



“Doing that which tends to the peace of all” Examining the roots of Quaker service at the UN

The finer essence of George Fox’s queer teaching ...was surely this – that Christian qualities matter much more than Christian dogma. No church or sect had ever made that its living rule before.

G. M. Trevelyan, English Social History, 1942

Our principle is, and our practices have always been, to seek peace, and ensue it, and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and welfare, and doing that which tends to the peace of all.

Declaration to Charles II, 1660

Introduction

This is a personal and preliminary reflection on the roots of Quaker service work, with particular reference to the work of QUNO in New York. The intent is to try to identify the particular skills or practices which, deriving from the Quaker tradition, provide us with something different to offer in the way of service to the world. The reason for this exercise is clear: if we can identify our particular skills, our comparative advantage, then it helps us to focus our small resources where we can do the most good, where we can have the greatest impact.

The path that I have followed is to start by naming a number of key Quaker insights, and then tracking the fruits of those insights as they have become concrete in ways that Quakers look upon the world and act within it. From those fruits, those habits and perspectives, flow some ideas about areas of activity where it would seem that Quakers may indeed have something different to offer.

This is not at all meant to be definitive. It is very much a work in progress, but it seemed a journey that was worthwhile to begin.

Some Quaker Insights

As a starting place, I have tried to name some of the insights that guide Quaker practice, insights that distinguish Quakerism from other Christian denominations and other faith traditions. My background is in the unprogrammed tradition of Friends, but I hope that my choices are not divisive and will resonate with all who consider themselves Friends..

That of God in everyone

And this is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you all in the presence of the living God: be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.

George Fox, 1656

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names; it is, however, pure and 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. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren.

The notion of the inner light, a spark of divine potential that exists in everyone, is a core concept for Quakers. The notion is not in itself original – many other sects and religions have similar concepts – but for Quakers, with their stubborn insistence on integrity, the idea is followed to its logical conclusion, that, if there is indeed ‘that of God’ in everyone, then we are all part of the same spirit, and all other distinctions and divisions, of gender, race, wealth, age, sexual orientation, class, religion, power, nationality, fade by comparison. For Quakers, the notion of ‘that of God in everyone’ is a fundamental concept on which is based a strong sense not only of common humanity but of common divinity.

Many themes associated with Quakers flow directly from this one idea. Pacifism, tolerance, emancipation of slaves, opposition to the death penalty, prison reform, upholding the powerless: all of these stem largely from the idea of ‘that of God in every one’, a simple concept, followed through with integrity.

From the same root comes the notion of equality of experience and insight: that the opinions of a priest, a king or a businessman are no more valid with respect to the ‘things that are eternal’ than those of a farmer, a factory worker or an undocumented immigrant.

The primacy of direct experience

‘Then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?’

Margaret Fell, quoting George Fox, 1694

let the Eternal Light search you . . . for this will deal plainly with you; it will rip you up, and lay you open . . . naked and bare before the Lord God, from whom you cannot hide yourselves

Margaret Fell

From the beginning, Quakers have set much store on the value of direct experience. George Fox said that his spiritual insights were acquired ‘experimentally’. What is most important is not what you read in books, or hear about from others: not theory, not custom, but what you know out of your own experience. When my meeting worded a minute on a difficult topic, we began with a reference to fundamentals, phrased not as ‘We believe that..’ but ‘It is our direct experience that..’.

If the lodestar of spiritual knowledge is direct experience, then there is also a premium to be placed on honesty and integrity. If part of the spiritual journey is to be utterly opened to the Spirit, being stripped down to your bare essentials, that brings with it a compulsion to integrity. Reading the Journal of John Woolman one is struck by his constant struggle to make absolutely sure that the path that he feels called to is the right one, that he is proceeding fairly and honestly.

Continuing revelation and leadings

Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts, which are the leadings of God.

