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## Friends Experiential Faith

For Friends, the inward experience of Truth, for both the individual and the group, is the starting point of faith. Friends' search for Divine Truth relies primarily on continuing revelation, through individual experience, tested by group discernment in Friends meetings. The local Friends meeting provides a stimulus for and a check on inward experience. Advices and queries are part of Quaker tradition and experience, and religious writings from other spiritual traditions often provide a broader perspective.

**Names.** The name, the Religious Society of Friends, finds its source in Jesus' words:

*You are my friends, if you do what I command you. I shall not call you servants any more, because a servant does not know his master's business; I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father.*

*John 15:14-15*

The many words and phrases Friends use for the divine life and power at the heart of the universe reflect the diversity of beliefs and variety of experiences among us. What one Friend may understand as the Inward Christ, another Friend may understand as the Ground of Being. Over the centuries, Friends have used many such words and phrases: God, the Eternal, the Truth, the Holy Spirit, the Divine Principle, the Light Within, the Inward (or Inner) Light, the Seed, the Light of Christ, Christ Within, the Living God, Lord, the Word, Power, True Silence, Spirit, Source, Grace, Presence, and others. All such terms are weak attempts to express the inexpressible—that which is beyond words.

**Sacraments and Creeds.** Friends seek to view all of life as sacramental. Desiring to avoid symbolism that may tend to supplant substance, Friends meetings do not observe outward sacraments, such as water baptism or bread and wine communion. The absence of outward rites and ceremonies affirms the primacy of inward experience and is a stimulus for it.

Similarly, Friends do not rely on formal statements of belief. We do share some common understandings such as the Divine spark within each person and the possibility of continuing revelation. Adherence to a creed is not a test of faith, nor is it required for membership. Rather than indicating a lack of belief, the absence of dogma actually invites and encourages personal responsibility for the discovery of faith. Instead of relying on priests or theologians, we each embrace the discipline and responsibility which enable spiritual transformation. The statements of belief, both in word and in deed, which belong to Friends flow out of lives of service, reflection, and prayer.

*It is not opinion, or speculation, or notions of what is true, or assent to or the subscription of articles and propositions, though never so soundly worded, that ... makes ... a true believer or true Christian. But it is a conformity of mind and practice to the will of God, in all holiness of conversation, according to the dictates of this Divine principle of Light and Life in the soul which denotes a person truly a child of God.*

*William Penn, 1692*

**Corporate Discernment.** The experience of the Spirit is both individual and communal. Through worship together, ministry in worship, group discussion and discernment, and daily interaction, individuals teach the meeting and the meeting molds and teaches individuals. Light comes to us both directly from the Source and through the meeting as a whole. Friends recognize that there is that of God

in everyone and share a common understanding that if we gather together faithfully, Truth will be revealed to us.

**Testimonies, Advices, Queries.** While Friends do not rely on creeds and dogma, there are guides to follow and to measure against. Testimonies are statements of central ethical principles and outward manifestations of the inward transformation that grows out of a living relationship with the Divine. Friends use testimonies as guides and as measuring-sticks in our lives as individuals, in our families, and in our Quaker communities. Testimonies among Friends vary over time according to the life and spirit of each Friends group. For example, the peace testimony has been foundational for many generations of Friends and the earth care (stewardship) testimony is rising in our time. For NPYM today, central testimonies include integrity, community, peace, simplicity, equality, and stewardship. These are described in more depth in Chapter 4, “Friends Testimonies.”

Advices are written reminders of what a life lived in the Spirit might look like. Friends in various yearly meetings have adapted and revised advices according to the Light they are given. Some advices are straightforward suggestions about specific issues of concern to Friends at a particular time; some are wide-ranging challenges for all time.

Similarly, early Friends used queries to ascertain the state of the Society as a whole, both spiritually and practically. The first set of such questions to be asked of monthly meetings was:

*Which Friends in service to the Society, in their respective regions, departed this life since the last Yearly Meeting?*

*Which Friends, imprisoned on account of their testimony, died in prison since the last Yearly Meeting?*

*How among Friends did Truth advance since last Yearly Meeting and how do they fare in relation to peace and unity?*

Friends use queries today to challenge ourselves and to open the way for growth in wisdom. Examples of contemporary queries are:

*How do we avoid being drawn into violent reactions against those who are destructive of human dignity? Do we reach out to violator as well as violated with courage and love?*

*In what ways do we honor all living things? Do we seek the holiness inherent in the order of nature, the wildness of wilderness, and the richness of the world?*

Taken together, the advices and queries are a reminder of the common faith and principles held to be essential to the life and witness of the Religious Society of Friends. Individually and in meetings, Friends consider how the advices and queries affect us personally and communally.

