

FRIENDS FELLOWSHIP OF HEALING

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HISTORICAL REVIEW OF QUAKER HEALING MINISTRY

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Life in 17th century England was a deeply chaotic and disturbing experience - probably analogous to what is happening in some Middle Eastern countries nowadays. George Fox's life encompassed the reigns of five different sovereigns, one of whom was beheaded; also the plague, the Fire of London and the Civil War, where a greater percentage of the population died than more recently in the First World War.

All the religious changes over the previous 100 years had ripped away the anchors and spiritual comforts from people's lives and made them frightened, and confused. The poet Milton wrote, at the time, "The hungry sheep look up and are not fed." George Fox, born on 13th January 1624, was one of these hungry sheep, but out of his desperation, as we know, came an inner inspiration, a direct experience of Christ, that caused him to spend the rest of his life encouraging people to value experience over dogma and look inward for their inspiration and source of strength.

One of the better things that Henry VIII had done in the previous century was to install a Bible in English in every church and eventually allow ordinary people to purchase their own copies, but paradoxically this provoked violent arguments and gave rise to all sorts of warring sects and groups who argued, fought and distributed violent, inflammatory pamphlets and tracts in attempts to assert their individual ideas of what it all meant and find securely based beliefs. The law of the land dictated that all citizens had to attend church, where they were treated as miserable sinners and forced to listen to hell-fire sermons that could last for 3 hours and more. No wonder that 17th century people in general, especially Quakers, avoided going to church if they could, but if the authorities found out, they were often imprisoned, had their goods confiscated or were made homeless.

George Fox seemed to go to church only to argue with the incumbent and this got him

into a lot of trouble, but he read the Bible avidly and practically knew it backwards. In fact a Dutch historian wrote that if the Bible were lost, it could be found again in the mouth of George Fox! His whole life was spent trying to follow the example of Jesus Christ, who was a healer and who had made it very clear that the power to heal the sick was not his own but that it came from his father, God. Fox realised that he too could become a channel for grace and transmit loving energy to help others who were ill or in need.

Jesus had told his disciples to go forth and heal the sick, and in the early days of Christianity healing was one of the charisms that any Christian might have. It was only later when various Holy Roman Emperors used Christianity as a sort of controlling glue to keep their empires together that healing became exclusively the province of priests.

The many records of Fox's healing gifts show that he was unusually willing for his time to help the sick and wounded and given that he was a healer, trying to follow the pattern of Jesus Christ, it's not surprising that spiritual healing has many affinities with Quakerism. It's difficult to describe: it's facilitated by what we call the Inner Light and it can only be properly understood by experiencing it. You could say that there are as many ways of being a healer as there are of being a Quaker. We are all capable of healing in some way or another.

The majority of Fox's healing acts were of physical disease but there were also instances of mental or psychological problems being addressed. These were recorded at the time as people "moping, possessed or in troubled states of mind." Chapter 2.18 in Quaker Faith and Practice records Fox's advice to Lady Claypole, Cromwell's daughter, who seems to have been depressed; perhaps the consequence of having a father like Cromwell!

Extensive evidence of Fox's acts of healing is contained in his journal and is also catalogued in a book called Fox's Book of Miracles.

However, despite the fact that Fox left a sum of money for this book to continue to be published after his death, it was not included amongst his publications, and over the centuries diary entries about his healing acts were also removed. So eventually this aspect of his ministry was played down because people were terrified of being accused of witchcraft or blasphemy, for which there were appalling penalties. James Naylor had a B branded on his forehead and his tongue pierced!

A panel of the Quaker tapestry shows Fox at Ulverston, having been ejected from a local church. He's surrounded by an angry mob, one of whom had just paralysed his arm with a violent blow! Fox is looking at his outstretched arm and saying in wonderment: "I looked at it in the grace of God and the Lord's power sprang through me and through my hand."

The man who had struck him apologised and offered Fox his sword so that he could defend himself but in keeping with his pacifist principles Fox refused and walked calmly back into Ulverston, where no-one attacked him.

