

EXPERIENCING THE LIGHT

By Daniel A. Seeger

All of us carry within us a great question. In fact, our very life itself is a quest, a search. We are all seekers. At some times we are more aware of this than at other times. Sometimes the question within us is sharply etched, sometimes it is vague, subconscious or unformulated. But when Jesus said that we cannot live by bread alone, he was speaking of this great question within us, and of our need for a corresponding great answer.

This great answer which we seek is indeed given to us. We not only seek, we also find. Sometimes what we are meant to find is given to a person in a blinding flash, suddenly, in an instant. To other people it comes slowly and gradually over time. But, however it arrives, there comes upon us a great experience of absolute Spirit and a leading to transform the way we live out our life in the world. Thus, the answer comes both as new knowledge, new awareness, but also as a transformed way of being, of acting.

It is important to understand that what we seek and what it is given to us to find makes us new persons. In religious life we try to describe this transforming experience in different ways: we are born again, we repent, we are justified or sanctified. In the original Greek version of the New Testament the word that frequently appears in this connection is metanoia. The prefix "meta" means beyond, and appears in such English words as metaphysics or metamorphosis. The root "noia" or "nuos" refers to the self. In metanoia we are taken beyond our old self, we are transformed. At its root, then, this seeking after the bread of life has something to do with our identity, with our nature, with who we are.

Let us consider for a minute what we notice about people who have advanced on the spiritual path. Whether someone's advance has been sudden or gradual, can we observe those respects in which a person is changed, or transformed?

The first thing that we notice is that there is an intellectual or cerebral dimension to the transformation. A spiritually advanced person seems to have a new kind of knowledge, a grasp of reality which is somehow more true than that of the ordinary person. The wise person knows the Creation and its boundaries and limits. Wisdom is a reality-based phenomenon; spiritual discernment is a kind of attentive respect for reality. The person who is advanced on the spiritual path sees reality clearly, knows reality in a way undistorted by personal whim or bias.

We also notice that as a person advances on the spiritual path there is a change in her or his emotional make-up. Things which at an earlier stage of the spiritual path produced anger or impatience may, at a later stage, elicit compassion, patience or sympathy. Things which at an earlier stage of spiritual development

seemed enormously exciting or interesting, may at a later stage seem less enchanting, while the attention is drawn to things which seem more truly to matter. People who have advanced on the spiritual path may maintain a zest for life in the face of obstacles which would have depressed and immobilized them during an earlier phase of their spiritual development.

There is also a change in the capacity of the will. I wonder if any of you have had an experience that I can recall from my college days. I knew I ought to study; I wanted to study; but I could not seem to study. Anything which came into view was a distraction. I had a weak will. But we notice when we meet people who have advanced on the spiritual path that they seem to do what is required of them with a correct and natural dignity and without inner stress. Now no one ever completely surmounts the weaknesses to which the will is prone. But I do not imagine that Mother Theresa engaged in titanic struggles of will as she faced each day the ministry among sick and dying people which she had undertaken. As people advance on the spiritual path the will is strengthened and clarified.

Finally, is there is what I will call the worshiping principle, which is at the deepest level of our being. I believe that everyone worships something. Even professed atheists worship something in the sense that, if we examine the situation carefully, we will find that there is at the center of every life some animating value or principle which gives form and shape to that life, which colors the experience the person has of existence, and which forms her or his nature. We encounter many of these gods in modern times -- they are idols, really -- money, power, prestige, some aspect of the passions or emotions, some popular hero or celebrity, some political ideology. Whatever god it is one worships gives form and shape to one's life, for better or worse. Even god-fearing people worship different things, for as one advances on the spiritual path one's concept of God changes and becomes more refined. To read the Hebrew scriptures is to encounter many different conceptions of Yahweh, as the people of Israel slowly and painfully advance in their conception of who and what the deity is.

So, there are four levels of being which our experience of the Light, whether it comes upon us suddenly or gradually, transforms. The question naturally arises: is there anything we can do to bring ourselves into the Light? Are there spiritual exercises, or special courses of study, or books of wisdom, which can conduct us into this transformation?

Here we confront a very profound paradox of the spiritual life. For, on the one hand, it is quite clear that a mystical vision, an experience of the Light, a profound spiritual transformation, is not really something we can conjure up for ourselves. Certainly it is not something we can struggle to get. It is totally beyond any human engineering or contrivance, totally beyond the accomplishment of any curriculum of spiritual study which a seminary, such as existed in George Fox's day at Oxford and Cambridge, might develop. Our enlightenment is entirely

a matter of God's grace and is never something for which we can take any kind of credit. Yet at the same time, and here is the paradox, it has been seen over the ages that spiritual truth tends not to come to those who are passive or who give up, and merely wait for God's grace to operate, but it tends to come to people who make some effort, who actively seek, and who consciously prepare themselves to receive this great gift. It is as if the price at which the Light is bought is the pure and selfless longing for It Itself. This is why Jesus promised that those who seek will surely find.

There is a very important paradox here. The Eastern sage, Vivekenada, expressed it well: "The winds of God's grace are always blowing, but we must raise our sails." Our experience of the Light is due solely to God's grace; the degree of perfectedness we achieve on the spiritual journey is solely due to the amount of wind God provides. And yet there are ways that we can raise our sails to catch this divine wind, or Light. Our Friends' tradition offers three ways in which we can raise our sails. I am thinking of the practices of service, simplicity and silence.

In the practice of simplicity, we find that to the extent that we are able to release self-centered grasping for the things of the world, to the extent that we can live in the world without clinging to or forming attachments of the dust of the world, we are overwhelmed by a feeling that the entire abundance of the creation is somehow available to be celebrated and enjoyed.

