

SILENCE, OBEDIENCE AND UNITY
The Roots of Quaker Service

By Daniel A. Seeger

Offered at the Orientation Retreat
at Pendle Hill
for Staff of Quaker Retirement Communities
Sponsored by Friends Services for the Aging
November 12, 1992

A day or two ago I read a story in the newspaper about an experiment to determine how much like a human being a computer could be made to be. Those of you who enjoy the game of chess probably realize that some time ago a computer was developed that could play chess so well it could defeat most of the world's Grand Masters of chess. Now they are developing computers which can simulate human thinking even beyond the matter of chess playing.

At any rate, the recent newspaper story related how, to test the success of these efforts to produce computers which respond like human beings, it was decided that an experiment needed to be conducted. People were asked to sit at a keyboard and begin a conversation with a computer. They were asked to try to discern whether it was the computer which was generating the responses in this conversation, or whether it was a hidden human being responding via the computer terminal.

As I recall the story, people were able to tell whether or not they were dealing with a person or a computer about half the time. But the other half of the time they were mystified! And the implication of the story was that this is only the beginning, that eventually, as programming developed and became more and more sophisticated, it would be harder and harder to distinguish between the responses of a human being and those of a computer.

I have thought about this newstory several times in these last few days. Is a human person nothing more than a very, very clever computer? Could a computer have faith? Could a very sophisticated computer love? Could it show compassion? Could a computer balance the conflicting demands of justice, on the one hand, and mercy, on the other?

What is a human being anyway? And to what extent do human beings allow themselves to become just like computers? To what extent are we "programmed" by the disordered spiritual environment in which we live? The other day I read that the average American child who watches an average amount of television sees the depiction of 3,000 murders by the time she or he is twelve years old. From everywhere, it sees, we are bombarded with the idea that human nature is innately violent, that our chief preoccupation is with our sexuality, and that our main goal in life is the purchase of ever more nifty possessions. Do we unreflectingly allow ourselves to be programmed by all this, as if we were merely a computer?

So behind the newstory about the experiment with the computers there lurks some age-old questions. What are we meant to be as human beings? Who are we? Why were we born? What is the purpose of life on this earth? How are we to behave in order to live in a fully human way? These are ancient questions, surely, but never have the answers seemed so elusive as they do now, at the end of the Twentieth Century.

It is a misconception of the modern age to believe that one who knows how to think rationally, like a computer, will know how to live. But while the rationalist says: "I think, therefore I am." the spiritually aware person asks: "I am *what?*" The answer to this question can only be supplied by a kind of intuitive certitude we know as faith. The answer our faith supplies is extremely important. Mohandas K. Gandhi, the great leader of the nonviolent movement for independence in India, observed that: "People tend to become what they think themselves to be." Clearly the conception of human nature which we carry about with us in our heads and our hearts is no inconsequential matter!

Religions have it in common that they offer answers to the great questions "what are we?" They tell us what we are meant to be as human beings, they offer explanations of human existence, and they outline ways for us to live which are expressive of such meanings. They do this not only for individuals, but they aspire to orient whole cultures by their religious roots: Islamic civilization, Hindu civilization, Christian civilization. People who grow up in different societies and different historical periods are formed in different ways. They become quite different persons than they would have been if they had not grown up elsewhere. To tamper with a person's culture or religion is, in a profound way, to tamper with his very identity, with his fundamental human nature.

It is also an understanding common to all traditional religious faiths that a human life which does not give expression to values which are lasting is a dismal business. Herein lies the distinction between all earlier civilization and modern secular society. The modern person is apt to see life in terms of his own ego and its immediate needs; spiritual people see life in terms of ends which are in need of us. True religion begins with a certainty that something is asked of us.

The goal of Quaker spirituality is to attune ourselves to something beyond ourselves, to some pure principle of universal good, to the will of God. George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, spoke of "hearing and obeying," a guide to living quite foreign to the modern sensibility.

