

Quaker Messages from Stephen Pope

A couple of years ago, I was invited to contribute a text once a month to W. Norman Cooper's "Quaker Dial-a-Thought" phone message (Tel. [805] 646-0939). The only criteria were that the texts take about two minutes to read, and that they reflect (my take on) current Quaker thought. The following are my contributions to date.

Note: If you are not accustomed to reading explicitly Christian texts (or explicitly non-Christian texts for that matter), please jump forward to the message on [Are Quakers Christians, and does it matter?](#).

Contents

The Dearest Sibling of the Thunder Storm
The Lighthouse and the Lantern
Quaker Process, Decision-making, and Caring
Word, Deed, and Prayer
My Basic Prayer
A Paragraph about a Lecture about Heaven
Being Light and Love
Starting Young
America as a Quaker Society
It's Here; Heaven is Here!
Quakerism as Art
Redefining "Christian"
[The Continuing Revelation](#)
[Surrender and Spiritual Hunger](#)
[We Are Meaning-seeking Creatures](#)
[On Being Present](#)
[On Feeling Connected](#)
[On the Integration of our Spiritual Lives](#)
[Gratitude, Service, and Responsibility](#)
[Knowing Truth](#)
[Living with a Soft Heart](#)
[Constructive and Prophetic Service](#)
[Dealing with "Difficult" People](#)
[Ubuntu](#)
[Elements](#)
[Are Quakers Christians, and does it matter?](#)
[Why Worship?](#)
[Blessing for Nicholas](#)
[The Way of Growth](#)
[The Challenge of the Closed Door](#)
[On Prayer and Love](#)
[On Prayer and Love \(part 2\)](#)
[When a War Begins, the Peace Witness Does not End](#)
[What is Love?](#)
[Life is a purposeful experience!](#)
[What do we Believe?](#)
[How Tall are You?](#)
[The Nightingale of the East](#)
[How can I lead?](#)

The Dearest Sibling of the Thunder Storm

I had a week recently where I was given several opportunities to marvel at the power of nature. First, I spent several days in the Mojave desert, where the sun provided a kind of heat intensity that I rarely get to experience, and then on the trip home I drove along the beach for a while during a major swell that provided waves quite a bit larger than we typically see here. The day after my return, we had a rare wind storm in Santa Barbara with constant hot winds that seemed to come out of nowhere and disappear back to there.

For some reason, all of this made me feel intimately related to these forces of nature; the experience reminded me that people—I mean we, all of us—are as much parts of nature as any animals or plants or rocks across which we stumble in the course of a day. I was very much saddened that we so often automatically move to negative associations with the parts of our bodies and our behaviors that we consider "animal." We seem to be conditioned to think that our animal or natural components are responsible for the mistakes we make and the vices we have, while the good that's in us and the charity and compassion of which we are capable come from somewhere else that's not quite so messy and profane.

Our bodies—and also our hearts—are natural phenomena; our spirits themselves are as much parts of nature as any beautiful landscape or single sweet flower or innocent kitten on which we might revel. Furthermore, it has been my observation, and the shared experience of Friends for 350 years now, that the spirit, or the Light within each of us, is a primal force of nature, and a strong force at that.

I have now come to think of the Light within as a strong, even violent, force of nature. The Light within each of us is capable of causing huge shifts in energy in all beings within a pretty large distance; the Light within can move you, or scare you, or break you, or console you. The Light within is the dearest sibling of nature's own thunder storm; it is the first cousin of the earthquake! It can change the course of rivers, or heal the deepest wounds we can imagine inflicting on one another, or guide any of us through the valley of the shadow of doubt. The Light within is our purest animal component, and I'd like to invite each of you to respond to the Light animal in your neighbor with the Light animal in you.

The Lighthouse and the Lantern

It would be comforting to assume the spirit is constant and unchanging; to expect the goal to be known, and well-marked, and assume that we simply have to follow a single direct leading or straight route in our

lives. The analogy that I'd like to propose here is that of the lighthouse and the lantern.

We all know that a lighthouse is only useful because it is fixed and well-known; it is very bright and visible from a large area; it helps mariners over a specific short part of their journeys, normally a part of the path where there are known challenges or risks that have been marked by previous travelers. In contrast to that, a lantern is personal and small, it only illuminates the local domain, but it moves with you, and is crucial to anyone who is trying to follow an unfamiliar or vaguely marked path.

In the journey that each of us is charged with making through this life-plane (as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's "spirit being having a human experience"), would you guess that we are each expected to follow the common and well-marked trade routes staying near to the coastlines? Is there any reason that our spiritual contracts (to use the nomenclature of Carolyne Myss) should be composed of pages of standard repetitive boilerplate text? I would certainly think not and hope not.

Every instinct I have, and every wise teacher I find, relates that we are directed to follow the road less travelled by, and to be ready to change course at frequent intervals. This is why listening and discernment are so central to Quaker practice; this is why we concentrate on the small lantern of the Light within each of us that travels around with us, instead of looking for a fixed lighthouse of faith. We hope to be able to illuminate our own paths, and to share our personal measures of the Light with those neighbors we meet along the way.

Quaker Process, Decision-making, and Caring

We Quakers are often identified with the Quaker process. People have often heard that we make all corporate decisions through unanimity, which is of course mistaken. The subtle differences between consensus, unity, and unanimity are important to consider. The dimensions of the field of group processes are time, compassion, and involvement of the spirit. In an authoritarian system, decisions are quickest, and the feelings of those with differing opinions are considered least. In a democracy, some discussion is generally afforded, and the so-called losers can at least be consoled by learning that they were in the numerical minority.

Consensus, on the other hand, implies that the decision is based on the general feeling of the group as a whole, without necessarily taking a vote and letting the numerical result determine the outcome. We've certainly all experienced a process in which much time is invested to convince a small minority of a group to agree with the rest in the interest of consensus.

The Quaker unity process is designed to combine the best aspects of the consensus model and the authoritarian model; one could call it the dictatorship of the spirit. According to our process, we deliberate on a topic for a while, and then the clerk of the Meeting or some other elder states his or her "sense of the Meeting" based on their sensitive discernment of the spirit behind what the participants are saying. Often, this takes the form of a statement related to the subject under debate that sounds quite different than the subjective proposal being debated. Often, this also causes a sudden shift in the hearts of the participants.

As one member of our Meeting has put it, "it's OK to come to a Meeting for Business with your mind made up, just as long as your heart is open, because your heart can change your mind in an instant."

Word, Deed, and Prayer

I recently read the following quote from St. Francis of Assisi, "What is it that stands higher than words? Action. What is it that stands higher than action? Silence." At first glance, this appeared quite deep; on further thought, it made no sense whatsoever. Now I've come around to thinking that it's actually rather profound.

We are all accustomed to the idea that deeds should be thought of as being higher than words on some scale. The lifetime of our acts is longer than that of our words, and we think that deeds generally leave a larger imprint on the world around us. More important, though, is the difference in the effect on ourselves, on our own hearts. As large an impact a thought or word can have on our internal lives, a deed, especially one that we repeat, becomes a part of our consciousness and of our muscle memory; we integrate it into our beings; it grows to influence what we say.

