

A Quaker Response to the Spiritual Crisis of Our Time

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A number of years ago, now, the British journalist, Alistair Cooke, hosted a television series titled, *America*. At the end of this series, Cooke made this prophetic statement about the United States: *I think I recognize several symptoms that Edward Gibbon saw so acutely in the decline of Rome...A love of show and luxury; a widening gap between the very rich and the very poor; an obsession with sex; freakishness in the arts masquerading as originality...The original institutions of this country still have great vitality and much of America's turmoil springs from the energy of people trying to apply these institutions to forgotten minorities...*

And then, with a cool precision which strikes at the very core of our national consciousness, Cooke brings his observation to an end. *In this country, a land of the most persistent idealism and the blandest cynicism, the race is on between its decadence and its vitality.*

Although it may be somewhat of an overstatement, this last line in Cooke's observation caught my attention, and has remained with me for several years.

And he should have the attention of all who care about this country and those things which keep it vital.

Some, but certainly not all of the issues which are a part of our spiritual crisis and that have led to our loss of vitality, are these: *First of all is a loss of a sense of community.* Although the industrial age and the age of technology have provided many benefits, the toll that they have taken on community is enormous. The compartmentalized individual who is seen by society as a functional cog in a smooth running machine is the symbol of our day. We work in a cubicle, surrounded by 100's of other cubicles, isolated from others. Human interaction has been replaced by cell phones.

And yet we all yearn for community, and to be understood as spiritual beings. Quakers have a Testimony on Community, which has always been important in the lives of our members. To suffer when others are suffering and to rejoice when others are rejoicing is central to what we aspire to have in community. Our Meetings should be places where we can *process* one another's pain, and laugh with one another as we experience all of the foibles that life offers. In this day of individualism and growing narcissism, our Meetings can provide an antidote to the loneliness that has become a national epidemic.

Another aspect of our spiritual crisis is the rise of fundamentalism within all of the major religions. A few years ago the former President of Earlham College, Landrum Bolling, was asked what concerned him most about our world. His response: "The rise of fundamentalism within all of the major faith traditions." And the Quakers, although in a milder form, have not escaped this rise in fundamentalism.

Fundamentalists and extremists will always be a part of every religious faith tradition, whether it is the fundamentalism that keeps a strangle hold on traditions that can no longer be defended reasonably or rationally, or an extremism that does not respect anyone else's tradition or position. There will always be those who are intolerant. The *best* of our Quaker and Christian traditions, however, and the *best* that is within each of us, will seek to discover those areas that will unite us and sustain us, and provide a basis of understanding and tolerance toward those who happen to be different from us.

While I was serving as the Minister of Faith and Learning at the Wayzata Community Church in Minnesota, the former Nun and now prolific writer, Karen Armstrong, came to speak on her book, *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Religious Tradition*. Of the many important things that she said, none was more important than this: "Compassion is the wellspring of

religion..." She made the important observation that the Golden Rule was first expressed by Confucius some 500 years before Jesus, and is the touchstone of all the major faith traditions.

When Quakers have been at their best spiritually, and as an antidote to biblical fundamentalism, they have embraced the idea of continuing revelation and the best of biblical scholarship. We have also embraced inclusivity and diversity, and have acted with compassion toward those who are different. We aspire to believe in and act out our Testimony on Equality, or the belief that all persons are equal, regardless of race, creed or sexual orientation, and that the rights of the majority should also be the rights of the minority. Some have questioned Cincinnati Meeting's stand on marriage equality...For me, the simple reason we support marriage equality is this: *We believe in our Quaker Testimony on Equality, and that the rights of the majority should also be the rights of the minority.*

Today our Testimony and our society is threatened by an "Us Vs. Them" mentality. A couple of weeks ago a Nazi Swastika was spray painted on the entrance to the Jewish Hebrew Union College in my hometown of Cincinnati. The Southern Poverty Law Center has reported no less than 1,000 hate crimes in our country since the presidential election. An important query for us to consider is this: *What has led us as a society to believe that diversity and*

inclusivity always comes at the expense of you or me? What should make us rich as a country, both spiritually and emotionally...our diversity...is, instead, dividing us and making us feel animosity toward one another. Alistair Cooke is right, "The race is on between our decadence and our vitality."

Another reality that we are facing today, and which contributes to the spiritual crisis we are in, is *the de-sensitizing of our society*. It shows up in major ways, such as our ever growing callousness to violence, and the increase of bullying in schools, and in small ways, such as our reaction to getting cut-off in traffic, and not saying "please" or "thank-you." I have been thinking a lot about this de-sensitizing of late, and have wondered how the effects of continuous war has been detrimental to our life together. As a nation we have been at war 222 years out of 239 since 1776. Last year, it is estimated that our military dropped over 26,000 bombs, primarily in the middle-east. What does this continuous war mentality do to our national psyche? How is this played out in our gun saturated culture? What does our Quaker Testimony on Peace lead us to do as individuals and as communities of faith to demonstrate the ways of love?

