"Members One of Another"

The Dynamics of Membership in Quaker Meeting

Thomas Gates

"For as in one body we have many members,
and not all members have the same function,
so we who are many are one body in Christ,
and individually we are members one of another."

—Romans 12: 4-5 (NRSV)

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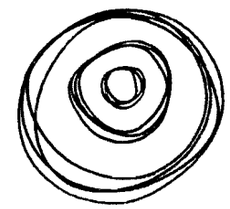

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Dedicated to the members and attenders
of Lancaster Friends Meeting,
from whom I have learned so much.

Introduction

As a member of my meeting's Care and Counsel Committee (formerly, Overseers) for the last several years, I have had the privilege to serve on many clearness committees for prospective members. Individuals have come to us with a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences, and it has been fascinating to listen to each of their stories. Some join relatively soon after finding their way to our meeting, while others have been attenders for as long as 20 years. Some come to us after disappointing experiences with stricter or more authoritarian denominations, while others come with no previous experience of spiritual community. After the formalities of the membership process, we have seen some continue to grow in their understanding of membership and commitment to the meeting, while others, sadly, stagnate or even drift away from the community.

During the clearness process, it is rare that any serious obstacle to membership is uncovered, and in my several years of experience no clearness committee has ever recommended against membership. At least in my meeting, this is not because we do not take the clearness process seriously, but rather because individuals tend to initiate the process only when they already have a clear sense of commitment to the meeting community. When asked why they have chosen to ask for membership, most applicants have answered that they are finally ready to ask for formal recognition of a reality they have already felt, sometimes for many years.

What interests me now, therefore, is not so much the formal process of clearness for membership (important as that is), but rather the underlying spiritual movement by which individuals come to find their identity in the meeting community, how they come to a full sense of belonging; in short, how we come to be

"members one of another." It is clear that this is almost always a gradual process and not a single event. As Patricia Loring has written, we need a vision of membership as "a life-long process . . . of spiritual maturing or transformation."[1]

What follows is an attempt to sketch the outlines of that process, as I have experienced it and as I have observed it in others. But more than a simple description of what actually happens, this is also a vision and a challenge to us, that we might lift up a corporate vision of spiritual community, where we are truly "members one of another." No individual and no meeting can possibly live up to the full implications of what is here described. Nevertheless, articulating the ideal to which we aspire— allowing ourselves to be challenged by a vision—is the necessary first step in fulfilling our potential as spiritual communities. In our meetings, we need to move beyond the simple question of, "Are you a member?" to the more important questions: "How are you maturing into the fullness of membership in this spiritual community?" and, "Is our meeting a community which nurtures the spiritual growth and transformation of its members?"

Individual and Community

In all communities, there is a complex interplay or balance between the rights and needs of the individual and the demands of community life. When I speak of "the dynamics of membership," I have in mind the Quaker version of this interplay, the relationship between the individual member and the meeting community.

I refer to this relationship as a "dynamic," in the dictionary sense of that which is "characterized by an equilibrium of parts which considered separately are unstable."[2] There is an equilibrium between the individual member and the meeting community, and if we try to separate them we find that each becomes unstable or nonsensical. The meeting has no existence except as it is made up of its individual members. At the same time, the idea of a solitary Quaker, isolated from a meeting community, is equally problematic. The meeting and the individual Quaker need one another; they each exist only in this dynamic relation of mutual dependence.

In the wider secular culture, we are continually told in tacit but very powerful ways that the ideals of "individual" and "community" are inexorably opposed. The individualistic culture in which we live tells us that in order to become authentic individuals, we must separate ourselves from the community. Conversely, community is possible only if we are willing to sacrifice some essential part of our individuality. We may give lip service to a longing for community, but shaped by the wider culture, our individual choices are much more likely to reflect "unfettered individualism."[3]

As part of this wider culture, contemporary liberal Quakerism cannot help but be influenced by this dichotomous thinking which exults individualism at the expense of community. Indeed, at first glance, Quakerism seems to be the most individualistic of religions. With no creed, no pastor or priest, no sermon, no sacraments, and sometimes even no words, the individual would seem to be free to believe whatever he or she wishes. Undoubtedly, some who come among us are attracted by this appearance of spiritual individualism.

But this is appearance only. Quakers have never accepted the cultural presupposition that community and individual are ultimately in conflict. From the "gathered church" tradition we have inherited a lofty image of the meeting as a spiritual community,

called out of the world and called together by God. Although this legacy is sometimes obscured by modern cultural assumptions, it is still very much alive, manifested in, for example, our practice of corporate decision making, or the profound experience of unity in "the gathered meeting."

In Quaker faith and practice, the individual and the meeting are in a dynamic, mutually supportive, and reciprocal relation. Viewed from the perspective of the wider culture, our most "counter cultural" claim is that, far from being mutually exclusive, true community and true individuality reinforce one another. We believe that the most vital communities are those which do not fear to encourage their members' individuality. At the same time, we believe that authentic individuality is most likely to arise not in opposition to community, but within the matrix of a supportive and nurturing community. What Joan Chittister has said about the Benedictine monastery applies also to the Quaker meeting: "It is not that there is no room for self here. It is just that self grows best when self is not its end."[4]

Images of Membership

If we accept the idea that membership is a "life-long process of maturing and transformation," then we also recognize that it must be a process of some complexity. By necessity, the relationship between the individual member and the meeting community evolves and changes over time, as we grow into the fullness of membership. Our images of membership must capture that complexity and growth over time.

There is, I believe, a certain progression to that process, a series of discernible steps or stages that we go through on the journey to the fullness of membership. At the same time, it would be simplistic to think of this as a linear process, with one stage predictably giving way to the next without variation. What I have in mind is a more fluid process, with individuals moving back and forth freely between the various stages as the circumstances and seasons of their lives change, but always in the context of life-long growth and transformation. The beginning stages are just as important and just as valid as later stages, but at the same time it is important to see them, from the standpoint of the whole process, as preliminary.

