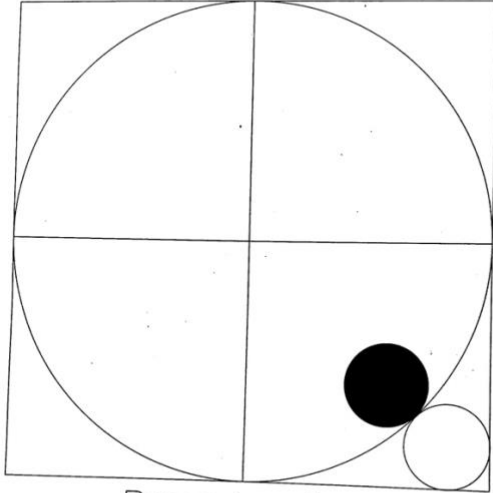


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New Voices • New Light



Papers from the
Quaker Theology
Roundtable
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Journey to “The Peaceable Kingdom”: Disciplines and
Discernment, Detours and Details – Pendle Hill, April 1995
by William J. Kreidler

A few weeks ago I received a letter from a woman who had heard me speak. She asked me an unusual question: “Are you an alive mystic?”

Now there’s a question: What exactly is an “alive mystic?” Am I one? What would the Society of Friends be like if it were made up of “alive mystics?”

It all seemed related to another question I have been mulling over for a while now. When I was a child, growing up in the Dutch Reformed Church, they used to tell us: “People should know you are a Christian without you ever saying the word.”

The question for me now is: Would people know I was a Quaker without my saying the word? Would they know that any of us were Friends without our saying the word, just based on how we behave in the world?

Somehow I think that if we were “alive mystics” they would.

As I think about these questions, I also wonder what kind of spiritual revival it will take for this to happen.

Like many people, I see my spiritual life as a journey. Step by step, concrete, down to earth, practical. A journey with smooth parts, rough parts, unexpected and sometimes unpleasant detours, places where I almost gave up, corners I turned and found visions of unexpected beauty, times I could only sit on a rock and cry in despair. A journey where some of the tiniest details became immensely important.

And a journey with a destination. For me, this destination is a vision a vision of the world united in the living Light, a vision both ideal and practical, a vision best articulated by Edward Hicks in his series of paintings called “The Peaceable Kingdom.”

I’m sure you’ve all seen a version of this painting--there are a least seventy that we know of. Hicks painted his vision over and over. It is a vision rooted in the word of God, in Isaiah 11:6-9 to be exact.

Hicks put forth an idealized image of that vision in the foreground of the painting, where he portrayed the lion and the lamb and the animals and the children. In the background he shows the practical working out of that vision, with William Penn and the Delaware Indians. And it's all unified by the inner light that comes from the center of the painting. It's a vision that, in the context of its time, presented peace, inclusiveness, and justice in a holy context.

It wasn't until much later that I saw the pain, fear, and tension that were also included in that vision. I saw them when I was ready to see them, when their presence did not sour the vision for me, but rather enriched it.

We're here this weekend to talk about Quaker theology, and I have to confess that I'm not at all sure what my journey to "The Peaceable Kingdom" has to do with theology, or what theology has to do with me. Theology has always seemed to me abstract, removed from daily life, and at some level, irrelevant. But I have learned that one of my roles in this life is to take the abstract and make it concrete, to take what seems removed from day to day life and make it practical and relevant.

In short, I don't think of myself as a theologian, I think of myself as a practitioner, and one who would like to see a spiritual revival in the Society of Friends. What follows is a practitioners' look at, if not theology, then the practices that in my experience nurture a Spirit-centered Quakerism.

I'd like to talk about four things:

Spiritual storytelling, by which I mean the stories of our spiritual journeys, how we got to where we are;

Spiritual community, the places along the way where we find support, inspiration, and guidance from fellow travelers;

Discipline, the practices that nurture our spiritual journeys;

Discerning leadings, the promptings of the Spirit that move us forward in our journeys, particularly those that cause us to express God's love in the world.

These four themes are separated here only to make them easier to discuss. In reality they merge and blend, and it's hard to distinguish where one begins and another ends, and there's really no reason to do so.

As I discuss these themes I'm going to talk a lot about my own journey and the journeys of people who are dear to me. Partly that's because I don't know any other way to talk about the spiritual life than to talk personally. But also, I believe it is vital that Friends tell each other the stories of their spiritual journeys. When I say "telling the stories of our spiritual journeys" it can

mean the whole story, starting with “I was born on a dairy farm in upstate New York. . .” to descriptions of particular aspects or pieces of our spiritual journeys.

