unexploded munitions and landmines make the land too dangerous to enter, and cause injuries and deaths for decades afterwards. Many of the victims are innocent people who have nothing to do with the arguments that precipitated the conflict years before.

The toll on people is unrelenting, and imposes huge ongoing costs to those countries affected. Individual families and their extended communities will pay for these injuries for decades in terms of extra spending needed for health, education, transport and employment. Antipersonnel landmines and unexploded ordnance such as cluster munitions from the Indo-China Wars in the 1950-1970s are still today killing villagers in Southeast Asia. In Cambodia alone an average of over two people are killed or injured every day. Worldwide, casualties were reported from 65 countries in a 12 month period spanning 2002-3, and the annual toll is still 15,000-20,000 casualties, at least one every half hour (Landmine Monitor Report, 2003).

More insidious effects are those of chemical pollution. Aerial use of toxic and carcinogenic herbicides by the US in Laos and Vietnam has resulted in thousands of deformed children and cancers in adults. In southern Iraq the widespread use of depleted uranium munitions in the 1991 Gulf War has seeded the countryside with uranium which will take hundreds of years to disperse. Here again there are horrifying numbers of congenitally deformed babies.

The violence of war extends laterally into other countries. The Vietnam War spilled into both Laos and Cambodia. Laos is the most heavily bombed country on the planet. Between 1965-73 the US dropped 2 million tons of bombs, many of them cluster bombs. The bombing rate was equivalent to a B52 load, 31 tonnes of bombs, every eight minutes for nine years! This onslaught was directed in an undeclared war at a neighbouring country, against an essentially rural village population at the time of 2.5 million people. Nearly 40 years later this damage is still ongoing. The continuing casualties and the munitions that make land unusable are two factors which keep the people in poverty.

Within any country that engages in warfare the violence also becomes internalised in that society. In fact war is really waged against two sets of victims: those on the opposing side and those in the lower classes of all sides. Inevitably it is the wealthy elite in a country who profit from war, but the lower working classes who pay the costs of death and family trauma. Returned servicemen and women inevitably bring with them the traumas, not only the physical injuries but

also the mental and spiritual damage. Injured veterans commonly do not have the ability to follow work they would previously have enjoyed, and many die prematurely from the effects on their minds and bodies.

In Australia the legacy of the Vietnam War is horrifying. A large number of veterans are barely coping with post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), with a high proportion suffering from nightmares, rage, depression, survival guilt and other mental disorders which severely impair their balanced functioning in the workplace and upset their lives at home. Children of Vietnam veterans have a suicide rate three times the national average, with deaths from illness and accidents also higher than those expected in the normal population (AIHW, 2000). Marital problems have taken an enormous toll on the partners and children. The same is true for hundreds of US servicemen (e.g. Mason, 1984). This legacy of internalised violence and social disruption has lasted for a couple of generations. The annual budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs in Australia for 2003-2004 is A\$10 billion, up from A\$6.4 billion in 1996. This is another of the ongoing costs of war.

The veterans from Vietnam seem to exhibit these trauma reactions more than veterans from previous wars. This is attributed to factors such as the different nature of the war: longer exposures to combat commonly lasting over 300 days, the lack of clear distinction between enemy and civilians, the ambivalent political support for their task, and the fact the soldiers were shunned on return and not treated as heroes. Many soldiers found the face-to-face cleanup after ambushes dreadfully difficult when they discovered it was women or children they had shot. However it is also worth noting that the soldiers had been given very advanced training to ensure they fired to kill (Grossman, 1996). In World War II only 15-20% of combat infantry were willing to aim their rifles to kill. In Korea the proportion was about 50%, while the operant conditioning of Vietnam soldiers aimed to ensure they fired to kill in more than 90% of cases.

It is clear that the vast majority of soldiers historically have avoided killing; there is a very deep, natural aversion to killing another human being (Grossman, 1996). There is evidence that those who kill easily are already mentally unwell, and that killing by anyone imposes, and perhaps even requires, a temporary insanity. The effect of the greater training of Vietnam soldiers to kill continues to have devastating mental and spiritual consequences, for themselves and for all of us who are part of their community.

When political and military leaders, commonly at no danger to themselves, commit their people to war these legacies are inevitable. In the wealthy western countries we do finance some superficial reparation, but what about those in the developing world where foreign powers have supplied the weapons to local rulers, or even prosecuted the violence themselves? In these countries there is very little care for orphaned children, few resources for the extra medical help, and virtually no counselling for the traumas and depression.

Whatever was the original problem, is all this damage pragmatically worth it? Could we not have solved the problem without such horrifying consequences? Of course we could have.

Yet communities across the world are wedded to the concept of national violence as a mechanism to bring peace and stability. It is an ineffective strategy. In contrast, there are a number of examples where nonviolent change has left the country capable of developing peacefully: for example India, Czechoslovakia and Georgia.

War is Spiritually Wrong

There is not a major religion in the world which does not, at its heart and best, advise against war and killing. All the prophets have recognised that such behaviour does not lead to God, or enlightenment, nirvana or salvation, or whatever you want to call the Divine peace.

The ancient Hebrews had it given to them as one of the Ten Commandments: you shall not kill. These Commandments were a major step forward in moral behaviour, and they still stand as the basis of our western criminal law system. Jesus extended them to a total nonviolence: love your enemies, offer the wicked no resistance. These are statements with serious consequences if any are to make them the basis of their lives.

Jesus' earthly life was ended on the cross. He did not take the opportunity to call on his many followers to resist the Romans or the Hebrew elders of the Sanhedrin with force. He did not flee into hiding. His example is: the cycle of violence stops with me, I will not pass it on. The Buddhist doctrine is similar: abstain from killing. And on the deeper level the *Dhammapada* teaches: "Hatred never ceases through hatred in this world. Hatred ceases through loving kindness. This is an ancient Law." These two examples could be supplemented by many

others. The lesson is that the great spiritual leaders have taught that killing and violence are wrong.

For most of us it is very distressing that national rulers and governments operate in ways we would never do. Few in any society, other than damaged and psychotic individuals, justify violence, murder, torture or terror as acceptable ways to solve problems on a personal basis. Every society has a moral and spiritual basis to avoid these behaviours, yet nationally all countries routinely have justified the most appalling behaviours. Political leaders present arguments based on fear or self interest, or so-called just wars, and proceed to organise murder, torture and terror. This schizophrenic attitude reflects on us all, and within us all. We know in our hearts it is wrong.

Yet we are part of it. As Australians we help legitimise the terror spread by the present American regime, and I need to oppose that in any way possible. For us as Quakers, opposing violence is a direct spiritual leading. While we may use rational, financial or pragmatic arguments to bolster a public case, the real reason for us is that killing and violence are wrong, no matter whether the effects are large or small.

EARLY STRUGGLES OF FRIENDS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PEACE TESTIMONY

There are good books written on this subject which cover far more history than I can (e.g. Brock, 1990: Hess, 1992, and references therein). My purpose here is more limited: to recollect some aspects of the world into which the first Friends were born, and within which they had to find a way.

