

“Friends: a People Disciplined to Follow?”

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Preface:

At Western Half Yearly Meeting in May 2001, I presented on the topic of “Leadings”, which I believe are at the heart of Quaker faith and witness. Though there are many Friends who could speak to this subject far better than myself, I offered to present on this aspect of Quaker practice because I believe that the concept of leadings is the foundation of Friends service work in the world. My personal investment in this is augmented by my service within the Society on the staff of Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC). But, it is also heightened by a deep concern that the particular language used to discuss and understand leadings in the past has been misused in such a way that does not promote a life conducive to following leadings. It is my desire, then, that we open up a fresh dialogue on this important topic, which may allow for new insight into how we live within the world.

When asked to submit my presentation to the Quaker Pamphlet Series Board for consideration, it became important to me to discern the truthfulness of the message in light of the past eighteen months. Though I have kept much of the original presentation, I have moved away from some certainties that are no longer as apparent, and toward a more nuanced understanding of the workings of the Spirit as I have pondered and remembered what God has taught me experientially. Moreover, it became clear that I needed to articulate that I am addressing substantive leadings in this pamphlet, rather than more immediate promptings of the Spirit in daily life. Many days, sometimes many times in a day, God will use us as instruments; and we act out of love, care, and concern. Leadings, however, are often those nudges we don’t necessarily want nor feel prepared to follow. When God asks something of us, we need to take it inward to discern the movement of the Spirit. I write out of my experience of having, and trying to understand, leadings. I have followed them and, in the process, I have also stumbled and bumbled and have even, on occasion, outrun my Guide. I have much to learn about how to be faithful, and how to be disciplined. I offer the following revised presentation as a more contemplative and recent reflection. The original text given in May 2001 is still available, though I hope those of you who are familiar with both will find this one more satisfying.

Introduction:

In 2001, Friends World Committee for Consultation held its Triennial in the USA. Its theme well encapsulated a theology of Quakerism: *Friends: a People Called to Listen, Gathered to Seek, Sent Forth to Serve* (drawn from Isaiah 6:8). Friends are a people who believe in the unmediated experience of God, which comes primarily through an orientation of listening for the “still, small voice”. Additionally, we believe that it is not enough to seek God’s will for us in isolation; for where “two or three are gathered”, there we will find the Spirit of Christ to guide us. As such, our corporate worship reminds us of the love and the strength we can find and foster in community. We believe that faith without works is dead (REF: James) and so we trust that our direct experience of the Spirit prepares us when we listen and seek and, at the right time, sends us forth to serve in the world.

As I read through the Triennial’s advance study guide on *Friends: a People Called to Listen, Gathered to Seek, Sent Forth to Serve*, it seemed that there was a missing piece, a missing ‘gospel’ message at the start. How do we first become those who are called to listen, to eventually be sent forth? Isaiah’s context reveals that his acceptance of God’s calling is preceded by self-confrontation. It is only after Isaiah recognises (and is grieved over) his own inadequacy, that he is able to hear the invitation to ‘go,’ and to respond with his infamous “Here am I; send me!” The question, “Friends: a people disciplined to follow?” came to mind, in part because of my own uncertainty about it. Unquestionably, discipline, as a part of the mystical tradition of Christianity, and as a key feature in the process of recognising and understanding ourselves and the world around us, is an essential component of our lives if we are to live as authentic beings with an awareness of transcendence. It is this prior step, the necessity of transformation, the willingness to be changed by the spirit and to see our own conditions clearly without self-aggrandisement, that is crucial preparation for hearing the leadings of the spirit.

To explain more fully the ideas of disciplines and leadings in Quakerism, some of the presuppositions behind the process of following leadings will be mentioned. These will be followed by a more thorough description of leadings themselves, of who receives leadings, of the role of the community, and of spiritual challenges that may arise. Finally, a concluding comment on how to test a leading, along with queries to consider, will be included.