**Scripture.** The Quaker movement began at a time when the Bible had recently come into wide circulation in English, and Friends drew greatly from it. George Fox and other early traveling ministers knew the Bible well, studied it earnestly, and quoted it often.

While affirming the inspiration of the Scriptures, early Friends also emphasized a distinction which has remained important to this day. In the words of the Quaker scholar of the New Testament, Henry Cadbury,

*Divine revelation was not confined to the past. The same Holy Spirit which had inspired the scriptures in the past could inspire living believers centuries later. Indeed, for the right understanding of the past, the present insight from the same Spirit was essential.*

Thus, in emphasizing the power which gave forth the Scriptures and the accessibility of this same power to us today, Friends have avoided making Scripture an infallible guide. Instead we are invited to be drawn into that same Spirit which inspired the Bible and leads to maturing discovery of the Divine.

Today, while many Friends still rely on Scripture in our search for continuing revelation, we are also open to writings from a broad array of faith traditions.

***Friends Place in Christianity.*** Whether we interpret the Quaker movement as a strand within Protestantism, as a third force distinct from both Protestantism and Catholicism, or as a new and distinct form of spirituality, the movement, both in its origin and in the various branches which have evolved, is rooted in Christianity. Over time, Friends have offered a critique of many forms of Christianity and felt empathy toward people of faith beyond the bounds of Christianity. Some Friends have placed particular emphasis on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, while others have found more compelling a universal perspective emphasizing the Truth enlightening every person. One of the lessons of Friends history is that an excessive reliance on one or the other of these perspectives is needlessly divisive and diminishes the vitality of the Quaker vision.

The concern of Friends is for this faith and practice to be a living and transforming power in their lives, not a particular verbal formulation. Challenged by the words of Jesus as quoted in Matthew 7:21—“It is not those who say to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but those who do the will of my Father in heaven”—Friends do not place emphasis on the naming of God. Instead each is encouraged, in John Woolman’s phrase, “to distinguish the language of the pure Spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart.” In the course of following this spiritual path, many Friends come to find great depths of meaning in familiar Christian concepts and language, while others do not. Although sometimes perplexing to the casual observer, these differences do not trouble many seasoned Friends who have discovered a deep unity with one another in the Spirit.

***Nontheist Friends.*** A number of Friends in North Pacific Yearly Meeting do not believe in the existence of a deity. This perspective cannot be described fully in a few words. Many nontheist Friends live in awe and wonder of the world, feel deep and mysterious connection to people and nature, and are convinced of the infinite sanctity of life. Nontheist Friends share strong callings to service, to the mystery and power of the gathered meeting, and to the importance of community in spiritual growth. Nontheists are warmly welcomed and valued as members of our Friends meetings.

***Many Voices of Faith.*** The Religious Society of Friends is a diverse spiritual family with several branches that have evolved in different directions over the past three and a half centuries. Even amid this diversity, a reading of Quaker literature reveals some similar patterns of belief. But a true understanding of Quaker faith comes from a careful, sustained observation of and participation in Friends work and ministry. In this way we see the basic underpinnings of our faith even though there are different ways to describe it. This *Faith and Practice* offers signposts to lead us deeper into Friends spiritual life.

*As I had forsaken all the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most-experienced people. For I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, O then, I heard a voice which said “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,” and, when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory. For all are concluded under sin and shut up in unbelief, as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the preeminence, who enlightens, and gives grace and faith and power. Thus, when God doth work, who shall let it? And this I knew experimentally....*

*George Fox, 1647*

*And so he [Fox] went on and said, How that Christ was the Light of the world and lighteth every man that cometh into the world; and that by this Light they might be gathered to God, etc. And I stood up in my pew, and I wondered at his doctrine, for I had never heard such before. And then he went on, and opened the Scriptures, and said, “The Scriptures were the prophets’ words and Christ’s and the apostles’ words, and what as*

*they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had it from the Lord.” And said, “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?” ... This opened me so that it cut me to the heart.... And I cried in my spirit to the Lord, “We are all thieves, we are all thieves, we have taken the Scriptures in words and know nothing of them in ourselves.”*

Margaret Fell, 1652

*The first gleam of light, “the first cold light of morning” which gave promise of day with its noontide glories, dawned on me one day at Meeting, when I had been meditating on my state in great depression. I seemed to hear the words articulated in my spirit, “Live up to the light thou hast, and more will be granted thee.”*