The followers of John Wyclif, the Lollards, had in 1395 tacked twelve conclusions to the doors of Westminster Abbey and St Pauls Cathedral. The tenth of these stated killing was wrong:

...This conclusion is openly proved by (the) example of Christ's preaching here in earth, the which most taught for to love and to have mercy on his enemies and not for to slay them ... (Brock, 1990, p.1).

In those times such an attitude was termed the pacifist heresy by many who believed it was holy to fight and even to kill in the defence of self, of justice, or of the realm, or of the Christian Church.

Elsewhere in Europe the Anabaptists and the Mennonites both argued against the force of arms, as did a mystical group the Muggletonians, whose co-founder, John Reeve, said in the 1650s that his followers were not "to take the sword of steel and slay their brothers, because they know that man is the image of God ..." (Quoted in Brock, 1990, p.6). So it is clear that the Quaker Peace Testimony had earlier roots to draw upon. The Lollards and the Muggletonians died out, though the Mennonites remain strong today.

This time was obviously one of great religious ferment. The Bible was available in English, there were questionings of mainstream Church authority, other groups such as the Seekers and the Diggers were searching for more real spiritual forms of prayer and worship, and several groups were openly advocating nonviolence.

A result of all this religious ferment was a great political struggle, between the monarchy and those wanting the common people to have a greater say in the country's destiny. The king, Charles I, had been executed in 1642 as part of a civil

war between the royalists and the parliamentarians. Oliver Cromwell was Protector of the Commonwealth from 1649 till his death in 1658. His son Richard Cromwell replaced him but was indecisive, and political instability ensued. In 1659 the Rump parliament was in place, and there were some who tried to rally the Quaker movement behind a fresh attempt at the republican cause. In October a military coup had replaced the Rump. It was a very confusing and uncertain time. In 1660 Charles II entered London and the Restoration of the Monarchy was complete with his coronation in 1661. However the urge for social change and religious toleration did continue with a series of parliamentary measures leading up to the Bill of Rights in 1688 and the Toleration Act in 1689.

This radical political reform was one in which the early Quakers were deeply involved and to which they were deeply committed. Many of the men who would join the early Quakers had served in Cromwell's army. For example, James Naylor had been a senior military officer before he was a leading Quaker (Bittle, 1986, p.4-5). It is likely, though I cannot find a specific reference, that these early Quakers who had been wearing swords and were heavily involved in the army had also been involved in the wounding and killing. No wonder that later they were called "changed men".

There were many who saw this struggle as a turn of the Millennium, that the old ways would be swept away and replaced by a society which operated on the leadings of the Holy Spirit, the coming of the Kingdom on Earth. These were huge changes. The established order of royal and feudal rule, which had existed for centuries, was in the process of being overthrown. And, as the human race has usually done things, it was being overthrown with violence and killing.

However many Friends gradually came to be convinced that bearing arms and killing, for whatever worldly cause, was inconsistent with the Truth. In 1655 William Dewsbury expressed it as:

At that time did the wars begin in this nation ... Then I was willing to give my body to death, in obedience to my God, to free my soul from sin, and I joined with that little remnant which said they fought for the gospel, but I found no rest among them. And the word of the Lord came unto me and said, 'put up thy sword into thy scabbard; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my children fight', which word enlightened my heart and discovered the mystery of iniquity, and that the Kingdom of God was within, and the enemies was within, and was spiritual, and my weapons against them must be spiritual, the power of God Then I could no longer

fight with a carnal weapon against a carnal man, and returned to my outward calling, and my will was brought in subjection for the Lord to do with me what his will was. (QFP : Quaker Faith and Practice, 1999, # 19.45)

The result created a serious problem for the army, and the authorities became alarmed at the spread of Quakerism among soldiers under their command. It is clear these Quaker men still wanted to continue the struggle for the Good Old Cause, but they were not willing to do it using violence. In 1656, Henry Cromwell, Oliver's other son and the commander in Ireland, reported : "Our most considerable enemy now in our view are the Quakers. I think their principles and practices are not very consistent with civil government, much less with the discipline of an army." There were wholesale expulsions from the army of anyone with Quaker sympathies. And many of those expelled were much aggrieved for they had committed themselves to the political changes for which the army was formed.

But how many Quakers were really committed to nonviolence? During the 1650s there is evidence of militancy among many Quakers, and there was no clear testimony.

Where did George Fox stand? Earlier he had made qualified statements on nonviolence, although in 1654 he had even argued that the English armies should continue the armed fight against the papacy on the continent. Through the 1650s Fox clearly refused to take up weapons himself, but allowed that others might use violence to establish a just society. At the time there were two separate groups of Quakers: those who rejected the use of any violence, and those more militant Quakers (such as Edward Burrough and Thomas Curtis) who accepted that violence was a legitimate way for a righteous cause. So Fox himself was struggling with the issue, both personally and in terms of leading and holding together the growing Quaker movement (more details in Ingle, 1994). In the second half of 1659 Fox was withdrawn and deeply depressed. It is probable that Fox was wrestling with the dilemma facing the Quakers: whether to use force of arms to establish a new, more godly political and social order or whether to renounce all arms, and work through nonviolent means (as discussed by Brock, 1990, p.22).

The collapse of the utopian dreams was almost complete as the country, after the social experiment of people power in the Commonwealth, reverted to a traditional model of the monarchy. Not that the move towards political reform and

religious tolerance was dead, just that it was not achievable at that time. The realisation that a wonderful new world would not happen must have been difficult to accept then, just as it is for us now.

With the country not yet stable the motives of early Quakers were under scrutiny. In the fourth month (June) 1660 Margaret Fell composed a statement directed to King Charles II and both Houses of Parliament. It was signed by George Fox and 11 other leading Friends, and made a clear corporate statement that Quakers: "...do deny and bear our testimony against all strife, and wars ...” (see QFP, 1999, #19.45).

Social and political unrest continued, and over three days (evening of 6th to 9th) of the eleventh month of 1660 (January 1661 in the modern calendar) a millenarian sect, the Fifth Monarchy Men, made an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the government. Several days of chaotic searching of houses by soldiers and guards ensued. Many Quakers were rounded up and imprisoned, either in gaols or under guard in inns, suspected of collaborating with the rebels. This harassment and jailing of Quakers for plotting violence was the crisis which led to the public declaration we now know as our Peace Testimony. Quickly George Fox and Richard Hubberthorne drafted the document, which was signed by themselves and ten other Friends, and then printed for sale and distribution. It was presented to the King on 21st day of the eleventh month 1660. I cannot avoid quoting the well-known extracts.

Our principle is, and our practices have always been, to seek peace, and to ensue it, and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and the welfare, and doing that which tends to the peace of all All bloody principles and practices we do utterly deny, with all outward wars and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever, and this is our testimony to the whole world That spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil, and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world. (QFP, 1999, # 24.04. The full version is in Nickalls, 1975, p.398-404.)

“... neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.” was a very important statement for it said not only that armed struggle was

unacceptable to gain worldly possessions, but more, neither was such violence acceptable to extend the church on Earth. Armies had been fighting for centuries to subdue other religious cultures. Christians were no different, having been involved in the Crusades against Islamic cultures, as well as the wars between Papal Roman Catholic armies and Protestant communities in Europe. For most people this fighting to defend or extend the Church would have been a totally acceptable thing to do.

