

Hospitality and the Pilgrim

a Quaker's reflection on communion and community.

Ireland Yearly Meeting, April 2023

Friends, I come before you today as a restless pilgrim, and a member of Rye meeting in East Sussex. I offer both the movement of a pilgrim and the desire for the constancy of a community. This is my third visit to this island. I first visited Belfast in the 90s, meeting local Friends and observing local projects. The second visit was here to Dublin on holiday, where I was won over both by the city and the people I met. I sometimes think that although I have been a Quaker for almost 45 years, I am still a visitor, a newcomer, a learner wherever I go. On my Face book profile, I wrote: seeker, finder, explorer. Now I would now add discoverer, dissident, exile, refugee, would be poet, and welcomer.

For almost twenty years I was outreach secretary to Britain Yearly Meeting. In a way I had to represent British Quakerism, if such a thing is possible to newcomers, to seekers, and to other religious groups. It is hard being a representative but then Quakers are so rare that we all become representatives whether we like it or not.

During the lockdown, I achieved one of my life's ambitions. I went through poems I had written over most of my life, threw away many I did not like and produced an anthology of the rest. I called the book, Epiphanies. Inspired by Khalil Gibran, I should like to read the opening poem, to give you an idea of my work with enquirers. It is called Questions:

Questions

They asked him: 'What do you believe?'

He replied: 'We are alive together on this fragile earth. What we do has meaning and consequences. We can fail and fall. We can love and nurture.'

They asked him: 'What is the light you talk about?'

He replied: 'It shines sometimes. It casts a shadow. It reveals. It warms. It burns. It may be found in the heart of each but is owned by none.'

They asked him: 'What is your faith?'

He replied: 'The light will shine even when our eyes are closed through sleep or blinded by fear.'

They asked him: 'What is your prayer?'

He replied: 'To keep my arms open. And my heart. And my eyes. That my lips may sometimes move.'

They asked him: 'What would you die for?'

He replied: "My question is rather, 'For what, for whom do I live this day, this hour?'"

They asked him: 'What is your God?'

He replied: 'The creative silence that welcomes beyond the edge of words. The light that burns in the darkness. The wind that is my breath, our breath, blowing where it wills. God is not the name of God and the wind has no name and blows through the doors and the windows of many temples.'

They asked him: 'What is your authority?'

He replied: 'The restless communion of the winding path. Visited sometimes by grace.'

They asked him: 'What happens when we are dead?'

He replied: 'Death has taught me a concern for life, for open doors, and arching bridges. For the challenge of this moment, for the challenge of this transient life. Moments of unknowing. Glimmers of more. A discovery.'

They asked him: 'What have you learned in your seventy years?'

He replied; 'We are not just our names, our past, our spoken and written words. We are all anointed. Our country, our deepest faith, has no flag, no borders. We may be each other's purgatory or hell, or even paradise.'

They asked him: 'What is your hope?'

He replied: 'That we may continue to cherish our questions, cherish each other. That we be not afraid to be silent with each other. That in spite of the pain we and the day inflict upon each other, we still can believe, have faith, pray, and even dare to love. My hope is that we go on hoping, though our hearts and our history and the shadows of the moon may teach us to give up hope. That despair may not be the last word.'

The questions remain. When working with enquirers I did not try to give answers. I merely hoped that we found new questions, new challenges. Quakers do not have creeds. We have lives. Hospitality is a sharing of experience, of dilemmas. It is a listening so that we may hear. It is a way of looking so that we may see. It takes place in a world where so many people are not seen; where so many voices are not heard. It is a sharing of an individual story that a larger story may be heard. And we all have our stories. Our individual stories are part of the larger story.

In my time as a Friend I have travelled quite extensively. I visited several American Yearly Meetings, each with their own flavour. I have met Quakers in France, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Palestine, South Africa, Spain, New Zealand and Australia. Largish and tiny communities. Isolated, declining and growing meetings. Each group with its own culture, its own idiolect. My training was as a modern linguist, in French and Italian. It was when studying linguistics that I came across the word idiolect. An idiolect is a personal way of speaking. I sometimes think of religions as languages. Quakerese, a language I had to learn some 40 years ago, is a dialect of the Christian language. As a dialect it has evolved taking on idioms and vocabulary from the environment in which it has found itself. But as a dialect it may be puzzling to those who don't speak the language. Each Yearly Meeting has its own way of doing things, its own version of Quakerese, its own idiolect. I am trying to engage with the idiolect of this Yearly Meeting at the moment – and I suspect it has its own sub-idiolects, if I may invent a word!

