Beyond Bricks and Mortar, Beyond Space and Time

The True Meaning of the Reopening of Firbank

This is truly a most amazing day, a great happening in the life of Pendle Hill, an occasion to celebrate the contributions of many people who have made possible this wonderful new facility in which we can carry out our program. It is certainly a time for us to give thanks for it all!

It is useful, indeed it is necessary, at a time like this, to think not only of this present moment, but also to remember the past and to reflect upon the future. I would like us to pause just very briefly to bring to mind four dates from the past:

- First date: 1682. It was in 1682 that the property on which we are standing was granted by William Penn to John Sharples, an ancestor of Anna Brinton.

- Second date: 1858. In 1858, one hundred and seventy-six years later, or one hundred and thirty-five years ago, the older part of the building behind me, the building we now know as Firbank, was built.

- Third date: 1930. Pendle Hill first opened its doors on September 24, 1930. Activities were centered in the part of our present property surrounding the Barn and the Main House, and this building, now newly renovated, was on a neighboring property owned by Philip Platt.

The idea of Pendle Hill's acquiring this neighboring property arose during the days of World War II. Our facilities were taxed almost beyond endurance by the large number of individuals who came for orientation on the way to their assignments as conscientious objectors in Civilian Public Service camps, and also, somewhat later, by the great numbers who came here for education and training in preparation for their service of providing relief and reconstruction abroad as the war drew to its tragic conclusion in 1945. Thus we come to the fourth date I want to call to mind:

- 1945. After strenuous negotiations and considerable worry over the financial implications for Pendle Hill, the Platt house, later named Firbank, with seven and one-third acres, was purchased in December of 1945.

The building was put to immediate use providing dormitory space, conference rooms and classroom space for relief workers who came to Pendle Hill to study everything from Quakerism, to languages, to auto mechanics in preparation for their overseas work. Men and women came and went, departing almost daily to distant parts of the earth to carry out Quaker service.

The acquirement of the Main House, the Barn, and the Platt property which we now call Firbank, occurring as it all did in the space of about fifteen years from 1930 to 1945, was made possible by the generous financial gifts and the hard work of many people, but most especially it was made possible by the leadership financial contribution of two sisters, Sarah and Lucy Bancroft, who provided the nucleus of the initial endowment in memory of their mother, Emma Bancroft.

So in thinking of this property, the history of which, at least as far as its Quaker associations are concerned, goes back to 1682 and the time of William Penn, and whose availability to us is the result of the vision of many people, especially those who struggled to acquire and refurbish it for Pendle Hill's use in 1945, we become aware that we have inherited a responsibility for the management and the right use of a valuable asset which in reality does not belong to us. We must not think of ourselves as owners, but as stewards. In a Biblical sense, a just and faithful steward desires nothing for himself, but completes his or her office in a way that is a service to others, and most especially, exercises the office with the future clearly in view. The Bible frequently reminds us of our responsibility to our children and our children's children, and the children of our children's children.

One sometimes hears of tension in Quaker circles because, while there are some who earnestly wish to care for our properties, there are others who wish only to spend time and energy raising money for programs, that is, for "good works," and who think it is somehow distasteful or sinful to worry too much about buildings and grounds. It is almost as if some thought that to inherit a valuable asset, like a building, and then to "use it up," bequeathing only a shambles to those who come after, is to practice a higher spirituality!

This etherealized idea of spirituality, with its apparent contempt for the mundane responsibilities of the householder and the steward, is actually quite foreign to Biblical and Quaker tradition. For our spirituality is not one which regards the material world as a source of evil, or of danger, nor do we regard it, as do some spiritual traditions, as fundamentally unreal. In our tradition God is the Creator of the material universe and all its creatures, and, upon beholding everything that had been made, God saw that it was all very good. So while we do not doubt the existence of evil, we do not locate evil in material things as such, but rather in maladies of the spirit, in the grasping quality of our nature, in the presumption of ownership rather than stewardship. Good stewardship challenges us to a life of worldly responsibility, and cautions us away both from a false possessiveness, on the one hand, and from slothfulness and neglect, on the other.