There is little doubt this statement was originally written as an urgent measure to prevent imminent and serious persecution of early Quakers. It declared that Quakers did not and would not take up arms against the King. There was no time to have it considered by meetings throughout the country. It was a policy done on the run. Yet it is an extremely important document, which has grown in importance over the years to be one of our most cherished and inspiring pieces of writing.

This declaration codified a Quaker attitude that had been developing over a decade of troubled debate and searching. Henceforth Quakers were firmly under the banner of nonviolence. I often marvel at the way early Quakers came through this period. After all, they were not operating in a stable country, they were doing this in a situation of civil war. It was a time of great unrest, such as we can scarcely understand, and also a time of great openings of the Spirit.

A key conclusion of the declaration is the distinction drawn between carnal or outward weapons, and spiritual weapons. Fox had come to the complete realisation that whatever the world does, we cannot fight it with worldly weapons. The struggle is a spiritual one. And the main venue for this struggle is inside each one of us. The real battle is in here, not out there.

That is a big change for any of us. We all tend to tackle worldly problems and struggles with worldly weapons, and despair when they fail. Fox and many of the early Quakers saw through all this. The struggle is within, and only when that is well under way can any serious change be made externally.

In this internal battle one side has to die. It is as if we are two parts: one is the person who has grown and followed a life, however reasonable and ethical, in fact a life dictated mainly by the worldly needs to earn and become wealthy and secure, and to fulfil personal goals and ambitions. The other person is who we could become under the direction of the Spirit. In the internal struggle, one of these has to die.

THE COMMITTED LIFE AND LOSS OF SELF

The committed life seeks to live under the guidance of the Spirit - to weld the inner and the outer. Most of us find we can do little outer without some inner, so I now want to talk, from my own experience, about the inner search for peace, and how the two fit together.

Let me be clear though: in my experience there is no lasting inner peace. Seeking an inner peace so that every day we feel at peace, so that life is tranquil, and unhurried, so that life is happy and yet worthwhile, so that all our interactions are happy and warming, is in my experience heading for disappointment. In fact such a state is more focussed on personal comfort and happiness than on following the lead of the Spirit. My experience is that working for peace has plenty of uncomfortable feelings, difficult attitudes from others, long hours of work, frustrations, disappointments and tiredness.

Two days before he died, George Fox had emerged from a Meeting for Worship and had felt the cold strike his heart. Thomas Ellwood's epilogue to Fox's Journal (Nickalls, 1975, p.759-760) records that Fox

being much out of order was forced to go to bed, where he lay in much contentment and peace, and very sensible to the last." Several Friends visited, "unto some of whom he said 'All is well. The Seed of God reigns over all, and over death itself. And though I am weak in body, yet the power of God is over all, and the Seed reigns over all disorderly spirits,' and that two days later Fox '... quietly departed this life in peace, and sweetly fell asleep in the Lord ...'

It is clear that George Fox was in a state of spiritual peace. Yet his life had been a huge struggle. He had suffered physically in ways that might have destroyed a less robust person. Many times he had recorded he was troubled, he had obviously known first hand of the internal jarrings and janglings. He had had great certainty of leading through all these troubles, a faith in the leading of the Spirit. His life's work was driven from the heart not just from the head. Fox was a man of prayer, not just a man of action.

So let us move from the head to the heart. While the head with all its intellectual ability - the mind - is the tool for sorting out worldly problems, the heart is the tool for prayer. Many ancient writings, for instance *The Cloud of Unknowing* written anonymously in England in the 1200s, are quite explicit: the intellect is a block to spiritual insight and progress. No ifs, no buts, no question, a block.

This is a major problem for many of us because we have been trained by school and other education, and by experience to think our way through problems. We know clear thinking is invaluable in dealing with the demands of the material world and also with the complexities of the huge range of people we interact with in our work and play.

Meditation is primarily a way to empty ourselves of the ramblings of the mind. Buddhist literature emphasises control of the mind, and being able to ignore it to silence when needed. As a monk once said to me: “You have to empty the bucket of dirty water before you can fill it with clean water”.

Prayer is not an exercise of the mind it is an exercise of the heart. Meditation is mainly a way of gently letting thoughts of the mind disperse to create space for the Spirit. And when in silent prayer we find our thoughts returning to a careful analysis of a problem, weighing the pros and cons, or worse still being diverted to another interesting issue which we have thought through and on which it feels good to reassure ourselves we have got it right - this is really spiritual escapism. In prayer, when we become aware of these thoughts, the task is to quietly let them go. I find it important to accept that these thoughts will come for an hour or so, each wanting to be noticed, and then being despatched. Pushing and fighting them, or castigating yourself is not helpful. As Francis de Sales says “back to the Master’s side”. Not my will but thine.

Why do we so easily turn to thoughts? Partly it is the mind just throwing up the concerns of the moment. Though we can also allow it to happen because it is easier to think through an issue. It avoids the harder work and the uncertainty of prayer. What if the Spirit prompts me to do something I cannot do or am not ready to do or am fearful of doing? Better stay in the mental space where I can make a rational decision not to!

My own response for several years when I worked at the university was “Not yet Lord”. In the end I had to leave a well paid academic job to allow space

for the Spirit to do the serious work, yet I was too cautious to do it before the children had left school.

Of course the Spirit does use our intellect and common sense in living and working for a better world. However in prayer we are seeking a deep communion with the Spirit, and in that job we have to let go of the mind because it is no longer useful. Yet the two are linked, and the more time we practise prayer the more it feeds into our daily lives. I am sure that we have all experienced this: that in those times when we each practise prayer daily the effects become more visible. Thomas Kelly was sure of it too, referring to being able to live on two planes (Kelly, 1941, p.35-38). There is a great reassurance in genuinely feeling the Spirit is with us, and directing us, in our struggles within this world.

God has no eyes but our eyes, no ears but our ears, no mouth but our mouth, no hands but our hands.

This saying has been attributed to Teresa of Avila, and it is as clear a statement as St Francis' prayer "Make me an instrument of thy peace". Our problem is to make sure it is the Spirit guiding us and not our own, somewhat mixed-up, Self.

How can we get closer to this point? There is a line in the Miserere, Psalm 51: "Give me thy free Spirit"

We might think that a person of free spirit is one who operates with gay abandon, unshackled by traditional habits, at least always willing to follow their own impulses. I think the Psalm is a bit different to this, at least it is for me. For me it is a prayer that the Spirit operate freely through me. How often do we hold back from a leading through prejudice, lack of confidence or courage? The Spirit is not free to operate. Would we as individuals and as a community be different if we allowed the Spirit to be free. We cannot ensure the Spirit is free in everyone else, but we can do it for ourselves. We must do it for ourselves: that is the reason we were born.

Jesus' admonition to "Take the beam from your own eye before being concerned about the mote in another's eye" is true. On one level it is a daily advice to be careful of criticising others. On the deeper level it is an instruction for us to work on our own opening to the Spirit, and less about another's situation. In terms of this discussion, it is a reminder to start working on our own peace not just to be concerned with another's warring behaviour.

