

## **Queries and Spiritual Growth**

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Matthew 18:21-22

Asking questions to nurture one spiritually has long been a practice within the Quaker Faith. Being a non-creedal tradition, queries or questions have been the medium through which the Society of Friends has kept alive their Testimonies of Peace, Simplicity, Integrity, Community, Equality and Stewardship of the Earth.

Sam Keen has been helpful in writing about questions and the human spirit in an issue of *Spirituality and Health Magazine*, saying, “What you ask is who you are,” and “...What shapes our lives are questions we ask, refuse to ask, or never think of asking.” Two queries have become constant companions in my life, as I have sought to grow spiritually...First...

- 1. What are the outward things and inner attitudes that separate me from a closer relationship to God?*

There are many outward distractions in my life that disrupt my relationship with God. I am grateful to Richard Foster for his understanding of Fasting in the modern world, enlarging the definition beyond just food, to anything that

gets in the way of connecting with the Light of God. Loud music, cable news, the cell phone, etc. can all be disrupters in my spiritual life.

Beyond the obvious outward things are the more subtle *inner* attitudes. Queries can lead us into times of simmering where we reflect on our inner attitudes and how they can affect our relationship with God. For example, I know that I can have a critical spirit. For much of my life I lived within the world of academia, which is built upon the Socratic Method of asking questions. Such a methodology leads to critical thought. The trick is to be able to use this important method at the right times, and not allow it to interfere in my relationships with others. The word, “Idiot” can too easily slip out when I am listening to someone else speak, especially if that person is an elected official.

The other day I was watching an interview with a Congressman from Ohio. It was not a dialogue between reporter and Congressman, but a monologue of fast talk, issuing in trite phrases and misconstrued thoughts which spewed forth from the Congressman’s mouth. He showed no evidence of being able to stop and think, as well as reflect upon anything that was being asked by the reporter. All that he could do is *talk fast* and share *trite talking points*.

**And yet the Congressman is a child of God, and the word, “Idiot” does not help to build God’s Kingdom on this earth. Critical thinking is an important tool in seeking truth. Personal criticism that leads to the judgment of others can damage our souls.**

**The world can be a negative place where we hurt others and where we can be hurt, either by words or by actions. By asking the query, “What are the outward things and inner attitudes that separate me from a closer relationship to God?” I can become aware of those things that interfere with my relationships with others and with God.**

**Second...**

***2. Do I manifest a forgiving spirit and care for the reputation of others?***

**This second query gets to the heart of where I need to grow spiritually. It is so easy to carry grudges and feelings of animosity toward those who have harmed us, or we perceive have harmed us. In the words of Nelson Mandela as he was leaving prison in South Africa, “I knew that I would never be totally free if I did not leave my hatred behind me in the prison I left.” By not forgiving others, we imprison ourselves.**

**To care for the reputation of others means not to participate in gossip or pass on hurtful allegations that are mean spirited and based on half-truths.**

**Again, it is easy to delight in the failings of others, which we believe will make us appear more righteous.**

**A few years ago, I was planning a conference and wanted to include a soloist as part of the program. I called Rebecca, who was a part of a congregation in the South, and with whom I had become acquainted during a trip to England. Rebecca was a devout Christian with a beautiful gift of voice. When I asked her if she would participate in the conference, she responded, “Jim, do you know what has been going on down here?” I responded that I did not. She began to cry as she shared her story of sexual involvement with her married pastor. “He has resigned, divorced and moved away,” she said, “I am still here, but I can’t go anywhere for the shame and embarrassment. I lost my job (She was the paid church soloist) and none of my friends will talk to me. I feel so ashamed.”**

**As I listened to the full extent of her pain, I was reminded of the words of a colleague when he said, “Christians are the only group who shoot their own wounded.” This may be an overstatement, but there is truth in this observation as well.**

**Forgiveness is central to both Judaism and Christianity. Most notable within the Jewish tradition is the idea of the “Year of Jubilee” where debts**

**are forgiven, and the former debtor is given the opportunity to begin anew.**

**Within the Christian tradition there is the response of Jesus to Peter's question, "How many times, Lord, must I forgive...Till seven times? Jesus' response, "...not seven times, but seventy times seven." In other words, forgiveness is to become a part of who we are. No one can forgive that many times without forgiveness becoming a basic tenet in one's life.**

**And yet, how hard it is to forgive. To harbor a grudge...to scapegoat others...to hurt another to raise one's own worldly favor, or to just wound another's heart, is to cause pain to our own souls. To learn forgiveness is difficult soul work, but, I am convinced, it is essential to spiritual growth.**

**What are those outward things and inner attitudes in your life that are separating you from a closer relationship to God?**

**Who are the Rebecca's in your life who await a healing touch...a kind and encouraging word...a forgiving spirit?**