

Some Thoughts on the Relationship between an Individual and the Meeting
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I've been told that the way to begin a talk is to lay out the basic point first. So here it is in brief: the relationship between an individual and the meeting is a balance. Think of a see saw, with each end balanced so that they work together. The seesaw is dynamic, it moves. The closer each partner comes toward the center the easier it is to balance and the less likely you are to throw each other off. But for the Quaker see saw, the important point is the fulcrum. The individual and the meeting are in balance in relation to each other because of their relation to God, the Center, the Fulcrum.

Now I will back off from that main point to give you the background context. There is a reality about the Religious Society of Friends that is more than the sum of our individual diverse, eclectic faiths and practices today. Perhaps the entity of the Religious Society of Friends does not now and never actually has existed in a pure form that is perfect and whole. But that does not mean that there is not a pretty clear set of concepts, based on experience, that can be understood, pointed to, and held up as the vision--the defining reality-- of the Religious Society of Friends.

There is a tendency these days (I've noticed it particularly among some studies coming out of Britain YM) to jump to the conclusion that the *reality* of the Religious Society of Friends is merely the sum total of what people today say it is. This can lead to a sort of lowest common denominator summary. I would agree that at the secular, material level, that can be one way of describing what it looks like "on the ground", so to speak. But when we are trying to describe something spiritual, something that is based in a human-Divine interaction, the surface, material, what-you-can-see-and-touch view is woefully inadequate. So it is with such a description of the Religious Society of Friends: it is woefully incomplete and thus inadequate.

Quaker theologian Melvin Keiser describes Protestant theology as starting with a concept, such as salvation or election, and working out a logical system from the given concept. Friends have not done that. Instead we start with our experience of God, and build on "the divine presence experienced in the present amidst our relatedness to the community of being". It is a very different way of doing theology. It uses our stories, our narratives, the "divine reality experienced in the present". Most important, its purpose was "not to describe the characteristics of an object, whether God or self, but to bring the reader to an experience of the divine".¹ In

¹Melvin Keiser, "The Quaker Vision and the Doing of Theology", *Quaker Religious Thought*, (Jan., 1997), 23, 28.

addition, Quaker theology is relational. This is a point I intend to come back to a little later.

The Religious Society of Friends takes as a fundamental assumption that what an individual can really know about God, about Truth and Love, about the Divine, is what he or she has actually inwardly experienced. Our knowledge of God is an inward, intuitive knowing. The words and images that earlier Friends used to describe, and the lens through which they understood, that experience have been Christian and Biblical. Douglas Gwyn describes the process of conviction for early Friends, when “the light of Christ gave them a searing, unmistakable knowledge of themselves. They were confronted as never before with their alienated conditions (including overt sins) *and* by the power of God to redeem them. These basic Christian tenets, which they had heard preached and which they had repeated endlessly before, became a staggering reality in that moment of conviction”.²

The use of a common set of images and words helped unite the group and to root this small Society into a much larger tradition. But in the beginning the choice of words and metaphors was not the point; the experience--radical and transforming--was what was important.

We are a Religious *Society*, and we do not come into this knowing about God alone or isolated. The famous description by Robert Barclay remains a touchstone of our faith. “For when I came into the silent assemblies of God’s people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart. And as I gave way to it, I found the evil in me weakening, and the good lifted up. Thus it was that I was knit into them and united with them. And I hungered more and more for the increase of this power and life until I could feel myself perfectly redeemed.”³ Our theology, our experience, is relational. By that I mean that (1) it is founded on an I-Thou relationship with the Divine, and (2) it is in relation to other humans that it finds its deepest and most powerful expression. The relational aspects are vertical, between us and the Divine, and horizontal, among us humans.

It is the horizontal relationship between one individual and the others in the meeting that I want to examine and explore today. My words about this are in the context of the above understanding that first, we know about God experientially--that is the basis of our faith, and second, our practice, as an expression of our faith, is learned, enlarged, and demonstrated in and

²Douglas Gwyn, *Seekers Found: Atonement in Early Quaker Experience* (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 2000), 377-78.

³Robert Barclay, *Barclay’s Apology in Modern English*, ed. by Dean Freiday (1967), 254; see also Melvin Keiser, “Touched and Knit in the Life: Barclay’s Relational Theology and Cartesian Dualism”, *QRT* (5/2/2001), 142.

through our relations with others, in the meeting and beyond it.

