

“That of God in Everyone” The Spiritual Basis of Quaker Education

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The Religious Society of Friends has represented a distinctive dissenting voice in Western religious and cultural life since the mid-seventeenth century. Responding, in part, to the turmoil surrounding the English Civil War, George Fox and his followers turned away from established Church practices and dogmas to seek an authentic experience of the Divine. Because many of the early Friends were so deeply, literally moved by this experience, they were called “Quakers,” a name by which they are most commonly known today. By turning inward in contemplative silence, these dedicated seekers encountered what they called “the Light” of Christ — the actual presence of the spiritual force that nourishes the created world. They believed that this Inner Light is universally present within all human souls, that “the sacred is always within us as potentiality, waiting to be addressed, answered, called into fuller being” (Lacey, 1998, p. 3). Fox claimed that this Light represented no less than “that of God in everyone.”

This turn from exterior ritual to interior awareness, from a theological emphasis on the transcendent (otherworldly) nature of God to an insistence that divinity is immanent within the human soul, represented a significant step in the evolution of Western religious consciousness. In recognizing that spiritual reality could be encountered directly by silencing the ego and allowing a deeper dimension of knowledge to appear, Quaker practice seems to confirm the pattern of spiritual development that Ken Wilber (1983) has identified in the history of consciousness: Over the course of many centuries and throughout diverse civilizations, he explains, religious understanding has evolved from magical practices to archetypal mythologies to intellectual models to direct apprehension of transpersonal reality. Fox and other Quaker seekers recognized the need to go beyond institutionalized ritual and theological dogma in order to truly experience the Light. In so doing, they began to break free of cultural (mythological and ideological) identities that differentiate human beings and make them adversaries; they saw instead that a more fully realized spirituality reveals the universal source of human identity. As the Bible puts it, in Christ (that is, in

true spiritual consciousness) there is neither “Jew nor Greek,” male nor female, slave nor free; there is instead that of God in every one. The Quakers took this to heart.

A Spirituality of Social Justice

This religious viewpoint leads to potentially radical social and educational ideals, as the Society of Friends has amply demonstrated. To Quakers, the Light within represents nothing less than a “bond linking all human beings” in spiritual equality and brotherhood, and Quakers’ “unyielding devotion to the Inner Light, as well as their belief in the universal nature of that Light, formed the basis of the Friends’ humanitarian impulse” (Kashatus, 1997, p. 17). Consequently, Quakers have been led to proclaim “testimonies” against slavery, war, and exploitation, and their moral passion has supplied potent leadership and ideals to movements for social justice and peace. Numerous Friends have been moved by their spiritual awakening to “speak truth to power”—to confront injustices perpetrated by governments, armies and others with authority despite personal risk. At many times in the past three and a half centuries, Quaker activists in both England and the United States (and increasingly elsewhere) have sought to arouse a greater public commitment to values such as community, equality, simplicity, and nonviolence or “harmony.” Friends have been involved in movements for prison reform, improved medical and psychiatric care, gender equality, human rights for Native Americans and other marginalized populations, conscientious objection to military service, environmentalism and other forms of political and humanitarian action.

Indeed, Quaker spirituality has had a profound influence on modern social movements, though it is not explicitly recognized very often. Recently, however, sociologist Paul Ray, who has studied so-called “cultural creatives” and the social vision they have carried forward from the 1960s, was asked about the “earlier struggles” that influenced the rise of social activism in that decade. “Well,” he replied, “you could argue that the Quakers started the whole thing....” centuries earlier, along with a handful of other groups. “Those people did the first versions of [cultural] reframing—it’s just that the rest of the culture didn’t pick up on it at the time” (van Gelder, Ray and Anderson, 2001, p. 17).

This pervasive concern for justice, equality and peace has also informed Friends' educational endeavors. Since William Penn founded the Friends Public School in Philadelphia in 1689, American Quakers have applied their religious and social ideals to a distinctive tradition of holistic, spiritually rooted educational thought and practice. In a recent study of the origins of Quaker education in Philadelphia, William C. Kashatus (1997) described the cultural and political forces that have shaped educational practices within the Quaker community. He found that, while Friends schools, like other denominational schools, were to one degree or another established to preserve the sect's integrity by providing religious instruction "guarded" from the corruption of secular society, Quakers' guiding testimonies and social conscience have clearly informed many of their educational efforts. Friends' education aims for far more than religious indoctrination.