My own idiolect is the result of my own life experience, of the circuitous pilgrimage of my own life. My mother's parents were refugees from Lithuania, my father's grandparents were also. I am a descendent of immigrants. To my ancestors English was a foreign language. I was brought up in a working class family in Manchester. So my idiolect began as a Jewish northern working class, but was then overlaid by an academic Oxford patois. Later I was increasingly influenced by Zen Buddhism, liberal Christianity, and mystical Judaism. I suspect I became a Quaker to integrate all the places and tongues I had inhabited on this journey. You see how representative a Quaker I am. I was attracted to Friends during my sixth form in school via the writings of the French philosophe Voltaire and by the peace posters outside the meeting house in Mount Street, Manchester. I left religion for ten years after going up to university and ten years later visited as a pilgrim the Quaker meeting in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. Here I could lay down for a while my restless seeking in a silent waiting for a

more profound revelation, in solidarity with a beautiful crazy group of people who could both affirm my travels, my perplexities, my doubts, and offer me glimpses of another way of being. They offered me a home and their homes. Their words, their silences, their food, their visions.

I mentioned my Face Book profile: a seeker, a finder, and an explorer. I was asked recently what I was seeking. I answered with a word I don't often hear in the Quaker dialect. Communion. My partner is an Anglican. When I met him over forty years ago I knew little about the Anglican church. He taught me about its religious beliefs, its language, its structures and its spirituality. I have subsequently learned that his Anglican dialect of Christianity is itself of the Catholic variety. He is for example quite convinced that as an Anglican he attends mass. The act of communion, as you doubtless know, is that part of the mass when the worshipper moves to the altar to take the bread or bread and wine. I once described Christian worship as centred either on the altar, on the pulpit, or it was the gathered assembly turning within through silence to the light within. A simplification no doubt. But I take this act, that of communion in a general sense of opening oneself to that which is in the depth of the self and in the depths of the others. Some language translates this depth as the Holy Spirit, the Christ within, God, the Presence, the Buddha nature, the ground of being. Hospitality is generously offering space to, is welcoming, the life experience of the other, the sacred. To listen to the voice of the other means trying to hear beyond their words, to what I would call their soul. It is a mutual process.

Ten years ago, I received a Joseph Rowntree scholarship to visit meetings to explore the theme, communicating spirituality in a puzzled world. The word spirituality is for some people, a total turn-off. For others it has a specific meaning within church life. Others are simply suspicious. At one meeting I was challenged once as to how I was using the word. On the train journey home, I took out a piece of paper, wrote the word spirituality at the top of the page, and waited. What came to me was a circle of relationships between the self and the self, the self and the group around, then the larger community, and the then the whole planet, all subsumed under the workings of Spirit (which I write with a capital S). Hospitality is then offering time and space to the deepening of these relationships. Moments when one has a sense that one has experienced these depths are moments of communion. These are moments when perhaps we feel we are at home, with ourselves, with others, with the cosmos, with the Spirit.

I should like to pause now for a few moments for you to reflect on when, how, where you may have felt at home. What does the phrase I feel at home actually mean to you? [PAUSE]

Earlier I mentioned other words such as pilgrim, discoverer, dissident, exile, refugee.

I should like to share another of the poems written during the lockdown.

Rye Pilgrimage 2020

On his return from the Camino de Compostela

he fastened a shell to his backpack

to remind him that each step was pilgrimage.

There were stars to follow and signs by the roadside,

many a guide with anecdotes and legends,
footsteps carved deep into the earth.

Throughout his life there were journeys undertaken
to shrines, ruins, where hermits and madmen
had found the consolation or hardship they craved for.

There was Jerusalem and he wept on Zion Mount
and at Yad Vashem where a candle was reflected
in many tiny flames.

There was Holy Island where the sheep bore witness
and at dawn a heron had joined him for worship
at the rising of the sun.

There was Walsingham. He knelt in the holy house,
built according to the instructions
of an improbable dream.

There were banners high
on his march through London.
They demanded peace, an end to lamentation.

There was the house of Anne Frank
where betrayal brought death. After her words,
only silence was possible.

There was the camp in Gaza
Where he spoke of his origins, could offer only
his lamentations.