But before I get into the faith and practice of Friends in regard to the interaction between an individual and the group, there is one other foundational piece I want to offer to you so that you will know where I am coming from. This provides the larger context of my comments.

The Religious Society of Friends has been likened to a three-legged stool. The first of these three legs is the individual's personal relationship with the Divine and the personal spiritual practices that support that relationship. The second leg is the meeting as a faith community in which we grow and are formed spiritually. The third leg is our witness out into the larger world.

It has helped me to play around a bit with this metaphor. First, what are the advantages of three legs, as opposed to two, or four or five? The stool will sit firmly on any sort of uneven terrain. It functions quite satisfactorily even if all legs are not identical, as long as they are approximately equal in length and strength. So each individual Friend, over the course of his or her life, needs to pay attention to each of these three "legs": personal relationship with the Divine Center, cultivating and being formed within the meeting community, and witnessing our Quaker values and testimonies to the wider world. There may be a rhythm that shifts the emphasis between, say, "navel gazer", "committee Friend", and "social activist", but if any of these is entirely neglected, the individual Quaker is balanced rather precariously. If too many Friends ignore one or more of these "legs", the entire Religious Society will be unbalanced and precarious.

If you weaken or shorten one leg disproportionately, it will collapse when weight or pressure is applied (or when it is stressed). If you have one large solid leg and two very puny ones, the stool will eventually topple over. The other legs will need to get propped up to prevent collapse, or the large one will be cut down to match the others.

If you want to add a fourth leg you run into all sorts of interesting metaphorical difficulties: it won't sit solidly except under the most favorable conditions. It is almost inevitable that the legs will be uneven, or the surface on which it stands will be uneven so that the thing will rock and jiggle; it will not be solid and secure. What might the extraneous un-needed legs look like? All those syncretistic borrowings from today's smorgasbord offerings of other faith practices and traditions, the seepage in from the secular, consumerist dominant culture. In short, whatever does not support what Patricia Loring has identified as the "Quaker gestalt", the wholeness of our spirituality that involves listening to Divine Guidance in all three areas of personal spirituality,

corporate life, and witness to the world.⁴

Today we are looking at the relationship between two of the legs. But please do not forget that there is also a third leg. The past few years during LEYM sessions we have heard about the first one. Perhaps in the next few years our plenary may address the third leg.

Let me describe more fully what I mean when I am talking about the meeting community. I want to try to create a different understanding of the corporate body and therefore of its relationship to an individual member or attender. First, let me try to describe the meeting group, not as it looks but in terms of its inner reality and possibility. Earlier Friends experienced a group cohesion, a knitting together based on the discovery that these other people had all experienced the same radical, transforming experience of being in the presence of Divine Love--or yearning mightily for such a knowing. I am not trying to say that each had had an identical experience. Not at all. But each recognized that the Divinity that touched him or her was the same that had touched the others. The fellowship was best described, they felt, by using one of Paul's metaphors: that of the body. As the human body is aware of all its parts, and a hurt to one part is felt by the whole, so with the body of Friends. As all the parts of the human body act in concert to accomplish a given activity (such as eating, reading a book, or playing a musical instrument), so the group worked together to worship God, conduct its business, and witness to the world. As Paul described the various functions of the parts of a human body, so Friends found that a variety of gifts had been bestowed on members of their group, all intended one way or another for strengthening the group and its witness.

Lloyd Lee Wilson's description of two contrasting meetings and their resulting dynamics is a helpful reminder to be aware of the underlying basis of the group. Meeting A "is based on a sense that these community members are somehow special human beings, who have the right concerns and values and live the right lives". But when, inevitably, the community fails to live up to these standards and expectations individuals leave and the group shatters. Meeting B "is based on an acceptance of a covenant relationship with God . . . [in which] we are given in relationship to each other precisely in order to help one another through these painful times, into a fuller relationship with God and one another. What is a centrifugal force in one case is a bonding experience among a covenant people. Our individual sins and failures become opportunities for the community to practice true loving forgiveness, to offer spiritual counsel and guidance, and to offer spiritual and emotional healing. It is precisely the imperfect, human nature of the people in a covenant

⁴Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality*, Vol. I: *Personal Spiritual Practices Among Friends* (1997), 1-4.

community that gives it the opportunity to witness to the redeeming love of Christ, through the redeeming love we have for one another in Christ.”⁵

Fran Taber puts it a different way, asking if our basic query in regard our meeting is, “Does this meeting adequately meet my needs for spiritual nurture and community support for my life?” If that is the fundamental question, the answer more likely than not is “no, my meeting does not adequately support my needs.”⁶ Yet this is clearly the attitude of most of the consumers in today’s religious marketplace. Friends fall into this consumerist mode by trying to present our wares with an emphasis on both the lack of demands made on members and our broad acceptance of individuals who are tacitly invited to create their own definitions of Quakerism. One result is that newcomers join with little expectation that they will explore and live into the richness of our tradition.