Another reality of our spiritual crisis, something that has always been a part of us, but today has become the expected norm, is the loss of our ability as a people, to think reflectively. In her Gifford Lectures titled, "The Life of the

Mind," Hannah Arendt states that her interest in "mental activities" had many sources, but was most immediately influenced by the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. In observing the Nazi Eichmann respond to questions by prosecutors, she wrote that he showed no evidence of being able to "stop and think," but rather spoke in cliché-ridden language.

To "stop and think" and to examine our actions, "tweets" or posts on Facebook, in a reflective way, as we interact within our various worlds of activity, are becoming less and less a part of our lives. Cliché ridden language abounds, and although we may not experience the demonic ways of Eichmann, we do know something about his thoughtless existence. A loss of the ability *to be thoughtful* is everywhere in today's world. Denying science and the warnings of climate change reach into the cabinet of the newly elected President, and into Congress. There are those who deny historical fact, claiming that the Holocaust did not happen. And just to the south of us is a museum dedicated to "creationism" which denies belief in carbon dating, and puts forth the belief that the earth is only 7,500 years old!

Quakers have always believed in the process of reflective examination, of one's life, and of the world around us. As Quakers moved West, at each place they settled, one of the first things that the community did was to establish educational institutions. Wilmington College is a prime example of this

practice. A belief in the reflective process has always led to questions. The healthy process of life examination and the faith questions surrounding such examination are under attack today by many who believe that questions get in the way of ardent belief. They are uncomfortable in that place where we sometimes must *rest in the questions*. I love the words of Rainer Maria Rilke, who was writing to a young poet: *"...Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."*

Soren Kierkegaard wrote of the "leap of faith" that one must take after letting theological inquiry and examination move us as far as they can. And yet today, many are making this "leap" long before they have adequately struggled with the "Why am I here?" questions. Of course, life examination and world examination, study and thinking, and the pursuit of questions surrounding the issue of our life purpose are difficult. The fruit of such questions, however, is what makes life meaningful.

In the end of the reflective process, we will come to recognize that we do, indeed, live in a world of mystery. Jim Yerkes, my theology professor at the

Earlham School of Religion, would say, "I believe in the mystery of God, but not too soon!" In other words, we will eventually come to the recognition of mystery, but the process of life and world examination is the means that will bring us to this conclusion. To love the questions is to live within the mystery on our way to experience and belief. There are times in life when it takes more courage to stand by one's reflective questions than to stand by beliefs which have not yet been tested by experience. And the point is, *especially the Quaker point is, to test everything by our experience.* As we journey through this life, when so much is open to question, experience is really all that we have. Our founder, George Fox, learned this in his quest, as have seekers throughout the ages. In the trustworthiness of religious experience lies the affirmation that seeking and questioning will eventually lead to finding...and more questions. In this spiritual context, *WHY* becomes a sacred word.

Some of you may remember my description of my first meeting with Elton Trueblood. I dined with Elton at my parent's home in Wichita, Kansas when I was 23 years old. At the time, I was the very young and inexperienced pastor of the Central City Friends Meeting in Central City, Nebraska. Elton was in Wichita to help inaugurate the new President of Friends University. While eating dinner he asked me if I had ever spoken on the "Holy Conjunction." I said that I would, but first, what is it?! He proceeded to talk

about the importance of balance and conjunction in the life of the Christian...A life of *both/and*, rather than *either/or*. To make his point, Elton opened his Bible, which he always carried with him, and turned to the passage from Mark 12: "*Which commandment is first of all? Jesus answered the scribe, 'The first is, 'Hear O Israel: the Lord our God the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'* The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." In the span of 45 minutes over dinner, Elton Trueblood initiated within me a course of thought which has continued to this day. In each different and varying phase of my spiritual quest, the idea of the Holy Conjunction, or what I call, the *Double Priority*, has been a central focus.

In the course of studying the history of the People called Quakers, two major contributions come into prominence which illustrate the Holy Conjunction, and which I believe is our best response to the spiritual crisis we are facing. On the one hand, Friends are known for their active social concerns. Since their beginning over 350 years ago, the story of Friends attacking a series of social evils has been a thrilling one. The most notable of these are the recognition of the evil of human slavery, the effort to care for the mentally challenged without cruelty, the humane treatment of prisoners, and

the continuous effort to work for peaceful solutions to problems between individuals, groups and nations. This concern for the social well being of humankind is a heritage in which Quakers take satisfaction, and one which continues today. *Love of neighbor...*It is one part of our *Double Priority*.