According to Paul A. Lacey, it seeks

to encourage people to make the world better, to become informed, skilled agents of positive social, political, economic, and educational change, devoted to the fullest possible expression of the particular world image and style of fellowship represented by the Quaker testimonies.... (Lacey, 1998, p. 80)

For example, Quaker educators take seriously the teaching that a divine "seed" animates every human soul, and they understand their primary mission to be nourishing this seed so that all people may reach their intellectual, social, moral and spiritual potential. Penn himself argued that "education was an essential form of outreach to children from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds" — a civic responsibility to build an inclusive and mutually supportive community (Kashatus, 1997, p. 29). Consequently, Quaker educators such as Anthony Benezet in the mid-eighteenth century were among the first to insist that African American youths be provided equal educational opportunities. Diversity has become a central goal, if not a hallmark, of Friends schools, and a major concern of Quakers who work for public school reform. For them, practicing respect for all human beings regardless of racial, ethnic, cultural, class or gender identity is not a politically correct act but a spiritual imperative. Such identities are partial and incidental, and the task of building harmonious communities depends upon recognizing our common humanity.

Responding to the Inner Teacher

The Quaker “world image” affects other dimensions of educational practice as well, beginning with a fundamental respect for young people’s autonomy and integrity as learners. Friends have placed a great emphasis on reason over the authority of tradition. Reflecting on their own experience of persecution at the hands of an established Church, they maintain that first-hand, experiential knowledge, refined by the exercise of judgment and reason, enables people to discern deeper truths than those they passively receive through dogmatic instruction. Like other Quakers, “Penn believed that human nature could only be improved if society respected the liberty of one’s conscience,” wrote Kashatus. “Only in this way could the individual exercise reason, pursue the search for inward truth and become a constructive member of the larger society” (p. 21).

Significantly, this trust in the individual’s ability to discern truth does not arise from some romantic, libertarian belief in personal freedom, but from a profound faith in the power of the Inner Light. Friends often speak of Christ as the Inner Teacher—a voice that contains the wisdom and insight that people need to achieve moral and spiritual maturity. Paul A. Lacey comments that “perhaps in no tradition is this metaphor—God is a Teacher—more central than in Quakerism, where the very core of the liberating message is, in George Fox’s words, that ‘Christ has come to teach his people himself.’ George Fox invariably describes his ministry as turning people toward the Teacher within them, the Light which has enlightened every person who has ever come into the world” (Lacey, 1988, p. 4).

This divine voice is not heard through the words of others but inwardly through one’s own receptive conscience, yet a certain self-discipline is essential to cultivating this receptivity. The Inner Light, according to respected Quaker author Howard Brinton, “can be reached only by ‘centering down,’ to use an old Quaker phrase: that is, by concentrating our attention on the inward side of life where the soul’s windows open toward the Divine...” (Brinton, 1953). “Centering down” means turning away from ego-driven pursuits, from selfish individual concerns, and allowing oneself to be moved by a spiritual intelligence greater than one’s everyday consciousness. And, though truth cannot be obtained from others, neither is it a “personal possession”; as Lacey and other Friends writers point out, Quaker spirituality involves the gathering of community to “practice discernment”—that is, to test the authenticity of what one believes to be a divine leading. “We turn to the Christ within us, but what we find there, if it is true, will be found within others

who also turn inward with a willingness to be taught” (Lacey, 1988, pp. 8, 9, 11). Or, as the well known educator and author Parker Palmer has said, “It is part of the genius of Quakerism, I think, that the movement of the spirit is not enclosed as a private matter, but is made manifest in public ways and put to public test. The most important consequence of any meeting is the nurture of community, of recentered and reconnected selves” (Palmer, 1976, p. 6).

Liberty of conscience, then, means freedom for thoughtful, selfless pursuit of truth within a fellowship of seekers, not freedom from all influences outside the individual. This is an important distinction, not only in Quaker practice, but in holistic educational thought generally. Quaker education, like all carefully considered holistic approaches, views the individual within a social and communal context, as well as a transpersonal (spiritual or divine) context, not as an isolated psychological atom. This does not diminish the integrity and even sacredness of the individual’s inner life, but it holds the individual accountable to larger realms of meaning (Miller, 2000).