We have not all been tested like George Fox and we have not necessarily felt or witnessed "the Lord's power" in action in the way he did, but if we have taken part in a truly and deeply gathered Quaker meeting for worship we can begin to understand the power of the Spirit and what spiritual healing is all about. In our meetings, "under God", as used to be said, we can safely expand our consciousness and come into a kind of focus together in the Inner Light, which allows healing energy to flow freely amongst us, affording us flashes of insight, glimpses of the mystery of what in other churches is called holy communion. Sometimes we are the ones whose words and attitudes open the door to the transforming power of love; sometimes we are warmed by the love flowing through the heart of another Friend.

The same collaborative situation exists between a healer and people offering themselves for healing.

Robert Barclay wrote about the spread of spiritual energy in a Quaker meeting and the effect it had upon him: a latecomer: "As soon as that person retires inwardly, the power, which has been raised in good measure by the whole meeting, will suddenly lay hold of a person's spirit. In a wonderful way it will help to raise up the good in him or her and will give birth to the same power. It will melt and warm their hearts in the same way that a person who feels cold feels warm when they approach a stove or a flame: or when a flame takes hold in some small combustible material which is nearby."

Healing is not about praying for a cure, rather it is drawing people into a loving atmosphere so that it's easier for them to experience the Light.

Spiritual healing is love in action and no matter how depressed or disturbed we may be in mind, body, emotions or spirit it can penetrate our distress and pain and bring warmth, better health and enlightenment to us and, most importantly, help our own healing processes to begin to operate properly. Healing is a gift of the Spirit. Fox only healed when, as he said, "the power of the lord was over all" and didn't claim any success for himself. Neither do present day healers. Members of the Friends Fellowship of Healing call themselves healers because no-one can think of a better epithet but we know that we are merely channels. Hildegard of Bingen called healers aqueducts.

A Meeting for Worship for Healing can be both a group or an individual experience. I like to think that the first Meetings for Sufferings were not just about organising practical help for Friends made penniless or homeless or ill because of state persecution but also Meetings for Worship for Healing - distant healing - for those Friends who were suffering the horrible privations and cruelty of prison life in those days. Fox was imprisoned on more than six occasions, once for a whole year, and he had three serious illnesses because of the strictures of prison life. It has been suggested that these malaises were partly brought on because of his

enormous compassion for his fellow prisoners. From his own experience he understood their suffering and wanted to transmit love to help them bear it and indeed survive it, as he had done.

Quakerism is a very broad church. No-one is turned away because they refuse to endorse a form of words or a dogmatic statement. There is plenty of informative material available for newcomers, who feel the need for instruction, but essentially it is not taught but “caught” by a kind of osmosis, by small personal developments of the mind, body and spirit, a process of continual evolution. Understanding spiritual healing is exactly the same. We often speak of “holding people in the Light” but there are different degrees of understanding of what the phrase means. When Karl Gustav Jung was asked if he believed in God he said “I don’t believe, I know.” Rather than a belief, he had, like George Fox, an inner conviction. Quakerism and spiritual healing have to do with what the Inner Light reveals to us, what we come to know in our heart to be true. It seems to me that we Quakers are on a life-long pilgrimage to find out what love requires of us - how we can make the world a better place. Quakerism

is inspirit-ional, experimental and goes through developments from age to age, as we seek a deeper understanding or a newly minted way forward.

Hugh Maw, writing in January 2014 in *The Friend*, bemoaned the fact that so many references to healing, mentioned in *Christian Faith and Practice* have been removed from *Quaker Faith and Practice*. It must have seemed to the editors that healing was no longer relevant and indeed, a good proportion of present day Quakers have never felt the need to acquire an understanding of spiritual healing, but those who have benefited from it have said things like “I felt really comforted”; “I feel at peace with myself!”; “The pain has gone”; or “I was aware of being held in the Light during my illness or my time in hospital”.

Spiritual healing or compassion in action is part of our Quaker heritage and many of us have cause to be grateful for the fact that since 1935, when the Friends Fellowship of Healing (FFH) was inaugurated, its members have been gathering regularly in groups all over the U.K. to send distant healing to all those who ask for it or who are felt to be in need.

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