One way for me to visualize this is with an image of a series of concentric circles. The first stages are represented by the more peripheral circles, with subsequent stages progressively closer to the center. God is at the center, but also surrounds the entire process, so that all stages are near to God. Most importantly, as we journey closer to the center, we do not leave behind the earlier stages. The later stages are always surrounded by and contained within what came before. We progress by deepening and moving toward the center, rather than leaving it behind.

Another image may be helpful. In our meetinghouse, the room in which we meet for worship is clearly central to what transpires in the community. On a First Day morning, ten or fifteen minutes before the hour appointed for worship to begin, you are likely to find at least a few Friends already sitting in worship. As a result, when you cross the threshold and enter into that room, you also enter into a sense of presence, of holiness and awe, to which you in turn contribute, allowing those who come after to more easily enter into worship.

But we do not enter this room directly from the outside. Instead, when we first enter the building, we find ourselves in what we call "the gathering room." A few minutes before worship, you will find many people there, greeting Friends and busily engaged in brief conversations, as we catch up on one

another's lives. There is a palpable sense of togetherness and fellowship.

To the left is our recently completed multipurpose social room. Before Meeting for Worship, you will find the adult discussion group there, and perhaps also a committee meeting, as groups of Friends engage one another on a deeper and more sustained level than is possible amidst the hubbub of the gathering room. And to the right is the library, where you may find two or three Friends sharing in a more intimate conversation than is possible in the other rooms.

During the course of a First Day morning, you may be drawn first to one and then another of these rooms and the activities therein. What goes on in each of the rooms is valid and essential to the life of the meeting, and yet the focus remains on the meeting room. In a similar way, in the journey toward the fullness of membership, you may find yourself lingering in one or more of the outer rooms for a period of time, often for very good and necessary reasons. And yet, we should not lose sight of the fact that the earlier stages of that journey are preliminary, and serve to prepare us for what comes later.[5]

Let us now turn our attention to some of the stages that we might enter into as we journey toward the fullness of membership. As we shall see, each stage raises distinct issues for the individual and corresponding responsibilities for the meeting community.

Meeting as a Place of Acceptance

> Community is a safe place precisely because no one is attempting to heal or convert you, to fix you, to change you. Instead, members accept you as you are. You are free to be you . . . free to discard defenses, masks, disguises . . . free to become your whole and holy self.
>
> —M. Scott Peck [6]

In contrast to earlier times in our history, most Friends today (at least in the liberal and unprogrammed branch of Quakers) come to membership from some other religious tradition, or perhaps from no tradition at all. Often we come as refugees, seeking to escape something that we have rejected, outgrown, or found inadequate. Initially we may be more concerned with what we are fleeing from, rather than what we are journeying to.[7] Even if we are coming to Friends with no particular baggage from a previous religious community, our first need is often for meeting to be a place of refuge, a shelter from the world, a place of belonging and acceptance. We seek a place where we will be accepted and valued for who we are, rather than judged for how we might not measure up to some ideal.

Sometimes our children are especially good at articulating this sense of belonging. One teenager who had grown up in our meeting was given an opportunity to become a formal member, on the occasion of his mother (a longtime attender) being accepted into membership. He was confused by the offer, and replied, "I thought I already was a member." He had grown up with such a strong sense of belonging and acceptance by the community that it had never occurred to him that he was anything less than a full member.

Some who come to us from outside and enter into this stage may feel a sense of joy and liberation, a feeling of finally having found a community where they feel accepted. Others may have a more difficult time, vacillating between hope that this community is different, and fear that it is not, all the while extremely vulnerable to any disappointment. When they do

experience disappointment, they may express the sentiment that the community feels "unsafe." This is likely to puzzle longtime members, but should be interpreted as evidence of this struggle to feel accepted in spite of perceived differences.

Individuals at this stage of their involvement with meeting need to feel explicitly and warmly welcomed, and those in the meeting with a gift for "spiritual hospitality" can be particularly helpful. At the same time, these individuals often "need space," and they can easily be driven away if they perceive that expectations are being placed on them too soon, or if they sense that others are trying to heal or convert them. This can be a particular problem in smaller meetings that see visitors only infrequently: when visitors finally do come, they can be so "smothered with hospitality" that they sometimes do not return. Thus, the task for the meeting at this stage is to balance the need for hospitality and welcoming with the equally important need to respect the newcomer's need for boundaries. What is especially challenging for the meeting is that the necessary balance will be different for different people. What one newcomer may welcome as friendly hospitality, another may see as intrusive. The exercise of spiritual hospitality requires great sensitivity to these individual nuances.

At its best, a Quaker meeting is able to convey to newcomers a sense of unconditional acceptance: of listening, openness, and hospitality that invites the newcomer to enter ever more deeply into the life of the meeting. Conveying this sense of acceptance and belonging becomes the first stage in the journey toward membership, the foundation upon which all else is built. Still, at this early stage of the individual's relationship to the meeting, there are very real dangers to both the meeting and the individual. Let me mention two.

The first danger is that in our sincere desire to be always

accepting and welcoming, we may fall into what Scott Peck has called "pseudocommunity."

> The essential dynamic of pseudocommunity is conflict avoidance . . . In pseudocommunity a group attempts to purchase community cheaply by pretense . . . the basic pretense of pseudocommunity [being] the denial of individual differences."[8]

A true community comes to understand and value the diversity of its members and is able to both accept and transcend those differences. By contrast, a pseudocommunity might be able to achieve the appearance of acceptance, but only by ignoring differences and avoiding conflict. Because we place a high value on the ideals of tolerance and acceptance, pseudocommunity can be a real temptation for Friends Meetings. We resist that temptation by remembering that genuine acceptance and hospitality can come only from a true community, which is able to be generous and welcoming to the newcomer out of its strong sense of shared identity, transcending differences rather than simply ignoring them.