As a people whose tradition is filled with the idea of following leadings, it is essential to address the primacy of spiritual discipline as it affects the process of discerning those leadings. Spiritual disciplines are those acts and activities that keep us oriented to the Holy. They remind us of the depth of meaning that is to be found in life, of our connection with the world; they are what provides us with rich spiritual growth and development. Spiritual disciplines may include prayer, worship, inspirational literature, any thing that brings us to a realization of ultimacy.

In a more generalized sense, spiritual discipline first requires one to rise above one's own self. Isaac Pennington describes this process of giving up the self as follows:

Give over thine own willing, give over thine own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything, and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart and let it be in ... and grow in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee. (Isaac Pennington, 1661)

This "denial of the self", the giving over of which Pennington speaks, is as much about turning away from ego and selfishness as from self-hatred and self-denial. It is a journey from the "false self" to the "true self". To illustrate, Thomas Merton's writings explore our alienation from God as a fundamental confusion of identity—theologically and psychologically—wherein our true self (God-centred, empowered and willed) is overarched by the false self (self-centred, empowered, and willed):

In order to become myself, I must cease to be what I always thought I wanted to be (or what others told me I was) and in order to find myself, I must go out of myself, and in order to live, I have to die. (Merton 1972:47).

The quest for the true self, the God-led self, is one of paradox: dying to the self in order to live through God. Thus, it is not about self-annihilation, but coming into the fullness of our being, who we authentically are, rather than who we (or others) think we should be. Thus, spiritual disciplines that ground us in what is true and reveal what is false are vitally important. Still, there is always temptation, despite our best intentions. Thus, we need to be tender with ourselves. Remember Paul, who despite his keen desire (one might even say obsession) for spiritual purity said:

I do not understand my own behaviour; I do not act as I mean to, but I do things that I hate... for though the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not: the good thing I want to do, I never do; the evil thing which I do not want - that is what I do. (Romans 7:15, 18b-19)

I envision and dream that Friends are disciplined enough to let the Light reveal us, all of our beauty and our blemishes, as a part of preparing to be servants of Love in the world, even as such a task is challenging at best. I am hopeful that we can, individually and collectively, honestly and with integrity, discern our true selves and what it is we are led to do in community. Only in this way, will we be able to fully claim and live out our inheritance as Friends. Admittedly, while consistent practice of spiritual disciplines¹ is not easy, it is a necessary part of the life of faith as we attempt to truthfully follow that which is brought before us.

¹ Specific Quaker disciplines also include reflection with and study of sacred texts such as the Bible and Quaker writings, corporate worship, participation in clearness committees and care committees, etc.

Love was the first motion...

Leadings are rooted in our experience of the Word, or Spirit, of God. Through the discipline of staying rooted in the Spirit each step of the way, we are prepared to live in this maelstrom of modern society and to do often small things to transform the world, heart by heart. Images that come to mind include:

1. stepping through fear to start a conversation with the homeless man you have passed in the park each day for two years;
2. deciding to wear the hijab as an act of solidarity with Muslim women when the war in Iraq escalates (when you do not even know any Muslims);
3. realising you cannot eat mass-produced food anymore and choosing to buy organic food even as it means you may have to eat less.

As William Penn said:

True Godliness (doesn't) turn (people) out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavour to mend it. (Wm. Penn, 1682)

One of the best books to read to understand leadings in an experiential way is the *Journal of John Woolman*. In 1761, this New Jersey Friend was led through a sense of an inward yearning to become better acquainted with Aboriginal peoples. In the winter of 1762, he shared his prompting of the heart with several Meetings and, "having the unity of Friends", he made arrangements to travel in the summer of 1763 to Aboriginal lands. Woolman spoke of "having given up to go" (Woolman, 1989:123) and of his unusual sadness as the time to leave approached. He reflected on the dangers that might face him. Particularly, he considered the tensions between the Aboriginal and settler populations. Though Woolman was afraid that he would be physically unfit to bear the demands of possible captivity, he knew he was acting out of a sense of leading and, thus, he must go. Once on the journey, he continued to test his motives "lest the desire of reputation as a man firmly settled to persevere through dangers, or the fear of disgrace from my returning without performing the visit, might have some place in me" (Woolman, 1989: 130). As he examined himself, he found personal weaknesses; still, he offered himself up to God's service.