Nelson Mandela observed that “To change a community is easy. To change yourself is much harder.” How often have I felt that I have changed myself, and it is the world which is at fault. It is a huge battle to change the world. I and many others have sat in peace meetings agonising about all that is so terribly wrong. And this awareness of what is wrong tortures our hearts. We feel very far from peace. Mandela did change things greatly and yet his belief is the opposite - changing the world is the easy part! Maybe I am not as changed as I imagined.

What processes of personal spiritual change and growth can we rely upon?

I turned to one of the long-standing writers on the Christian life - Thomas a’Kempis - who wrote some advices and discourses assembled into a volume called *The Imitation of Christ*, which was known before 1427. Thomas a’Kempis had been influenced by the Brethren of the Common Life, a group which had a wide following of religious and lay people committed to simple devotional lives, with some forming Christian communities as they imagined had lived in New Testament times. He wrote from an ascetic Christian tradition, primarily for male monks, and there is some stuff about punishment as well. However I choose not to let that ruin all he says, and I want to consider three short quotes:

There is nothing that pollutes and entangles the human heart so much as an unpurged love for things that have been created (p.86, all these quotes come from the Imitation of Christ, 1971 Fontana Books edition)

Sounds just like a Buddhist admonishing cravings and attachments. Though I note Thomas a’Kempis does say ‘unpurged love’, for surely there is much in creation to love and wonder at. The essence is what is the prime attachment. This takes some clear examination of our inner desires:

You have to learn to bring your desires wholly into line with my will ... (p.128)

Before I continue the quote, I can feel strongly what has often been said: how much wrong has been perpetrated by those who are sure they know the will of God. For me I normally think of the Way of God. I try to avoid asking to be shown God’s will and be told what to do. There is a spiritual danger for me here because it is easy to give myself a bit of satisfied, internal self-congratulation that at least this time you have done what God told you. In this lies an element of

pride, and that is a spiritual trap. I find it more helpful to ask to be shown the Way that I may follow, but that is not the language of Thomas a' Kempis. Let me go on.

You have to learn to bring your desires wholly into line with my will. You must be no lover of your own ends, but a man who endeavours with all his heart to do what pleases me. You are often full of enthusiasm for some scheme, but you must stop and consider whether your real motive is to honour me or bring yourself some advantage. If you are doing it for me you will be content with whatever I decree, but if there is any suggestion of personal gain, you will find yourself burdened and hindered. So take care not to throw yourself wholeheartedly into any scheme until you have first consulted me, or later on you may find yourself regretting and hating it, though you were so enthusiastic and pleased at first. You are not meant to go off at once after every impulse that looks a good one, nor should you run away at first sight from every unwelcome sensation. (p.128)

Some stern advice for testing my leadings if ever I heard it! This was a passage which had a large impact on me a couple of years ago, when I realised I did have serious thoughts that the peace work I was doing was important because I thought it was important, and that it might lead to even more important peace work. I was operating from satisfaction at intellectual understanding of the issues, but not from a centre of compassion.

In fact I realised with some dismay that I had only been pretending to be a Quaker for some years. This continues to trouble me. I am not really grasping the spiritual opportunity, and that while I have become increasingly aware of the answer I have difficulty embracing it.

And the third quote:

... you can only enter into my being as you escape from your own.
(p.203)

This I believe is the Way.

Since we are Quakers I want to draw on that spiritual heritage too. The essence of George Fox's experience and message is (and I say is, not was) the opposite of two ideas in Christianity which continue to prevail today. Firstly that salvation is solely due to the miraculous life of Jesus Christ two thousand years ago when he was crucified and rose again, and secondly that even today the

transfer of this salvation to ourselves requires the intervention of trained priests and the weekly Eucharist. George Fox, picking up the feeling of many seekers and others of his time, did not subscribe to these two beliefs. He certainly placed great value on the teachings and example of Jesus, but he realised it did not all happen two thousand years ago and stop there.

He accepted, quite literally, Jesus' astonishing declaration that "the kingdom of God is within you." What do you mean - here and now? In this room? For those of the Hebrew nation which in Jesus' time had been waiting for the Messiah for centuries, this was a wonderful message. Fox said it was still true in the 1600s. We say it is still true now.

How many of us have really believed that and accepted its practical implications? We may say we do, yet how much of our lives are spent doing just the opposite? Much of our everyday behaviour shows that our journey towards God and spiritual peace is best served by reading countless books, talking about it, making actions, denouncing politicians ... How many of us accept what Jesus said and act upon that - in other words, devoting much of our time and effort to seeking that of God within us?

We are aware, almost as Quaker clichés, of George Fox's statements: "Mind that which is pure" and "Stand in the Light". When we pray I think many of us hope we will see the Light in all its glory and be transformed, but every time we see internally just a black void. A common response is to feel despondent. It reminds us every time how far we have to go. It does not give us the blessed relief and peace we crave.

For this Light very commonly starts by revealing that which is wrong in us, making us quite uncomfortable, showing us what were called sins, what stood as blocks between us and God. I have had this experience many times.

However we would not have even noticed those flaws had not the internal Light shone to reveal them. The Light is rarely a Damascus experience. If the Spirit is gently but clearly revealing a flaw to be fixed, you can rest assured you are standing in the Light, just as your shadow is cast by sunlight upon a path. Without the Light you would not see your own defects just as without the Sun your shadow would never be obvious on the path.

Fox's advice is clear "Mind that which is pure in you to guide you to God". (Quoted from *Many Select and Christian Epistles of George Fox, 1698*, by Lloyd,

1950, p.66 and in Nickalls, 1975, p.xxviii). George Fox differed from so many preachers in that he did not say focus on the sin and beat it out or suffer damnation. Instead, he said forgo your own thoughts and justifications and fears. Instead focus on the Light. Accept the defect shown by the Light for what it is, but cast your attention to the Light. It is the Seed.

Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind unto the Lord God, whereby thou wilt receive his strength and power from whence all life comes, to allay all tempests, against blusterings and storms ...

Therefore be still a while from thy own thoughts, searching, desires and imaginations, and be stayed in the principle of God in thee, to stay thy mind upon God, up to God

And now as the principle of God in thee hath been transgressed, come to it, to keep thy mind down low, up to the Lord God; and deny thyself. And from thy own will, that is, the earthly, thou must be kept ...

What the light doth make manifest and discover, temptations, confusions, distractions, distempers, do not look at the temptations, confusions, corruptions, but at the light which discovers them, that makes them manifest; and with the same light you will feel over them, to receive power to stand against them ... For looking down at sin, and corruption, and distraction, you are swallowed up in it; but looking at the light which discovers them, you will see over them. That will give victory; and you will find grace and strength: and there is the first step of peace. (Letter to Lady Claypole, quoted in Nickalls, 1975, p.346-347)

William Penn, while imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1669 wrote No Cross, No Crown, an essay of exhortation to the Christian life. In it he writes about his experience of both the Light and its role in changing our lives from self-directed to Spirit-led. Penn talks of the Light,

That first showed thee thy sins and reproved them, and enabled thee to deny and resist them ... So that the cross mystical is that divine grace and power which crosseth the carnal wills often, and so may be justly termed the instrument of man's holy dying to the world and being made conformable to the will of God ... The great work and business of the cross in man is self-denial, a word little understood by the world, but less embraced by it; yet it must be borne for all that. (Quaker Classics in Brief, 1978, p.7,8,9)

These are unusual sentiments for us to hear and accept. I do not imagine this is a call to daily breast-beating and public martyring of our own needs. However these are the words of people who were changed men, and if they say this is important, my guess is they are right.