A second danger is inherent in our image of the concentric circles: it is the danger of mistaking this first and preliminary stage for the whole meaning of membership, of confusing the periphery with the center. This was brought home to me in a very compelling way about two years ago at our Quarterly Meeting, which in the spring of each year is held in conjunction with a weekend retreat for Young Friends from across the Yearly Meeting. At the concluding worship on Sunday morning, one of the Young Friends spoke very movingly and eloquently of how important the retreat had been to her, of how she could come to these retreats and be with others who might be very different from her, and yet feel totally accepted for who

she was, with no demands or expectations placed on her. She concluded by saying, "Now I know what it means to be a Friend." I was moved by her obviously sincere expression of acceptance and belonging, and yet at the same time I found myself asking: is being accepted by others *all* there is to being a Friend?

Meeting as a Place of Shared Values

> The Society should reach out to and welcome into active membership all who find unity with the principles and the testimonies of Friends . . .
>
> —NEYM Faith and Practice[9]

Sooner or later, both the individual seeker and the meeting will come to the realization that acceptance by itself does not provide a sufficient basis to sustain spiritual community. In our pluralistic society, many areas of our lives may be characterized by a spirit of acceptance and appreciation of diversity (work, school, neighborhood, even riding the city bus), and yet community may be lacking. True community requires something more: a sense of core beliefs, values, and commitments that are understood and shared by all.

In our clearness committees, we commonly ask prospective members what first attracted them to Friends and encouraged them to stay and get to know us better. In my experience, by far the most common answer to that question is "the testimonies." In the absence of any creed or defined doctrine, the testimonies often provide the closest thing Quakers have to an articulation of shared beliefs and values.

Seekers often come to us with a commendable but preexisting belief that there is too much violence in the world (or too much inequality, or too much materialism). When they then learn that Friends have a long-standing conviction, dating back to our earliest days, of something we call the peace testimony (or the testimonies of equality or simplicity), it can very much add to the sense of belonging and acceptance that we have talked about. They may say to themselves, "Finally, here is a group that believes as I do."

I myself can testify to the tremendously reinforcing effect that the discovery of shared values can have on a seeker. As a young man of 18, I was trying to convince my local draft board that I was a conscientious objector to war in all forms, which was a decidedly minority view in the mainline Protestant church in which I was raised. In seeking to support my claim, I had read about the Quakers and their peace testimony. A few months later, when I had the opportunity to attend a Quaker Meeting, I found that the small meeting which I first attended (Bennington, Vermont) claimed as members not just one but four men who had been conscientious objectors during World War II. Here were people who could know something of my struggle, who could encourage and inspire me with their own stories. This, even more than the hospitality extended to me, was what initially made me feel that I belonged there.

My story illustrates how there can be a reinforcing interplay between the first two stages of membership. Newcomers are more likely to feel a sense of belonging if they discover that they do indeed share important values with their new community. The community, in turn, is more likely to be accepting and hospitable if it perceives that the individual is in unity with the basic convictions of the community. Conversely, a meeting may find it more difficult to extend hospitality to those who do not seem to share our basic values. Although understandable, this attitude risks turning a meeting into an exclusive club of the

like-minded, instead of a spiritual community that transcends differences.

At this stage in the evolving relationship between individual and the community, the meeting's task is not only to articulate its values and beliefs, but also to convey a sense of where these convictions come from, and to demonstrate by example how they are part of the fabric of our lives. The peace testimony is more than an intellectual opinion that there is too much violence in the world. It is a conviction that arises (or should arise) from our understanding of the nature of God, based on our own experience of the transforming power of God's love in our lives. This of course is harder to communicate, but if we do not at least make the attempt, we are in danger of misrepresenting the nature of the testimonies.

The corresponding task for the individual at this stage is to listen, to absorb, to be open, to grow, "to be formed into" the community. It is here that Quaker lore and the well-known stories from our past can play an important role. The seeker may bring to us a conviction that nonviolence is important, but it is our common narrative that shapes and molds that conviction into the Quaker peace testimony. George Fox rejecting the officer's commission; Thomas Lurting refusing to fire his cannon in battle; William Penn giving up his aristocratic sword; the frontier Quakers spared by hostile Indians because of the white feather on the meetinghouse door; ordinary Quakers down through the centuries suffering for their conviction that God does not call us to war, but peace: these stories are more than a nostalgic sentimentalizing of our past (although in truth they can sometimes degenerate into that). These shared narratives may not provide specific answers to the difficult challenges we face in our time, but they can shape us and form us, providing us with inspiration and the spiritual resources for living our

lives with integrity in a world that often does not share our values.

Just as in the first stage, so too in this second stage there are pitfalls on the journey toward the fullness of membership. The first is the danger of disillusionment. A newcomer, initially attracted by the Quaker testimonies, in time may come to perceive that the meeting does not always live up to its professed beliefs. We may talk about the importance of the testimonies, and tell stories of our past triumphs, but if we are not today "letting our lives speak," seekers may eventually become disillusioned and look elsewhere for a group which does not fall so short of its professed ideals. (Those who come to us as single-issue activists may be particularly prone to this disillusionment.) This in turn becomes a challenge to the meeting community; the testimonies are not just beliefs but actions, and if we extol them to newcomers as a reason to be a Quaker, then it behooves us to demonstrate in action how these lofty ideals do indeed make a difference in our lives.

A second danger I would put in the form of a question: Where is God in all this? There is a constant danger that if we focus on the testimonies but forget where the testimonies come from, then our meeting may come to resemble an ethical society or even a political lobbying group, instead of a faith community. The testimonies, as originally understood, were not just "values" or abstract beliefs about the way the world should be, but specific and concrete actions that "testified" to the Truth of the transforming power of God in the lives of Friends.[10] In the familiar metaphor, this personal experience of a transforming encounter with the Divine is the "root," from which will sprout the "fruit" of the testimonies. If we tend only to the fruit and neglect the root, then eventually the fruit will wither and die.

