

Introduction to Quakers and Friends Ways

Session 2 - Experiencing the Spirit – Our Faith

Introduction

Canadian Yearly Meeting's Faith and Practice offers the following introduction to the Chapter, 'Experiencing the Spirit: Our Faith'

For Friends the wellspring of faith is the search for what George Fox and early Friends described as the Inner Light, the Seed, the Truth, the Life, the Power, the Christ within – all leading to an inner awareness through which they embraced and experienced the Sacred and were changed by it. Waiting in silence that brought forth vocal ministry, they discovered a power that challenged them to find their own faith. Friends have found inspiration in the Christian message and in the role and significance of Jesus, but at the heart of this faith is an emphasis on the inward experiential testimony to a way of life that resists creeds or doctrines, inspiring Friends to act out their faith in their everyday lives.

As George Fox said, "We need no mass to teach us, for the spirit that gave forth the scripture teacheth us how to pray, sing, praise, rejoice, honour and worship God, and in what, and how to walk and to behave ourselves to God and man, and leadeth us into all truth, in which is our unity; and it is our comforter and guide and leader, and not men without who say they have not the spirit and power that the apostles had" (Epistle 171, 1659).

For Quakers, the encounter with the Sacred is within, and the inspiration for that encounter may be found in the Bible, in the Christian faith, in testimonies of other Friends, through individual and corporate discernment and through our relationship to other faith traditions and to the natural world. However, the foundation experience is that the Truth is reached beyond words, in stillness, in the hearts of all people who seek God.

Settle into silence together, considering the following queries:

1. How have I come to be a seeker here?
2. What has drawn me to the spiritual community of Friends?
3. How do I listen for the 'promptings' of Spirit', and then practice discernment?
4. What sustains my faith?

Agenda (Lesson Plan)

1. Worship (half hour). This is a chance to listen for the Truth that is beyond words, and even to try to use words to express it.
2. Worship Sharing rising from worship and the queries above (half hour)
3. Conversation with the group: Consider the selections from Faith and Practice on the following page. Friends express our experience of the Spirit in a variety of ways. Which speak to you? How do you describe your experience of the Divine? How does this experience influence your practices of discernment? (half hour, 10 minutes reading, 20 conversation)
4. Reflect on the learning: (15 minutes)
 - a. What remains most strongly with you from our reflection and conversation here?
 - b. What questions do you still have?
 - c. How would you like to explore further?
5. Closing Worship (15 minutes)

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Selections from Faith and Practice, Canadian Yearly Meeting

1.8. *Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand. — Isaac Pennington, 1667*

1.10. *The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers. This world is a form; our bodies are forms, and no visible acts of devotion can be without forms. But yet the less form in religion the better, since God is a Spirit; for the more mental our worship, the more adequate to the nature of God; the more silent, the more suitable to the language of a Spirit. — William Penn, 1693*

1.12. *There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages had 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 in the best sense of the expression. — John Woolman, 1762*

1.20. *It seems to me that faith is optimism and cheerfulness, the opposite of despair and giving up. Even in the first half of my life, which was devoid of any religious practice, I had faith — but didn't know it. It was a matter of interpretation of terminology, as well as curiosity, and I am still seeking. I think of faith in God as a kind of human version of instinct: the Light Within, or as Aboriginal people say, "instructions from the Creator." Quaker silent worship can reveal this right and natural part of us, and I am grateful to have experienced its mystery. I have found, too, that this centering connects me with feelings of justice and equality I have harboured since childhood but didn't know what to do with, and stimulates me to act upon them. — Edith Miller, 1998*

1.22. *The aim of seeking God's will...is not confined to Quakers. A concern for the human condition is strongly developed amongst humanists. The recognition that the hungry need to be fed, the sick healed, the deprived comforted is not only a Judeo-Christian teaching although a prominent part of it. Quakers have a good record in that they have recognized that a little practice is worth a deal of preaching. In other words, the philosophy of love your neighbor is a practical one. It is also an extroverted one. One does not attain Nirvana by thinking about how to obtain it, but by forgetting self sufficiently to act for others. One does not opt out of society but sees oneself as a part of it and capable of doing something to improve it. To quote William Penn, true godliness does not turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavours to mend it. — Betty Hurst, 1971*