The fundamental truth which undergirds all the teaching of George Fox and of the early Friends was simply that God, who spoke in olden times to Her people through the mouths of prophets and apostles, and who gave the fullest measure of revelation in the person of Jesus Christ, still speaks; and we may, every one of us, hear that divine voice in the secret place of our own hearts.

How do we establish this communication with the Divine? Is it something we can do for ourselves? Can we lift ourselves up by our own boot straps? Can we simply dial some number and make a connection with the Divine Source?

Here we come face to face with one of the great paradoxes of the life of faith.

No one can will it to herself or himself to have Divine guidance or inspired leadings. Such guidance and such leadings are due solely to the operations of God, and are not experiences human beings can churn up from within themselves through their own creaturely efforts. At the same time, paradoxically, it is only those who undertake some spiritual effort, who strive, and who prepare, who are likely to achieve some spiritual progress. As Vivekananda once said: "The winds of God's grace are always blowing, but we must raise our sails."

In Quaker spirituality the three keys to raising our sails are silence, obedience and unity.

Let us consider the first of these--silence. Fox, Barclay and Penington are all quite clear that in order to hear the Divine voice we need to be still. Another Friend, Caroline Stephen, has written: "the silence we value is not the mere outward silence of the lips. It is a deep quietness of heart and mind, a laying aside of all preoccupation with passing things--yes, even with the workings of our own minds; a resolute fixing of the heart upon that which is unchangeable and eternal." Isaac Penington encourages us to still what he called, "the wanderings and roving of mind." Robert Barclay commends to us that we repair to that measure of grace within ourselves which can be sensed if we refrain not only from outward words, but also from inward thoughts and desires. George Fox advises: "Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit, and from thy own thought, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God." Indeed, to the extent that we can lay down our preoccupations with cravings, with transient concerns, with our businesses, with our special likes and dislikes, with all the accidental and passing things which preoccupy us, we begin to make a space within ourselves where universal and eternal things can be heard. Thus, through inner silence we become poor in spirit, and becoming poor in spirit brings us closer to the "Kingdom" of Heaven.

Or, as it is written in the Tao Te Ching: "The truth awaits eyes unclouded by longing."

The concept of silence is closely linked in Quaker spirituality with the idea of obedience.

When early Friends referred to Meeting for Worship as being based on silence and obedience, the word obedience was not added merely as an ornament. Fox thought that the Spirit that moved so fiercely in his heart did not stop at giving him some sort of bracing feeling of spiritual uplift. It went further and laid upon him things that were to be done. As Penington says, "There is that near you which will guide you; wait for it, and be sure ye keep to it." Here attention and obedience are linked. The silence is not only a releasing, a letting go, a centering down, but it is always an opening to the Guide which lays upon us changes in our priorities, and tells of things to be done, and done promptly. Quakers believe that true religion

excites our endeavors to mend a broken world. But it is important to understand that a leading that grows out of obedience is not the same as an all-too-human impulse which may grow out of agitation, out of "politically correct" reflexes, or out of the anxiety or outrage which follows upon the reading of the latest issue of the *New York Times*. It is very important to keep this in mind.

About two years ago I was on Long Island, where I had been invited to bring a message to a gathering sponsored by a local peace group. After I had spoken, during the period of questions and discussion from the floor, one man in the audience said that every worthwhile action he had ever undertaken in the social change field had been motivated by a sense of outrage.

I have thought about that man's remark often since that time.

It occurs to me that if what the man on Long Island said is true, either his social activism must be very intermittent, or he must be endangering his health by being in a state of anger much of the time. One of the problems with anger as a motivating dynamic is that by the time a situation becomes egregious enough to stimulate anger, probably all the really valuable opportunities to do something useful to avert calamity have been allowed to pass by. When we are finally aroused to it, the responses which anger calls forth from us are often designed more for our own catharsis than to address the true needs of the situation of concern. Finally, if we believe that there is any reality to the intangible world of the spirit, we know that the spiritual foundation out of which our actions spring does much to determine the character of the results of what we do. Actions springing from anger and hostility are apt to produce anger and hostility. Can a truly healing service grow out of perpetual outrage?