There was Iona, and the western saints,
a fortress against the tide. He longed again
for illumination.

The old meeting houses of South Jersey,
where the Friends had gathered
to realise the kingdom.

Now the roads are blocked
and the sky is limited
and footsteps counted.

He leaves the house and walks
the short path to where
honesty flowers among the maples.

Beyond the yucca and the rosebush,
the armoury and the tollhouse,
the path grows sacred.

Again the path leads inwards,
past the bluebells and the cow parsley.
He honours the nettles.

Dandelions and butterbur,
periwinkles and violets,
stations of the cross.

The rising and the falling,
the rebirth of beech and horse chestnut,
forget me not.

A journey beyond bramble,
horsetail, to where
lords and ladies hold court.

Among the nettles and the celandine,
an intimate pilgrimage.
None the less holy.

No given name. No guide.

No sacred text.

Just signs of grace along the roadside.

Having in a way exiled myself from my childhood community, where I was told what to think, what to read, where to go and not to, whom to love and whom not to, I have borne my exile with me for most of my life. And yet this exile has led me to seek community, that group of people who would affirm me, help me to discover a sense of authenticity, hear my voice and my story, and would allow me to make my own contribution. This poem was written as a commemoration of the places I had visited, and which had offered me solace. So many people during the lockdown remarked how they had heard birdsong anew, had visited as pilgrims, the places near where they lived but had never noticed before. A sort of Eden restored.

A pilgrim is in origin a stranger, but one who seeks more than to remain so. A pilgrim is a wanderer, but also someone who has seen much. She has her tales to tell. He has his visions, revelations, and disappointments. She has taken risks. He travels to where he is told there is a treasure, usually but not always, of a spiritual nature. But refugees also are pilgrims seeking safety, a new way of living, bearing also the grief of a former life. They have their visions to share, their contribution to make. We seek shrines, refugees, sanctuaries, oases, a place to lay down the burden. These visions, these contributions, are mutual. I once had the image of how we all walk into the house of each other's lives and rearrange the furniture there, without even knowing it. We are all enlarged by an encounter with the other. In so many films and plays, the complacency of the established order is overturned by the unknown stranger who eventually bears hard messages of redemption.

The shrines, the places of communion, are not always or even usually designated as such. I remember as a student visiting Paris by myself. One day I sat in the Bois de Boulogne, unwrapping the oranges and chocolate I had bought – they were the only things I could afford. On the bench next to me was an elderly tramp. He was feeding the duck with scraps of bread. I shared my food. He told me about his life in wartime France. I have never forgotten that meeting. It was what the early church would have called an agape – a love feast. 'Do not forget to show hospitality, for by doing so, some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it'. Angels are messengers. They announce to us the voice of life. They rarely wear wings.

One of the things that most attracts me to Friends is that we have a testimony to community. We can sit in silence by ourselves, but it is not the same things as to sit in silence with Friends. We can try alone to discern how we should act, and what we hold dear. But to test our leadings with other Friends gives a depth and a width which is difficult to attain alone. A community teaches us how to challenge each other, it teaches us discipline, it makes us accountable. In this way we may even be angels to each other. I don't think of Friends as belonging to an ism, what after all do we mean by Quakerism? I think of our being a movement, open to and sharing new light with each other and with the world around. There is an old Jewish blessing for newlyweds moving into a new home: may your house be a place of welcome like Abraham's tent, door open on each side to receive the visitor. But a tent is not fixed. It can move.

However I have been around Friends long enough to realise that it is not always like that. Having spoken with many enquirers over the years I have heard tales of Friends' unfriendliness. Some have found Friends stuffy, patronising, ultratraditional in spite of professions of progressive thinking, snobbish, and proud that they, that we, are not like other people. For all our talk of hospitality, I wonder why we are so few in number. Do people feel they have to be well educated, articulate, politically active all the time? At least to be a Friend in Europe and North America. Do we actually confuse a sort of European based Quaker culture with Quaker spirituality? Forgive me if you do not think this applies here, but these are criticisms I have met in several countries I have visited – that is if Quakers are seen at all. This has led me at time to wonder whether I am still the restless pilgrim who may not be readily welcomed at the Quaker door. And yet I stay, because I have realised that Quakers are human beings after all and I am not looking for perfection...just love, trust, and a challenge to embrace life in all of its fullness.