Caroline Fox, 1882

*Experience is the Quaker’s starting-point. This light must be my light, this truth must be my truth, this faith must be my very own faith. The key that unlocks the door to the spiritual life belongs not to Peter, or some other person, as an official. It belongs to the individual soul, that finds the light, discovers the truth, that sees the revelation of God and goes on living in the demonstration and power of it.*

Rufus Jones, 1927

*The best type of religion is one in which the mystical, the evangelical, the rational, and the social are so related that each exercises a restraint on the others. Too exclusive an emphasis on mysticism results in a religion which is individualistic, subjective, and vague; too dominant an evangelicalism results in a religion which is authoritarian, creedal, and external; too great an emphasis on rationalism results in a cold intellectual religion which appeals only to the few; too engrossing a devotion to the social gospel results in a religion which, in improving the outer environment, ignores defects in the inner life which cause the outer disorder. In Quakerism the optimum is not equality in rank of the four elements. The mystical is basic. The Light Within occasions the acceptance or rejection of a particular authority, reason, or service.*

Howard Brinton, 1952

*What is the Quaker faith? It is not a tidy package of words which you can capture at any given time and then repeat weekly at a worship service. It is an experience of discovery which starts the discoverer on a journey which is life-long. The discovery in itself is not uniquely the property of Quakerism. It is as old as Christianity, and considerably older if you share the belief that many have known Christ who have not known His name. What is unique to the Religious Society of Friends is its insistence that the discovery must be made by each man for himself. No one is allowed to get it secondhand by accepting a ready-made creed. Furthermore, the discovery points to a path and demands a journey, and gives you the power to make the journey.*

Elise Boulding, 1954

*There is indeed One that speaks to my condition, but that One may not announce a name, or even speak a word; it may reveal itself as Light, or inner peace, or compassion for humanity. But whatever its manifestation, there is only One. If that One is perceived as a King, then that is a true perception; if it is perceived as a Mother, then that is also a true perception. If I call God “Holy Mother” and you call God “Divine King,” does that mean there are two Gods? No, there is only One.*

*That of God within every person is sometimes recognized as the Spirit of Christ, or the Holy Spirit, or the Inner Light. As Friends we accept and respect that Spirit, however perceived, in all people, and particularly in each other. We can give testimony to our own*

*experience, as honestly and faithfully as possible, but we cannot alter another's spiritual condition. Let us receive Light as it is given to us, and share it as we are able, and trust in the One that can speak to the condition of all people, to care for and guide us all.*

*Helen Park, 1979*

*When we turn inside or beyond ourselves to grasp some understanding of the divine, we discover through encounter that what we need to find we will find: a Something creative and renewing, overwhelmingly strong and passive, completely wise and innocent, living and dying, feminine and masculine.*

*Our father, our mother, our light, which is in heaven and earth, holy is your name. Come.*

*Patrice Haan, 1983*

*I am just now beginning to feel comfortable with the realization of a Feminine Spirit as a personal presence. I will continue to work toward centering in Worship, to be open to the Light, its peace and comfort, and maybe then, its message through her voice. I do not search for her. I just know her as the source of my Light.*

*Molly Barnett, 1983*

*The spirituality that is real to us finds its inner strength in the mystical experience of connectedness with each other and with the whole of creation. This is the deep, still and vibrant centre that transcends time.*

*David James & Jillian Wychel, 1991*

*Each path is unique. Though Zen practice has blessed me greatly, I do not urge others to follow my footsteps.... [M]y Zen journey has helped me to appreciate, from "the outside," features of Quaker spiritual practice that I had formerly overlooked. Radically understood and faithfully followed, the Society of Friends needs no bolstering by alien traditions; rather, Quakerism is itself a fully sufficient path of transforming spiritual power and grace.*

*Steve Smith, 2004*

*When we have made the unreserved plunge into a covenant relationship with God, when we have experienced God directly and personally through that relationship—why then we look up and see God everywhere. My own ability to see and honor and be thankful for the way God is revealed to the followers of all the great religions—Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Taoism and the rest—is enhanced by my own relationship to God as encountered in my own faith tradition is deepened and strengthened.*

*Lloyd Lee Wilson, 2005*

*Part of our challenge is to feel the presence of God and movement of Truth and Love. This is not 'feeling' as in the modern usage, but a deep inward knowing that is more than intellect and emotion. It allows no space for manipulation of others or falsity. When we feel the inward motion that comes from God rise up in us, then we are rightly led to speak, be it in worship or in daily life.*

*Margery Post Abbott, 2016*

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