There is a final pitfall. I have presented a picture of the seeker

bringing with him or her certain beliefs and values and then finding within Quakerism a certain congruence with the testimonies. But this has the danger of making Quakerism into "simply an organizational endorsement of what people believe anyway." [11] A Friends Meeting then becomes nothing more than a collection of individuals who, for whatever reason, bring from outside the community similar values and beliefs, and then choose to associate with others in an effort to support and encourage one another in those beliefs. At best, this is a rather impoverished view of the possibilities of Quakerism. To move beyond this impoverishment, we as a faith community need to find ways to lift up to both seekers and members the possibility that the tradition with which we have chosen to identify may indeed have something to teach us, and may be calling us beyond the certainties of our past to a life of transformation.

Meeting as a Place of Transformation

> Membership is, or ought to be, about transformation. The transformation of individuals who have experienced the divine spirit at work in their lives. The transformation of a community which has sensed, and tries to live out, its particular role in bringing about the transformation of the world which can be seen as God's purpose.
>
> —Helen Rowlands [12]

The dangers of the second stage—failure to live up to our ideals, forgetting God, the testimonies as simply an endorsement of what we already believe anyway—lead us directly into the opportunities of the third stage. Up to this point, we have been

talking about what is conventional, comforting, secure. By contrast, what begins at this stage is challenging, uncomfortable, transforming. William James once said that for some, religion exists as a dull habit, while for others it is an acute fever.[13] Embarking upon the stage of transformation involves just such a shift in perspective. What up to this point may have been peripheral—the dynamic relationship between individual, community, and God—now becomes central.

This transition may first come to our awareness through a vague feeling of discomfort, a sense that something is about to happen, or perhaps that something unknown is struggling to be born. Before, we have been seeking, but now we are aware of being sought. Before, we have been turning toward God, but now we sense God turning toward us. Before, we have depended on our own initiative, but now we are being asked to respond to God's initiative.

In the liberal unprogrammed branch of Quakerism, it seldom occurs to us to link membership with transformation. And yet, in the early years of the Quaker movement, spiritual transformation was the *sine qua non* of membership. For our first 90 years, there was no formal membership process and no recorded lists of members. One became a Quaker not by meeting with a clearness committee, but by being convinced of the Truth through an experience of the transforming Power of God. This in turn led to a transformed life, as manifested by the public keeping of the testimonies (including most importantly the willingness to assemble in worship in the manner of Friends, even when such assemblies were against the law). Although there was no official list of members, everyone in the local community "knew who was a member and who was not."[14]

Although the importance of a transforming spiritual experience as a prerequisite for membership has receded with time, our

Quaker tradition nevertheless continues to provide ample opportunities that can lead us toward transformation. Let me mention three such opportunities for transformation in contemporary Quakerism.

The first occurs when, for whatever reason, an individual commits to more fully and deeply exploring one or more of the testimonies. When we move beyond the level of abstract values and instead allow the testimonies to search our own lives, change is almost inevitable. We begin to ask questions. In my daily life, are there ways I can help guide the world away from violence and toward peace? How can I change my life so that I am less complicit with systems based on violence and oppression? What would simplicity look like in today's fast-paced consumer culture? What is God calling me to do in this specific situation?

As we engage deeply with the testimonies on this personal level, we may be led to make specific changes in our lives. These changes in turn strengthen our sense of responding to God's initiative. As we begin to feel more in tune with the Divine, we may be led to make still more changes, in a self-reinforcing process of transformation.[15]

One example of how this dynamic might work is currently taking place in my own meeting, where a group of members and attenders has recently begun to look seriously at the issue of our society's racism from the perspective of our Quaker testimonies. As we confront our own complicity with a cultural system that is so contrary to our professed ideals, we begin to look for specific ways that God is leading us to change. Although we are only at the beginning of this process, I believe that for at least some in our meeting, this endeavor is providing the means by which the thick husk of our lives can be broken open, allowing the seed inside to emerge and grow in a process of true transformation.

A further example of this dynamic is provided by a man in our meeting who, after taking a leadership role when the meeting resettled a Bosnian refugee family, later felt led to volunteer to serve as an election monitor in Bosnia in 1997. As he learned first-hand of the needs there, he was drawn more deeply into peace work and the opportunity to help heal the divisions in that land. He eventually received advanced training in the Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP), and he has now made four subsequent trips to the Balkans, and has been instrumental in helping to develop an AVP program there. Through this engagement with the peace testimony, he has also become a spiritually deeper and more grounded person. Indeed, he himself would be the first to describe this entire process as "transforming."

A second opportunity for transformation comes from our traditional Quaker encouragement of individual spiritual discipline and practice, now being reclaimed in several yearly meetings through "Spiritual Formation Programs." These programs typically encourage the individual to commit to some daily spiritual practice, organize participants into small local groups whose members meet regularly to support one another in their spiritual journeys, and also bring together larger regional groups for monthly discussion of some spiritual reading from the tradition. The three intertwined components of the program seek to recapture a sense of mutual encouragement and accountability between individuals and the larger group, where members come to know themselves individually and together to be "humble learners in the School of Christ."[16]

Over the last three years, more than 20 members and attenders from my own meeting have participated in our yearly meeting's spiritual formation program, and this has been an impetus for deepening and growth not only for the individuals involved, but

also for the entire meeting. For some, the process has been truly transforming. No doubt other workshops, retreats, and courses may have this same effect, but the focus of the spiritual formation program seems to make it a particularly suitable vehicle to encourage transformation.

A third opportunity for transformation is exemplified by the Quaker concept of "leading," which is so central to our spirituality. A genuine experience of "having a leading" is an invitation to transformation, with its inward yielding to the divine initiative, as we learn to trust God instead of our own controlling impulses.

A major tenet of Quaker spirituality is the belief that leadings are the single most important way that God is potentially present in our lives. A leading is more than a mystical sense of God's presence, for it conveys a sense of movement: sometimes an outward and geographical movement, but always an inward and spiritual one. In this sense of movement, a leading seems related to the New Testament word *metanoein*, usually translated as repent, but with a literal meaning of "to change one's mind." Whatever the outward results of our leadings, they always demand from us spiritual growth, and even transformation.