Given that, why would one think that silence was still higher than action? If one assumes that St. Francis meant silence as silent prayer or meditation, rather than simply lack of speaking, then it only makes sense to the extent that we are changed by our silence, by our prayer. Higher than action is a silence that is strong enough and regular enough to continually change and evolve who we are; one that will then certainly ripple into, and be expressed by, our words and our deeds.

My Basic Prayer

We've had several messages in our meeting recently related to prayer, and specifically to prayers of petition. I thought about this at some length, since I generally don't pray with words directed at any other being outside of myself. The following is a simple prayer that I would use if I were convinced that Angels could hear my words.

Angels

Angels who are here with us now.

Angels who are here with us now, please help us. Please help us, that, when we say "thank you" we mean it as deeply as we can, and that it leave a stronger imprint within our hearts, so we will remember the feeling of gratitude at a later time.

Angels who are here with us now, please help us. Please help us, to be more careful when we say "I'm sorry," to mean it more sincerely, and to have a more profound healing impact on those to whom we say it.

Angels who are here with us now, please help us. Please help us, to say "I love you" more. Please help us love nature whenever we encounter it, whether it's being beautiful in a large way, or simply being nature. Please help us find more to love in our neighbors, whether or not they're actively doing anything lovable at all. Please help us to love more as a pure act of giving, as an act of sharing our joy and our light.

Amen

A Paragraph about a Lecture about Heaven

A Friend recently related to me a video she had seen where the speaker posed the following question. Suppose you have died, and you arrive at the Pearly Gates only to find St. Peter standing before two large and ornate doors. Above one is a sign that reads "Heaven," and above the other a sign that reads "A Lecture about Heaven." Which gate to you choose?

On a related note, I was recently speaking with an old friend about a life transition I'm in the middle of, and mentioned that I didn't feel "ready" for it. In her typically Austrian direct and forceful way, she commented, "what's this being ready? Are you doing it now, or not? With the next breath, are you doing it more than you were doing it with this breath? That's all that matters, you know."

I have to keep reminding myself that George Fox called on us to "be patterns, be examples; that your carriage and your life may preach to all sorts of people." We are not called on to read the works of the great examples, or to attend seminars on famous pattern-people. We are it; we are the best hope that our future has; it's up to us, or else it won't happen. As George Fox continues his call "then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of the spirit in everyone; in them you may be a blessing, and make the witness of the spirit force in them to bless you."

Being Light and Love

The so-called paradoxical commandments, by Kent Keith are often referred to as "Being Light and Love," and mistakenly attributed to Mother Teresa of Calcutta because it was engraved on the wall of her orphanage.

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered; forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives; be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies; succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you; be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous; be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God; it was never between you and them anyway.

To close with words that really do come from Mother Teresa, "I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world."

Starting Young

In our reading group, we've just started Howard Brinton's anthology of Quaker "Journals," which are actually more "spiritual autobiographies" in his words, than daily diaries. His book collects and compares the spiritual autobiographies of Quakers from the earliest years in the mid-1600s up to the last century.

One very unusual feature that links the writers is that most of them had a key spiritual experience at a very young age, often as early as 5 to 7 years. These experiences are commonly described as a heightened awareness of God's love, or of the presence of Angels in our realm, or simply an experience that left a life-long impression of the grace of the spirits.

The more I think about this, and combine it with my feelings about the continuing revelation, the more logical it feels to say that the "weighty Friends" surveyed in the

Brinton book are simply more aware or more highly evolved humans who realized at a very young age that we all have more than the 5 standard physical senses, and that we are not at all alone in this plane of existence.

I very much like the notion that evolved humans become aware of the spirit's constant presence at the same age at which their psyche first develops its sense of self. Desmond Tutu reminded us that, "we know inside ourselves that we are made for the transcendent." It is comforting to me to feel affirmed in my belief that the continuing revelation is truly available to all of us at all times, and that all we need to do is to open our hearts, to try to return to a relaxed state of listening in order to hear the voices of the angels. This will automatically help our discernment, since, as Joseph Campbell said, "you can work out of your own intention, or out of inspiration; yes, inspiration, there is such a thing; it comes up and talks to you. Those who have heard the rhythms and hymns of the angels, who have heard the words of the angels, will try to recite these hymns in such a way that the angels will be attracted."

America as a Quaker Society

We often think today of America as a purely materialistic consumerist society. Many of us bemoan the loss of ever more societal power structures, leaving only the large corporations with any ability to act on a large scale. The following insights into the role of Quaker ideals in shaping the American spirit appeared in the "Saturday Review of Literature" in 1926 in an article with the title "Quakers and Puritans."

The mental habits and ideals of the Quakers are stronger in the American mind today than anything else that has been brought over seas, and are only to be equalled by the effect of the native environment itself. [...] We know that Penn's state was the first model of a liberal government and far closer in ideals and practice to our own United States than was the puritan theocracy. But it is too commonly supposed that essential Quakerism was lost in the rigidity that strangled the Friends in the 18th century and changed a world-wide enthusiasm into a prosperous sect. This is not true. The seed of the Quakers was sown as widely, if less deeply, than the mental habits of the Puritans. The Quakers, while their energy lasted, permeated every corner of the infant country. [...] Indeed, one need not fear overstatement in saying that the fundamental qualities of what can properly be called the American brand of idealism are essentially Quaker in character and largely Quaker in origin.

"Quakers and Puritans" by Henry Seidel Canby, Saturday Review of Literature 1/2/1926 pp. 457-9. as quoted in "Quaker Journals" by Howard H. Brinton. Pendle Hill, 1972.

It's Here; Heaven is Here!

There are several fundamental articles of faith that separate Quakers from mainstream Christianity. For example, we often cite our belief in the continuing revelation as something that defines our theology that is not shared by most others. What seems even more important to me, however, is the faith that Heaven can and will be established here on this earth.

The very first operative sentence of the Lord's Prayer is, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We feel that we are given the task of recognizing that heaven can and should be here and now, that the full life of the spirit can lead each of us to a deep awareness of heaven in our midst. Heaven doesn't have to be perfect, or even free from suffering and strife. Heaven is simply knowing where you belong, as we've been singing for centuries, "It's the gift to be simple; it's the gift to be free. It's the gift to come down where we ought to be, and when we find ourselves in the place just right, it will be in the valley of love and delight."

This all reminds me of the parable of the man in the maze from the Tohono O'odham nation of indigenous Americans, of the idea that every human travels through a maze, but that the center can be interpreted as death, or as achieving heaven on earth. Yes, heaven is right here, but you have to find it. What separates us from mainstream Christians (and especially from fundamentalists) is that we don't think we need to wait for the rapture or any second coming of any given prophet. This world here, this is heaven, or it can be if you're willing to see it. In closing, I'd like to add that I recently established a new publishing company for my music and am calling it "HeavenEverywhere!"