So as we think of the significance of this moment, let us think of all that we have

been given by those who came before us. Let us think of all we owe as faithful stewards to those who will follow us, and let us give a special prayer of thanks for those who have done very special work in making it possible for us to be good stewards in the present: to our Development Committee, to its able and experienced clerk, Lloyd Bailey, and to my intelligent, dedicated and conscientious co-worker, Paul Jolly. Let us renew our resolve to support them as they move forward with the completion of this great work of stewardship which my predecessor, Margery Walker, launched in 1987, and which we hope to complete with the renovation of the Barn in the summer of 1994. They will need the help of all of us in pushing through to completion this phase in our on-going responsibility of exercising good stewardship.

I have mentioned the generous help of the Bancroft sisters whose financial support made the early days of Pendle Hill possible. Two years ago, many of us gathered to celebrate the opening of the Steere Wing for which our dear friends, Douglas and Dorothy Steere, provided the challenge grant. The present phase of our project, the completion of Firbank building, would not have been possible without the leadership gift of an old friend of Pendle Hill, Janet Mustin, who is here with us today. Many of you know Janet very well, for she has been part of the Pendle Hill family for a good number of years, and there are many places in Pendle Hill which give evidence of her sensitive touch. Janet is an artist, and many of us have seen the harmonious and balanced compositions which she has offered to us, and which have hung in various places on the Pendle Hill campus, eliciting moments of recollectedness in those whose eyes are fortunate enough to light upon their beautiful colors and textures. The art exhibit which you will see as you tour Firbank includes three of Janet's works. Janet has also helped Pendle Hill in many other ways, most especially in counselling us about in the decoration of what are now some of our loveliest spaces, serving on the small committees which picked out fabrics, furnishings and colors for the Waysmeet living room, the Main House living room, and the Upmeads meeting room. I invite you all, before you leave campus, to look at these three other sites which express the unity of the material and spiritual worlds and which owe much to Janet's aesthetic sensitivity. I would like to ask Janet to share a few thoughts with us.

(Janet speaks here.)

(Thank you, Janet.)

In a few minutes you will be invited to take a tour of this splendid new facility. As you do this, I would like to invite you to keep in mind the way this very building itself, with its library, its crafts studio and its residential living space—that is, with its accommodation for study, for community living, and for creative work—symbolizes the very nature of Pendle Hill.

All of us have one great need in our simple humanity, the need to know truth, a kind of truth which takes account of the ultimate issues before us—what it means to be a human being, how we are meant to behave in order to live in a fully human way, what our role

is in the unfolding destiny of the Creation, what our relationship is to the Creator. When Jesus said that we cannot live by bread alone he was referring to these great questions, and to our need for a corresponding great answer. He knew that failure to come to grips with truth in relation to these questions is to live a kind of twilight existence.

Pendle Hill is a place of learning, but it is a school with a difference. Here at Pendle Hill we know that the truth about these ultimate questions is not available to us in a set of sharply etched propositions which we can learn or teach by rote. Yet the answer is accessible. For it is within us and around us and seeking to make Itself known to us. Jesus often spoke in parables because he understood that the answer to this great question comes in the form of paradox and mystery. Jesus never said that he came to teach us a penetrating philosophy. Indeed, his sermons, at least as they are conveyed to us in the gospels, could scarcely even be said to follow an outline. One can hardly imagine them being delivered except as they might be interspersed with long periods of silence, the silence of wisdom listening.

The fundamental principle upon which learning at Pendle Hill is based is the principle of 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."

Someone who is inwardly silent is wholly available to the present moment, because the inner conversations, the imaginings, the mental movies, the anger, the grasping desires or anxieties, the things that divide our attention, the things that take our spirits somewhere else than our bodies are, have been released. Thus, an inner silence of the heart and mind is often recognized by its character of "presence."

Such inner silence, the calming of the agitations of our heart 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 successfully, if we can, means that we can participate in political and social life in its 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 establishment of an outer peace and outer harmony in the world at large.