To me one of the key questions in the spiritual life is “What canst thou say?”

Now this can be a very divisive question— “*That’s* what thou canst say? That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard. This is what *I* canst say, and I maketh a hell of lot more sense than thou. Or thee. “

But I have also seen, countless times the possibilities that are open to us when we answer the question “What canst thou say” *not* with our opinions, *not* with our statements of belief, *not* with what we think is right or wrong, but with our stories. The stories of the time we’ve spent both in and out of the presence of God.

It was about eight years ago that I started to learn the value of spiritual storytelling. I was in a very low period in my life. Part of this low period involved a serious alcohol and drug problem; and finally in desperation I called up a Quaker lesbian I knew was in recovery and asked her to take me to an AA meeting.

I didn’t know what would happen at an AA meeting, so on the subway ride there she explained that people tell their stories. They tell about their drinking, what led them to it, and they tell about hitting bottom and about finding their way out in recovery.

Telling your story is considered in AA to be a fundamental part of recovery, and I was blessed that first AA meeting to hear some exceptionally well-told stories. I’ll never forget the first woman who spoke. For one thing she was funny, which I hadn’t expected at all. She told about coming out of an alcoholic blackout and finding herself on an airplane and having to figure out a discreet way to ask the flight attendant where the plane was going. It turned out she had booked herself on a flight to Anchorage, Alaska. And all she had in her purse was a credit card, about two dollars and thirty cents and a pack of Dentyne.

That woman’s story could not have been more different from mine, but she told it with such wit and grace, that I didn’t even realize she was throwing me a thin lifeline. I was so amazed at what I heard that I went to another AA meeting the next night, just so I could hear more stories. That was what started me on the road to recovery.

Shortly after that, I went to a Friends General Conference Gathering where I met two women who changed my life. One was Teresa of Avila, the 16th century Spanish mystic, the other was Julian of Norwich, a 14th century English mystic.

Teresa and Julian really opened up my thinking on any number of aspects of the spiritual life: how I thought about God,

how I named God, the kind and quality of relationship I had with God, how I nurtured or didn't nurture that relationship through spiritual discipline.

In addition to all their other gifts to me, which I will describe later, Julie and Terry started me reading the lives of the saints. Roman Catholic Saints. Now this is an odd thing for a Protestant boy from upstate New York. But I was and still am fascinated with these lives built entirely around the love of God and Jesus, with these extravagant spiritual journeys.

I began to look for opportunities to hear other people's spiritual journeys, and a couple of years ago, I joined a spiritual support group in my meeting. There were eleven people in the group, and each of us took a turn telling our spiritual autobiographies. It was a group of very different spiritual paths--Christian, Buddhist, Universalist. But in that group I learned some more about why we should tell each other our spiritual stories.

First, it benefits us as individuals to both tell our story and to hear other people's stories. You learn something about yourself and you learn about the people in your meeting.

Second, telling your story is healing. The novelist Isak Dinesen said "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them." And where should healing happen if not in our meetings?

Finally, telling our stories connects us. For me, the storytelling in that group enhanced the feeling of community and reconnected me to the meeting at a time when I was feeling distant.

In my own meeting, we've found that it's incredibly powerful to tell each other our spiritual autobiographies. It's a way to talk across the theological divisions that can separate us and find unity in the Spirit as we learn more about the paths people have followed in their Seeking. We can't underestimate the importance of the fact that Friends from a wide range of spiritual backgrounds, bringing different ideas, histories burdens of pain. Hurts and cherished memories of their experiences.

This amazing diversity can be enriching. It can also be divisive. This spiritual storytelling is one way to find common ground. How and why this happens is mysterious to me, but I know experimentally that it can happen. One woman in my meeting commented on this process saying, "It's amazing how different we are, all in the same ways."

I want to say a little bit about what spiritual storytelling is not.

Telling your story is not a confession or an admission of guilt, although it can certainly include tales of wrongdoing. Nor is it a justification of things you've done in the past. Claire Booth

Luce once commented that most autobiographies should, by rights, be called “*alibiographies*.”