Let’s take a brief look at our tradition, that is, how the first Friends experienced and articulated their concept of community (also known as “church order”). One of the basic presuppositions of George Fox was that God is calling all people “into a community whose fellowship and order are produced by a master-disciple relationship with the living Christ.”⁷ In the words of Fox scholar Lewis Benson, early Friends understood Christ to be active in the community in three ways.

First, as he is present in the midst of the gathered community, teaching, instructing, and guiding them. His people can hear his voice as he raises up spokesmen and sends his spirit by which the spoken word is confirmed in the heart of each member. . . . Second, he speaks to the individual member and shows him how to cultivate his gifts and offer them acceptably toward the harmonious functioning of the whole community. Every member is called to contribute something, and the functioning of the community is dependent on the faithful response of each member to the call of Christ. And third, God and Christ send the spirit which is good and holy, and which helps us to know Christ as the one head of God’s people, and helps us to hear and obey him.”⁸

This language, which pulsed with Life for earlier Friends, is foreign to many of us today, and even repulsive.

So let me try to approach our topic from a somewhat different angle. In the Quaker ideal, the individual and the meeting are in balance. There is a healthy tension such as is in a taut violin

⁵Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, (1993), 69.

⁶William and Frances Taber, *Building the Life of the Meeting* (the Twenty-fourth Annual Michener Lecture, Southeast Yearly Meeting, 1994), 9.

⁷Lewis Benson, *Catholic Quakerism: A Vision For All Men* (Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1973), 43.

⁸Benson, *Catholic Quakerism*, 50.

string. Seekers in the 1640s and 1650s lived in the almost unbearable tension “between visible churches and the invisible church, the particular and the universal, the already and the not yet, the conservative and the progressive.” Creative energy is released in a situation of healthy tension, and this was perhaps one of the most important aspects of the early Friends’ experience.⁹

Let’s look at both ends of this metaphorical violin string, first the individual, and then the group. Each “end” has its responsibilities, its role. In today’s more familiar psychological terms, each end has its particular needs and wants. But narrowing our understanding to this psychological view, if used exclusively, seriously diminishes our understanding of the larger spiritual dimension.

My assumption is that humans are created (by God, by evolution, by genetics) to be social animals, which means that it is very rare for one human being to come into the full fruition of human potential living entirely alone. The desert fathers and mothers in the fifth and sixth centuries fled into the desert to face down their own internal demons, but in time, one way or another, they did not remain isolated. Either they joined together in monastic communities, or others sought them out for spiritual direction. They supported themselves by simple crafts, which necessitated commercial interactions with other humans. Japanese survivors of the Second World War after 20 or more years hiding on Pacific islands could no longer stand the solitude, and stumbled out of the jungle to face what they thought would be surrender and infamy. Prisoners under the supposedly benign punishment of solitary confinement often went mad. So I am not arguing but accepting as fact that we humans must, some way or another, live together.

So the individual needs a group. But what kind of a group will it be? We are addressing one of the basic human questions of virtually any age: what is the right relationship between individuals and the group? What sort of group do we create in which we can best function? What structure will facilitate us becoming the people we were created to be?

Early Friends felt they were living in the new covenant, under Gospel order, which gave them a way to live in love with each other in community. These terms, which they used with great frequency, have lost much of their meaning for us today. The new covenant, that relation between God and God’s people in which God was to write God’s law on the hearts of people, was experienced by Friends not as a set of internalized rules, but as a person: Christ Jesus. As Sandra Cronk wrote,

⁹Gwyn, *Seekers Found*, 94.

At the heart of Quaker faith is the understanding that one cannot live God's new order alone. This is a sociological as well as a spiritual reality. It is necessary to have a community to embody a new pattern of living. A single person cannot live a new social pattern alone. . . .