Quakerism as Art

Because I am a composer, I have often been asked why my music is not more commercially viable. My first response is that most of the now-revered master composers were considered failures in their own lifetimes. Wolfgang Mozart is buried in a pauper's grave in Vienna, and even Johann Sebastian Bach held the post of choir master in a relatively small court. (There's a wonderful anecdote about the fugue he composed when he was finally invited to be a member of the Prussian academy of music-- "From Heaven on High to Thee I Come.")

A more serious answer though, is a pair of definitions; the first is that entertainment is concerned with giving the consumer easy answers, and making them feel comfortable about being separate from one another. On the other hand, art is all about connecting people to something larger than themselves, and about suggesting better questions.

Obviously, there's an analogy I draw here that equates many kinds of religious practice with entertainment, and sets Quaker mysticism apart as a parallel to art. We often hear that the Quaker way is a path rather than a destination.

The Quaker movement grew out of Christianity, but it is a strongly mystical tradition, and thus has perhaps more in common with Sufism, Kabbalah or Zen than it does with mainstream Christianity. These mystical traditions eventually transcend the faiths out of which they sprang; they share the notion of a continuing revelation, meaning that the spirit speaks through each of us, the spirit acts through our lives, if we let it. The mystical experience is not one of easy answers, but of ever deeper reflections. I like to think of it as an art form, and as a source of really meaty questions.

Redefining "Christian"

It is distressing to many people that the term "Christian" has come to be so strongly associated with a fairly narrow neoconservative political movement. There are efforts afoot to redefine the term "Christian," and to link it with progressive views based on compassion and charity.

While it can be difficult to derive a single message from the wealth of Christian teaching on any subject, if we restrict ourselves to the directly quoted teachings of Jesus found in the synoptic Gospels (meaning those that agree on what he said), we come to focus on the Sermon on the Mount, and we find the Beatitudes, which include the statements, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy," and then, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Later in the same teaching, Jesus says, We were taught "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment" But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council. Just a few paragraphs later, in the Lord's prayer, he teaches us to petition God saying, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Lastly, he repeats twice with emphasis, "Most certainly I tell you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, even to the least of them, you did it to me."

For my taste, this is quite specific and concrete; it is quite unmistakable that Christians are instructed not only never to kill, but to become experts at anger management and nonviolent conflict resolution. Our sister faiths agree unanimously; we find in the Talmud the adage that, "Anger deprives a sage of his wisdom, a prophet of his vi-

sion," and in the Muslim Hadith of Bukhari we read, "The strong man is not the good wrestler; the strong man is only he who controls himself when he is angry."

In contrast to this, there are a number of things that Jesus certainly did not say, but that are often held as defining features of Christianity. These include the clauses of John 3:16, which says "for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." There is a whole book shelf of recent biblical scholarship about the origin of the non-synoptic gospel of John, but it is interesting that even John didn't put these claims in Jesus' mouth. Jesus never said that he was the Son of God, or the only one for that matter, nor that belief in him was any special key to heaven. His teachings were about how we should live and how we should treat one another.

In the gnostic Gospel of Thomas we find the clearest and most direct instruction imaginable; it is quoted as, "His disciples questioned him and said to him, "Do you want us to fast? And how shall we pray? Shall we give alms? And what kind of diet shall we follow?" Jesus said, "Do not lie, and do not do what you hate. For all things are disclosed before heaven." This is so simple as to transcend even the sublime, "Do not lie, and do not do what you hate."

To close with another poignant quote, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr said that "to really carry out the precepts of Jesus would be the most revolutionary and dangerous thing in the world."

The Continuing Revelation

The idea that God talks to each of us, that we are each capable of being lead by deep divine inspiration, this concept of a continuing revelation, is central to the Quaker faith. This attitude influences our relationship to scripture (both Christian and other), since we feel driven to hear the spirit behind the words, and to feel a connection with the underlying motivating force of the scripture, "to have Jesus read it to us," as some Christian Friends say.

In a pamphlet on the religion of George Fox, the noted contemporary American Quaker thinker Howard Brinton wrote that "Fox believed in appealing to the spirit that created the Bible, rather than to the Bible itself. This spirit imparted to people only what they were able to receive. Fox could then repudiate the Old Testament as an imperfect revelation of the truth, and claim for the New Testament a new and higher revelation. He considered this new doctrine to be a changeless religion because it was based on the Spirit of Truth, on whatever the Spirit of Truth might reveal, rather than on any particular revelation of it."

The only change in the last 350 years is that modern Friends often believe that the revelation is both continuous and complete, that God, in whatever form, is revealed in everything and at all times, and that people only differ in their abilities to be aware of this spirit. If one believes in an aware God, a God with a first-person voice, so to speak, then this God must surely be trying to get through to us in any way possible. If one perceives of God as the unity of all existence, as the Universe, then this, too, is revealed to each and every one of us in every situation. It is only in the depth of their attitude of inspiration and wonder that people differ.

Surrender and Spiritual Hunger

I have received a variety of very interesting responses over the past year to my email signature. The line I use is, "Faith, surrender, and hope are only as important to life as, say, breathing."

The people who have responded (among them several Friends) have invariably asked specifically about my interpretation of the word "surrender," (as though faith and hope were themselves well-understood). There are several quotes I'd like to contribute here.

St. Francis prayer opens with, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love." Psalm 19, in the recent translation by Stephen Mitchell, begs, "Let me keep surrendering myself until I am utterly transparent." A landmark song with the title "Awaken" by one of my all-time favorite rock bands, who are called Yes, has the line (shouted at full volume) "Oh closely guided plan, awaken in our hearts!"

It feels as though everywhere I look, I hear artists and seekers crying out in surrender, not simply asking for God's intervention, but asking to be led, asking to be made instruments of God's will, and recognizing that it involves our listening better, not God's yelling louder.

If only it were easy for us to arrange for our lives to be taken over by the spirit. We have to make a place for it; the process requires slowing down, letting go of our momentary attachments, listening, making an explicit place for divinity in our lives. In one of her books on angels, Doreen Virtue presents the following rules for bringing Angels into your life: (1) Live your life with full integrity; (2) Acknowledge (explicitly) your faith in Angels; and (3) Have the silence to hear what they're saying.

In the end, returning to my email quote, I actually have a much harder time defining and staying in touch with faith and hope than maintaining an attitude of surrender and spiritual hunger.

We Are Meaning-seeking Creatures

In a recent interview with Bill Moyers, the British theologian Karen Armstrong described humankind as "meaning-seeking creatures," adding that, "soon after we stopped living in trees, as homo sapiens brains and bodies differentiated themselves from the other primates, we started making works of art and trying to define our relationship with the divine through religion." She spoke of language, art, and spirituality as necessary parts of our life as a species, and of the impact of this on our family groups and societies. In religion, art, and societal activities, we find many ways of sharing our meaning-seeking.