Parker Palmer, the American Friend who has written a lot on community wrote: ‘

‘In a true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and world. In fact, we might define true community as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives!’ (Faith & Practice 10.19)

I love the application of the word grace to the act of hospitality. Grace is a gift, irrespective of our worth. We offer hospitality not because we are better or lord and lady bountiful, but simply because at our best we really realise that we are addressing that of God in the hand that knocks at the door. I have visited monasteries and convents on my winding path of pilgrimage. The Benedictine rule holds that the visitor is Christ. Christ wishes to enter the monastery. The encounter is that of God within myself with that of God in the other.

But – and this is a but – it doesn't take Quakers a lot to feel guilty. We may not feel up to this encounter, or we may feel unworthy, or clumsy. We may not be at home to ourselves. What can we offer to someone else, if we feel lacking in ourselves? However, we have to begin where we are. We are the people we are and we are embarked upon a spiritual task and that begins not with wallowing in guilt but accept our relationship with ourselves. To prepare myself for this talk I read one or two former addresses to this Yearly Meeting. I was particularly impressed with last year's talk by Lynn Finnegan. She ended with referring to the words of Victoria Safford, which she made her own: *Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of hope*. She talks of the lonely place, the place of truth telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be... And she ends 'And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people

what they see ' She describes this as the tragic gap. The place of truth telling. In this sense we are Christ to each, Messiah, all anointed to the task of affirming, liberating each other.

Out of respect for my Jewish heritage, my partner encouraged me to reinstate into our relationship the seder, the Passover meal. It celebrates liberation from slavery and reminds the participants of the command that you should respect the stranger at your gate because you were slaves in Egypt. It is a great act of solidarity. Treat all people with compassion said Plato (I think it was Plato, but it has been ascribed to others), because we have all come from a battle field.

This leads me to add that hospitality is for me a form of testimony, an outward sign of an inward grace. We are offering the home we have found and widening its boundaries to welcome others. This applies politically, economically and socially. It embodies our testimonies: equality: the other is as we are; peace: it offers a vision of how we may live together; simplicity as our sharing requires only the unadorned gift of ourselves; and truthfulness as we can only offer what we really have and that demands a real recognition of who we are.

There is another story sometimes told at the Passover meal. When the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea, the angels were supposed to have said to God, that God should rejoice. How can I rejoice, God is supposed to have said, when my children, the Egyptians are drowning. When I read that story, I also thought of all the horses that were drowning also. Hospitality is not just solidarity with humans, but also with animals and the very earth itself.

I should like to end with another poem drawn on insights which the natural world taught me during the lockdown.

Still

This earth is the same earth, is it not,
which we traversed with determination,
where, in former times, we ventured forth,
when travel was permitted, and choice was ours
over time and destination? This earth
now proclaims a different dominion.
It cries out now from the fissures
we have torn in it, from the scars
we have clawed in it, from the brutality
of our embrace, our craving for conquest.

Yet we, vanquished by victory, remain apart
until in the bowels of the earth we bury our dead,
and scatter our ashes in its still fertile loam.
Still even now it is ready to receive us.

We are its children, are we not, made of its flesh,
dust of its dust? Our hearts beat to its rhythms.
We spin as the earth spins. Though we tasted the fruit
of the tree of knowledge, and Eden became exile,
we remain the offspring of its seasons.
Still the earth offers us ground for our planting,
generous still if we would grow wise and tender,
earth for our planting, trees for our healing,
a new, a fragile, an abundant harvest. Still.

A question which haunts me often is how do we fragile human beings live together on and with this fragile earth. We are of earth, on the earth. The earth has hosted us. We have however offered in return her not hospitality but hostility. Spiritual hospitality is precisely an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things. But it also offers a place of discovery, of learning, of nurture, of reciprocity, of repentance and of lamentation. In former years many Quaker meeting houses had windows towards the top of walls. You were not to be disturbed by the natural world outside. Today the windows are lower. We are encouraged to see the world as an extension of the meeting house – or even the meeting house as an extension of the world. Perhaps our worship is greener nowadays. Quakers have never adopted the Puritan stance of purifying one's own soul. We are a community whose spirituality is expressed in relationship with society and more and more with the earth itself. We are the offspring of her seasons. She is our host. Her life and ours depend on each other. We are her children. We are her pilgrims. She offers us a way of pilgrimage into ourselves, into our communities. Even in exile, she calls us into friendship. We bear, still, the marks of Eden.

Harvey Gillman 30/03/23

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