There’s another trap. Many times when people tell their spiritual story it comes out sounding something like this: “I used to be a _____ (Presbyterian, Lutheran, Catholic, Buddhist, Baptist, whatever), but that wasn’t very meaningful so then I wasn’t anything for a while but now I found Quakerism and it’s really great and I think you’re all just living saints.”

A spiritual autobiography isn’t the story of where you went to church. It’s a deeper examination of your experience, of the feeling that went with your experience and the times you’ve been in the presence of God and the times you haven’t. The best summation I could find to explain what I mean by telling our spiritual stories comes from my own culture, lesbian, gay, and bisexual culture. The concept is the thing we call “coming out.”

The term “coming out” has two roots. One is borrowed from social circles where a young woman comes out into society. It’s a rite of passage into adult society. The other derivation is from the phrase, “Coming out of the closet,” meaning coming out from behind closed doors, from hiding, to come from the darkness to the light.

Coming out is not a confession or a celebration. It is a process of coming into one’s authentic self. It begins with an acknowledgment of the way things are, being honest first with oneself, then in some public way, sharing with others the truth you have discovered about yourself.

The coming out story usually tells a sequence of key, or pivotal experiences in someone’s journey that brought them to this place of being openly lesbian, gay or bisexual. In my culture, when lesbians and gay men get to know each other, there is always, at some point the question “When did you come out?” and a sharing of coming out stories.

Ever since I came out I have thanked God for the gift of being gay. My mother once sent me a card that said, “What we are is God’s gift to us. What we do with it is our gift to God.”

Like all gifts it has responsibilities and trials. But it also has the kind of joy that comes from knowing that this is, in part, my authentic self, what I call my “God Self”. The person I was created to be. This is the same joy I feel about my leading to work in conflict resolution which I’ll talk about later.

When you’re telling your story, you don’t throw discretion to the winds. Any lesbian or gay will tell you that coming out is not to be taken lightly. It carries with it consequences and risks, sometimes tremendous risks. Lesbian theologian Carter Heyward writes about the risks of coming out: “Whenever we speak the

truths of our lives in situations in which our truths are unwelcome, we are like intense light, difficult for others to bear.

This is true in our spiritual “coming out” as well. Not everyone wants to or is able to hear your truth or know your God Self. One of the dangers Carter Heyward discusses is that in coming out, you may be left without a predictable road map. We have to find a new one. Or draw a new one.

This is where spiritual community becomes so important. In my experience, spiritual storytelling takes place in the context of spiritual community. I think Teresa of Avila summed up the importance of spiritual community best when she said “To be with God’s friends is a good way to keep close to God in this life.”

For us as Friends, spiritual community is particularly important because we come from so many traditions and because we don’t have an articulated creed. It is, at least in part through the experience of community that we draw the road map we need for the next leg of the spiritual journey.

When I first came to Friends, I was told that the meeting served the function of a refining fire that helped the individual more accurately discern his or her leading. I pictured this vaguely in my mind as the individual being a horse and wagon galloping almost out of control. Seated on the buck board were various members of the meeting. They were holding onto their Quaker hats and bonnets as they pulled back on the reins and cried, “*Whoa! Are you sure God wants you to do this?*”

In my experience, this image has not, by and large, been accurate. Instead, being part of a community of seekers enabled me to really meet my Godself, really come out and integrate the disparate parts of my life. It was in spiritual community that I was able to integrate three of the most important aspects of my self--spirit, sexuality, and vocation. A most wonderful gift.

I am blessed in that I have two spiritual communities: one is my monthly meeting, Beacon Hill, the other is the national Quaker organization, Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns. One way I understand the nature of God is through my spiritual communities. What I mean by this is that the reason I can conceive of a spirit that is unconditional love, the reason I can even believe there is such a thing as unconditional love, is that I experience it in these two communities. Having experienced it there, I am now able to name it when I experience it elsewhere. But that initial experience was in community.

I don’t want to wax romantic about community. Building and sustaining a spiritual community is hard work, and there have been times I have felt profoundly alienated from mine. And times I returned like a prodigal child. All of this, the work, the conflicts, the celebrations, the joy, the sorrows, becomes part of the spiritual

storytelling, in the same way the community becomes a context for the storytelling.

As we tell our stories we are in a sense, authoring them. Author and authority have the same root. And by authoring them we also assume authority over them.