Out of such rooted self-knowledge and discipline comes this well-loved entry in *The Journal of John Woolman*:

Love was the first motion, and then 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 be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of Truth amongst them. (Woolman, 1989: 127)

John Woolman did not have a strategic plan. He did not have goals, objectives or criteria for his time amongst Aboriginal peoples. He had no idea what the outcomes would be, though, he hoped to learn and he desired that his encounter would be of assistance to the Susquahanna with an impending war in sight. On each step of his journey, Woolman turned to God to reveal meaning and direction.

How markedly different from the way of today's world! May we, like Woolman, remember that leadings are God's. Our human efforts, then, to look to conclusions, to results, even to meaning, before our process has begun takes the leading astray. When our desire to know and to direct takes over, the leading becomes a human instrument, and no longer that of the Spirit. May we remember stillness, to be in the present moment where God is available. Perhaps this waiting, the non-action before the action, is the most difficult part of discerning a leading.

What are leadings?

Leadings are difficult to describe in rote terminology. A few Friends, however, have observations to offer us. For instance, Paul Lacey, a well known Quaker educator, chronicled four descriptive elements of a leading in his Pendle Hill Pamphlet (#264) *Leadings and Being Led*. I have included his four criteria below, which I offer with commentary.

Lacey's Four Descriptive Elements of a Leading:

1. It is inwardly led, beginning with a motion of love or caring. While the direction and/or object of what is inwardly felt may be unclear, God keeps nudging. It is our responsibility to continue to listen deeply. Even when that which is being asked of us seems beyond our means or risky, God's presence is there and we can be both humbled and supported in the process.

2. It requires a period of (often painful) waiting. Waiting can be arduous, especially with pressing needs around us. Yet, in the time of waiting, we learn to persevere and to develop patience and courage. We can sift out false answers, identify our willful interpretations, and perceive our reluctance. The act of waiting tests the integrity of the leading—is it rooted in love and humility? Is there any inkling for personal gain or satisfaction of the ego? Waiting or abiding also helps us to recognise endurance as a necessary gift. In this time, we can realise the truth of the leading, we can know the affirmation of our sense of the leading when time does not lessen its impact.

3. It requires a disclosing of human frailties, including our own. Yes, even Woolman had shortcomings! In the inward searching that a leading requires, Woolman faced himself and found that he did not like—nor did he have confidence in—all that he saw. During his self-reflections, Woolman humbly depended on God. This orientation of “teachability” and humility opened him to a deeper understanding of the tender condition of others, which enabled him to engage with them in a loving manner and which prompted within him a desire, not so much to be known, as to know.

4. There is increasing clarity of direction as we obey what we hear. “Obedience” is another seldom heard, and probably unpopular, word. Yet our name itself is predicated on this inward discipline. Jesus said, “You are my friends if you do as I command you” (REF). Leadings are God's voice in us, calling us forth, asking us to come along, to trust—especially when we are not comfortable. “To know what is right, we must know God” (Romans 12). Regular prayer, expectant worship, and other spiritual disciplines open us to the Spirit and help us to listen and to be teachable.

Through our time of disciplined listening and waiting, searching and testing, clearness is attained and we develop *conviction* to accomplish our tasks. Small as we may think we are, we can follow our leadings and God will guide us as we listen for the next steps and for what we are to do and learn. (Lacey, 1985: 8-10)

From experience, I would add a fifth element - **As we are sent forth to serve, we keep following.** The seeking and the following remain a continuous process after we receive clarity to proceed. *Following* is the baseline orientation (we are being *led*), for without this we risk outrunning our Guide and our leading, which, in the worst of situations, can cause havoc for ourselves and others. At minimum, we risk deviating from the purpose for which God prepared and sent us.

Who is given a leading?