An important milestone in my own spiritual development was my struggle with a decision to leave my medical practice in rural New England in order to follow a leading to live and work among Kenyan Quakers at Friends Lugulu Hospital. The full story of that leading has been told elsewhere,[17] but suffice it to say that it was a life-changing experience that started as the smallest of seeds, was nurtured along the way by timely encouragement and counsel from various Friends, and was finally made possible by a classic experience of "way opening" to overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. There was a sense of unfolding events carrying us along to a place we were meant to be, but each step requiring our cooperation and consent, our willingness to follow even though we could only see a little way ahead. Looking back from the perspective of 12 years later, I think the most important spiritual lesson was this: only when we are willing to put ourselves in situations beyond our own power to control can the transforming power of God become fully manifest in our lives.

Not all leadings will result in such major changes in outward circumstances as our three years in Kenya. However, like the mustard seed, even the smallest of leadings has a way of growing into something big. Having once had the experience of being faithful to a genuine leading, however small, we become gradually more sensitive to the further movement of the Spirit in our lives. Leadings faithfully followed have a way of begetting more leadings, and eventually, even transformation.

Our theme has been "the dynamic of membership," the complex interplay between individual and community as we grow into the fullness of membership in Quaker meeting. As in previous stages, we now turn to an examination of what the relationship between individual and meeting might look like in this stage of transformation.

From the perspective of the individual, we start by recognizing that transformation can come at any time, with or without the contribution of a Quaker meeting. God has many ways to shape a life. Nevertheless, in our Quaker tradition there is an important option open to the individual which can powerfully encourage the process. When a person begins to be aware of the movement of the Spirit in his or her life, sensing that something still unknown is struggling to be born, a crucial step comes when the individual then turns to the community and says: I need help in discerning what is being asked of me. The prototypical example would be a member who is struggling with a leading

then asking the meeting to appoint a clearness committee. Ideally, the individual will find his or her leading validated, encouraged, and nurtured by sitting with others who have themselves experienced similar leadings in their own lives. The process of transformation is greatly enhanced when the individual can recognize his or her own inadequacy and request assistance from the community.[18] Asking the meeting for help may serve as a prelude to the essential step in transformation, which is asking God for help.

From the perspective of the community, the meeting's most important contributions at this stage are an attitude of expectation and the capacity to respond authentically to requests for help. Mature meetings recognize that some of their members may at times require more than a sense of belonging and shared values, and that the community's responsibility has now moved beyond hospitality and acceptance. The meeting must be able to recognize when individuals are entering into this stage, and be prepared to assist in concrete ways. Here again, the paradigm is the clearness committee. The individual must be willing to ask for guidance, but the meeting must be able to respond, by providing an opportunity for the individual to meet with those experienced in spiritual nurture. A meeting will foster transformation to the extent that it lifts up the expectation that individuals will have leadings, has a mechanism for responding to individual requests for clearness, and can confidently assist in the discernment process.

As we enter into this stage of transformation, there is often an air of challenge, discomfort, and uncertainty. The individual is being challenged by God to change and grow beyond previous limits. The meeting is challenging the individual to be true to his or her leading, even at a cost. And the meeting itself is being

challenged to make room for the Spirit, to be willing to change in response to the genuine leadings of its members. All of this can be difficult, even painful. It is also in marked contrast to the earlier stage of acceptance and belonging. Although this contrast may seem stark, it is fundamentally important, because it is rooted in our basic understanding of God. Challenge and transformation are central to the process of membership, precisely because they are central to our understanding of how God acts in our lives. To fully comprehend this, we need to understand how love (both God's love for us and our love for one another) must include both acceptance and challenge.[19]

In what is not a bad summary of the entire New Testament, John the Evangelist says, "We love, because [God] first loved us." (1 John 4:19). Love is not something we grudgingly give in an effort to live up to some external commandment. Rather, love is a response, a free and grateful response to the experience of having been loved. We are able to keep Jesus' commandment to love one another only to the extent that we have first experienced the grace of God's love toward us. This experience of having been loved by God is primary; everything else follows.

If this is true, then the next question is: How is it that we experience God's love in our lives? When I try to answer that question from my own experience, I can distinguish two facets, two different but complementary aspects of God's love for me. The first is the experience of unconditional acceptance, the conviction that no matter who I am or what I've done (or not done), I am somebody in God's eyes. In theological terms, this is grace: love that is unwarranted and undeserved, and yet unconditional, not dependent on anything I do. In terms of the Quaker image of the Light, we can think of this facet of God's love as sitting in the warm glow of a sunset and feeling everything is right with the world. In terms of human love, we

can compare it to parents' love of their newborn infant: adoring love that is unconditional, not dependent on any particular action or trait on the part of the child, but simply rejoicing in the child's existence.

If this were all there is to God's love, then our spiritual lives would eventually become bland and complacent. But I experience another facet of God's love for me, not different from or in opposition to the first, but complementing it. This is a love that is never quite satisfied with the way we are, but always inviting and encouraging us to become what we are meant to be. It is not just a here-and-now acceptance, but a leading toward the future. It is a love that challenges us, leads us, and transforms us. In terms of the image of the Light, it is not the warm glow of the sunset, but a beacon that searches us out, shows us the way, and, at times, makes us uncomfortable enough that we may long to return to the darkness. In terms of human love, it is more like the love of parents for a toddler: love that by its constancy, firmness, and patience transforms a self-centered being that knows only its own physical needs into a social person capable of sharing toys, using a fork, and speaking in sentences.