While I have used the example of anger, the general point is that we must attuned very carefully to the source of our impulses to serve or to act. Anger, fear, the need to feel ourselves powerful or effective, the need to assuage a feeling of guilt, the need to have our own way with the unfolding drama of the Creation, are all examples of spiritual states which are alien to the obedience which grows from inner silence.

If there is a great natural disaster, like an earthquake or a typhoon, a calamity in which thousands of innocent people may be killed, our being outraged and agitated would do nothing to help the situation. We usually know that in such a circumstance it is useless to carry on about Fate, or about the absence of God. Nor is it of much use if we are so overcome at the sights of affliction and injury that we become immobilized or ill rather than being able to assist. We do our best when we lay aside our personal agitation and as calmly and efficiently as possible address the service that it is laid before us to do.

In a sense it makes little sense to respond any differently to mad-made calamities such as war, poverty or injustice. Human groaning and misery did not begin with this morning's headlines. Just as great physical forces build up to cause an earthquake, so too are humanly generated calamities the result of enormous pressures which have been built up in the spiritual realm by too much false living. We are often ready to forgive the crimes committed by those in the inner city because of the poverty and other social illnesses which have led up to them. Seldom do we realize that to be brought up in highly favored circumstances may be as inimical to balanced judgment; privileged living, however enviable in material terms, can be as disabling in the realm of the spirit as poverty sometimes is. Remember Jesus' saying about the camel and the eye of a needle. The point is that as Quaker social activists we must compassion for the satisfied as well as for the hungry.

The true basis of all useful social change activism, of all truly reconciling work for peace, is a sense of connectedness. What touches our hearts deeply about any single, caring act, or about any life given entirely to service, is the way they give expression to the underlying unity of all things. One of the things we have come to realize as a result of the Vietnam War experience is that it is wrong to be angry with the women and men of the armed forces. But we must also learn that we should not be angry with the officers, the generals and the Pentagon staff members who lead them. Nor should we be angry with Saddam Hussein or George Bush. We must struggle ceaselessly to build peace and to organize the machinery of justice, but it is through our inner silence, and through the quietude of our hearts and minds, through being "poor in spirit," that we allow the hope that our limited and time-bound efforts will shine forth with the beautiful light of eternal things.

It is especially vital that the link between silence and obedience be kept intact, and that busy-ness and activity not begin to be carried along by their own momentum, a momentum which may seem to allow little time for the cultivation of the still, small voice of calm and quietness. In spite of our reputation for activism, we Quakers must avoid being such totally committed activists that there is no time for corporate meeting for worship, for periods of silent meditation each day, and for devotional reading. As it has been so well said, if you are too busy to pray, you are too busy.

In this sense peace making is a matter of *spiritual* economics. In economics we know that over the long run income must balance expenditure. This economic principle is true on every level: the emotional, the intellectual, the physical, and the spiritual. We cannot put forth physical energy unless we stoke our body with food and give it rest. We cannot hope to utter anything worth saying unless we digest inwardly the words of prophecy which have come to us through our spiritual traditions. We cannot act rightly or effectively unless we are in the habit of pausing, of stopping our activity, and of laying ourselves open to the leadings of the Spirit which come out of stillness.

Lastly, the practice of unity is essential in Quaker faith and practice. It is sometimes thought that Quakerism advances a kind of individualistic spirituality, but this is very far from the truth. Quakers are more accurately described as having invented a kind of corporate mysticism, a highly disciplined procedure of governance and discernment through which the prophetic function operates collectively.