Now, given the fact that members of the Religious Society of Friends have traditionally held art in distrust, f/Friends may be inclined to wonder why a Quaker center for study and contemplation engaged in such this sort of search for Truth should develop

for itself so fine a crafts studio as you are about to see. The answer is that crafts as they are practiced here at Pendle Hill are about one thing. They are about the practice of inner silence. They are about the secret of how we should be within ourselves as we do our work in all things. A craft at Pendle Hill is about how we are when we are making things, when we are doing our work.

Consider this simple and lovely mug. There is no applied ornamentation, but there is a skillful use of form, color and line, producing an effect that is strikingly pleasing to the eye. And so although there is an absence of idiosyncratic self-expression, there is, nevertheless, evidence of the deeper nature and condition of the maker. In the shape which is carefully crafted to fit the hand we see an object whose maker was concerned about the needs of the user whom the object was meant to serve. All the maker's intelligence and skill was bent to joyful, useful and efficient service. Secondly, there is a sensitivity to the materials at hand, which are molded and shaped in ways entirely compatible with their inner nature. The beauty of this object derives from the quality of attention given to it, from the fact that its forms correspond to natural laws, that it reflects a partnership between the unchanging and the experimental, that the goal of the maker was service. It is not possible to make an object such as this if one's mind is somewhere else, if one is distracted by anxieties over next week's meeting or disappointment over yesterday's events, while the clay turns under one's fingers. Thus, there are many levels of obedience represented in this object. Indeed, a work such as this one can only be fashioned out of a very deep inner silence.

This mug was made by our crafts teacher, Sally Palmer. After working for two years here at Pendle Hill, I have finally managed to enroll in Sally's course. Just a week ago, I attended the second session of the course, and Sally was showing us how to center the clay on the potter's wheel. As any of you who have done pottery know, this is not an easy process for a beginner and requires a remarkable combination of sensitivity and sheer strength. As one fails and starts and fails and starts again, one can be tempted to an inner swearing rather than inner silence, just as when I practice the craft of calligraphy, which comes more naturally to me, it is useful to watch the movements of the mind as the stray ink blot ruins hours of work. Can we learn to be inwardly silent as the ink blot falls or as one's thumb goes through the wall of a pot-in-the-making? Here is where we learn detachment. But what most impressed me in the pottery-centering exercise was that the centering was only the beginning. Among Friends we talk rather too glibly about being centered, as if it were an end in itself. At the potter's wheel we learn that getting centered is only the beginning. A balanced lump of clay is still a lump, and to stop there, to admire it, is to shirk responsibility. And so the exercise of pottery-making is symbolic of our Quaker spirituality, which tells us that centeredness is a beginning and leads to an active rather than a passive life, that a proper inner life will lead to an exterior life lived with both hands.

But Pendle Hill education is not based only on such intuitive exercises, but also recognizes the role of right reason, of true learnedness, and the value of clear intellect.

Reading in some circles is dismissed as linear, cerebral and cartesian, a function of the much maligned right side of the brain. Now, when you go through the library you will see that the shelves are entirely bare of books. Please do no think we have abandoned reading! Here at Pendle Hill we value the life of the mind; the books are not yet installed since organizing them properly in the space is a large task for which we did not have time before today. But before too many more weeks will have passed, the library will be full of our precious volumes, once again under the care of the very special stewardship which Yuki Brinton, over many years, has provided to keep everything ordered and available. So as you walk through this building, you will see that parts of it symbolize the right side of the brain, and parts of its symbolize the left, and as a unit, the building represents the fact that here at Pendle Hill we know that one cannot live on half a brain alone, but that both side of our brains are a gift from God. Yuki, who has cared for our library for so many years has announced her plan to retire, and so as you walk through the building, I hope you will greet Yuki and thank her for the many years of service she has rendered with our beautiful books.