John of the Cross was sure too. He taught that we could not cope with the full intensity of the Light; witness what it did to Saul. We get it in small doses. For it is that Light which starts as a seed which we have to nurture so it grows. Each time we have to respond - how?

A gentle letting go of our own will and asking the Spirit to help is the Way. We are in a place where thought is not the tool, prayer is. The Spirit may then guide us to do something practical in our lives to help a problem disappear or be controlled. Submission is a word which comes to mind.

Isaac Pennington had clearly felt that call:

Give over thine own willing, give over thy own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee and be in thee and breathe in thee and act in thee; and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of Life, which is its portion. (QFP, 1999, # 26.70)

William Penn, also in *No Cross No Crown*, considers the simple needs of life but notes they too are subject to God's direction :

... conveniency, ease, and enjoyment, and plenty, which in themselves are so far from being evils that they are the bounty and blessings of God to us: as husband, wife, child, house, land, reputation, liberty, and life itself - these are God's favours, which we may enjoy with lawful pleasure, and justly improve as our honest interest. But when God requires them, I say, when they are brought in competition with him, they must not be preferred; they must be denied. It is too much the sin of the best part of the world that they stick in the comforts of it, and 'tis lamentable to behold how their affections are bemired and entangled with their conveniences and accommodations in it. (Quaker Classics in Brief, 1978, p.10)

Robert Barclay in his Apology for the True Christian Divinity brings several of these strands together, as was his great gift, and his contribution in setting down the basic tenets of the Quaker Way was first published in 1676:

This great duty then of waiting upon God, must needs be exercised in man's denying self, both inwardly and outwardly, in a still and mere dependence upon God, in abstracting from all the workings, imaginations, and speculations of his own mind, that being emptied as it were of himself, and so thoroughly crucified to the natural products thereof, he may be fit to receive the Lord, who will have no co-partner nor co-rival of his glory and power. (Quaker Classics in Brief, 1978, p.73)

John Woolman had a graphic vision in which his Self died, yet we can note that it only came after many years of faithfully following the leadings of the Spirit and of denying common human needs and ambitions. It was in 1743, when he was 23, at the start of his public ministry, that he bowed to the Spirit, and refused to write a bill of sale for a negro slave. It was in 1770, 27 years later when the vision came:

I then heard a soft, melodious voice, more pure and harmonious than I had heard with my ears before; I believed it was the voice of an angel who spoke to the other angels; the words were, 'John Woolman is dead' ... Then the mystery was opened and I perceived there was joy in heaven over a sinner who had repented, and that the language 'John Woolman is dead' meant no more than the death of my own will. (Journal, p.214, 215)

It is the same for most of us. This gradual process requires much hard work and self-denial, takes many years and does not result in a single major religious experience. Yet through all that, it brings greater awareness of God's love, comfort and instruction, greater clarity of purpose in life, and gradually some inner peace.

Once we have experienced a spiritual opening and are aware of the potential, it never leaves us. We can dismiss it for a while, or submerge it in work or idleness, but the call is there. What we have to do is answer the call by denying our Self.

Yet we must undertake that journey without expecting great rewards.

How difficult this is for most of us, who have spent much of our lives learning to think and analyse, to accumulate the reasonable comforts of life, and to build a strong sense of personal individuality. This loss of Self is not simply destruction of ego and self-abasement. It is a struggle to let go of many of the habits and ambitions which are no longer useful.

Yet it is still difficult because if we relinquish our own control - what is left? Nothing - just an emptiness awaiting, hopefully, the Spirit. That is a rare process and step for any of us to take. We do not willingly allow ourselves into areas of uncertainty. We abhor being left in the dark.

This struggle to overcome the Self is integral to allowing the Spirit free rein.

TO FIND OUR WAY

To find our way we need the Spirit's help, and whenever it comes, it is a gift. Typically my own, natural, internal response is gratitude for the merciful release from pain. And even that response hardly seems to come from me - more as if it is another gift from the Spirit in acknowledgement to God.

None of us can control the movement of the Spirit. We cannot think it into existence. No way can even the most intellectually strong person turn it on or turn it off. As Henry Higgins would say in *My Fair Lady* when faced with similar impotence "Damn, Damn, Damn". So if we are to discover a new truth, a new peace, a new freedom for the Spirit, how do we find our way?

My own experience has drawn on the long traditions of several spiritual faiths, and in particular recognises that we can use all that is available to help us by practising three things: private reading, personal prayer and group worship.

Private Reading

Private reading, either alone or over the family table registers daily the importance of spiritual input. My own preference is to be alone and commonly I read only a short passage, seeking not so much to analyse and understand, as to allow the spiritual weight of the words to work on me. The method of the *lectio divina* is my way.

This is not the reading we do to get on top of issues. That reading is important to give us the facts and figures, and some rational understanding of the problems and solutions. It helps stabilise our anxieties and prepares us to engage the debate, either in public or talking with people individually. We also read to get new perspectives on our internal journey, or inspiration from the examples of others. Yet we can read good book after good book, one thoughtful article after another, and be ready for the next recommendation from a friend, always chasing the answer. That is part of the journey - always searching - but not the only part to be given attention.

Private reading to prepare for prayer is very different. The spiritual answer is not in the written word or in the visual stimulus. While most of us find regular reading helps us grow spiritually and stimulates our meditations, we cannot expect it to be the prime teacher. The reading or meditation upon a picture or nature is good to focus our attention, and in this context its major value is to lead us inward. Staying with the words imprisons us in the intellect. In doing so we may get some satisfaction that we understand what is going on, but it stops us hearing the Spirit. The Spirit is the real guide.

It is important to learn the point at which to let the words or the sounds go, and ask to be taken deeper and away from the mind.

Personal Prayer

Many people practise an awareness of God during their daily round, or the prayer known as the Review of Consciousness each night before retiring to bed (see Hughes, 1985, p.77-79, 94-95). For many years I was too exhausted at the end of the day to think about anything, and my best prayer times were when I woke at 3 am and went to sit by myself. I viewed these wakeful hours in the night, due partly to stress, as the Spirit calling me to attention. These are precious hours.

In my experience prayer takes determined effort. It takes discipline to maintain the daily practice, and committed attention to pray and not relax into thinking about other matters. Sometimes an hour or two is needed. There are times when I need an extended period alone – perhaps even a whole day.

Group Worship

The meeting for worship is our Quaker method of prayer together. It is a time for each of us to spend some time centring and letting the world go, and opening ourselves to the messages of the Spirit through a much greater number of channels than just ourselves alone. There is great support in having others with you. Robert Barclay's analogy was that the Light from many candles is much greater than one alone, and enables the message of the Spirit to be seen far more readily and clearly. For me I tend to put the cares and concerns aside and say, "Yes they are important and I will deal with them in due course, for now is the time to spend with the Spirit". Not uncommonly ministry will address one of those worries.