Friends refer to this as Gospel Order. A key understanding of this Gospel Order is that individual inspiration should be tested against the leadings of the group. From its earliest days, the Society of Friends has affirmed the importance of all individual leadings being confirmed by the group, and has tended to believe that the Spirit's voice as heard in a gathered community is, in general, more reliable than the Spirit's voice manifested in an individual only.

Unprogrammed Friends, having abolished the clergy (it would be more accurate to say that Friends abolished the laity, making everyone responsible for ministry) conduct the business of their spiritual community by deliberative bodies consisting of the entire congregation or meeting. Most people have heard that in conducting this business Friends do not take votes. Decisions are made only with the agreement of everyone.

Essential to the Quaker understanding of unity-based decision-making is the idea that "there is that of God in everyone." When a group comes together out of each member's sincere desire to serve God in the here and now, each expects to find some manifestation of God in everyone else's remarks. In other words, since it is the same Spirit that speaks in every heart, members expect to end their meetings united. In practice, this is a strenuous discipline requiring much patience. In the history of the Society of Friends some key problems have been labored over for as long as a century before unity was found.

In this practice of seeking decisions based in unity, the dogmatic person who speaks with an air of finality, or who assumes the tone of a debater determined to win, is a serious hindrance. Eloquence which appeals to the emotions is regarded by most Friends as out of place. Those who come to meeting not so much to discover Truth as to win acceptance for their opinions retard the process.

Roughly speaking, George Fox was a contemporary of John Locke, the great English philosopher of the Enlightenment, whose ideas deeply influenced the American Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution, both drafted about a century after Locke and Fox were active. It is sometimes tempting to identify Quaker practice with secular democratic theory because there are certain resemblances between the two. But the distinctions between them should be kept clearly in view. These distinctions involve more than a refusal to vote or to define a majority or a minority. Often a democratic decision making process involves a kind of brokering of viewpoints, a kind of seeking after a fair compromise in which the

interests of diverse parties, interests often seen as "self interests," are maximized at minimal cost to everyone else. While this may be a reasonable approach for a society's political life, it is quite different from a Quaker process, where self-interest, for example, is presumed to have no place. Quaker decision making is an exercise in obedience, in the denial of self will, in the seeking of a truth which might be quite distinct from one's own special interests.

Isaac Penington wrote beautifully of the virtues he regarded as essential for participation in the Quaker discernment process. "First is the pure fear of the Lord. This poises and guards the mind, keeping down fleshly confidence and conceitedness, making it wary and inconsiderate, either of what it receives or rejects; of what it practices or forbears practicing. This causes it to wait much, try much, and consult much with the Lord, and with his ministers and people, and preserves out of suddenness and inconsiderateness of spirit. For truth is weighty, and will bear trial; and the more it is tried in the balance, the more manifest its nature and ways appear."

"[Another great help] is sobriety of judgment. Not to value or to set up my own judgment, or that which I account the judgment of the life in me, above the judgment of others, of that which is indeed life in others. For the Lord has appeared to others as well as to me There are others who are in the growth of His Truth, and in the purity and dominion of His life, far beyond me."

"The last is tenderness, meekness, coolness, and stillness of Spirit. These are of a uniting, preserving nature."

The portion of the Sermon on the Mount which we know as the beatitudes expresses the spirituality which underlies Quaker peace making. The blessedness of which Jesus speaks is not a future reward for certain kinds of practical accomplishment; rather this blessedness is something which attaches to a way of living in the present, to a new spirit, a new kind of person. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right, not those who succeed in transforming vast social empires. Those who hunger and thirst for justice, who are merciful, who are pure of heart, who are peace makers, and who are gentle, bring the realm of God into full sight right now. The beatitude lies not in the successful attainment of remote strategic goals, but in the way of life, in the spirit, and in the search.

Friends are very wary of service motivated by anger, by guilt, or by indignation. With a silence of the heart and the mind we seek to let go of anxieties and fears, of stubborn grasping desires, and of inner conversations and distractions, hoping to see things for what they are so that with simple and quiet dignity we can carry out whatever the situation requires of us.