Let me be clear. Authority over our lives in this context does not mean being controlling or directive or separate from God. It means making an intentional decision to be more open to discerning God as our journeys continue. You and the Holy Spirit co-author your story. In her book, *Walking on Water, Reflections on Faith and Art*, the children's book author and enthusiastic Christian Madeline L'Engle says "God is constantly creating in us, through us, and to co-create with God is our human calling."

In my experience, one way we co-create with God is through community. Another is by keeping spiritual disciplines. And the last is in discerning our leadings.

When I say spiritual disciplines I mean the obvious ones: regular prayer, spiritual reading, Bible study, attending meeting, and meditation. I also mean our unique Quaker disciplines, such as worship sharing and clearness committees.

I often give workshops for Friends, and am always struck by how interested people are in the topic. But again, they also bring with them complex and often painful histories regarding prayer and other spiritual disciplines. How do we help them develop a uniquely Quaker spiritual Discipline that acknowledges and honors the experience they bring from other traditions.

One way, again, is through community. Much of what I know about prayer I learned from being part of prayer groups in my meeting, from worship sharing groups, from Bible study. In prayer groups study. When the meeting community does not offer these things in a way that is accessible to people, I have noticed that the quality of worship and meeting life begins to suffer.

Like many aspects of the spiritual journey, keeping disciplines is full of surprises. For example, I never expected to have my own clearness committee, although they have been quite a wonderful blessing in my life. I mean my other clearness committee.

I have a clearness committee that lives in my head, and it's quite a group. Let me tell you who's on it: Lucretia Mott is on it-- she was the first to join. George Fox was second. John Woolman is on it too. St. Teresa of Avila is on it so is Julian of Norwich. Watching over all of them is Jesus.

These are the regulars. I didn't invite these people, they simply arrived. They arrived when I knew enough about their lives,

their work, and their personalities that they could live for me and I could ask the question, “What would so and so say to me about this?”

What I didn’t expect was the degree to which they would live for me--they sometimes astonish me with their actions. When I meet with my clearness committee, George Fox frequently arrives late, with the excuse that he has been out in the countryside witnessing to the Truth. He seems to radiate a kind of heartiness and Light, and sometimes he brings me flowers from the fields. Lucretia Mott often rocks and knits, and, for reasons I don’t understand, every now and then she reaches over and pats John Woolman on the hand.

Teresa of Avila laughs a lot and gets the others laughing, but she always has pointed questions--they all have pointed questions--and practical things to say. Julian and John Woolman are both quiet and somewhat enigmatic. Julian reminds me that God is love, endless, unrelenting love, and John tells me that I know the right thing and can do it. He reminds me to listen to where the words come from.

There are a couple of others. Margaret Fell pokes her head in now and then. St. Joseph of Cupertino floats overhead sometimes. He never has anything to say, but he is a shining example to me that God can take anyone, even a fool, a teach them to fly. He floats by when I need to remember that.

I can’t really say how and why someone joins my Committee. I read lots of lives of the saints and the writings of mystics, and most of them never join my clearness committee. Even Francis of Assisi, whom I love dearly, hasn’t joined. Even Jesus, whose presence as certainly felt on the committee isn’t really a member. When I want to talk with Jesus I talk to him directly. The clearness committee serves a different function

Sometimes I call them together, and sometimes they just come to me. They might comfort me. they might comment on a problem I’m having. They don’t give advice really, they usually just ask questions. What they gave me is clarity. They usually say to me, “You know what to do,”- they say that quite a lot-and then I do. Each has his or her own unique slant on living a life of the spirit. But they’re a group that exemplifies, “How different we are, all in the same ways.”

All in all, not unlike a living, breathing clearness committee.

Sometimes I think that’s what it really means for a saint to intercede with God on our behalf. They don’t go to God and say, “Listen. help this guy out I’ll owe you one. When God feels obscure or hidden, they act as conduit to help us see God’s will more clearly.

As a spiritual exercise I recommend having an internal clearness committee, because to do so you have to get to know the lives and work of people whose lives and work are worth getting to know. They are some of the people that Teresa would call “God’s friends.” It’s also a way of integrating the wisdom of many traditions through that great Quaker invention, the clearness committee.

Discernment is, I think the fourth spiritual practice that will lead us to that uniquely Quaker theology. Again I am struck by the roles played by spiritual community and the development of disciplines in discerning our leadings. And the leadings, of course, become part of our spiritual stories.

Speaking of discernment makes me think of a quote from St. Catherine of Siena. “The spiritual life moves forward on two feet, one the love of God, the other the love of neighbor.”