The building you see behind me, both in its restored portions and in its brand new portions, was designed by our wonderful architect, David Egan. He has been enormously patient with Quaker process throughout the design stage, and I know as you walk through the building, you will appreciate the logic and right reason, the marriage of beauty and utility, which he has been able to visualize so excellently in response to our needs and to our way of working. David's design was brought into reality by the contracting firm of J.J. DeLuca, whom we were very pleased to have working on our project once again after the happy collaboration we enjoyed with them at the time of the erection of the Steere Wing. I know you will want to appreciate everything that David Egan and the J.J. DeLuca firm have accomplished as you walk around this magnificent building.

Lastly, I want to mention the contribution some of my colleagues have made to the accomplishment of this building's opening. Everyone at Pendle Hill—every committee member, every staff member, every program participant—made some special effort, and suffered some inconvenience, as this project unfolded. But our housekeeping and hospitality team and our maintenance team bore the brunt of all this, especially in recent weeks, and we owe them a special debt of thanks. Our Business Manager, Denny O'Brien, has worked tirelessly on this project for well over a year, even foregoing his vacation this last summer, which, at my insistence, he will belatedly enjoy in November. So please express special thanks to Denny and to David Dobbins, Lloyd Guindon, Joseph Linton, Patty O'Hara, Charlotte Fletcher, Sharon Gowdy and Barbara Mays when you see them here on campus.

So here we have a building, a piece of work, which stands for good stewardship, and for the search for truth through silence, study, work and community. Who would have thought, as we gazed despairingly at the rotting soffiting several years ago, that we were about to embark on so rich a path? So, as you walk through this building, I hope that you, too, will encounter something more real and more lasting even than time and space. I hope that you will experience a Presence, a truth which is both light and dark, a truth which is

mute though spoken, an unspoiled mystery, a silence wherein which there are no questions, doubts or anxieties, an ideal pattern, the gateway to an experience for which we can both live and die. But above all, let your eyes and your ears be so opened that you can sing out a psalm of thanksgiving for this most amazing day!

Daniel A. Seeger
Pendle Hill
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October 23, 1993

About four years ago, when Astrid Dorsey mentioned to me that a new art/craft studio was a distant goal for Pendle Hill, I knew at once that was something I would like to help to get off the ground--or rather, up out of the ground, because it combines two great loves of my life, Art and Quakerism. For many years those two loves were in considerable conflict for me.

We all know about the traditional antagonism between Quakerism and the Arts. At Swarthmore College, when I was there, there was no studio art offered. The emphasis was definitely on the social sciences. Nevertheless, I aspired to be an artist. I also joined the Quaker meeting there. That these two avenues were incompatible was obvious by the cliches that were then available concerning Art and Quakerism. The artist was a proverbially selfish person, bound to do his/her own thing at the expense, if necessary, of society. He/she was given to exhibitionist promotion and passionate emotional extremes, and offered a product that was suspiciously commercial or superfluously decorative.

The Quaker, on the other hand, was geared to the needs of society, and ready to offer his/her life for the good of others, was not going to waste time in trivial pursuits, and was solidly grounded, with an emotional and productive life very much under moderate control.

Well, my ideas have come a long way since then. This was all a very exterior view of the outside from the outside. What I missed at that stage of my life was that the artist and the Quaker are on the same internal journey. Each is seeking a relationship with the Divine, and each is seeking a way to express that relationship. For many, the path to the Self has to be entered by way of the Arts, whether or not we are gifted in that field. As St. Paul says, if we have not love, we are as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal, and for many of us, the pathway to love is through the arts. The process of working with and forming material things can lead beyond them to the spiritual, and a shape of clay, or colors of paint, can be a window into another world.

Through much reading of Carl Jung, through courses with Dorothea Blum and Marian Sanders at Pendle Hill, through years of volunteering as an art therapist, I discovered the profound relationship between the visible symbols of the arts, and the inner symbolism of the religious, spiritual life. Pendle Hill led the way in that search, and I am proud and pleased that Pendle Hill can bring this kind of leadership up into the light.

– Janet Mustin
October 23, 1993