This inner silence has the quality of "presence," of being present where we are

as our bodies and our minds are united upon the release of the imaginings and the wandering thoughts which take our spirits elsewhere. This present-centeredness is vital for the non-violent character of Quaker service. We know that as we sow so shall we reap, that a better future will be built solely by right action in the present, that means and ends must be kept consistent. This consistency of means and ends with truth and right can only be maintained through present centeredness, through inner silence, since means take place in the present. Gandhi correctly observed that if you take any instance of untruth or of violence and analyze it, you will find at its root a desire to do something distasteful or evil now in order to obtain some cherished aim in the future.

I once had the privilege of descending into the Grand Canyon on the back of a mule. The Canyon is over 5,000 feet deep, that is, its walls are over five times as high as the World Trade Center back in New York City where I used to live. As one descends into the Canyon, one passes layer after layer of rock of increasing age. Some of this rock has imbedded in it the fossilized remains of water creatures, left from a remote time when this now arid region was the bed of a sea. Ultimately, at the very bottom of the Canyon, one comes to rock which is a solidified form of the earth's central plasma--rocks thought to be fully half as old as our planet itself. And as one gazes upward from the bottom of the Canyon, past all the strata of rock from different ages and eons, up to the very rim, one realizes that the time that human beings have walked upon this earth is represented only by the top two or three inches of all these layers, and one is awestruck by the great and long creative process which has raised us up to where we are.

A true simplicity of heart, a true inner silence, will enable us to know at any given moment if we are acting so as to be at one with this great Creative Principle, or if we are not.

Who shall silence the human heart, asks Saint Augustine, so that it may stand in stillness and see how eternity, ever motionless, neither of the past nor of the future, nevertheless utters time past and time to come?

Silence reminds us that while most things grow by a process of addition, the human spirit grows by a process of subtraction. Why have so many people of sanctity expected to find the gift of wisdom in the desert? It is because the desert, with its vast spaces and deep silences, expresses the truth that the essential characteristic of those ready to receive a great gift is their condition of emptiness.

Inner silence, the calming of the agitations of our hearts and minds of all that is stubborn and grasping, is essentially an expression of the love of Truth. To be dispassionate, not to let one's own needs, emotions or prejudices color one's actions, is essentially to put Truth before everything else. To love Truth in this way is to love God, who is Truth. Thus, the practice of inner silence is the same as the love of God.

To practice it means that we can participate in political and social life in the fullest sense without demanding anything for ourselves, without there being any narrowness or pettiness of soul to poison our work. It is to establish an inner peace and inner harmony which will allow us authentically to contribute to the growth of an outer peace and outer harmony in the world at large. If we presume to be peace makers and activists, especially if we presume to speak in the name of spiritual values, we ought not to utter any word which does not arise from silence, which does not upbuild reason, peace and justice. Words and actions which dissolve and disintegrate are evil. Friends see it is our sole duty to find modes of public discourse suitable for advancing all those values and only those values which cohere and endure.

I began this reflection on Quaker spirituality by mentioning a news story describing an experiment conducted to see if people could tell whether they were interacting with a person or a computer. I would like to end it with the mention of a movie that was in circulation several years ago. I am thinking of the movie *Short Circuit*. Some of you may have seen it. It is a comedy in which a military computer, a kind of robot, develops a short circuit, and as a result becomes compassionate and refuses to kill people. The humor of the film depends upon the situations which arise as the computer becomes more and more like a person and its human masters in the military, in their frustration with it, begin behaving more and more automatically, like computers. Ultimately, they try to destroy the computer which became too much like a human being.

Quakers are people who hope they too have a short circuit within them, a short circuit to a diving source of all Truth: they are also people who expect that, like the deprogrammed military computer which ran amok with compassion, they, too, will be always in trouble!