When I talk about discerning our leadings, I mean the ways the Spirit asks us to show God’s love in the world the practical expression of that love. This is exemplified for me, again, in the Hicks painting of the Peaceable Kingdom, with its idealized vision of peace mirrored in the scene of the practical expression of that vision.

Twenty some years ago, when I started teaching, I received a leading to work with children and conflict resolution. There was no bolt of lightning, no voice coming from the clouds, as it did for George Fox. It was quiet and it happened over time. What started as an interest became my life’s work and I understood at some very deep level that it was to be my life’s work.

It all started in an unusual way, with the Hicks painting of the Peaceable Kingdom which has been part of my life since 1970. I was attending college in Buffalo then and my first week in town I went to the Albright Knox Art Gallery where I first saw the painting.

I would go back several times a week--admission was free in those days--to visit what I thought of as “my painting”. I also bought a postcard print of it to tape over my desk, and that postcard went with me when I left Buffalo and moved to Boston.

It became particularly important to me after I started teaching in the Boston Public Schools in 1974. This was a banner year for conflict in Boston. It was the year the Boston public schools were desegregated, and there was a lot of conflict in the city.

And there I was in an inner-city classroom that under the best of circumstances was filled with fights, arguments, name-calling, put-downs.”

I wondered how do I begin to change all this—”tame” is how I thought of it. I would sit at my desk at night and look at the

Peaceable Kingdom and wonder, what would a Peaceable Classroom look like? What would it take to get to that place?

That was how I first realized I had a leading to work in conflict resolution--thinking about the Peaceable Kingdom and translating it to the Peaceable Classroom, then figuring out, step by step, how to get there.

While writing the book *Creative Conflict Resolution* I went out and bought a large print of the Peaceable Kingdom to keep over my desk as I wrote. It was always there as I wrote about The Peaceable Classroom and named the five qualities I had learned were necessary for it--cooperation, communication, expressing feelings, appreciation for diversity, and conflict resolution.

In fact, I wanted to call the book *The Peaceable Classroom*. The publisher didn't care for that title, and it turned out that there already was a book called the *Peaceable Classroom*, so I was left with the straightforward but flat-footed, *Creative Conflict Resolution*.

But the Peaceable Kingdom was a very direct inspiration in my work, and I always tell people about the Peaceable Classroom and where that term comes from. In fact it has had a wider influence than I ever would have predicted. At Educators for Social Responsibility we use the model of the Peaceable Classroom in all our work.

It's a funny thing about this leading -- when I have stayed true to that leading, way has opened for me. The work has grown and broadened, and some wonderful things have happened, not the least of which was that it has taken me all over the world. When I have not stayed true to that leading, by which I mean when I've been lazy or when I've been more interested in my ego than in doing the Lord's work, or when I've outrun the leading, doing what I want, instead of trying to discern what God wants, things haven't worked out, or they've been much harder.

I can't explain this, but I know it experimentally. Staying true to my leading is what it means for me to co-create with God.

Our social witness as Friends is also an example of co-creating with God. Just as our witness needs to be rooted in the experience of the Spirit, so our experience of the Spirit can come to us through our social witness. As a teacher, this has happened to me many times, when I was interacting with a student or students, and suddenly felt blessed and knew I was in the presence of God.

Times have changed since Edward Hicks articulated his vision of "The Peaceable Kingdom." For Quakers today the details of our personal visions of the Peaceable Kingdom would be different. For example, we would probably have a more inclusive vision than Hicks's was. And even the name-modern Friends are often uncomfortable with words and concepts like "kingdom"

when discussing their spiritual lives. Several years ago New England Yearly Meeting developed a beautiful statement that described “The Peaceable Commonwealth.” But the core idea remains, and witnessing to the Truth that the Peaceable Kingdom is possible is surely an essential part of any Quaker theology.

How can we get there? If we tell our spiritual stories, nurture our spiritual communities, keep the spiritual disciplines, and discern God’s will in our lives, we will have made a good start.

And if we act on that discernment and do the work, large and small, that expresses God’s love in the world, I think we’ll find that we are indeed a group of “live mystics” and the world’s people will recognize us as such, without our ever uttering a word.

At that point I think we’ll cease striving to reach our destination of a Peaceable Kingdom, or Commonwealth, or whatever, because we will find that we are catching glimpses and visions of it all along, around every corner on our spiritual journeys.

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