A disciplined conscience comes through the experience of silence. As practiced in Quaker worship, silence is an active effort aimed at “greeting the sacred” and “centering outside the self” (Lacey, 1998, p. 9). The individual strives to put personal wants and preconceptions aside, and to listen carefully for guidance from a deeper source. Silence, as a spiritual and educational practice, is a means of opening one’s heart and mind to dimensions of truth and wisdom that lie beyond our current understanding. We need to cultivate the humility and sense of receptivity to acknowledge that Truth is not contained by our presently held ideas, assumptions and understandings; rather, it is continually being revealed in ever greater fullness throughout our lives. “Every moment bears in it the dynamic of new truth, a life-changing insight, a hitherto unexplored perspective often coming through unexpected and unlikely channels,” as one Quaker educator has commented (Brown, 1982). This is a truly radical conception of knowledge! It demands of each person that we continually re-examine our beliefs and attitudes in light of new experience. This notion is very similar to John Dewey’s attack on the “quest for certainty” that underlies so much of modern Western knowledge, though with a more spiritual conception of the source of experience.

Even further, Friends’ insistence on spiritual equality erodes social ranks and distinctions, claiming that the Light will appear through any soul that is open to it. This challenges our common assumption, based on vestiges of a long history of authoritarian social control, that teachers,

textbooks, and government standards contain the only important elements of learning. Everyone's voice is valuable, because every person's experience represents some measure of Truth, and until we listen, until we afford compassion and respect to dimensions of human experience outside accepted norms, we cannot know what measure this might be. All people, even students and youths, have access to knowing that is deeper than common knowledge if they are prepared to receive it. And we become prepared through silence and the caring support of spiritual fellowship, not professional rank or academic training.

Compassionate Knowledge

An education grounded in this practice has been described by some Quakers as “worship across the curriculum.” In this spirit, academic disciplines no longer hold total authority over self-awareness and personal conscience, but become vehicles for cultivating an ethical and spiritual relationship between person and world. All fields of study are attempts to engage the world in a deep way, to know the mystery of things as well as established facts, to respect the wholeness and integrity of the world as it is. Parker Palmer captured the essence of this Quaker understanding in his wonderful book *To Know as We Are Known*. He contrasted modern scientific knowledge, motivated by a desire to control the world for our own material benefit, with a knowledge arising from love and compassion—that is, a sincere effort to know the world on its own terms, in all its subtlety, complexity and unfathomable depth.

A knowledge born of compassion aims not at exploiting and manipulating creation but at reconciling the world to itself.... A knowledge that springs from love will implicate us in the web of life; it will wrap the knower and the known in compassion, in a bond of awesome responsibility as well as transforming joy; it will call us to involvement, mutuality, accountability. (Palmer, 1983, pp. 8, 9)

Palmer had been dean of studies at the Quaker retreat center Pendle Hill before he wrote this book, and his conception of knowledge reflects core values expressed in Friends' testimonies and teachings. In this light (or, we could say, in this Light), education is not viewed as training for a competitive job market but as the cultivation of a respectful, receptive, compassionate, connected and accountable attitude toward the human community and the world as a whole. This is an education for peace, for acceptance and celebration of diversity, for collaboration and partnership,

and for ecological wisdom.

It is important to note, however, that Friends education has generally been eminently practical as well, recognizing the importance of academic and vocational accomplishment and nourishing these very successfully. Most of the authors on Friends education emphasize this element, and it is reflected very clearly in the high quality and stellar reputations of many Quaker high schools and colleges. Still, academic success is viewed within a larger social and moral context. Intellectual attainment is expected to be put into the service of making a better world, in collaboration with others in the community. Personal success is an important goal, but without a moral conscience making one accountable to larger contexts, the essence of Friends education is lost.

Reviewing various publications for and about Quaker educators (Miller, 1989), I concluded that they “tend not to emphasize techniques so much as distinctive attitudes or an atmosphere as being essential to a Friends school.” There is general agreement that the school environment should cherish and nurture every member of the school community despite differences in ability or background, that educators should encourage imagination, self-awareness, and self-expression, that cooperation is essential, and that decisions should be made democratically, even by consensus if possible. Quaker congregations have traditionally run their affairs by a spiritually grounded form of consensus they call the “sense of the meeting”—an open-minded acknowledgement of “the gathered wisdom” of the community. These meetings for business maintain the same respect for silent attentiveness to deeper truth as do meetings for worship. In a pamphlet written for Pendle Hill that previewed the ideas he expressed in *To Know as We Are Known*, Parker Palmer saw a natural extension of this core Quaker process to education.