In my experience, these two facets of God's love are both necessary to the spiritual life, complementing each other as they become intertwined in a tapestry of intricate detail. When I feel only God's unconditional acceptance, grace begins to degenerate into complacency, even arrogance, until God rescues me form my smugness by once again humbling me and challenging me to new growth and maturity. And when too many challenges begin to overwhelm me, or I begin to fall into the trap of believing I must somehow earn God's love, then grace reasserts itself, usually with some experience that reminds me that I am not in control, returning me once again to the joy of being grounded in God's unconditional love. We need to

recognize and experience both aspects of God's love in our lives: both the comforting love of unconditional acceptance and the second love, the uncomfortable love that challenges us and transforms us. This second love is a major theme of the Biblical witness: it calls Abraham to leave his father's home and go to a strange land; it leads Moses and the Israelites out of bondage and into the Promised Land; it inspires the disciples to leave their boats and follow Jesus; and it calls forth Lazarus from death into new life.

What is true of God's love for us is also true of our love for one another, in the context of the spiritual community that is Quaker meeting. We come together in community so that we can begin to reflect God's love back into the world and to each other. We need a vision of community that allows not just for loving acceptance, but also for loving challenge, growth, and transformation. Just as in our individual spiritual lives the two facets of God's love complement one another, so too in our community life both kinds of love are necessary.

This goes to the very heart of why we gather in community in the first place. We all need to belong to a group in which we can feel acceptance and support, and that is a very valid reason why we choose to be together. But there is another reason that God calls us into community: we are people in need of transformation, and community is the place of that transformation.

At its best, a Quaker Meeting is not just a collection of individual seekers, but a community of faith, a covenant community, knit together by our common seeking of God. We are like spokes on a wheel: as we draw closer to our center in God, we also draw closer to each other. And as Douglas Steere has reminded us, "to come near to God is to change."[20]

Differences and disappointments are inevitable, but in a faith community these are seen not as obstacles, but as opportunities

for transformation. God calls us into community because it is only in community that we can learn God's transforming lessons of love, service, compassion, and forgiveness.

On occasion, relatively new attenders at our meeting will voice the sentiment that meeting feels "uncomfortable" or even "unsafe" to them. To the extent that they are finding us less than perfect in our practice of spiritual hospitality, we need to listen to them and endeavor to improve our practice. But these newcomers may also be perceiving something important that longtime members can sometimes overlook. In the words of Helen Rowlands:

> Membership is costly . . . It is not just about belonging, feeling accepted, feeling at home (although these may be the things we talk about most often). It has also to do with being stretched, being challenged, being discomforted . . . We can never be entirely sure of where the venture will lead us . . . [but] the one thing we can be sure of is that the process, taken seriously, will call us to change.[21]

Meeting as a Place of Obedience

> [The end of this process] . . . is to produce a type of character which is probably the chief enrichment of Christianity hitherto made by Quakerism, the man or woman who goes through life endeavoring to decide every question as it arises, not by passion or prejudice, nor mainly by the conclusions of human reason, but chiefly by reference to the light of God that shines in the prepared soul.
>
> —William C. Braithwaite [22]

If the characteristic of the preceding stage is transformation, we might now ask: What is the goal of this transformation? What are we being transformed into? Here I am on precarious ground, for I can claim no knowledge about this final stage, except from brief and limited glimpses of it in my own life, and by likewise observing it imperfectly in others. In its fullest expression, this stage of obedience must be relatively rare. But even if uncommon and difficult to talk about, it remains of crucial importance to our discussion of membership. For if obedience is our goal, the very center of the process we have been describing, then in a certain sense it gives meaning and purpose to everything that precedes it.

There are many words by which we could describe and name this final stage; all are inadequate. I have chosen to call it "obedience," largely out of deference to Thomas Kelly's essay on "Holy Obedience." [23] Toward the beginning of his discussion, Kelly quotes Meister Eckhart:

> There are plenty to follow our Lord half-way, but not the other half. They will give up possessions, friends and honors, but it touches them too closely to disown themselves.

The distinctive characteristic of the stage of obedience is this willingness to go the other half, to renounce the old self so that the new self may be born. This is exactly the experience to which the Apostle Paul speaks: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:19-20 NRSV).

In the Christian tradition, the paradigm for obedience is the earthly life of Jesus, epitomized by his words in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42, KJV). Obedience, renunciation of the old self, and

birth of the new self also provide the basis for the various forms of the "great paradox" of the Gospels:

> If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it (Luke 9:23-24 NRSV);
>
> Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it (Luke 17:33 NRSV) (see also Mark 8:35, Matthew 10:39 and 16:25, John 12:25).

Although "obedience" is one traditional word that has been used to describe this stage, the term is open to misunderstanding, because it can connote an acquiescence to some external authority or code of behavior. In the sense I am using it, obedience conveys a willingness, a surrender, an openness to the presence of God in our lives. It involves relinquishing of control, a trust in and attentiveness to the living presence of the Mystery. Like falling asleep or falling in love, obedience is not something we accomplish, but something we can only allow to happen. It is something we receive as a gift: grace. In traditional understanding, obedience can occur only when we get our selves out of the way.

Obedience points to the conviction that one can live one's life in such proximity to the divine that "doing God's will," or if you like, "deciding every question as it arises . . . chiefly by reference to the light of God," becomes not only possible, but second nature. Obviously, this is a controversial claim. In George Fox's day, his Puritan opponents denied that such a degree of obedience could ever be possible (in Fox's phrase, they "pleaded for sin"). In our own day, some deny that the claim to obedience is even logically coherent, because if one's conception of God is

such that it does not allow for God having a will (i.e., some outcomes are more valued by the divine nature than others), then it is meaningless to speak of obedience. Suffice it to say that the Quaker tradition comes down strongly in the affirmative on both questions: obedience is both theoretically and practically possible.