The end result of prayer is a person more prepared, not flawless or always right, but more prepared. For most of us, our lives are not a process of thinking and then acting. Most of the time we are too busy doing it, we are in it up to our necks. We say or do. It just comes naturally forth from us, and that is why what a person says and does is such a clear indicator of what they are inside. We are being. And if we wish to be more centred in our speech and actions then we must prepare daily for this.

Putting it into Practice

Quaker practice draws on two quite separate traditions of following the Spirit, and putting a leading into practice (see also Gregory, 1968).

The first is the impulse to prophesy - to give forth the Truth, to speak truth to power, to say what we are absolutely sure is right. These are times of instant awareness of the truth on particular issues. In such statements we are drawing the lines between what is right and what is wrong, we are asserting the differences. Today we hesitate to put this forth as the word of God, in the manner of an Old Testament prophet, yet that is exactly what many early Friends believed they were doing. This prophetic practice is the ancient Hebrew legacy.

The second is to express the Spirit as the link both vertically to God and laterally to our fellow humans and to all creation. This inclusive spirit convinces us of the link between all, and of a deep, eternal, intangible source of life and truth. If we could grasp it fully, be at one with it, be at one with God, we would always know what to say and do. This understanding has been identified as the Greek legacy, so clearly stated in the first words of John's Gospel. However this and also John's other teachings, especially his division of life into light and dark, may also be derived from the Essenes, a Hebrew sect with whom certainly John the Baptist, and most likely Jesus and the disciples were all familiar (Brown, 1988, p.11-15, 110).

Where does each of us stand with these two mystical legacies? When is each of us called to speak out and when to work devotedly to build the links? Both forms of witness are valid.

It seems to me that most of us are far more comfortable with the second than the first. That is absolutely normal. So were most of the great prophets.

Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah were all uncertain about taking on the prophetic role and felt a bit inadequate until God reinforced the leading and gave confidence. Many of our Quaker forbears felt the same way.

Most of the time we make rational decisions that minimise danger and uncertainty. When faced with a significant decision for action in life, especially when there is time to consider the options, it is not uncommon there will be two choices. One choice will take some effort and action, and we can do that knowing we will be left fairly comfortably where we are, in a position we have foreseen as acceptable, and which takes account of our fears and prejudices (Castle, 1973, Chapter VI). Typically we can see we will be OK in the end.

The other choice is commonly more difficult but has an element of 'rightness' about it. Yet this choice does not take account of our other misgivings about our abilities or resilience. Almost always the end is not clear. We cannot see where we will sit afterwards and be reassured everything will be OK. Yet the stirring is there. What a dreadful dilemma.

What do we see in our spiritual heroes: Fox, Lucretia Mott, Gandhi, Mandela, Francis of Assisi, Oscar Romero, William Penn, Isaac Pennington? Surely they have taken the second path more often than not. Well, we are not all Foxes and Gandhis and Mandelas, but the bidding is there. In small things and in large things the choice is ours.

In all this there is a breaking of the former Self. The Gandhi who led India in Nonviolence was not the Gandhi who dressed and trained as a British lawyer, the Mandela who initiated the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was not the violent freedom fighter.

Each of us is an agglomeration: our natural born selves, together with all our experiences, and affected not only by all the supportive comments but also by the warped and stupid advice we may have been given. Then, for many there is also the additional pain inculcated by ignorant or damaged adults when we were children. All of this we are asked to re-examine, and much of it to throw away. We cannot mind what is pure if we spend so much of our time focussed on all this useless baggage. We are in fact spending our lives minding that which is impure and damaging.

And for those of us imprisoned in a tomb of pain from these events, this change is extremely difficult. Perhaps the question to ask is: why do we hang on

to them? Can we let go for long enough to ask God to help us? In other words, can we give up our control and let the Spirit do the work for us?

The early Quakers also called themselves the Children of Light. A reference to themselves as children may sound a bit quaint, and reminds us of Jesus' advice to become like little children. In worldly terms this is beyond us as adults. That is not our role in life. In real life little children are protected and led by adults. They have no ability to provide for themselves, tend to follow when asked, sit and wait when told to, and hope to grow into something they cannot yet even fully imagine.

Is that not where most of us are in the spiritual life? We know almost nothing, we do not know how to go forward, we desperately need a guide. Until we are willing to make that admission and be like children, *with no pretence* we have the power to do it ourselves, we have not much chance of progress or peace.

Keeping pace with the Spirit

How do we do work for peace? In any way we can! The Spirit will show us. The written and other experience of many people is that the Spirit does not take you so far, and say "Well Bloggs, that is as far as you are capable of going. Nothing much more I can do for you". The experience is that the Spirit is ready as soon as we are for the next steps. One of the things God gives us is the power to change. One of the things we have to do is consent to that change.

I am sure we are called to shine our light on any difficult situation - show evil for what it is, but also focus on what can be done.

One of the things about serious proposals for violence or wrong is that they make the decisions much clearer. When life is acceptably comfortable and simple there is not much to exercise the role of the Spirit other than gratitude. However when there are major issues, the scope is there to make the stand. It is common for people to admit that some of their most important spiritual journey was accomplished in times of great difficulty or anguish, for that is when prayer and dependence are deepest.

People often propose extreme situations to test the consistency of our faith. What would you do if faced with Hitler, or if there was a murderer at the door? Sometimes we propose these disaster scenarios inside ourselves, and they arise

from very normal subconscious fears. I think many of us could be honest in saying these thoughts arise because we are scared of locking ourselves into a totally nonviolent stance where we would not be able to defend ourselves or our loved ones in times of mortal danger.

I think the first response is to say I do not know how I would react. I will take the nonviolent path as far as I possibly can but I cannot promise to live it unto my own death because I have never been faced with that situation and I am not sure how I would handle it. Is this just a cop-out? I do not believe so - I think it is how we tackle all life. We commit ourselves to be loving but know we are not always so, we commit to telling the Truth, but know the grey lies slip in. This is not an excuse to accept and keep repeating these failures, though some may use it as such. They are reminders of the path still to be travelled and of the need to allow the Spirit more rein.

Secondly we can observe the range of responses by Friends in the past, and accept that each of us will work out our own actions. For example, during all wars, there has been a range of actions taken by Quakers. A few chose to serve in the armed forces, believing they could not stay passive in the face of great evil. Some chose to serve in humanitarian work, such as the Friends Ambulance Unit, and of those, some resigned believing that such service was only allowing the violence to be continued for longer. Some chose conscientious objection, and were reviled and went to prison. Do we hold any of those in judgement? Not likely.

I cannot believe that every person who has been tested or martyred would have been able beforehand to give precise answers to every scenario. The records show that all these people learnt as they went along and that the final examples came after years of change. It does not matter that we cannot guarantee perfection already. So I do not think it matters to say I am not sure. What we can be sure of is that the more we commit our lives to the Spirit, the more faith we can have that when that moment comes we will know how to respond.

I do not find such disaster scenarios helpful. To focus on the impossible task of righting all wrongs is paralysing, and condemns us to despair and helplessness. It is too goal oriented. It reeks of needing success. We do need a vision, but as people of faith we need to remember our role. One of the texts I found helpful is in St Paul's letter to the Hebrews (Hebrews 11:13):

All these died in faith, before receiving any of the things that had been promised, but they saw them in the distance and welcomed them, recognising they were only strangers and nomads on earth.