Early Friends stressed that God's new order was not present simply because people did all the "right" things in an outward sense; rather, God's new order, gospel order, was present when people lived out of the fullness of their living relationship with Christ. Truth is not found by professing correct beliefs and correct actions while actually living outside the life and power of Christ.¹⁰

But perhaps the reality of this profound transforming experience is too foreign to our present lives. So let's go back to the question of why individuals might want to join together with others in a meeting. The most obvious reason for Friends to come together is to worship. As Robert Barclay pointed out so descriptively, "Many lighted candles, when gathered together in a single place, greatly augment each other's light and make it shine more brilliantly. In the same way, when many are gathered together into the same life, there is more of the glory of God. Each individual receives greater refreshment, because he partakes not only of the light and life that has been raised in him, but in the others as well."¹¹ When a group waits in expectant silence, with hearts and minds prepared and open, they can be gathered up by the Spirit to experience communion with God and with each other in a way that is not possible when praying or meditating alone. A time of covered worship is more than the sum of its individual participants.

Within the religious context of a Friends meeting the individual needs the group to be the laboratory in which he or she tests what he has learned about how to love, forgive, and give over to the greater good. Patricia Loring has eloquently spelled this out: in Volume II of her *Listening Spirituality*. An important part of Quakerism

is an implicit assertion that God's work in us is not confined to the solitude and privacy of our inward relationship in prayer and worship. A major arena for that work among Friends has been life together in spiritual community in both worship and fellowship. . . . [This] means learning to live lovingly with and through the human frailties of others. Most especially, it means allowing our own frailties, faults and sins to be illuminated in the encounter with others--accepting the guidance of the Light to lead us out of our own darkness. . . . It can't be done by gritting our teeth and forcing ourselves to "be nice" any more than we can force ourselves to accept a theological dogma that has no meaning or logic for us.¹²

¹⁰Sandra L. Cronk, *Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet # 297 (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1991), 7-8.

¹¹Barclay, *Barclay's Apology*, ed. by Freiday, 280.

¹²Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality*, Vol. II: *Corporate Spiritual Practice Among Friends*, 35, 36.

[T]here are times of great sweetness, comfort and warmth in [communal life], although we live this life together with people we might not have chosen for our beloved community. The mystery is that peoples' inevitable differences give us openings for spiritual growth and maturing in ways that are sometimes uncomfortable, if not downright painful. The harmony, peace and tenderness we experience in favored times of worship are usually actualized only at the cost of revelatory confrontations with, and healing of our own wounds, brokenness, willfulness and egotism--in encounter with the wounds, brokenness, willfulness and egotism of others. Staying with conflicting senses of God's will and Truth testifies to our trust in the healing and revelatory work of the Spirit of God within our very conflicts. Friends have cherished meeting community both for the Life in it and as a prophetic witness to the rest of the world about the nature of God and the effect of God's transforming love. It is at once hard-won and a gift of grace.¹³

As Sandra Cronk sums it up, "The internal life of the meeting-community, the church, was a reflection of the love and unity Friends felt in their relationship with God. Conversely, in the meeting they could know God's power and love through one another."¹⁴

The facet of the relationship between an individual and the group having to do with gifts is pointed to in Paul's epistles to the Romans and Corinthians.¹⁵ Each individual needs to expect and look for whatever gifts are given, great or small. The individual must be willing, with humility, gratitude, and awe, to try out these gifts within the group and learn how to rightly use them for the good of the faith community, for the "upbuilding of the church".

The group, at the same time, needs to take up the high and weighty responsibility of overseeing and nurturing the spiritual life of individuals, both in terms of encouragement and in terms of setting limits and expectations. The group needs to expect and discover gifts and to encourage their right use. The group then gives authority to those whose gifts it has recognized (either explicitly or tacitly) to go forth and exercise those gifts. One small example among a wide spectrum of possible ways of exercising one of many diverse gifts is to counsel with those whose messages in meeting for worship give cause for concern.

Another responsibility of the group in regard to its care of the individuals of whom it is constituted is to set expectations of behavior within the group. Each meeting or group develops--either carefully and consciously or unthinkingly--a corporate culture that includes how we treat each other, how we live together, what we do when we hurt each other, or disappoint each other,

¹³Loring, *Listening Spirituality*, Vol. II: *Corporate Spiritual Practice Among Friends*, 37-38.