Leadings are experienced by everyone. They might be as mundane as day-to-day happenings or, more particular to Lacey's description, a leading might involve an in-depth request by the Spirit that requires full discernment. With regard to types of leadings and to those who receive them, one of my favourite writers is Lloyd Lee Wilson, a Conservative Friend. In *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, he reminds us that we are all called to ministry and that all ministry is risky; this “riskiness is important to vital, Spirit-led ministry” (Wilson, 1996: 73). This risk may involve personal change, vulnerability, and discomfort, and those who are called are often the unlikeliest of characters (Wilson, 1996: 74-75). Leadings come about through our knowledge of God's love for us and our willingness to be instruments of God's peace in the world. “Our part is simply to turn our hearts over to God and allow them to be reformed by him (sic).” (Wilson, 1996: 179). In choosing “to do those things which are in harmony with the divine will ... those things bring us closer to God.” (Wilson, 1996: 181).

Even if we don't readily listen for that still, small voice within, God is persistent enough to break into us, to find a way through to our conscience and our hearts, to stir our souls, to entice us, to change and to use us. The belief that God will enlist us for divine service in the world is fundamental to how Friends understand ourselves as a people: God is present, God speaks to us, and God leads us—this belief is held no matter what name we use for God (including none at all). This may sound grand, even epic. It is—and it happens everyday. It is ordinary and spectacular.

Still, as Paul Lacey reminds us:

A leading doesn't come to us simply so we may have one. Eventually, its inwardness takes outward form and affects the rest of the human community. When we are led to the Truth, it is so we may live *by* it and do something *with* it. (Lacey, 1985: 15)

There are times when we are concerned about an issue or situation, when we wonder how our Quakerism is lived through us when we find we are not "out on the barricades", when we long for a leading. Leadings are a gift and cannot be forced or bought; they come through faithfulness.

While a leading arises out of personal experience, there are vital roles for our Quaker community in the process of discerning certain leadings. These roles are based on two important assumptions. First, since leadings belong to God and not the individual, the community becomes a key agent in discerning clarity and also in the fulfillment of the leading. Second, since God is magnificently activated and known through relationship and, therefore, through community, it is often advisable to engage the community through various means in the discernment process. Consider the following:

- Has the Meeting been approached to help the Friend test the leading through the appointment of a clearness committee and through bringing the leading to the meeting for worship for business?
- How might the Meeting offer support to the Friend who, as we say, is acting under a concern (through the appointment of committees of care and/or oversight, financial support, prayer, etc.)?
- Does the Meeting share the leading? If so, how can the Meeting act corporately on the concern?

Spiritual challenges

The difficulty with leadings for most people lies in their hesitation to realize their worthiness to serve and, accordingly, to acknowledge that God might use them. Over the years, I have observed that people will go to some lengths to avoid a leading. Some do not believe they can live up to the Light given to them – some even question whether the Light is within them at all. It is at this point, when we least trust ourselves, that we can turn to and trust in God's wisdom to determine those servants who will be agents of the Divine in particular ways. Often, as mentioned, they are the most unlikely of characters. Sometimes, they are the most unlikely, or unusual, of leadings. There are times in this realm that one must cast personal reasons and rationale aside and trust the guiding Presence. Often, we cannot know the effects or fruits of the faithfulness until it is past.

I have also observed that while individuals may act with integrity to follow the promptings of Love and Truth in their hearts, Meetings may fall short in their roles. Burdened with too much business (or with an unwillingness to do business), Meetings sometimes support a leading or concern without appointing a clearness committee or without asking crucial questions before the Friend proceeds. Clearness committees sometimes function more as support groups to the Friend, ready to affirm a leading without truly testing its validity nor assisting in the discernment. Committees of Care often meet at the prompting of the Friend, rather than as a result of a personal sense of responsibility to monitor and uphold the Friend as the leading progresses. Committees of Care provide ongoing spiritual and emotional support and stand ready to provide healthy and helpful eldership when necessary. At times, we can be too engrossed in our opinions and perceptions to be ready to hear God, especially when a leading brought before us is unpopular.

Yes, Friends, we have room to grow. I trust we can.

