

The Practical Background for Quaker Prayer

Many of us have read extracts of the Quaker saints and thought how much we would like to lead a life like that—so centred, so inspired, so courageous, so productive. Those people did not lead such lives just by working hard and going to Meeting for Worship once a week, perhaps missing meeting if there was too much going on.

If we delve into the stories of those people's lives we find that their spiritual life was central, and was practised every day. Scripture was read daily. Meeting for Worship was generally attended twice a week. They practised their spiritual work first and foremost, and took their spirituality with them everywhere they went. They took Jesus' advice seriously: "Seek ye *first* the kingdom of God and all else will be added unto you". (Matthew 6:33; Luke 12:31 emphasis added)

Consider the family life of William and Gulielma Penn:

In summer they rose at five, in winter at seven, in spring and autumn at six; a real daylight-saving arrangement. They had breakfast at nine, dinner at twelve, supper at seven and to bed at ten. They assembled with the servants for worship in the morning; and at eleven to make a recess in the work of the forenoon they met again for reading the Bible and other religious books. At six in the evening, the servants reported on what they had done, and received orders for the next day. 'Loud discourses and troublesome noise' were forbidden. All quarrels were to be made up before bedtime.⁸

The early Quaker and strenuous communicator, one of the First Publishers of Truth, Edward Burrough, described some of their early meetings for worship:

We met together often and waited upon the Lord in pure silence, from our own words and all men's

words, and hearkened to the voice of the Lord, and felt His word in our hearts to burn up and beat down all that was contrary to God; and we obeyed the Light of Christ in us... and took up the cross to all earthly glories, crowns and ways, and denied ourselves, our relations and all that stood in the way betwixt us and the Lord. ...And while waiting upon the Lord in silence, as we often did for many hours together,... we received often the pouring down of the Spirit upon us ...and our hearts were made glad, and our tongues loosed, and our mouths opened...⁹

Some time before Elizabeth Fry died in 1845, she said to one of her daughters:

My dear, I can say one thing—since my heart was touched at the age of seventeen, I believe I have never awakened from sleep in sickness or health, by day or by night, without my first waking thought being how best I might serve the Lord.¹⁰

Stephen Grellet, the man who brought Elizabeth into her work in prisons had this to say, his words reflecting a practice, not of coming to the Spirit in prayer when it suited, but of abiding in that state permanently.¹¹

Lie low, O my soul! Abide in humility and meekness before the Lord thy Redeemer, whom thou hast so frequently known to be thy Strength in weakness, thy Leader and deliverer.

In 1855 as he died, he cried out:

My heart and my strength faileth, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.

Nor should we think that daily prayer was only for those ‘olden day’ Friends; the reliance on daily retirement and prayer has been a regular practice for many throughout the last

360 years and still is for many today: “and by [1936] ..., Bayard [Rustin] was, in Quaker fashion, ‘depending upon my daily periods for guidance’”.¹²

The early Friends writings are replete with references to the Bible. They were completely reliant on it as a source of spiritual advice, example and nourishment. Modern liberal unprogrammed Friends are commonly reluctant to read and meditate upon the scriptures, let alone place their trust in them. Early Friends were quite clear that Jesus, his teachings and example, and also much of the Old Testament writings were fundamental to their faith and practice.

We may think that if we read enough good books we will come to know all about the spiritual life. Yet experience tells us that after some years we may be painfully aware of the limited spiritual progress we have made. Why is that? If our knowledge is “head” knowledge it helps us learn about God, but cannot take us towards God. The *Cloud of Unknowing*, written in the early 1300s, makes a clear distinction that is sometimes difficult for us moderns to enter into, for with our extensive education we have difficulty believing that the mind cannot solve everything:

*All rational beings, angels and men, possess two faculties, the power of knowing and the power of loving. To the first, to the intellect, God who made them is forever unknowable, but to the second, to love, God is completely knowable, and that by every separate individual.*¹³

Thomas Kelly’s advice was that the centred life comes with practice, for this journey with the Spirit requires personal surrender, great openness and, like all relationships, is built on love and attention.

Down beneath the fluctuating change of heavenly elation and hellish discouragement we can carry on a well nigh continuous prayer life of submission,

‘Father into thy hands I commend my Spirit.’ This internal prayer of submission of will we can carry on in the very midst of our busiest days. There is a way of carrying on our mental life at two levels at once, but it only comes with practice. At one level of our mental life we can be talking with people, dealing with problems, carrying the burdens that our calling in time puts upon us. But beneath all this occupation with time we can be in prayerful relation with the Eternal Goodness, quietly, serenely, joyfully surrendering ourselves and all that we are to Him.¹⁴

The examples of solitary prayer set by Jesus, George Fox, Gandhi, Bayard Rustin, Henri Nouwen and many others make it clear that daily personal prayer is an essential part of the spiritual journey—the willingness and then the delight in spending time alone with God. As was noted of Jesus: “*And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed*” (Mark 1:35).¹⁵ For some this is the prime spiritual practice, though the group worship in meeting adds another dimension, comfort and strength to a life of prayer.

All this reminds me of Paul’s advice “*Pray without ceasing*”.¹⁶ But how?

Step One: In Practice, Centre Down, “Turn thy Mind to the Light”, and “Stand Still in the Light”

The traditional Quaker method was to centre down; ‘center down’ is a term picked up by many others seeking progress in meditation and prayer. As Elizabeth Bathurst noted in 1679 “*This effectual Operation of the Spirit ... cannot be known without a being centred down into the same.*”¹⁷ This advice has two words, ‘centre’ and ‘down’, and we can examine each in turn. Helen Gould in her Backhouse Lecture, an invited annual presentation to Australia Yearly Meeting, has given a very clear set of guidelines.¹⁸ In the appendix are listed some other ways people have found helpful to still the mind.