At the same time that Quakers have been known for their attacks upon various forms of oppression, they have been equally known for their cultivation of the inner life of devotion...The *love of God*. No other religious group has produced more journals and books dedicated to sharing their experiences with the Living God, than Quakers.

Our power as a religious body lies in the fact that we stress both of these priorities equally. I believe that our belief in this Double Priority is the chief message that Friends are able to give to the world. If we only emphasize the love of God, or the inner life of devotion, without our social concern, we become self-centered and complacent. On the other hand, if we have only active social concern without the sensitivity that comes from an inner life of devotion, we can become arrogant and judgmental.

Like many of you who are here this evening, one of my spiritual heroes is the colonial Quaker of the 18th Century, John Woolman. In John Woolman's life and actions he sought to embody this Double Priority. Toward the beginning

of his spiritual autobiography, what we know as his *Journal*, he wrote about his own spiritual transformation in this way, "*While I silently ponder on that change wrought in me, I find no language equal to convey to another any clear idea of it. I looked upon the works of God in this visible creation, and an awfulness...a sense of awe...covered me. My heart was tender and often contrite, and a universal love to my fellow creatures increased in me.*"

Here in succinct form, Woolman captures what it means to live according to the Double Priority. It finds expression in *a tenderizing of one's heart, and an increase in universal love to one's fellow creatures*. This, I believe, is our best Quaker response to the spiritual crisis we are in. All of us know how this played out in Woolman's exceptional life, especially as he confronted the evil of slavery. And, as we face the evils of our own time...the loss of community and the rise of individualism and narcissism, the bigotry and intolerance, the violence and the de-sensitizing of our nation, the loss of reflective thinking, and so on... our own hearts need to become tender and contrite, and a universal love needs to increase within us.

Thomas Cahill is a writer who knows something about the spiritual life of civilizations. A few years ago I was fortunate to be on a panel with him discussing spirituality. I asked him, "Every former civilization has died.

What gives you hope that ours will survive?" His response was, "*I am not at all sure that ours will survive.*"

Toward the end of his most famous book, *How The Irish Saved Civilization*, he wrote: "What will be lost and what saved of our civilization probably lies beyond our powers to decide...The future may be germinating today, not in a boardroom in London or an office in Washington, or a bank in Tokyo, but in some antic outpost--a kindly British orphanage in the grim foothills of Peru, a house for the dying in a back street of Calcutta, started by a fiercely single-minded Albanian nun, a mission to Somalia by Irish social workers who remember their own great hunger--in some unheralded corner where a great hearted human being is committed to loving outcasts in an extraordinary way...The 21st Century will be spiritual or *it will not be*. If our civilization is to be saved, it will be saved by saints."

As we have gathered here this evening, we are tempted to tell ourselves that the decisions regarding all of the pieces of what seems to be an overwhelming spiritual crisis, are not something that we can affect. And yet I believe we can. Our Meetings...the Meetings which take seriously the Double Priority, can be those "antic-outposts" of community that Cahill describes, where we love outcasts and society's expendables in an extraordinary way. Where we live out our testimonies on simplicity, peace, integrity, community and equality in

the face of materialism and greed, war, fake news and untruths, individualism, narcissism and bigotry. Working for peace and justice is something we can all do individually, and something that our communities of faith can do collectively.

We can also pray and meditate, loving God with all of our hearts, souls, strength and minds. This is how we nurture our hearts to be tender and contrite, like that of John Woolman. Prayer is an important part of who we are as a People. William Penn described George Fox and his life of prayer in this way: "But above all he excelled in prayer. The inwardness and weight of his spirit, the reverence and solemnity of his address and behavior, and the fewness and fulness of his words, have often struck even strangers with admiration, as they used to reach others with consolation. The most awful, living, reverent frame I ever felt or beheld, I must say, was his in prayer."

As we enter into a more full and deeper relationship with the Living God, we will discover, as John Woolman discovered, that "Our gracious creator cares and provides for all his creatures. His tender mercies are over all his works; and, so far as his love influences our minds, so far we become interested in his workmanship, and feel a desire to take hold of every opportunity to lessen the distresses of the afflicted, and increase the happiness of the creation. Here we have a prospect of one common interest, from which

our own is inseparable, that to turn all of the treasures we possess into the channel of Universal Love becomes the business of our lives."

If our Quaker communities of faith can become the "Outposts of the Double Priority," and if we, as individuals can turn all of the treasures we possess into the Channel of Universal Love, we can make a positive spiritual difference in our world. As for Alistair Cooke's observation, I choose *vitality*.