As Desmond Tutu relates, "human beings will strive after freedom, for we know inside ourselves that we are made for the transcendent; it's the very essence of being human -- knowing that my humanity is caught up in your humanity. We need other human beings in order to be human. We are made for togetherness; we are made for family, for fellowship, to exist in a tender network of interdependence."

Art, and family, and the divine-seeking, are all components that make up the meaning of this experience, indeed, the driving force of life is to connect to our humanity and our divinity, and we will want to use languages and art to share these expressions with any other meaning-seeking creatures we meet.

On Being Present

The following is from a speech given in 1967 by Friend Douglas Steere named "On Being Present Where You Are."

I believe that, in the period that lies ahead, there is no deeper challenge to Quakers in their personal, spiritual, and social witness, than the issue of learning to be present where they are in their personal relationships, and making their infinitesimal effort to rouse other people to be present to each other. The issue of peace and war, of social and racial tensions, of our responsibility to contribute to the relations of all peoples and religions, all come down to this daring to be present where you are.

The divine presence, that quickening spirit and burning of the heart, is available to us all; through it we feel joined to all life, hope is restored in us, and we are made aware of the sacredness of life and the gift of being among fellow humans. Not only is there, "no time but this present," but there is not task that we are more called to, and that is more exciting and challenging, than to be inwardly ready to be present where we are, and to re-

spond to the deeper presence of others.

On Feeling Connected

The following is a message that I wrote down last Spring; it seems particularly relevant in light of the present political situation in the world.

In order to center in Meeting, I often use a breathing meditation practice in which I focus on feeling the energy of the air as I inhale, and then hold my breath lightly for a moment to concentrate on the spread of that energy throughout my body. As I do this, I become aware that we all share the same air, that the energy in the air I breathe in came from somewhere, that this same energy is shared, that it is imparted to the air by plants and trees as well as by animals and people. I'm also aware that the energy is shared, even by people I think I don't think I like or agree with.

In our traditional representations of the spirit, we often envision it as coming from above, as in the tongues of fire pictures depicting the day of the Pentecost. We know, of course, that there is no "up" to the spirit, that it is everywhere and that it flows through everything, except sometimes our thoughts.

In a discussion on the nature of God a while ago in our Quaker spirituality reading group, one of our senior members became flustered by the intellectual approach we were taking, and blurted out, "You, you're, God is all around you. You're right in the middle of God!" I often remember the quote from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (ch. 13) (which is unfortunately only read at weddings these days), "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. [...] If I have all knowledge and all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing."

In our everyday dealings with people, one-to-one or group-to-group, if we are not aware of being filled with the spirit and motivated by love, we should stay home. All of creation is intimately connected, and all people are capable of being aware that they are filled with the spirit. The best statement I've seen recently that put this in perspective relative to the current climate, was a flag with the words "united we stand" and a photograph of the earth as seen from outer space.

On the Integration of our Spiritual Lives

Our recent reading of the "Advices and Queries on the Spiritual Life" led me to look into the Faith and Practice manuals of other Yearly Meetings for statements on

the subject. I found the following.

The individual Friend should lead a life rooted in an awareness of God's presence in all times and places. [...] Faith in God finds its expression in a way of life based on spiritual rather than material values. We place authority of the Spirit above any outward authority. [...] The life of the spirit gains depth and vigor through devotional practices, prayer, study and meditation.

It has always been my feeling that the human experience is defined by physical, emotional, and intellectual aspects, which are being simultaneously lived through by our inner spirit-beings. It seems to me that the only way to "live the spiritual life" is to learn to integrate these aspects of life together, so that our spirits take part and rejoice in our emotional, physical, and intellectual lives, so that these components are so well integrated that we don't actually need to take special time for any one of them in particular.

Just as we don't stop thinking if we go to play our favorite sport, or stop breathing when we have a particular feeling, why should our spirit stop being fully involved at any time during our daily life? Prayer and meditation can and should still be central components of our daily routines, but it's important to remember that our spiritual life is meant to be as continuous as our emotional or physical lives are. In the phases when I feel most integrated and focussed, my favorite prayer is the one that I say on each breath when I inhale life and energy and joy and connection between the outer and inner worlds.

Gratitude, Service, and Responsibility

The oft-repeated Zen Buddhist Gestalt Prayer calls us to live with an attitude of "infinite gratitude for all that is past, infinite service to all that is present, and infinite responsibility for all that is future." The prayer continues with the oft-forgotten statement, "we focus now on the creation of all that is."

There seem to be many parallels in modern Quaker thought to these sentiments. The notion of fostering a feeling of gratitude, service and responsibility is certainly not foreign to us. Innumerable prayers focus on thanksgiving, and then on instilling in us some feeling of stewardship for our surroundings. The "infinite responsibility for all that is future" is a bit more abstract to many of us, and also sounds more demanding. The focus seems to be on being in the present where you are, but being ever-mindful of both the past and the future; in this sense, it reflects a major component of most other disciplines of the contemplative life.

Lastly, the idea that we create the situations in which we

find ourselves, that we should even bother to think in terms such as "we focus now on the creation of all that is" would be quite foreign to many Christians, but very familiar to Quakers. We are already called on to be patterns and examples in how we live our lives, and this enables us to serve as the creators of our surroundings. To the extent that we do indeed respond to that of God in all of creation that we encounter, we call forth the best elements of creation, and thus we can create a better world.

Knowing Truth

The following excerpt is from a pamphlet published in 1955 by Thomas S. Brown called "The Personal Relevance of Truth."

I remember clearly a personal letter I received that spoke of "the insensitive and righteous glory with which Christians seem able to bask in the message of Jesus without any need of commitment or sacrifice." To know the Truth is not to accept it by an act of the intellect, as a person may know the Greek alphabet, or as one may know his or her neighbor across the street. To know the Truth is, rather, like the way in which life partners know each other, to live a life of wholly shared commitment, of utter trust, of freedom from fear.

Indeed, there is no knowledge of the Truth where there is no commitment that results in significant action, for the living root produces living fruit after its own kind. We know the presence of love, not by sighs and simpers, nor even by desire, but by its power to lift us outside of ourselves, to allow us to live beyond ourselves. Honor is known by honorable actions. Beauty is known by its creation among us. Truth is not a group of intellectual concepts to be manipulated at will like the symbols in mathematics or the notes in music; Truth is living and life-giving, and those who have welcomed the Truth have life.

This is crucial: it is not that we discover the Truth and make it our own for our own purposes as we might harness a mountain stream to light our houses or run our machines. We are, rather, discovered by the Truth, and are given power by the Truth to light our souls. We are besieged by the Truth, which stands knocking at the door.

Living with a Soft Heart

So far this year, my personal life has been full of risk and anxiety, and also of hope and joy; I've been searching for guidance on the issue of how to discern my path in unfamiliar and poorly marked territory. I found, in our own Faith and Practice guide, the following helpful words from William Penn's mystical handbook "Fruits of Solitude." "Men may tire themselves in a labyrinth of

search, and talk of God, but if we would know him indeed, it must be from the impressions we receive of him, and the softer our hearts are, the deeper and livelier those impressions will be upon us."