Traditionally, Quakers have talked about "perfection" as the highest goal of the spiritual life, but that word may be subject to even more misinterpretation than "obedience." When early Friends advocated for a doctrine of perfection, they often ended up in prison on charges of blasphemy, because to their opponents any talk of perfection seemed tantamount to a claim of equality with God. But at least the more sober among early Friends were clear that they were talking not about a state of divinity, but a state of obedience; not about a metaphysical union with God, but a yielding of the individual will to God's will. Robert Barclay writes:

> It [perfection] is by no means a claim to be pure, holy, and perfect as God . . . This is not a perfection that has no room for daily growth . . . It is a perfection that is proportional to a man's requirements. It is sufficient to keep him from transgressing the law of God and *to permit him to do what God requires of him.*[24]

What early Friends meant by perfection is perhaps best summed up in the aphorism attributed to Caroline Fox: "Live up to the light that thou hast, and more will be granted thee." It is simply a confidence that, at a certain stage of spiritual maturity, the resources granted by God are sufficient to accomplish whatever may be required of us. It is not a claim that we are able to do everything, but only a claim that we are able to do what God requires of us.

This stage of obedience seems to be identical to what Howard Brinton has called "the Quaker doctrine of inward peace." Brinton describes a dynamic that occurs again and again in early Quaker journals: the individual's sense of peace is disturbed by a vague sense of disquiet; the person eventually perceives that he or she is being led to undertake some specific task; after a variable period of discernment and resistance, the leading is followed; and upon completion of the task, the sense of inward peace is restored. In Quaker understanding, inward peace comes not by withdrawing from the world, but rather by being faithful or obedient to one's leadings.

> For the Quaker, perfection and its consequent inner peace can be reached when all of God's immediate requirements as understood are faithfully met. These requirements are never so great that the individual cannot meet them . . .[25]

In the modern world, attuned as we are to cultural ideals of self-actualization and liberation, all this talk of self-denial, obedience, and perfection is likely to evoke negative images of spiritual masochists, grim and somber in their self-righteousness. But nothing could be further from the truth. We are here in the realm of "the fruit of the spirit," where obedience is invariably accompanied by love, joy, peace, patience, and compassion (Galatians 5:22). Humility is also characteristic, so much so that those closest to a state of obedience are the ones least likely to claim it.

A life of obedience is also likely to be a life of prayer, however broadly we may define that. Before we can be obedient, we must first be able to perceive the sometimes subtle movement of the spirit in our lives, and then to discern what is being asked of us. Prayer is an essential part of this process. At its most basic level,

"prayer is attending to our relationship with God."[26] As this relationship grows in intimacy, we cultivate a sensitivity to what is required of us in the given circumstances of our lives. Although for a few this sensitivity may come quite naturally, for most it requires a disciplined *intention* and *attention* to the spiritual life of prayer and worship.

As with previous stages, we now turn to the relationship between individual and community at this final stage, as we seek to become "members one of another." Undoubtedly, our tasks and mutual responsibilities are more difficult to delineate at this stage, for obedience is not something that can be directly taught or even talked about.

For most of us most of the time, the obedience to which we are called is not great deeds in the world, but small deeds within our intimate circle of community. As the individual member grows to know some intimation of obedience, he or she often comes into a time of great service to the meeting community, but it might be service that is not very visible. These are the people we used to call elders, those who nurture others on the spiritual journey, teaching by example and gentle encouragement. They may not be the most noticeable members of the community, nor the most frequent to speak in meetings for worship or business, but often they have a "presence" that is evident to others. The recent willingness on the part of some of our yearly meetings to re-explore the positive aspects of the eldering role is perhaps a hopeful sign that this type of service can once again be recognized and valued among us.

The task for the meeting is perhaps best grasped by looking at two pitfalls.[27] The first is putting the life of obedience on a very high pedestal, something approachable only by those once-in-a-generation saints like John Woolman, Elizabeth Frye, or

Rufus Jones. Too often, the implicit message is that a life of obedience is out of reach for us today. While idolizing John Woolman, we may fail to notice and encourage the lesser examples of obedience in our midst.

Conversely, the second pitfall is that, far from taking obedience too seriously, our meetings don't take it seriously enough, such that we do not actively discuss, encourage, and nurture it. If a state of obedience is truly the end and goal of our spiritual lives, then we must not fail to uphold it as such, even to those members who are still far from it, for how else will we know to aspire to it? If we do not provide a vision of "the fullness of membership," then how will any grow into that fullness?

For both pitfalls, then, the end result is the same: the failure to lift up the life of obedience as a practical and worthy goal to us here and now. Without a vibrant and vital image of this stage of membership, the whole process, the entire "dynamic of membership," can become truncated. We may be able to attract attenders and new members, but we will be unable to take them more than half-way.

Conclusion

Membership in a Quaker meeting is a kind of journey, a journey from individualism to individual-in-community, to being "members one of another" in the context of a covenant community. The limits of written language have made it necessary for me to discuss the stages in that journey in sequence, as if one stage succeeds another in a linear fashion. But of course that is a distortion: in fact they exist as a complex totality, interpenetrating one another at all times. For instance, membership as a sense of belonging and acceptance was described first, but no matter how far we travel on this journey, we never really leave this behind, nor should we. Most of us will have recurrent occasions when nothing is more important to us than the opportunity to be held in loving acceptance by the community. Likewise, transformation has been described as if it is a single profound experience, whereas most of us probably experience this stage as a series of smaller experiences stretching out over most of a lifetime. Finally, we should think of obedience not as a once-and-done achievement, but rather as a possibility that is continuously before us, even if we know it only through brief and infrequent glimpses.

When we are asked to describe membership in Quaker meeting, most of us probably respond by describing the formal process: a letter to the clerk, meeting with a clearness committee, approval by a pastoral care committee, and finally acceptance by the business meeting. What are the implications of this present discussion for that formal process of membership?

The first thing that should be apparent is that, however meaningful and symbolic the formal process of membership may be, it is a very small part of a much larger process, a process that, as we said in the introduction, is life-long. Even Quakers have their symbols and rituals, but Quakers at least should know the danger of mistaking the symbol for the entire reality, the shadow for the substance. Membership is, or should be, much more than the formality of the application process. Just as Friends have always taught that the outward rituals of baptism and communion are neither necessary nor sufficient to produce the inward reality of a transformed life, so too the outward formality of the membership process by itself cannot produce true members. All of our meetings have nominal members who no longer have any real connection to the meeting community. Conversely, some attenders function as true members for many years before

joining. The formal process is hopefully meaningful and important, but by itself is no guarantee of the fullness of membership.