So a third thing we can all definitely say is that such scenarios are a long way down the track. There is much we can do to build a life and world which will not lead to those ends. Peace will come through the daily efforts of every one of us, through the will and practice of ordinary people like ourselves. Peace-making is an incremental process. Peace is a process, not an end. I am sure that as we each commit ourselves to travelling the path of nonviolence, and submitting to the guidance of the Spirit every day we will each come closer and closer to being able to fully live a life of nonviolence whatever faces us.

Does this mean the Peace Testimony is a sham? Not for me. The Peace Testimony has been a marker for all Friends, and history shows that it is has been a valuable marker, and one to which Friends have aspired and held for hundreds of years, some of them at great cost. Friends have prayed and worked strenuously to live up to it. The fact we wrestle with our adherence is a testament to its value. It is a living statement to guide our actions in the world in line with the teachings of Jesus and the guidance of the Spirit.

It is important to remember that we are not to be examined on how closely we live up to the Peace Testimony. That is not the main aim. Living the lead of the Spirit is the real task of life. As George Fox said “living in the virtue of that life and power which takes away the occasion for all wars”. Then living the Peace Testimony will follow naturally.

And we do this because we know in the depths of our being that we are called to live and act as if we are living in the Kingdom, whether it fully exists on Earth now or not. That is the only way to be true to the Spirit. For many, living any other way is a lie.

The Depth of the Struggle

I want to recall the depth of the struggle. The struggle for peace is not something we can take as serious but not too demanding.

Jesus felt totally at one with the poorer people who were marginalised and manipulated by those with wealth and power. He felt their oppression and

impotence as if they were his own, and there are clear statements in the Gospels of his very human, righteous anger at the Pharisees and Sadducees. Gandhi faced an almost impenetrable wall of racism in South Africa, and an ageless tradition of discrimination against the untouchables in India. Fox was opposed by a Church and State which had no intention of giving away their superior position, and moreover no compunction in using violence and imprisonment to maintain themselves. In all three cases the general public thought these established ways were correct, and opposed change.

I have sometimes had a vivid sense of the overwhelming compassion which each of these three must have felt, and of the moments of total despair and anger at the forces opposing them. Some hint of the depth of the struggle, of the public and personal costs, can be gleaned from a brief consideration of one event in the movement to abolish slavery. Woolman had refused to write the bill of sale for a Negro in 1743. There followed decades of targeted, relentless activism, and even another 95 years later, in 1838, the debate was still vigorous in American society. Many Friends, women and men, in America and in England were passionate campaigners.

In Pennsylvania two prominent speakers against slavery were Angelina and Sarah Grimke, daughters of a wealthy, slave-owning family from South Carolina. These sisters had moved out of their family home, and northwards to become Quakers and to work for abolition. They were eloquent speakers and writers.

Yet many in the Society of Friends did not approve of the anti-slavery agitation, or of “fanatics” like Lucretia Mott. When Sarah sat on the bench reserved at the back of the Meeting House for black members she was eluded, and when she spoke from the floor she was publicly silenced and rebuked. It seems this was not just because she spoke against slavery, but also because she was a woman. The two issues had converged. Women had to fight to become equal partners in the struggle to end slavery. The Grimke sisters must have felt a huge personal cost firstly leaving their family and then being rebuked by their new spiritual community.

In 1838, Pennsylvania Hall had been built by public donations from many organisations irrespective of sect or party, including the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. The Hall was opened on May 14 and its dedication ceremony was on May 15. In Whittier’s introduction to his poem ‘Pennsylvania Hall’ read at the dedication, he notes the hall was erected “that the citizens of Philadelphia should possess a room wherein the principles of Liberty, and

Equality of Civil Rights, could be freely discussed, and evils of slavery fearlessly portrayed". A program of meetings included temperance, Indian rights, physical education for children, colonisation and a meeting of the American Convention of Anti-Slavery Women.

The townspeople were alarmed that both black and white people would be meeting together in the Hall, and a hostile crowd assembled. Posters were placed around the town urging citizens to interfere "forcibly if they must". On the night of 16th May both men and women met together in an unofficial antislavery meeting, unofficial because some members of the female anti-slavery societies still objected to men and women meeting together. The crowd outside had gathered. Margaret Hope Bacon (1986, p.106-107) summarises the next events :

They tried to drown out the speakers throwing bricks and stones. Against the tumult, Angelina Grimke Weld delivered an impassioned antislavery speech, and she was followed by a new recruit, Abby Kelly, a young Quaker teacher from Lynn, Massachusetts.

The next day the mayor suggested that black and white women cease meeting together in order to reduce tensions in the city. When they refused, the mayor threw up his hands and went home, and in the evening the mob burst into the hall and burned it to the ground. They then started for the Motts but were deflected and instead burned several buildings in Philadelphia's black community. Undeterred, the next morning the Anti-slavery Convention of American Women met in Sarah Pugh's schoolhouse.

Thus, only three days after it had been opened Pennsylvania Hall was destroyed, and with it the office of the Pennsylvania Freeman of which Whittier was the editor, including his papers and books. After all that inspired effort and work to build the Hall, one can barely imagine the heights and depths of enthusiasm, excitement, despair and anger, and the renewed commitment which men and women, black and white, felt over those three days. Yet the campaign to end slavery went on.

I find such stories restore my energy and commitment. If they did it, so can we. We face a military and economic dominance today of similar dimensions to slavery in the 1800s. This dominance is causing immense damage, which we know is wrong. We also know those involved cannot really comprehend there is a better way, and we know they will use violence. We know this is a long struggle.

But the even bigger struggle is the internal one.

YIELDING TO THE SPIRIT

In terms of the struggles it was George Fox's advice: "Never heed the tempests, nor the storms, floods nor rains, for the Seed, Christ, is over all." (QFP, 1999, #20.23). Fox's life showed he did not mean ignore it all. Instead, I am sure he meant do not be put off balance by all the distractions and discord, for the Spirit is at work if you and others can let it. That is why Jesus, Gandhi and Fox and many others took time away from others. Luke's Gospel is very clear on this, and says repeatedly that Jesus went away by himself to pray.

I have a very tangible awareness of the great promise at the end of Matthew's Gospel – "I am with you, even unto the end of the world". I understand the statements of Jesus before he was crucified that he would depart and would send the Holy Spirit - as advocate, comforter, guide and teacher. I do not experience a personal closeness to Jesus, and God is just a total unknown. But the promise of the sending of the Spirit is very real.

I find God primarily in silence. I am aware of God in the world around me, but I find the deepest connection and instruction in the silence. And in there I have to wait until the layers of conscious mental activity are quietened. For God is hidden in the silence. I have to follow in there, in my personal prayers and in Meeting. Then I follow the Spirit out of the silence and into the world to undertake what work has been indicated.

For me this is a regular cycle. And when I am too active, things start to unravel, and I am doing things the wrong way. Once I used to make my efforts more urgent and frenetic. No longer. I recognise that the anxious heart and breathing means the need to sit for a day in silence. And where does that need come from? It is the Spirit tugging on that invisible thread and encouraging me back into the silence for another lesson. The Spirit leads me into the silence and then out again.