I felt very drawn to the notion of a soft heart being a good thing, even being a goal towards which we might strive. This runs counter to much modern thought on hearts, where vulnerability is not necessarily encouraged. I started to think of my short-term personal dilemma as a microcosm for some of the larger and longer-term needs of our community.

Dwelling further on this, I was reminded of Thomas Merton's quote that, "you do not need to know precisely what is happening or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope."

Again, it was informative for me to hear this admonition both in a very personal light and in a larger corporate sense. We as a community often need to work to be more able to respond to the state of the world with an attitude of "recognizing the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment" and we especially, both in the local and the global, should work to embrace challenges "with courage, faith, and hope." A friend recently defined love to me as "unending hope."

It all comes back to another well-known quote from William Penn; when speaking about war and pacifism, he wrote, "let us then try what love can do." Substituting my friend's definition in this gives us "let us then try what unending hope can do." This sounds like a good attitude for life with a very soft heart.

Constructive and Prophetic Service

The following note is based on a message by Rufus Jones.

The world peculiarly needs today the constructive and prophetic service of religion. When it's vital and creative, it brings us up into relation with God. It dignifies and ennobles us through that relationship. It expels cynicism through faith and hope and justifiable expectation. It releases energies of life, and turns sunsets into sunrises. It gives marching power to those who are torchbearers. Religion can be a profound source of ideal vision.

I once heard someone referred to as a serene and adventurous spirit. These are the two qualities we need. There are persons who are serene, but not adventurous, and those who are adventurous but not serene. We need this fusion and balance in a single life.

It is just this combination -- seeing religion as constructive and prophetic service, and balancing our serene and adventurous aspects -- that has the potential to anchor us and support our activism, to help us act out of love and focus, while at the same time take real risks and cope with anger. This can give us the power not to doubt; it can provide us the power to believe.

Dealing with "Difficult" People

(In a recent Quaker Meeting for Worship, one of our senior and "weighty" members voiced her dilemma with respect to the current political climate in the USA. She felt her faith challenged by the lack of integrity of our current leaders, and was distressed by her difficulty at maintaining charitable feelings towards them.)

As Quakers, we are told to "respond to that of God in all people" or, in the more modern, less theist, and more inclusive interpretation, to "respond to the light in all creation." I'm certain that all Friends over the years have at times found this to be a challenge in one case or the other.

When I notice that it's too easy for me to deny that a person or a situation has any "measure of the light" in him/her, I remind myself that we are admonished by our faith to "respond to the light," not necessarily to find it near the surface and pointing at us.

When this happens, there are two changes that I notice. First, if I assume that the person or situation that I find to be a challenge indeed has "some measure of the light," but that it might be obscured from my view, or indeed misunderstood by me entirely, then it becomes easier to find some small amount of charity on my part and to have faith (or at least hope) that the other person could in fact, be operating with compassion and integrity, but starting from a very different point of view and a different set of definitions.

Secondly, even if we cannot "find" the source of light in another, we are still instructed to "respond" to it, in other words, to point our "light" at the other person, and to respond with the best that is in us. Doing this changes your heart entirely, and therefore changes your attitude and your voice as well. Even if I fail completely on the first point, at acknowledging the light in a situation or in another person, if I still make it my policy to respond to the situation with the best of the light that I can locate within myself, I will be responding as a different person. I will stand a much better chance of being pleasantly surprised.

Ubuuntu

The following is taken from a quote from a speech by South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

We all know that we are made for freedom, and even if you stamp on us almost for ever, as a tyrant you have had it, and freedom will come. Human beings will strive after that, for we know inside ourselves that we are made for the transcendent. We are made for the transcendent. In the African languages, we speak of this as something called *Ubuuntu*.

I would say that the priority for us in life is the development of Ubuuntu; it's the very essence of being human -- knowing that my humanity is caught up in your humanity. Ubuuntu means that a person is a person through other persons, that we are interconnected, that we all belong one to another.

We don't come fully formed into the world. We learn how to think, how to walk, how to speak, how to behave, indeed how to be human, from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human. We are made for togetherness; we are made for family, for fellowship, to exist in a tender network of interdependence.

When one of us goes down, ultimately we all go down. If you are dehumanized, then inexorably I am dehumanized. For me to be whole, you have to be whole; if you are a perpetrator, a torn and broken human being who has lost your humanity, then I too am less than whole. So for me to be the person God wants me to be, you must be the person God wants you to be. That's Ubuuntu.

Elements

I have no language for this poem.

The image is of the flint stone and metal striker making a spark.

Almost all of the sparks expire in mid-air, like the Biblical sower's seeds fallen on rock, or parched earth, or in the thorns.

But oh, the spark that meets the tinder, how it compensates the flint for its chipped and lost matter, how the tiniest flame recharges the entire atmosphere for all the spent siblings of its spark, how the shortest duration of the warmth erases the cold silent death of the failed attempts.

The opposite is, of course, the single small drop of rain falling into the ocean.

Each drop contributes its whole self; nothing is ever lost.

Each drop changes the temperature of every ocean on earth.

The salt in each drop commingles with all the world's salt.

The cycle of drops between ocean, cloud, rain, and ocean never ceases.

Our souls are, of course, like both of these: spark-to-fire and drop-to-ocean.

Of course, we experience our spirit through our thoughts and our emotions;

these fragile and garbled hints are the sparks.

The burning tinder never meets the proud parents, flint and iron.

But the spirit also informs the heartbeat, motivates the breath, and all of the never-ending cycles of our body's working are in harmony with the driver.

Yes, it is the earth that actually coordinates all of life's many clocks.

The deeper truth is actually more like that other element: the wind.

Everywhere you look in nature, you see what the wind does,

how it rakes the mile-long dunes,

how the trees strain in sometimes defiant response,

how the waves get perturbed white caps,

how the fire's whole smoke is ushered away by the slightest breath,

how the clouds with their tons of water are pushed around the heavens with seeming ease.

But you never see the wind itself; you never see the wind itself.

I have no language for this.

Are Quakers Christians, and does it matter?

Modern Friends are often asked the question, "Are Quakers Christians?" As we publish no creed, and have somewhat vague and ambiguous spiritual practices, this question is rather interesting to ponder, both in the historical light, and with respect to what it means to modern-day Friends.

Within the Friends movement there are groups that call themselves Universalists and others who consider themselves decidedly Christ-centered. This spectrum runs from those who can still feel in tune with the Apostle's Creed's profession of belief in "one holy catholic (i.e., universal) church," and those who sometimes call themselves "many avatar Quakers," who find important truth also in the teachings of other faith traditions.

