

A Pilgrimage, an Experiment with Light

*'...then, oh, 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 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... And this I knew experimentally.'*¹

British Friend and theologian Rex Ambler made in the 1990s what he calls "a thrilling discovery". For some years he had been immersed in the writings of the early Quakers, asking some basic questions. Fox and the early Friends, he said,

*'...talked of the 'the light' within them that showed them the way, 'the truth' that set them free, 'the life' which sprang up within them and between them, and 'the power' which enabled them to do the seemingly impossible. What were they talking about? What meaning did these simple but elusive words have for them?'*²

Fox's writings, in language from 350 years ago, can be difficult to understand. Rex's *Truth of the Heart, an anthology of George Fox*³ opens a pathway. In the anthology, passages from Fox are paralleled with a translation into modern English, making it much easier for us to make sense of his words.

Still, questions remain unanswered. What explains the almost explosive growth the early Friends experienced in the mid-seventeenth century? How was it that so many people, when they joined with Friends, so rapidly experienced such spiritual depth that their lives were so radically transformed? Specifically, *how* did the early Friends pass the essence of what they had discovered on to those just coming into the nascent society? Why are there no explicit "how to" instructions in the early writings?

Rarely missing an opportunity to testify against the "empty form" they perceived in traditional religion, we can understand how they would naturally have avoided any attempt to codify the methods (if indeed they had methods) that they used in teaching their practices. Subject to harsh societal criticism from the beginning, and then persecutions far-harsher-still, they were forced to be carefully guarded in all their public communications.

Thus it is quite remarkable that Rex Ambler discovered, implicit within the writings of early Friends, a detailed guide for a definitively-Quaker style of meditation. In a 1653 tract, Fox wrote,

*'...for the first step to peace is to stand still in the light (which discovers things contrary to it) for power and strength to stand against that nature which the light discovers.'*⁴

The first step. Careful study slowly brought into focus all the essential subsequent steps of what is, perhaps, the method used by the early Friends. Rex communicated his discovery to Friends in the 2001 Cary Lecture, and wrote *Light to Live By*², in which the entire meditation form is explained.

Over the past dozen years, a movement has sprung up around Rex's discovery within the Society of Friends, a growing movement which held its first "International Gathering of the Experiment with Light" September 27-29, 2013 at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, UK. I am fortunate to have been at this gathering, one of 71 participants from the UK, Palestine, Finland, Russia, South Africa, Austria, Canada, Sweden, Norway and the USA. And fortunate to have attended the "1652 Country" pilgrimage which followed. For travel funds, I gratefully acknowledge the assistance provided by a Quaker Studies grant through the Education and Outreach Committee of Canadian Yearly Meeting.

'How far, how deep, how wide can you go this weekend?' Rex asked as we gathered in the Cadbury room at Woodbrooke. 'If we are to deepen our meditation, we need to risk facing unpalatable facts about ourselves and risk speaking about this with our group, and not get stuck at a comfortable level where we feel safe sharing with others... We can take the Experiment with Light farther, deeper and wider. That is our challenge.'

I met Rex Ambler and had my introduction to the Experiment with Light at a Friends General Conference workshop at Amherst, Massachusetts in the summer of 2004. Evidently the workshop not only inspired but also empowered me; somewhat surprised, I found myself on my feet after Meeting for Worship in Vancouver that fall announcing that I was led to organize a 'light group', to share what I had learned and to practise the 'experiment' with Vancouver Friends. Since then our light group has met monthly and will celebrate its tenth anniversary next fall. A 'light group' is a meeting in which the guided meditation, the 'experiment with light' is practised and the writings of the early Friends are discussed. The best way to understand this is to experience it for yourself. Dozens of Light Groups now meet regularly in the UK and around the world.

Our weekend at Woodbrooke was beautiful in its intensity, its depth and breadth, and the impact we feel it has had on our lives. With effective and sensitive leadership, a caring spiritual community formed amazingly quickly, engaged in a series of powerful large and small group sessions, then too quickly ran out of time.

A fortunate eight of us, carrying the spirit of the Gathering within us, made a four-day pilgrimage to '1652 Country', birthplace of Quakerism. We stayed at Swarthmoor Hall, home of Margaret Fell and later George Fox, now a Quaker retreat centre, venturing each day by mini-bus to places steeped in Quaker history, where the storytelling could include "...and this is where it happened". A host of volunteers, including Rex, spoke to us, bringing Quaker history to life. We climbed Pendle Hill where George Fox had his

famous vision, stood on cobblestone streets where George Fox had run for his life from angry mobs, sat in silence in Meetinghouses where Friends have worshipped for 350 years, and read from Fox's personal pocket bible. Rex spoke at Firbank Fell, where in the summer of 1652, a thousand people gathered to hear Fox minister.

Plans are underway to hold a workshop on the Experiment with Light at Canadian Yearly Meeting in the summer of 2014.

1. Nickalls, John L. (editor). 1952. *The Journal of George Fox*, p.11.
2. Ambler, Rex. 2001. *Light To Live By*, p.2.
3. Ambler, Rex. 2001. *Truth of the Heart: An Anthology of George Fox 1624-1691*.
4. George Fox, 1653. *To all that would know the way to the kingdom*, in *Works* 4:17.