

**May 20, 1984**

About a week ago, on Saturday, I was working with a group of high school-aged people who donate some of their time to community service as volunteers.

Ordinarily this volunteer work takes place in the hustle and bustle of downtown Brooklyn. But last Saturday, with the coming of spring, it seemed that it might be a good time to do some work at the Quaker burial ground which is nestled in a quiet corner of Prospect Park. The winter had left a scattering of broken branches and other debris on the ground, and there were even very large piles of dead leaves left over from last fall. All this needed clearing away.

Ordinarily, when these young people undertake tasks of simple manual work they seek to do so under a discipline of silence. Paradoxically, on this occasion, when we were working at a site imbued with serenity and peace, the discipline of silence seemed more difficult to maintain. There tended to be lots of nervous chatter—chatter about a great lottery which apparently was about to be decided, chatter about a recent television program which had featured a spectacular volcanic eruption, chatter about a movie depicting a great battle. When the young people did seem to notice the character of the worksite they tended to find it "spooky," and alluded to expectations that they would be haunted that night in their sleep. In other words, their responses seemed to have been pre-programmed by the Grade B movies of popular culture.

Clearly we have moved a long way from the time when it was common for almost everyone to walk through a burial ground at least once a week on their way to worship, to experience the burial grounds as an aspect of the practice of renewing and sharpening their attunement to first and last things. I felt myself feeling quite unresolved about the experience I had shared with the high school students, feeling that we had missed an opportunity of some sort, but being unable to focus quite clearly on what it was that we had missed.

This was all brought into focus for me by the good words we heard from another Friend in this meeting last week. You will remember that she spoke about the Light which is partially obscured from us by a kind of mesh, and about the fact that as we approach the Light the apertures of this mesh seem to widen, so that we received more Light and more energy to draw us forward. This idea has been with me during the week, and I have come to realize the significance of a burial ground in reminding us of our finitude. For is it not true that if our days were infinite, were without number, we would be without any motivation to take these first steps toward the Light of Truth, for they could always be done another day. But it is the silence and peace of a burial ground which reaches out to a place of silence and peace within ourselves, and places there the gentle question: "And why are you living?" And the burial ground reminds us that the greatest tragedy which can overtake a human being is by no means physical death; rather the greatest tragedy is to have lived with indifference to this great question, and not to have taken those first halting steps toward the great Light which time cannot disperse.