Britain Yearly Meeting, Quaker Faith and Practice, 1995

Love was the first motion, and thence a concern arose to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they might be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of truth among them

The Journal of John Woolman, 1871

Another key concept for early Quakers was that the spirit that underlies the Christian scriptures is alive and available to us today, that spiritual insight is as accessible now as it has ever been, and that that insight may lead us into completely new territory. Again, this is not an exclusively Quaker concept but the Quaker response was also to take it to its logical conclusion. If revelation is available to us today then our practices must be set up in such a way so as to be open to it. Thus the un-programmed meeting for worship is set up largely as a listening exercise, to be open to those insights. And as individuals, we must be open to new ideas, new solutions, new paths. It is a tremendously powerful and flexible perspective, to make the assumption that our understanding at any moment is only preliminary, is necessarily incomplete, at best an approximation of the truth, and that we always need to be open to new insight.

The Woolman quote demonstrates how leadings and concerns are different from just having a bright idea or a brainwave. Leadings arise from a deeper place than that, out of love and humility, out of prayerful listening and consideration. And in this case, what a different approach it was from the mainstream attitudes of his society towards Indians. He doesn't want to convert them, or exploit them, or fight them: he wants to understand them, to learn from them, and then to help them if his help was needed.

The importance of group insight and testing leadings

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 unto it I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up; and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed

Robert Barclay, 1648-1690

Since there is but one Light and one Truth, if the Light of Truth be faithfully followed, unity will result....The nearer the members of a group come to this one light, the nearer they will be to one another, just as the spokes of a wheel approach one another as they near the center.

Howard H. Brinton, Friends for 350 Years

In a meeting rightly held, a new way may be discovered which none present had alone perceived and which transcends the differences of the opinions expressed

Britain Yearly Meeting, Quaker Faith & Practice Third Edition

One of the key insights of early Quakers was that the spiritual experience of the group was different from that of the individual, that there was a significant added element of intensity, of power. Somehow it seemed that a group gathered in a Meeting for Worship could get to a deeper place than an individual alone.

In the meeting for business, this group experience takes on an additional element, that the group together is searching for insight or for the solution to a problem, that may turn out to be different from what any one present may have come into the room with. That if all approach the process with humility, a new way can be found, beyond where any individual member may have gone. This goes beyond 'two heads are better than one' or the story of the blind men and the elephant, (each of whom only have a piece of the puzzle). It is that in group discernment there is a greater power, a stronger ability to get closer to the truth.

From this belief in the power of group discernment came a set of tools, of disciplines, to test individual leadings and concerns. From early on, it was clear that if everyone had a direct line to God, and that if a great emphasis was put on the power of individual leadings, then there needed to be a way to test those leadings to avoid anarchy. And the way to test those leadings was to submit them to the discernment of the group.

So not only is the group a place for a higher level of spiritual insight, it is also a place where that higher level of insight can be used in discernment around individual leadings.

The fruits of Quaker practice

Out of these spiritual insights arises a way of looking at the world, patterns of living and thinking and interacting with others that are peculiarly Quaker in tone and that can be thought of as the fruits of Quaker practice.

Insight: the quality of openness to new ideas, new solutions, based on the experience of following and testing concerns and leadings, on the expectation that new way will open, enhanced by the discipline of testing such leadings through discernment.

Fellow-feeling: the quality arising from internalizing the concept of ‘that of God in everyone’, reaching out in love across divisions, it includes elements of tolerance, openness, equality, humility, and a readiness to learn from others. (cf John Woolman’s reaching out to the Indians).

Groundedness: the quality of knowing that knowledge and truth are based in direct personal experience, processed in honesty and humility. Pragmatism. And by extension, that the starting place for understanding is to know each others’ reality.

Integrity: arising in part from the humbling and vulnerable experience of encounter with the divine, feeling naked before God, as well as an ingrained and stubborn insistence on the truth (e.g. Quaker insistence on affirmation rather than taking oaths).

Inclusivity: the quality engendered by the experience of the transforming power of a group, of solving problems or coming to new insights as a group process.