The Universalists often cite the following words of John Woolman. "There is a principle that is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages has had different names. It is, however, pure, and it proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion, nor excluded from any, where the heart stands in

perfect sincerity. [...] I find no narrowness respecting sects and opinions, but believe that sincere, upright-hearted people in every society who truly love God are accepted of him. Rather than seeking specific names for God, Woolman advises us to "distinguish the language of the pure spirit, which moves inwardly on the heart." Early Friends, were, of course, also devoutly Christian, and Woolman spoke often of all people of faith as being the family of Christ Jesus in this world.

Similarly, Robert Barclay defined the "one holy catholic church" as including all who have responded to "the inward calling of God by his light in the heart," and stated, "there may be members of this church not only among all the several sorts of Christians, but also among Pagans, Turks, and Jews." As St. Paul wrote in his second letter to Timothy, "tell them in the name of God that there is to be no wrangling about words; all that this ever achieves is the destruction of all those who are listening." The Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, "when you are a truly happy Christian, then you are also a Buddhist, and vice versa."

What truly defines the Friends movement, our creed, if you will, (in the words of Robert Vogel), is our shared emphasis on "plainness and devotion to truth, a clear understanding of spirit-led worship, and essential inwardness; the use of queries and advices in framing faith, the peace testimony and other social concerns, and the rejection of outward ordinances and sacramental worship." In the gnostic gospels, after the sermon on the mount, Christ tells his followers, "my father has told me that you shall all find your own ways to him." As one member of the Santa Barbara Meeting has stated on several occasions, "being a Quaker makes me a better Hindu!"

Why Worship?

In his book "Encounter with Silence: Reflections from the Quaker Tradition," John Punshon writes the following. "It was the Testimonies that first attracted me to Quakerism. These say that, in all circumstances, no matter how trying, we are under a religious obligation to speak and live truthfully, peaceably, and simply. I have also become convinced that within the Society of Friends, the silent meeting for worship is the best guarantee that the strength to live up to the Testimonies will continue to be available."

Among Friends, there are many different interpretations of how the meeting for worship gives us strength--strength to live according to our higher plans, strength to be active in our communities. A meeting can be a place for active prayer; among the members of our reading and

discussion group, prayer of thanksgiving was a common theme. For some, this comes automatically as soon as they calm their "chattering minds;" for others, it is a more conscious act, a part of a centering process. Many friends practice one form or another of visualization in meeting--either for the purpose of calming and centering, or of putting one's mind in a specific state of opening to the light.

In the end, a common thread appears in that Friends often relate to the presence in a Meeting that is more than the individual presence of the attenders. One can find many analogies for this "light" within our worship: the presence of angels or spirits, of Christ, or simply the congregation of souls who are open and peaceful and willing to be lead, to be available to the leadings of the spirit. Surely that leading is all around us all the time, it is only rarely, though, that we can hear it clearly.

The Challenge of the Closed Door

This is an excerpt from a message by Rufus Jones.

In the Bible, Jesus never promised that the door to the things we most desire is an open door. The policy of the open door is not in the Gospels. Christ brought, rather, the challenge of the closed door. He said, "knock, and the door will open." It isn't open to begin with. None of the things we want most are within easy reach. None of them are waiting for us through open doors. We must not only knock, but often besiege the door and endure a long wait before it opens for us. One of the first laws of life is this: you must seek, you must want and then you must eagerly and patiently knock.

It seems strange that the things we want most are not furnished ready-made. If God is good and loving, why didn't He meet our deepest wants with open doors to them? The world might have been made so that all that you would need to do would be to go through an open door, and what you want would be there waiting for you.

The apocalypses all take the easy line of expectation. Everything is done for us without any effort on our part. In the Revelation, the Apocalypse says "behold, I set before you an open door," but the true blessing is in the slow, hard way of spiritual progress. The beatitudes emphasize the blessedness of wanting, not of easy attainment. The main trouble with the biblical scribes and pharisees is that they didn't have any remaining wants!

Blessing for Nicholas

(Our Quaker Meeting recently welcomed a new baby into our care, Nicholas Moore Meaney. Quakers generally eschew the sacraments, but hold special silent Meetings for Worship to honor members at birth, 16th birth-

day, marriage, and death. In these Meetings, anyone present can rise to address the honoree in person or the Meeting as a whole. For the Meetings held to honor a child's birth, the child is generally passed around the Meeting.)

Nicholas, it gives me such joy to hold you, squirming and gurgling as you tend to do in Meeting for Worship. Looking at you fills me with awe at the miracle of life, and humbles me in light of your near perfection. It also reminds me how inappropriate I find the ritual of baptism for the removal of original sin. A child is a promise that we as a community make to the future. As I look at you, my sudden sense of humility prohibits me from feeling that I can "bless" you in any way at all, but rather motivates me to wish things for you out loud in front of our circle of Friends.

First, I wish for you a strong sense of just how lucky you are to be alive, and especially to be born into the family, society, and milieu you've come into. This is much more than "the white man's burden," though I do notice, holding you like this, that you're a white man. I prefer the model of "noblesse oblige" ("nobility obligates you"). I hope for you that your good fortune will motivate you in your life to give to others whenever possible. Service is such a high form of devotion. I feel lucky myself that, for the first 18 years of my life, I spent several seconds each evening listening to my father open the evening prayer with "Dear Lord, thank you for our many blessings." The Lord is dear, and we are blessed.

A second, related but different, hope I have for you is that you will soon learn that "as you sew, so shall you reap." I see this as taking "what goes around, comes around" in its positive interpretation. I believe that angels are available to us at all times, but that their first requirement is that we live with integrity. In a more formal and biblical expression of this, Edgar Cayce said "So as ye condemn, so are ye condemned. As ye forgive, so may ye be forgiven. As ye do to the least of thy brethren, so ye do it unto thy Maker. These are the laws; these are the truths; they are unailing."

I cannot bless you, Nicholas, but holding you this morning fills me with hope.

The Way of Growth

The following is based on a note written in 1933 by Rufus Jones.

In Psalm 1 there is the phrase "He shall be like a tree planted by brooks of water." This is saying that a certain kind of man is like a certain kind of tree; they are alike in the point that they both grow. Did you ever stop to think

how much is written about growth? Consider the lilies how they grow. They toil not, they spin not. They just let the forces of life operate. They never know how it happens; they simply find themselves beautiful.

We puff and wheeze; we struggle and discuss; we have endless committee meetings. But Jesus said that where two or three meet in his name, he is there in their midst and then they grow like the lily or the tree by the brook. It isn't effort; it isn't struggle that makes us grow; it is life. It is contact with the forces of life that does it. Growth is silent, gentle, unnoticed, but you can't have growth until you have the miracle of life--soil, sun, water, and air.

It is the same with spiritual growth. It begins with life from God, and it grows through light and truth and love, which have their source in the spirit. A good many people expect the Kingdom of Heaven to come by a sudden relief expedition from the sky, but Jesus said it would come like growth of a tiny seed. It is like a mustard seed or yeast. You start with a tiny germ of life, and the growth is sure to follow--first the blade, then the stalk, then the ear, and finally the full corn in the ear. It grows while the farmer sleeps; he knows not how. It is a mystery, but not a miracle. When it comes to the Kingdom, we people are the soil, we are God's farm. God will come like rain on the mown grass; he will come as dew.