Where else should the search for truth have greater prominence than in the process of education? Of course, for many of us, “education” has come to mean a scramble for information, which leads to grades, which lead to a diploma, which leads to a job. There are too many educational institutions where truth is not the point! Perhaps the image of a “meeting for learning” will remind us of forgotten depths in the educational process, just as the silent meeting for worship once stood as a rebuke to ways of worship which put the human before the divine.

Paths of Learning

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A meeting for learning is, in the first place, a genuine encounter between persons, a “meeting” in the literal sense.... In a meeting for learning the individual is always in relationship, and knowledge emerges through dialogue. (Palmer, 1976, p. 2)

Friends schools have, indeed, emphasized this communal nature in the search for knowledge. Douglas H. Heath observed that “Friends believe that growth occurs most fully when an ‘individual-is-in-Community’.... To create a school, a class, that corporately searches for truth means some radical changes in the way we typically teach and learn....” (Heath, 1969; Heath, 1979). In place of individual competition for grades, status and personal success, Friends schools encourage activities such as reflection, listening and collaboration and values such as compassion and service.

Education for Transformation

Given all these elements of Friends pedagogy, it is not surprising to find more student-centered, experiential forms of teaching in their schools than in many traditional private and denominational schools. Methods such as cooperative learning, project-based instruction, whole language, and multiage groupings are familiar to many Quaker educators. During the twentieth century, a number of Quaker schools became associated with the progressive education movement in its various forms (for example, they were prominent in the Network of Progressive Educators that was active in the 1980s and early 1990s). Lacey (1998) explicitly recognized an affinity between Quaker educational ideas and the work of holistic education pioneers such as Pestalozzi, Froebel, and Montessori. Although there is little evidence of cross-fertilization between their ideas and Friends education,¹ they hold similar views about the nature of the human being. Starting with a basic trust in the process of human development (whether this is seen in a biological/social context, as in progressive education, or in a more spiritual sense), all these holistic educators insist that true education is an encounter between an active, aspiring, evolving being and the larger world with which we are co-evolving. This encounter requires respect for, and dialogue with, the learner. In yet another essay, Parker Palmer (1978) expressed this point very clearly:

Adults will always have the power to coerce children. But caring rests on the power of hope and trust, not the power of containment. If we try to keep our children within safe boundaries, we prevent them from undertaking any great experiment with Truth. (pp. 9-10)

Palmer went on to state that the primary responsibility of mature, authentic adults is “caring for new life” — a phrase that impressed me so deeply that I recently used it as the title for a collection of my writings about holistic education.

Palmer, along with other Quaker educators and the larger holistic education tradition, is essentially concerned with honoring, protecting and nourishing the creative vital forces that give rise to life and to our human identity. It should be the function of education to cultivate these energies, to see where their evolution will lead us, and not to impose the existing culture’s prejudices on each new generation to keep young people’s consciousness within “safe boundaries.” Thomas S. Brown (1982) maintained that “our Quaker experience of education is different from education understood as the transmission of the group’s inherited wisdom...”(p. 9). Using this term, transmission, precisely recalls Jack Miller’s (1996) distinction between “transmission” and “transformation” orientations in education, and brings us to the very essence of Friends education as I understand it. In the Quaker tradition, education is not primarily about transmitting authorized knowledge to passive learners, but achieving personal and social transformation by unleashing and nourishing the creative power of the Inner Light. Again, it is Paul Lacey (1988, p. 26) who summarizes this point so well; indeed, his words provide a fitting close to this essay:

When it is faithful to its foundations, Quaker education is neither student-centered, nor discipline-centered; it is inward-centered. Quaker education operates from the conviction that there is always one other in the classroom—the Inward Teacher, who waits to be found in every human being.

Notes

1. One example of contact between these traditions is the interesting case of Amos Bronson Alcott, the romantic Transcendentalist who attempted to practice holistic teaching in New England in the 1820s and 1830s. As a young man he had left home to become a traveling peddler, and it was

immediately after visiting a Quaker community in North Carolina that he returned to New England to teach and to begin a lifelong spiritual journey. He was further inspired by his studies of Platonic and romantic philosophy while teaching in the Philadelphia area (where he was probably further exposed to Quaker influence) between 1830 and 1834. He did not join the Society of Friends but it does seem that his exposure to Quaker spirituality left a lasting impact. As further evidence of the connections among diverse holistic perspectives, Alcott did explicitly call his educational method “Pestalozzian,” and over 150 years later his work was published and promoted in anthroposophic (Waldorf education) circles.

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