¹⁴Cronk, *Gospel Order*, 10.

¹⁵Romans 12:4-8; I Corinthians 12.

or don't live up to the expectations of the group.¹⁶

Individuals, on their part, need to “show up”, to “stay at the table”, to participate rain or shine, steadfastly, reliably. Getting one's feelings hurt, pouting, and dropping out short circuits the possibility of the Divine Teacher working within the classroom of the meeting's “school of the Spirit”. Recall the quotation I read from Patricia Loring that a great deal of the painful work is seeing one's own faults in the mirror of others' actions, and with God's help dealing with the beams in our own eyes.

Each person needs to come with heart and mind prepared to listen humbly to the Divine Presence directly and as it comes through others in the group. This is true in our meetings for worship and when we attend to the business of the meeting. It is also true in our other dealings with each other. This means laying aside our cherished agendas and our own strong sense of how others need to change in order for the problem to be fixed. The dominant culture preaches self-actualization, looking out for number one, getting to yes, and a zillion variations on the message of self-centeredness and how to reach decisions that get things done to produce the outcome we want. The Religious Society of Friends offers a different world-view, which puts God in the center. Each individual human is beloved and has a special place within the cosmos. But that place is not in the Center. Our tradition has developed a structure in which the individual and the group are in balance, or in a healthy, creative tension. At times in our history things have gotten out of balance, or the tension has become destructive. When things are working well, individuals may receive fresh or deeper revelation, which is then taken to the group for further discernment. The assumption has been that the larger group, with more hearts tuned faithfully to God, will together be able to discern God's will more fully than a single individual. But sometimes the group's hearts are careless and not listening. Nowadays individuals tend to go ahead and do their own thing anyway if the meeting isn't united in support of their leading or project. But in more balanced times, a John Woolman, for example, waited and labored with his meeting until the whole group came to understand God's new instructions for Friends. Part of our tradition includes the necessity for individuals to learn to submit willingly to the Greater Wisdom as expressed in the gathered meeting. Note: the individual Friend submits to the discernment of the group when it has come together with hearts and minds humble and open to God, and while gathered in worship experiences unity in God's presence. There is important work for both the individual bringing a leading, concern, new revelation, or vision, and for each individual who is a part of the group. All must engage in this labor or our Friends' balance will be off center.

¹⁶See, for example, the chapter on the Angels of the churches in Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 69-86.

Fran Taber describes “the classical Quaker understanding that the life of the meeting grows in response to the individual, personal faithfulness to God’s call in the lives of its members.” She suggests an alternate query to the one offered above, “How can I contribute to the spiritual and/or to the community life of my meeting?”¹⁷

The larger Religious Society of Friends is badly divided today, and even within our own Friends General Conference branch we have a very wide (although usually partly invisible) spectrum of beliefs. These differences threaten to weaken us either by ascerbic splits or by seeking a bland, safe, irrelevance. Douglas Gwyn describes today’s two ideological poles. One is “fundamentalist universalism” that insists the traditional truths they have are absolute and non-negotiable for all people everywhere. Its opposite is “universalist fundamentalism” that insists that truth is beyond any group, and anyone claiming to know or impart any categorical formulation of truth is by definition wrong.¹⁸

But this need not be a reason either to select one of these two unappealing poles each of which claims to uphold truth, or to sink into despair. There is another way. Our Friends tradition has built on the Hebrew scriptures and on John’s experience of Christianity to proclaim that Truth is not a static entity to clasp but is something to be enacted through faithfulness and love. As early Friend Thomas Curtis advised Isaac and Mary Penington, the only way to know truth is to do it. Curtis paraphrased John, “he that will know my doctrines must do my commands”.¹⁹ Friends not only experience Truth, they do Truth. We have both a faith and a practice. Together they make Truth visible.

To return to the analogy of the three-legged stool, the stool must be constructed and it must be used. It is not a theory but a piece of furniture. It is not a museum display, or something to cherish because it belonged to great grandmother. It is a kit handed to us. Some assembly is required. The Instructor is standing here, ready to help us. Let’s get to work on this great construction project --together.

¹⁷Taber, *Building the Life of the Meeting*, 9.

¹⁸Gwyn, *Seekers Found*, 398.

¹⁹Gwyn, *Seekers Found*, 284, 398; John 7:17 KJV.