I have learnt not to demand and expect full instructions for every difficult case I bring with me. Rarely are clear commands given or the action plan laid out. In the silence I get a sense of calmed readiness, and then the release to go forth.

One of the changes which I have felt is the movement away from emotion and towards the Spirit. I was probably not alone in often acting from an emotional

centre, typically a state of anger or passionate indignation at the political or military actions of a person or government. My response was commonly to write an impassioned or well-argued letter; to do something immediately while I was steamed up.

Yet the traditional attitude of Friends has been to be very wary of emotional statements. Why were Friends so wary?

It seems to me firstly, that the judgements we make in such emotionally charged states are not always right. In the emotional moment we are sure this is IT, this is the issue, this is what has to be done and the whole universe should recognise this and help. Yet some time later we can look back and realise that this may not be, or was not, the whole story and the best way.

Secondly it is self-indulgent - we often vent our emotions to make ourselves feel better. That is, we are focussing on our SELF and responding to that, justifying that, and wanting others to hear it for our sakes.

The emotional centre is not the same as the spiritual centre. The heat of emotion, in fact, prevents us discerning clearly the Spirit's directions. My own response now is to go immediately and sit in silence. Only in that way can I operate from a spiritual centre not an emotional centre.

What I need, and I suspect many need, is not an even more urgent effort to force worldly change, but much greater daily devotion. Increasingly I depend on it. Only then can I have some confidence God is with me in what I am doing. Only then can I work effectively for peace.

The Spirit can be like a small spark or fire inside that lights up the path or the issue. For others it is an aching heart, or an uncomfortable churning in the stomach, like a strong stick is twisting. For others it seems as if an internal door or window starts to open and suddenly the air is a little fresher. Sometimes it is as if an unseen hand has sharply turned your head and you immediately see the new path so clearly. These are all signs of the Spirit starting to move inside you. The Spirit is grabbing you and saying "Come, I am ready to work with you". There is a moment's stillness, and then "Are you ready?" That is the point of choice. You can decide - do I follow or stay here where I know my bearings.

Sometimes, as people talk to me about such times and how they feel apprehensive, confused or troubled in spirit, I find myself curiously, and

seemingly perversely, just the opposite. While I can feel their anguish, I also rejoice that the Spirit is at work. It is just so wonderful to be aware of the Spirit starting to seriously engage someone. It reminds me that in fact it is not we who instigate the relationship with God. It is Spirit who reaches out to us.

So what do we each do when the Spirit reaches out and asks us to follow? Have the faith and courage to let go of your self, of your strength and control, allow yourself to be stripped to an internal nakedness. Allow the Spirit to dismantle your emotional and spiritual barriers. This is the internal poverty which will allow your re-making, and the space for God to use you.

When the Light shines internally it is abundantly clear that I personally have nothing to offer. What I thought was strength and competency was fragile and ineffective - just an illusion. What I can offer is to allow that stripping to happen, and then to offer what is left for whatever purpose God intends.

That is the difficult thing about holy obedience: it is entirely up to each of us. You are the only one who hears that call for holy obedience inside yourself, and the only one who knows what you will answer.

If you decline, you may get away with that and be left alone. Or you may find yourself pitched into worse physical and spiritual pain until you submit, as happened to dozens of others before you. A common effect is you gradually lose the ability to think and act clearly as the Spirit removes its unseen support. Frustration and violence are not unknown. The experience of Nebuchadnezzar who became a wild beast when God abandoned him can be a reliable analogue. This discomfort or wretchedness may require someone to help you sit with it until the blocks are removed.

There is a saying - pray as you can and not as you can't. Act the same way. Do not feel dismayed or inadequate if you cannot act or speak in public. Do as you are directed, and whatever is next will follow. Most importantly, start today.

But do not worry that in submitting, all your knowledge and skills and abilities will have to be discarded. Your knowledge and common sense and judgement are what the Spirit wants you to work with; that is why your life has been spent developing them. However they may not be used in the way you are accustomed to using them. More than that, you will not be using them for your own purposes. Somehow a new set of priorities directs their use. The skills and the energy flow more than ever. You will need that extra flow because often

things will be very difficult and you will need all that extra energy and internal support to keep going in the face of massive disappointment and pain.

And yet it is not all such deadly serious talk. When Thomas Merton reached the decision to take his vows he went on a retreat, and at the start of this retreat, he was lying on his face on the church floor with the Father Abbott praying over him. With his mouth in the dust he could not stop laughing. He laughed and laughed. Why? He had actually done the right thing, with all the twists and turns of his turbulent youth, here at thirty three he had done an astounding thing, a wonderful thing, but more than that he acknowledged the Spirit had worked the work in him. In his words:

In fact I could not be sure I knew or understood much of anything except that I believed that You wanted me to take those particular vows in this particular house on that particular day for reasons best known to Yourself, and that what I was expected to do after that was to follow along with the rest and do what I was told and things would begin to become more clear. (Merton, 1975, p. 420-421.)

Whether or not you are ready to obey I can only urge that when you feel the movement of the Spirit you pay great attention. Do not let the opportunity pass to develop the relationship. The parable of the talents has a spiritual lesson - make good use of the first small openings.

Early Friends laid great store on 'Mind that which is Pure'. I am convinced that was not an advice to do what you have been taught is moral and pure, an accumulated conscience. I am sure it is far deeper and more demanding. It is an advice to follow closely the deepest spiritual demands. It is an advice which urges us to forgo the desires of our Self, and leave the way open for the Spirit to have much more influence.

And the example of the saints and spiritual heroes shows us that the way to peace is to have the courage and faith to follow that path. And that path is one of struggle, within ourselves and with the world.

When we look back at the early Quakers we can be amazed at how revolutionary were their lives. The Puritans had revolution-ised England with their commitment to have a society in which the Bible gave the directions for government and business. For them all the answers were in the Scriptures. Quakers went a step further - they admitted that the Spirit is the guide. So they

were not constrained by the Bible, even though they were inspired and justified by it. This admission of the Spirit allowed them to see how to respond to situations that were not already explained in the Scriptures. They were not to be guided by what was in books or established teachings. Their primary source was within and gave new leadings. No wonder the rest of the community was startled and afraid of such developments. No wonder early Friends could be so revolutionary.

Early Quakers started a process which 350 years later is not finished. Many of their revolutionary ideas are now accepted in our community, but by no means all, and not by all. The main testimonies of Truth, Peace, Simplicity and Equality are yet to be fulfilled.

The revolution I feel most strongly is to have a world without weapons - something never countenanced seriously, but one demanded by a life which aims to be lived as if the Kingdom were already here. The Quaker way is just that - to live at every moment as if the Kingdom of God is here and now.

So, what about the inner peace? Is there something we can get now, which will take away all our cares, something that we can hold onto permanently, so we can be happy for the rest of our days? No, that is just wanting something for ourselves. If we want peace we have to work for it - just like Lucretia Mott and Fox and Gandhi and Jesus had to. In William Penn's words: no cross, no crown.

The inner peace comes finally from doing God's work.
The evidence is it can be done. We need not despair.

As Thomas Kelly invites us, let us "Walk with a smile into the dark".
And let us not delay. There is not a day to be wasted.

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