I believe that these spiritual challenges are often rooted in fear, self-doubt, and ignorance. We live in a society that places individualism on a pedestal, thus, who are *we* to question what this Friend is led to do? Likewise, who are *they* to test *me*? We live in a society that is too busy, too fast, and too wounded. Consequently, who has *time* to test things thoroughly, let alone wait? Many of us are afraid to test because we are unwilling to challenge individualism and, moreover, we are unwilling to engage potential conflict in the discernment process. We may be afraid to wait because we fear our action might be too late or we fear the unknown and cannot act.

We may be afraid to believe that God loves us and wants to use us in his service. To counter these fears, we must develop trust that God's purpose will happen within God's time in our lives.

Our most beloved forebearers possessed an exceptional degree of unconditional faith in God and, through their faith, developed tried and true methods of personal and corporate discernment and decision-making. Many among us are versed in Quaker history and Quaker ways. For many others, these ways remain a mystery. That which could once be learned simply by growing up in Quaker families and Meetings over a lifetime now needs to be shared and learned more intentionally - through reading, religious education, mentoring, elderring, and, naturally, through experience. Many of us are ignorant about Quakerism because education, even helpful advice, is lacking in our Meetings. Too many are afraid to let the Light out from under the bushel - "to live up the Light" that we have been given. Many are afraid that teaching about our faith, history and ways comes too close to proselytising. I believe, however, that if we do not address and overcome our fears, self-doubts, and ignorance (and sometimes arrogance), Quakerism will become a bloated, empty faith that many will leave, for Quakerism's strengths are its mystical nature, its spiritual disciplines, and, yes, the discipleship to which it calls us.

The Light that shows and reveals

... the very function and nature of the light is not to be hidden or darkened in an enclosure, but to be revealed to shine forth outwardly and to overcome the darkness. Our calling is to release that light, to be the salt of the earth once again, to be ready to suffer the consequences of the conflict that the releasing of such light creates. Peace does not come without conflict. Division comes before the peace. The peace will surely come, as it has been promised ... Religion can once more be practiced to its fullest as a public and political undertaking in a light not hidden under a basket but as a fire revealed to all the nations in our actions." (Durland, 1988: 30-31)

The Light is that which plants the leading and guides us in following it. To know a leading, we must know the Light and how it works in and through us. Testing a leading is a great calling; through testing, the community itself becomes a part of the leading. While I am aware that not everyone is comfortable with seeking guidance from a clearness committee, and many don't, we often consult with spiritual companions or informal groups of trusted elders. Seeking clearness should be supported in whatever means we feel able to undertake it. I hope we can increasingly bring such concerns and leadings before the Meeting, with which I believe we share our accountability to God.

Testing is not easy, especially as it involves asking challenging and probing questions that help the Friend (and the Meeting) to discern the integrity of the leading. Because of this, the process can feel so personal, even a bit intimidating. And, yet, I have found clearness committees (both formal and informal) to be strengthening, encouraging, and refining. They have challenged me, helped me sift out the chaff from the wheat, encouraged me to be more honest with myself and, when the leading has been rightly led, have galvanised in me a sense of purpose and rightness. There is a wonderful depth of relationship and true love that can be felt in a clearness committee of integrity.

For resources on listening methods that may help a clearness committee function well, I recommend the writings of Patricia Loring. From our own fold, I offer four tests of a leading that Jerrilyn Prior identified in her 1992 Sunderland P. Gardner Lecture, *I Feel the Winds of God Today: Leadings as Explored by a Woman, Mother, Doctor, Quaker*. As you will see, they are somewhat relative to Lacey's elements of a leading:

Four tests of a leading:

- 1. Consistency with “certain evidence of Divine Truth”** - The leading should necessarily be consistent with what we know of God, through experience (personal and corporate), teachings, scripture, the fruits of the Spirit, etc. For example, we know God is love and lives through relationship, thus, it is inconsistent with the Spirit to kill others. The “certain evidence”, born out of searching, takes us into the sanctum of the Spirit, to an inward place of humility, which Prior considers a part of the consistency.
- 2. Persistence** - The persistence we witness in listening, being willing, and following—even though the path may seem hard and the Friend may feel ill-suited or ill-equipped for the task—is an indicator of Truth. One may experience turmoil and disquiet during the discernment and, rather than the chaos diminishing, it may even increase. This destabilized state is not a sign of inauthenticity per se, in fact, it can indicate quite the opposite. God will “disrupt ‘til you give up” as a Friend told me. The persistence is important, and it may involve a refining, as if by fire, of both the leading and the led.
- 3. Clarity and calmness** - These qualities become present when, as Prior says, the “led-one” becomes willing. Though daunted by the task, a certain stillness and rightness will be present and can be felt by all.
- 4. Presence of a transforming, enabling or unifying power** - When the testing is done, a sense that we can do what we once felt unable to do becomes present. It can be felt. Whatever the person is led to do may take time, it may cause discomfort, may even incite conflict both within or outside the Meeting. For those with “eyes to see and ears to hear”, however, there will be a power within working to transform, to enable movement, and to bring us to unity. From this, the change occurs, perhaps inward, perhaps outward. (Prior, 1992: 10-21)

Conclusion

... the greatest certainty in my life is a not knowing - as if, in many areas, my only certainty is uncertainty... I am certain that we can experience God’s leadings ... words being given to me, actions being prompted and confirmed ... I have also known times when no leading at all was given. And sometimes I do have to find the way ahead ... At those times, I simply do the best I can. I take a step in the dark, uncertain whether no leading was itself a leading. (Muriel Bishop Summers, 1995: 1, 12-13).

Leadings rarely come as dramatic shafts of Light, as to Paul on the road to Damascus. They are more often quiet and subtle. They may make us uncomfortable, they may make us frightened. The way may be unpredictable. There may be risks - and definitely temptations. Hardship and painful questioning may come upon us as we seek to follow. Listening, prayer, and asking for support are indispensable parts of our discipline “tool kit” as we proceed faithfully. And, we may be surprised to find that these “tools” are more valuable than books or expert knowledge, for people frequently look for external signs and answers in times of uncertainty, rather than centering down and turning inward or asking for help.

In sum, we may, and we probably will, resist our leadings now and again, miss them, and, sometimes, have none at all. But, as our dear Friend Muriel Bishop Summers noted, we will do our best. This has been comforting advice over the past year when the only clear leading that I had as the so-called “War on Terrorism” gained steam was to pray. It felt small and useless in the face of the bombs dropped on Khandahar and as planes flew into buildings. It did not stop me, or CFSC, from taking steps rooted in our tradition of witness and care for those affected by war. Still, I longed for the clarity of the one, true, right thing to do in the midst of it all.

It has taken me a year to realise that I had it all along. And so, I am still praying, trusting that in some way this is preparing me, and CFSC, for some task that will require the rootedness and obedience that prayer fosters. As the generations before us, we can listen, seek and follow, be sent forth to serve, and transform the world. We will be changed as well, for this is our testimony to the whole world.

Queries:

How spiritually prepared are you to hear and respond to God's calls and leadings?

Have you had an experience of a leading, but were hesitant to follow, only to realise that the leading was authentic?

What would make you more confident in discerning and following your leadings?

How well do you help prepare yourself and others to listen to God, to be re-centred and re-formed by God's Love?

Do you trust and abide in God's love? Are you willing to let God lead you? Are you prepared to reason, argue, and wrestle with God, to be cleansed and blessed?

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Biography:

Jane Orion Smith took membership in the Religious Society of Friends in Halifax, NS in 1992. She is a member of Victoria Monthly Meeting (BC) and has served the Yearly Meeting through service with Canadian Young Friends Yearly Meeting, Home Mission and Advancement Committee, and the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Harassment and Abuse. She was blessed to study and serve as a Friend in Residence at Woodbrooke College (1996-1998) and to continue research and studies into the life and writings of James Nayler at Pendle Hill (1998-1999). Since 2000, she has been serving as the Coordinator of Canadian Friends Service Committee.