1.34. *As a Friend, I know the Spirit can and will be reached in the simplest way: sitting together in silence. So why do I continue to sing and dance and dress up and story-tell? Mostly, because I delight in these activities. Also, they are religious tools. The music, movement and symbols of stories speak to my mind,*

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body and soul. Energy flows through me; I open myself and hear that Inner Voice. I enjoy the sense of connection and play with others and the sense of being a part of all life.—Susan Dew-Jones, 2000

1.58. *Spiritual discernment lies at the heart of Quaker spirituality and practice. It's grounded in the central Quaker conviction of the availability to every person of the experience and guidance of God, immediate as well as mediated. Discernment is the faculty we use to distinguish the true movement of the Spirit to speak in meeting for worship from the wholly human urge to share, to instruct, or to straighten people out. It is the capacity we exercise in a centred meeting for worship for the conduct of business to sense the right course for the meeting to take in complex or difficult circumstances. It is the ability to see into people, situations, and possibilities to identify what is of God in them and what is of numerous other sources in ourselves — and what may be both. It is that fallible, intuitive gift we use in attempting to discriminate the course to which we are personally led by God in a given situation, from our other impulses and from the generalized judgments of conscience.—Patricia Loring, 1992*

1.59. *The theme that has woven through my spiritual journey over the past ten years has been the sense of accepting leadings and following them even if the way of doing so is not always clear. My experience has been that I am given what I need to know to get to the next stage. As I am faithful, things become clear...I am able to go about searching with a sense of somewhat awed confidence, after seeking clearness that the way is right. —Elaine Bishop, 2001*

1.61. *A Quaker method of discernment, which I consciously use often, is a combination of listening for guidance and actively watching to see how the Way opens. If I am receptive, I will see where the Spirit is leading me. —Betty McInnes, 2001*

1.66. *It is good to be reminded that even trying to discern works for us as it brings our spirit closer to God. I don't think of God as something with personal attributes, so I don't feel forgiven by God when I make mistakes, but I can feel the spirit of God working in others when they forgive me for making mistakes.—Lynne Phillips, 2001*

1.68. *The only way that I can understand who I am and what my life is about is to consider myself a "led-one." I have not often experienced dramatic Leadings, never has a beam of light spoken to me, yet I have a quiet sense of being led. The clarity I feel relates to a profound sense of looking for and finding evidences of "divine truth" in my life... I am very sure I have missed Leadings. I hope I will be ready with the next tide, or for the next "freshening breeze." —Jerilynn C. Prior, 1992*

1.100. *George Fox asked, "What canst thou say?" and for Friends the text is still being written in our lives and spiritual experience; indeed, we are the text. The Hebrew scriptures are a record of how God's activity in creation was perceived by one people over many years. The "heroes" and "heroines" are very human, and through their imperfections we can move across time and culture and relate to the*

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human feelings and experiences recorded in this text. –Anne Thomas, 1992

1.110. When we are nourished to our roots in any one tradition, the truths of all the others will be available. Someone who rejects the Christian tradition out of hand has not yet fed deeply enough on whatever their alternative religious source may be. – Rachel Britton, 2004

1.111. If I were a Yogi, I would seek samadhi, or transcendence. If I were a Buddhist, I would seek to achieve Nirvana. But I am not. I am a Quaker, a Friend. Thus, I seek to be perfect: to be whole, to love fully as I am loved. Thus, I seek to truly know and respond to "that of God" in myself and each person that I encounter. – Margery Post Abbott, 2002

References for those who wish further resources:

Geoffrey Durham, *The Spirit of the Quakers*, (Yale University Press, New Haven and London - 2010), pp 90 - 108

Canadian Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice (The Lowe-Martin Group – 2011) – Chapter 1 – Experiencing the Spirit: Our Faith

Patricia Loring, *Personal Spiritual Practices Among Friends*, Volume one of *Listening Spirituality*. Washington, DC: Openings Press, 1997).