

Welcoming Talk Given to Members of the AFSC Board When They Met at Pendle Hill on June 21, 22, and 23 in 1992

Good evening everyone. As many of you know, I was until very recently a member of the AFSC staff, and so it is a special pleasure for me to join my new colleagues here at Pendle Hill in offering a word of welcome to you.

For those of you who may be here at Pendle Hill for the first time, I should mention that the twenty-four acres of grass and trees and flowers and buildings which you see is a Quaker center for study and contemplation--a Quaker school of spirituality.

Since we all know that George Fox loudly insisted that study at Oxford or Cambridge did not qualify a person to be a minister of the gospel, you might well ask why the Quakers are operating something here which looks suspiciously like a seminary. Outrageous as it may seem for me to say so, we believe that the kind of education which occurs here at Pendle Hill is a more comprehensive one than is given at Oxford or Cambridge or other places where theology might be studied.

George Fox's complaint about the ministers of the gospel whom he encountered was that their knowledge was in their heads only, and did not seem to attach to the deeper layers of their being. I am sure many of us have had the experience of meeting people who were very conversant in theological and philosophical principles and yet who did not lead deeply spiritual lives.

Pendle Hill does resemble other educational institutions in that we do run courses with knowledgeable teachers and the serious study of important texts. For example, Bruce Birchard teaches a course in social activism and social change. We have courses in the Gospels, in the Letters of Paul, in various aspects of Quakerism, in Earth Ethics, in Faith and Feminism, and in the Spiritualities of Francis of Assisi and George Fox. But people do not cram for exams here, nor do they write massive papers in order to qualify for some kind of degree. Our courses are based on a process of searching dialogue, in which the experience of members of the group, the challenges of the texts, and the insight of the teacher all converge in an encounter which occurs at a deep level of spirit.

But more importantly, the education which occurs here at Pendle Hill is not confined to classrooms. The entire life of Pendle Hill is its curriculum: the practice of living in community; the daily jobs in the kitchen and on the grounds; the work in the garden, the pursuit of weaving, pottery and other crafts; and most importantly of all, the daily gathering for silent worship.

These various aspects of Pendle Hill's life challenge us, renew us and refresh us at many levels of our being. Hopefully, someone for whom the opportunity of spending

time at Pendle Hill proves to be truly meaningful will speak and act with an authenticity which George Fox found the people from Oxford and Cambridge to lack.

I know many of you in the American Friends Service Committee have had experiences such as I have had many times. I would meet a constituent or friend of the AFSC, most likely a financial contributor. Upon talking to him or her, I would find out that the fondness in which AFSC was held stemmed from some occasion long ago, perhaps an encounter with an AFSC worker in 1936. Somehow this impression has kept the person writing checks year after year. Often, no intellectual reorientation occurred; the person was not persuaded of Quaker theories. The other night at the AFSC's New York Metropolitan Regional Office's 75th anniversary celebration, the well known cartoonist Jules Pfeiffer commented that he did not have faith in pacifism, but he had faith in pacifists. This is the sort of thing that happens again and again. People respond to something deeper than the ideas.

This is not to say that the ideas are not important. We hope that eventually people will become pacifists. But feeling that the witness of pacifists makes a claim upon their respect is certainly the first and crucial step. Without it, the intellectual claims of pacifism may simply be drowned out by the noise of counter arguments.

What touches one's heart deeply about any single act of service, or about a life given wholly to service, is that it gives expression to the underlying unity of all things. The Quaker service which touches people deeply does not arise from the supposition that human beings can exalt themselves, can build justice or peace, merely through the exercise of their own creaturely contrivances, out of their own merely human efforts. Quaker service has the characteristic that the practitioner is aligning herself or himself with the larger harmonies of the Creation, is acting in concert with or giving expression to, not the needs or desires of one's own ego, but rather to the same Creative Principle of love which has raised all things up from the dust. Such Quaker service is rooted in an inner silence which allows us to appreciate each event, each place, each person that we encounter in their uniqueness, and to see each of them as a divine utterance. Service undertaken in this spirit has far more power than any of the merely "realistic" enterprises which are part of the clamor of things as they are.

Such a Quaker spirit cannot be taken for granted. It has to be nourished and cultivated. Relentless super-activism is the enemy of such a spiritual approach. There is nothing in God's natural creation which resembles one of humankind's most diabolical inventions, the continuously spinning wheel. I use the image of a spinning wheel both literally and figuratively. As human beings, we are not meant to be like constantly spinning wheels. We alternate activity with sleep. We breathe in and we breathe out. The heart pulses and then rests, pulses and then rests. Pendle Hill stands as a testimony that through the years Friends have acknowledged that we must alternate activity with contemplation, motion with stillness, if we are going to do

anything truly worthwhile. With Pendle Hill we acknowledge that, as Rufus Jones so aptly stated, the first step in the rendering of service is the spiritual preparation of those who would serve.

Pendle Hill has a long history of collaboration with the American Friends Service Committee. We are very happy you are here this weekend. We want you to come often. Think of Pendle Hill when you have sabbaticals. Think of Pendle Hill when you have new staff who need orientation. Think of Pendle Hill as a place to convene when you must give special attention to difficult or vexing problems which confront the life or work of the American Friends Service Committee. Pendle Hill is here to do everything it can to support the work of the American Friends Service Committee. We are delighted to see you here now, and hope to see you very often in the future.

Daniel A. Seeger
Pendle Hill, Wallingford, Pennsylvania
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