On Prayer and Love

The following is a slightly paraphrased excerpt from the pamphlet "On the Reality of the Spiritual World" written in 1944 by British Friend Thomas Kelley.

The springs and sources of dynamic, creative living lie not in environmental drives and thrusts, but deep within us. Within us is a meeting place with the light, which strengthens and invigorates our whole personalities, and makes us new creatures, with new values and estimates of the world around us, seen through the eyes of direct and spontaneous love.

A leveling of earthly eminences and earthly obscurities takes place. The tempests and inner strains of self-seeking, self-oriented living grow still. We learn to be worked through, serenity takes the place of anxiety; fretful cares are replaced by deep and certain assurance.

How then, does one enter upon the internal life of prayer? Dynamic living is not imparted to us by one heavy visitation of the light, but comes from continuous inner mental habits pursued through years.

Inside of us, there ought to go on a steady, daily, hourly process of relating ourselves to the Divine Goodness, of

opening our lives to its warmth and love, of steadfast surrender to it, and of sweet whisperings with it, such as we can tell no one about at all.

Some of you who read this may be well advanced in this inner practice and able to go far beyond this simple and imperfect experience. Some of you may have seen it from afar; some of you have lapsed from it after a short time, accepting the secular habits of mind of our secular age, which sees only time, but not time bathed in Eternity and regenerated by Eternity.

I do not have in mind those formal times of private devotions when we turn our backs upon the family and shut the door of our room and read some devotional book and pause in meditation and in quiet prayer. Those times are important, and need to be cultivated. But the eternal prayer life is something still more basic. It is carried on after one has left the quiet room, and opened the door and gone back into the noisy hubub of the family group. It is carried on as one dashes for a trolley, as one lunches in a cafeteria, as one puts the children to bed. There is a way of living in prayer at the same time that one is busy with the outward affairs of daily living.

Linking the notions of the light and of love is the following poem by the 13th-Century poet Ibn al-Arabi.

My heart has become capable of every form;
it is a pasture for gazelles,
and a convent for Christian monks,
and a temple for idols,
and the tables of the Torah and the Quran.
I follow the religion of Love;
whatever way Love's camels take,
that is my religion and my faith.

On Prayer and Love (part 2)

The following is a slightly paraphrased excerpt from the pamphlet "On the Reality of the Spiritual World" written in 1944 by British Friend Thomas Kelley.

The practice of continuous prayer in the presence of the spirit involves developing the habit of carrying on the mental life at two levels. At the one level, we are immersed in this world of time, of daily affairs. At the same time, but at a deeper level of our minds, we are in active relation with the Eternal life. I do not think that this is a psychological impossibility, or an abnormal thing.

One sees a mild analogy in the very human experience of being in love. Newly accepted lovers have an internal life of joy, of bounding heart, of outgoing aspiration toward their beloveds. Yet they go to work, earn a living, eat meals, pay bills. All this time, however, deep within, there is some level of awareness of an object very dear to

the lovers. This awareness is private; the lovers show it to no one, yet it spills across and changes their outer lives, colors their behaviors, and gives new energy and glory to the daily round. [...] The deep love relation underlies all the frictions of home life, and recreates them in the light of the deeper currents of love. The two levels are there -- the surface and the deeper -- in fruitful interplay, with the creative values coming from deeper into the daily affairs of life. So it is sometimes when one becomes a lover of God.

When a War Begins, the Peace Witness Does not End

The following is taken largely from an article called "When War Begins, the Peace Witness Does not End" by peace activist and Friend Chuck Fager.

What do the crises in the Middle East mean for Quakers? Consider here an analogy: most fire departments work hard at fire prevention, and an actual building fire means a setback for this goal. Yet the blaze does not put the fire-fighters out of action. To the contrary, they redouble their efforts, take risks, and absorb casualties, all in a struggle to contain the fire, roll it back and ultimately put it out. Once this is done, they catch their breath and return to their prevention campaign.

Friends are in a parallel situation. The outbreak of war surely marks a setback for activities of marching, vigiling, and writing to head it off. But it does not spell defeat, and much less a reason for withdrawal into disappointment, indifference or escape. There is still much To Do. And even more, there is still much To Be. Here I'll pass by what To Do; there are many possibilities and opportunities for action, and they are widely advertised. Rather, let me focus briefly on what, for Quakers, there is To Be.

At bottom it is straightforward and simple, so much so that it can be easily overlooked: It is, in George Fox's phrase, to "keep to our meetings," that is, to maintain and deepen our life as a worshipping community. This cultivation of a deep center will not only help sustain us as individuals in a dark time (which it will). It also, and perhaps more importantly, has a public aspect: it can maintain our meeting as a place of refuge from the spirit of war.

We know that, in the last six months, our meetings were at times filled up with pilgrims. They were seeking a similar respite from the war-spirit, and somehow figured that among Friends they would find it; and they were not mistaken. By "simply" being who we were, the meeting sustained a public witness, ministering to many who did not know where else to turn. From a worldly perspective,

the meetings do not "accomplish" much. Our public protests are largely ignored or ridiculed. Yet we did achieve something, which I am convinced is more lasting than many a noisy protest: the meeting's presence and character helped sustain the hope of many. By the time the tide of that war receded, I was convinced this was one of our most important tasks during wartime: the task of being, rather than, or better yet, undergirding all our doing. As we continue to rush about doing all that we can to stem the tide of yet another war, let us not forget that much of our most potent peace witness will grow out of our being, as a worshipping community, rather than our doing.

What is Love?

(Based on a message that came to me in a Quaker Meeting during the Spring of 1998, edited into the form of a toast for my parents' 50th wedding anniversary.)

Hello and welcome, friends and family. I feel lucky to be able to speak for the 16 people who have the greatest reason of all to celebrate Polly and Phil's 50 years of marriage: their five children and eleven grandchildren.

I feel lucky to have grown up in a household where prayer was an everyday activity. Anyone who shared a dinner with our family in the period from approx. 1958-1978 will already know this, but for those who are new to our circle, for the first 18 years of my life I spent several seconds each evening listening to my father open the evening prayer with "Dear Lord, thank you for our many blessings." Every psychological and spiritual theory from neurolinguistic programming to chanting meditation agrees that this experience must leave a strong imprint on those who grow up through it. The Lord is dear, and we are blessed.

Thankfulness is an attitude, or a situation; it is not an action. If you let it, it becomes a filter through which you view everything else in your frame of experience. Also, it is an attitude of the heart, rather than of the mind. You don't think thankful, you feel thankful. One of the things in this life for which I am most thankful is being given this as an opening posture from which to view and experience the world (even those parts that I eventually decided did not qualify as blessings).