Hope: Belief that there is an answer, a true understanding, beyond the scope of our current approximate knowledge, and in the transformative potential of new insights.

Application to Quaker service

When we consider the history of Quaker service, of Quaker action in the world, in the light of this list, certain areas of activity emerge, where these patterns of thinking and this approach to the world has resulted in significant impact. (From a more religious perspective, these ‘areas of activity’ could also be thought of as ‘ministries’, but that terminology is not required by the analysis). A number of such areas could be suggested, but the ones that stand out for me are as follows.

The first area of activity could be described as *transformation through insight*. On a number of social and humanitarian issues over time, Quakers have been early to the party (e.g. the anti-slavery movement). The qualities of fellow-feeling, insight and integrity (among others) seem to come together to enable Quakers to identify issues early, to vanguard and raise new, tested concerns to the attention of the world. But it should be noted that the identification of new issues is not something that Quakers have necessarily set out to do: rather it has been the result of discernment over time, of being open to individual concerns, testing them and holding up those that are confirmed.

The second could be described as *transformation through relationships*. Quakers have frequently been involved in facilitation, in mediation and conciliation. The qualities of integrity, inclusivity and fellow-feeling seem to create trust, and fellow-feeling leads to a strong basis for being able to reach out across divides. This facility comes from a combination of forming relationships of trust, reaching out in a loving, curious and unthreatening way, and thus creating space for meaningful discussion. Put another way, ‘that of God in everyone’ provides the impulse and the humility to build bridges, and integrity provides the strength to be able to take and maintain an independent position, despite being pulled in other directions.

So this analysis suggests that these, traditional areas of Quaker service activity are not a coincidence. It seems that the exercise of Quaker spiritual insights leads to certain ways of approaching the world and interacting with others, and this renders Quakers particularly suited for certain types of social action.

Quaker challenges

One issue with this analysis is that it assumes that, for these observations to be true, the practitioners must have some reasonable familiarity with Quaker insights and practices, or have acquired similar or complementary skills in other environments. For example, Quakers have developed sophisticated processes to test leadings and concerns in a disciplined fashion. In some ways, being open to leadings is the easy part: testing them and applying discernment is the hard part. Without that discipline, an openness to each and every concern can lead to chaos and frustration. Similarly, in the field of relationship building, the generous instinct to reach out to others is only part of the picture: the other, and perhaps the harder part, is having the strength and integrity to maintain an independent vantage point. And in all of this, there is a clear need to stay grounded, to continue to search for clearness.

Further, it should be acknowledged that ongoing spiritual practise is an important but not sufficient condition for operating successfully in these areas. For example, to make the most of a mediation opportunity requires a detailed knowledge of the relevant subject matter, however strong the impulse to reach out and however unshakable the integrity of the Friend. To suggest that there is a Quaker predilection for certain types of relationship activity is not to suggest that every Quaker is naturally a skilled mediator. Similarly, to be open to insight is important, but to test that insight effectively, to make the right decisions on program choice or direction is a process that is better done with the right information and tools. Particularly to the extent that we start to build program around these areas of activity, these natural tendencies should therefore be built on with appropriate training, in relationship-related skills (networking, mediation, etc.) and in situation and program decision tools and skills (e.g. conflict analysis).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to try to identify what particular insights or skills we bring to service work by merit of our Quaker tradition, to analyze the extent to which Quaker insights and practices provide us with any comparative advantages compared to other actors. More informally stated, the aim has been to consider if the 'Q' in 'QUNO' has any meaning beyond historical accident.

The path that has been followed is to start by naming a number of key Quaker insights, and then tracking the fruits of those insights as they have become concrete in ways that Quakers look upon the world and act within it. From those fruits, those habits and perspectives, flow ideas about areas of activity where it would seem that Quakers may indeed have something different to offer. Those areas of activity can be summarized as *transformation through insight*, and *transformation through relationships*.

Over time, as the working environment changes, it is hoped that this analysis can continue to be used to assist in focusing the work of the Quakers at the United Nations.

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