In the practice of service, we find that we are taken out of ourselves, carried away, as it were, and united not only with those with whom we are working, or those whose situation is addressed by this service, but also with the entire family of the Creation, with its groanings and its joys. Our hearts embrace the earth and the sky and all living creatures. We find when rendering service that we are more truly alive than at any other time.

And in our practice of silence, do we not discover again and again that everything makes sense, that meaningfulness strikes us and takes hold of us as soon as we are able to release the agitations of our minds. As soon as we stop making noise and actually practice listening, we see that an answer has been quietly waiting for us; but that our questions have drowned it out.

Thus through silence, simplicity and service, we discover that when we stop grasping and struggling, abundance and meaning is there awaiting us. At Pendle Hill where I live and work, we do study and think. There are classes in the Bible and in Quaker history and experience. There are teachers and books and reading assignments, and to some Friends we might look suspiciously like one of the schools of theology George Fox so energetically denounced. But there is a difference, in that at Pendle Hill we know that study is only part of the story. It is practice that counts. And so we live in community, break bread together, undertake manual tasks and the practice of crafts such as pottery and weaving,

and most importantly, begin each day with communal worship, because it is these practices which touch the deeper layers of our being. At Pendle Hill the entire life of the community, not just the courses, is its curriculum.

There are four traditional virtues which Friends practice as individuals which, I believe, if practiced faithfully, allows hope that each of us will advance in our experience of the Light and in our ability to give authentic expression to it in the way we live. These virtues are: 1) basing our spiritual reflection on concrete experience and everyday practice, 2) the cultivation of a healthy emotional life, 3) careful attention to the work of the mind, and 4) a willingness to be accountable to our spiritual community.

The first thing we must say about Friends' spirituality is that Friends are activists. They see a close relationship between spiritual life and daily affairs. Friends' spirituality is the spirituality of the householder, the citizen, the businessperson, worker, the artisan, the physician and the teacher. Friends' spirituality is not primarily about reclusiveness and a self-centered search for inner consolation. This engagement in life provides a rootedness in first-hand observation. Friends try to keep close to experience in pondering spiritual and moral questions. They seek to make acute observations about economic and social conditions based upon this experience, and to avoid vast theorizing which is detached from direct experience. Moreover, Friends, in their activism, try to practice what they preach, and to observe and to learn from the results of this practice. They seek to advance on the spiritual path experientially and experimentally through practice and observation undertaken in the course of engagement in life as it is lived as householders and citizens.

Second, Friends' spirituality involves the cultivation of healthy emotions. There is a vibrant emotional component to a Friend's spiritual make-up. The practice of inner and outer silence is not akin to a retreat into the impersonal bleakness of pure reason, as is sometimes thought. To read Quaker journals written by individuals, or the minutes of yearly or monthly business meetings at times when key decisions are made, is to become aware of a deep level of feeling. Often, Friends' approach to the issues which vex political and social life is rooted in a strong sense of compassion for their fellow creatures, and not some sort of impersonal logic about causes and effects, or about reasoning as to why peace in Bosnia or Rwanda is really in America's self-interest.

It is impossible to imagine an authentic Quaker spirituality which is not characterized by deep feeling and which does not give evidence of a strong emotional component. In fact, one complaint of George Fox and other early Friends about the religious life they saw about them was that people, especially trained preachers and clergy, could talk fluently about theology but seemed not to feel Christianity deeply within themselves.

But while Quakers have strongly emphasized the emotional component of

religious life, their attitudes about emotions and about human psychology are starkly different from ones which have become common in modern life. One sees little evidence in Quaker writings of what might be called the "thermodynamic" view of human psychology, wherein the human psyche is analogized to a steam boiler. According to this popular theory, emotions can build up in the psyche and cause an explosion of some kind if they are not let out. But one never reads in a Quaker journal something like the following: "I was very exercised about what my neighbors were saying, and was glad to relieve myself of inner discomfort by giving them a piece of my mind, thereby narrowly averting for myself the calamity of ulcers and neurosis." In fact, quite to the contrary, John Woolman silenced himself for several days once because he felt that something he said lacked sufficient charity.

Especially absent from Quaker experience is the disabling modern idea that we are helplessly determined by emotions over which we have no control, an idea which has all the characteristics of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Friends have clearly regarded some emotions as coming from God, emotions such as love, tenderness, compassion, and humility, while other emotions are seen to arise out of creaturely weakness or out of the delusions of a civilization gone awry. The practice of inner silence, rather than erasing all emotions, as is sometimes thought, liberates the God-inspired emotions from the clutter of worldly impulses which modern life seems intent on inducing. Friends have always regarded the cultivation of healthy and vital emotions as an active responsibility, rather than as something over which we have no control and for which we are invited to blame others -- our parents, our genes, our employers, our childhood experiences.

Given the vituperative and shrill turn the so called culture war has taken in society at large, Friends' willingness to practice sensitivity to others, compassion, and deep sincerity in the search for truth, and to avoid escalating the anger and indignation now overwhelming the public square, would seem to be an important contribution to the community's spiritual health.

Third, Friends have always been careful to cultivate the critical intellect, and have not neglected the life of the mind in favor of some sort of religion based on pure feeling alone. The best Quaker writings about human issues, such as slavery, gender equality, the education of the young, the relationship between European settlers and Native Americans, the issues of war and peace, skillfully merge facts and observations with spiritual ideas and principles. Quaker writers usually take the thoughts and concerns of people who disagree with them quite seriously and