The second component that we children saw demonstrated on a daily basis was conflict-solving and forgiveness. I can safely say that, had my parents not had enormous reservoirs of forgiveness—and been able to transfer these to my older siblings very quickly—I would not have survived the early-1960s. It is necessary to be able to forgive in order to be able to maintain an attitude of thankfulness. Like thankfulness, forgiveness is a posture of the heart; you can easily think forgiving without feel-

ing forgiving, but it is renowned the world over for not working. This is why forgive and forget are so often mentioned together, only your heart can make you do both.

Being an engineer by training, I like to reduce things to simple formulae, so I have postulated the definition of love I learned at home as: thankfulness + forgiveness = love. Any relationship where there is a mutual feeling of thankfulness and a strong capacity for forgiveness has a good chance at developing into a working love. No matter who the participants are, or what the circumstances, to make a life-partner relationship work for half a century requires a wealth of thankfulness and forgiving. The other components typically associated with successful relationships—good two-way communication and the ability to compromise—are certainly greatly facilitated by a posture of thankfulness and forgiving.

If there is any lesson in this celebration of my parents' 50th wedding anniversary, it is that there are a good number of elements in the recipe (or chemical formula in our family's case) of a successful long-lasting relationship. My oversimplified formula for love simply links two of them for easier memorization according to the example with which I grew up.

Life is a purposeful experience!

American psychic Edgar Cayce (1877-1945) was a time-traveler and clairvoyant on par with Nostradamus and Francis Bacon. In his many "visions" he spoke in very concretely Christian terms, but included a strong element of reincarnation and soul evolution across a series of lives. The following statements are taken from the chapter on soul development in the book "Edgar Cayce's Story of Jesus."

As to whether a soul is developed or retarded in a particular life depends on what the person holds as its ideal, and what it does in its mental and material relationships about that ideal. Life is a purposeful experience, and the place in which a person finds himself is one in which he may use his present abilities, faults, failures, and virtues, in fulfilling the purpose for which the soul decided to manifest in the three-dimensional plane.

Know in thyself that there are immutable laws, and the universe around you is directed by laws set in motion from the beginning. So as ye condemn, so are ye condemned. As ye forgive, so may ye be forgiven. As ye do to the least of thy brethren, so ye do it unto thy Maker. These are the laws; these are the truths; they are unfailing.

Life is a continuous experience, and the mind, the soul,

and the will, are the influences that act through material manifestations, for the improvement and development--or for retardment--in the whole of the experience. For each soul enters each experience for development, that it may be prepared to dwell with that which it seeks as its goal. Hence the necessity for each entity to set its ideal in each experience. It is not what an individual entity may proclaim that counts, but what each soul does about what it has set as its ideal, in relationship to other individuals around it!

Remember, all ye may know of heaven or hell is within your own self. All ye may know of God is within your own self. [...] The pattern is set and exemplified by the Master; the path is as varied in complexity as there are individuals treading it.

What do we Believe?

One of the best definitions of Quakers is people with no creed, but a very strong theology. The most recent edition of the "Faith and Practice" manual of the Pacific Yearly Meeting opens with a quote from the 1995 Britain Yearly Meeting's "Faith and Practice." The quote reads, "We, like every generation, must find the Light and Life again for ourselves. Only what we have valued and truly made our own, not by assertion, but by lives of faithful commitment, can we hand on to the future. Even then, we must humbly acknowledge that our vision of the truth will, again and again, be amended."

There are several statements here that warrant closer reflection.

First is the widely accepted definition that Quakers are people who "come to know God experimentally" as George Fox put it. What's unique in the statement above is the notion that we do this not just as individuals, but as generations as well. Each generation of Friends is called upon to wrestle with the social and moral issues of their day, and to carefully discern their responses.

Second, it is worth repeating that the insights we have into the human condition, our living faith, are useless and cannot be passed on, unless we apply them in our own lives. We can only lead by example if our truths are based on mystical experiences.

Lastly, and I believe unique among the world's religions, is the notion that we must remain open for our most deeply held beliefs to be amended, to be amended again and again. If one accepts the notion of the continuing revelation, one also has to accept that it will indeed continue.

How tall are you?

I have terrible posture. I inherited a slight stoop and tend to slouch. I have to constantly remind myself to sit up straight, to "walk tall" as it were, and to press my shoulder blades together to counteract my natural tendency to slump. I have the capacity to be 6'2", but typically stand 5'11".

It seems like this is a good working analogy for our spirits and the old Quaker notion of the "measure of the light" that we are each granted. We don't all have the same path, nor are we all at the same relative place on our respective paths. What matters most, what Quakerism is about, is helping each of us be as bright in our lights as we can be. What "the Quaker Way" means to me is a set of tools to spend more of my life "standing tall" and having good built-in mechanisms to notice quickly when I slouch in the light. This is also the most important constituent of our faith communities, that we accept and honor the different paths we each take, and strive to help one another to be more true to our respective paths.

The Nightingale of the East

The following poem was sent to me by a Friend. It is by the late Joel S. Goldsmith, a prolific writer and founder of "The Infinite Way."

Amidst the flowering plants of a garden in Egypt sat a nightingale of great beauty. Its soaring song filled the Oasis with lilting melody. Its song was a carol of love; a message of peace from out of the heart of the Infinite, stilling the waves of a world of sense.

Knowest thou, O Bird, of the peace that fares forth with thy song? Knowest thou of the strife that is stilled by the melody from thy throat? Nay, the nightingale knows naught of the power of its song and less of the unrest that is quieted by its sound.

So should ye be as the song of God pours forth from you--the willing carrier of the divine message--yet unaware of the power of your being and still less aware of the troubled hearts ye quiet with your melody of love.

How can I lead?

Many people of faith feel challenged by recent events in the world. How can we respond to external forces that upset or anger us in an appropriate and loving manner? How can we let our faith speak to people whose actions we cannot accept?

Writing from prison, George Fox admonished us to "be valiant for Truth upon earth. [...] Be patterns, be examples in all places, [...] wherever you come, that your car-

riage and life may preach among all sorts of people [...] then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one." Mahatma Gandhi instructed us to "be the change you wish to see in the world."

Well, these all sound like pretty tall orders. I, for one, often have a hard time feeling like I'm much of a "pattern" for others to copy. How can I set an example for anyone else?

Just as the Chinese proverb tells us, however, that "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." We can each do something each day, in every interaction we have, in every thought we think, to "be the change we seek." As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us, "we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal we seek, but that it is a means by which we arrive at that goal." The life of faith is not just the goal we seek, it is also the path to that goal.

As a first step towards "answering that of God in every one," we can each work to treat the people we deal with in a way that respects their dignity. We can respond in a manner and using a language that encourages understanding and communication on a higher level. With a little bit of effort and concentration, we can each start today, in our own ways, to "be valiant for Truth upon earth." Starting now, I can be a better pattern than I was able to be yesterday. I'm ready to let my life speak for my faith, even in the very small ways that I'm capable of today.

Copyright (c) 2000-2006. Stephen Travis Pope. All rights for reproduction and distribution granted, provided that acknowledgment of authorship is maintained. Responses are invited to stp@create.ucsb.edu.