The second implication of our discussion is that, given these several discernible stages in our spiritual growth in relation to the community, different prospective members may very well be at different stages in the process when they ask for formal membership. There is no single "right" time to join the meeting, no threshold of achievement that one must first reach. Again, if membership is a journey, what is important is not how far one has traveled, but rather one's commitment to travel this particular path we call Quakerism.

This point is sometimes negatively illustrated by prospective members who hesitate to ask for membership, because they feel somehow "unworthy": i.e., that they have not yet traveled far enough along the road. Out of her own experience, Patricia Loring speaks to this misunderstanding:

> . . . Membership is simply a rite of passage in that [life-long] process [of transformation], the moment of adult declaration that this is the church structure, this is the spiritual community within which we feel called to live out the process of our spiritual maturing. This is the trellising that best supports the growth of our interior relationship with God and our exterior relationship with the world. These are the people with whom we will live out the vicissitudes of our inner and outer lives. Worthiness has nothing to do with membership. God has already accepted us in our imperfection and is loving us forward toward a more perfect image of God's self. The real issue in membership is commitment on the part of both the meeting and the applicant to remain faithful to the development and requirements of the process within Quaker tradition.[28]

Finally, an appreciation of this dynamic can allow us to meet prospective members where they are, while at the same time lifting up to them a vision of where they might be going. We can be genuinely accepting of those in the beginning stages of this journey, while at the same gently encouraging them to remain open to the possibilities of transformation. For those who already know something of transformation, we can validate the importance of that experience, while at the same time encouraging them toward a life of disciplined obedience to the Light in more and more aspects of their lives.

This is a challenging but critically important task for our membership clearness committees. Too often, these committees are content to relate to a prospective member only on the first level of belonging and acceptance, when in reality the individual may be well beyond that in her own spiritual development. As a consequence, the prospective member, while wanting to feel that joining the meeting is a significant life event, can sometimes experience the clearness process as perfunctory and superficial. The meeting has then missed an important opportunity to help that new member toward growth. If membership is a journey, our clearness committees need to communicate some sense that the journey has a direction and a goal, lest new members be left to wander aimlessly, mistaking the rest stops for the final destination.

Membership in a Quaker meeting is a spirit-led journey of coming to know ourselves as individual-in-community, a journey on which we experience meeting as a place of acceptance, a place of shared values, a place of transformation, and a place of

obedience. These stages represent not so much a specific map towards membership, but rather the four points of the compass, a way to locate ourselves and describe our progress. By necessity, each individual's actual journey remains unique, but each will in some way be bounded and defined by these four cardinal points. As Quakers, we have no creed to recite, no confession to confess, no rituals to undergo that will reliably bring us into the fullness of membership. But we do have a rich and inspiring tradition; we have each other; and we have the Spirit of God which, we are promised, will "lead us into all things."

Notes

1. Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality, Volume 2: Corporate Spiritual Practices Among Friends.* Openings Press, 1999. p. 44.
2. Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1993).
3. Parker Palmer, *A Place Called Community.* Pendle Hill Pamphlet # 212 (1977).
4. Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled From the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today.* HarperSanFrancisco, 1990. p. 36.
5. The image of the process of membership as moving through a series of rooms was suggested to me independently by Michael Green of the School of the Spirit and Nancy Bieber of Lancaster Meeting.
6. M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, p. 68.

7. Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order.* Burnsville: Celo Valley Books, 1993. p. 64.
8. Peck, *Different Drum,* pp. 88-89.
9. *Faith and Practice of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends* (1985), p 235.
10. Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision,* p. 163-4.
11. John Punshon, *Testimony and Tradition.* 1990 Swarthmore Lecture, Quaker Home Service, 1990, p.27.
12. Helen Rowlands, "The Meaning of Membership," in *Searching the Depths: Essays on Being a Quaker Today,* edited by Harvey Gillman and Alastair Heron, Quaker Home Service, 1996, p. 72-76.
13. Quoted in Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion,* New York: Harper and Row, 1941, p. 53.
14. Alastair Heron, *Membership: Past - Present - Future.* Curlew Productions, Kelso, Scotland, 2000.
15. For an excellent recent account of this dynamic, see Jonathan Dale, *Quaker Social Testimony in our Personal and Corporate Life.* Pendle Hill Pamphlet # 360 (2002).
16. Edgar Dunstan, *Quakers and the Religious Quest.* Swarthmore Lecture, 1956. Quoted in New England Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice* (1985), p. 129.
17. Tom and Liz Gates, *Stories from Kenya.* Pendle Hill Pamphlet #319 (1995).
18. I am indebted to Michael Green for this insight.
19. What follows is largely taken from my address to the Friends United Meeting Triennial, July 1999, Williamsburg, Virginia (unpublished).
20. Douglas Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer,* Nashville, Upper Room Books, 1997, p. 33.

21. Helen Rowlands, *Searching the Depths*
22. William C. Braithwaite, "Spiritual Guidance in Quaker Experience," (1909) quoted in Alan Kolp, *Fresh Winds of the Spirit,* Richmond: Friends United Press , 1991, p. 114.
23. Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion,* pp. 51-76.
24. *Barclay's Apology in Modern English,* edited by Dean Freiday (1967), p. 156. See also Cecil Hinshaw, *Apology for Perfection,* Pendle Hill Pamphlet #138 (1964).
25. Howard Brinton, *The Quaker Doctrine of Inward Peace.* Pendle Hill Pamphlet # 44 (1948).
26. Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew,* HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, p. 123.
27. Paul Lacey, *Leading and Being Led.* Pendle Hill Pamphlet #264, pp. 3-4.
28. Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality,* pp. 44-45.