

THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES OF SOME SEYM FRIENDS

Love is like light; it enters wherever there is a crack or door ajar in one's heart. If you don't love yourself, then you maybe find that you love one other person; then maybe you find that you love another person. And, if you don't love another person, then perhaps you love a work of art or an animal or a mathematical formula or a sweater. You begin somewhere and practice loving. And, once you open your heart to loving one thing, then another, you may eventually find yourself enjoying how loving makes you feel. If we love others only as much as we love ourselves, then perhaps we feel God's love for us only as much as we feel our love for ourselves.

Wendy Clarissa Geiger, 2008
Jacksonville Meeting

Surely you know that you are God's temple, where the Spirit of God dwells.

1 Corinthians 3:16
Revised English Bible

Out of my experience comes the sense of a loving and sustaining presence in whom I am grounded and overshadowed. God, with infinite patience, draws from me love, trust and worship as my response, and service as I come to recognize the presence at work in the lives of my sisters and brothers. God cares about the way I respond and does not ask to be defined, and thus limited, as one or three or male. In this awesome mystery are hidden my source and my goal, and God is growing in me now.

Robert Allenson, 1987
Gainesville Meeting

I believe in one Supreme Being who I call God. I believe that God is within me and without, and that every single thing is God. I also believe that God is too complex and incomprehensible to be described. Naturally, I don't go along with the sole divinity of Jesus Christ as I believe that there is that of God in all of us. Nor am I still awaiting a Messiah. We all have the potential for being a Messiah; some of us use it, some of us don't. My belief in the power of prayer is very strong, whether it's the verbal intercessory request or the non-verbal swelling of the heart in gratitude. I believe in miracles and magic and that we have gifts we haven't even used yet. I believe that whatever you believe is true and that if you don't believe it, that's OK, too. And that the greatest sin we can commit is not to enjoy life fully. I subscribe to the following quotations, the first from the Talmud, which Jesus of Nazareth probably read, and the second from Anthony de Mello, a contemporary Roman Catholic priest living in India:

*On Judgment Day, a man will have to give account
for every good thing which his eye saw and he did
not enjoy.*

Palestinian Talmud, Kiddushin

*I am fortunate indeed!
I have been granted
the wealth
of another day of life.*

Anthony de Mello, Wellsprings

You might say I'm a practicing Hedonist, but cursed at birth by three wicked witches: "Protestant Work Ethic," "Jewish Guilt," and "Twentieth-Century Anxiety." They curse me daily and stand in the way of my wholehearted delight in the utter beauty of the Florida sky and the enjoyment of love for my fellow man. When I learn how to get rid of the wicked witches who live on my shoulders and shout in my ears, I will have become the person I want to be. However, I believe God loves me anyway, witches and all, because He/She/It has given me multiple blessings, and today I am very, very grateful!

Marie Stilkind, 1986

Miami Meeting

I'm a Lutheran minister's daughter—therefore I'm a Christian Quaker. Due to my husband being a C.O., we were invited to become members. All I can say is—I love my Bible, my various devotionals, including one put out by Quakers, "Fruit of the Vine," and of course our journals. I have that Inner Peace. All in all, it gives me the knowledge of what God expects of me. I'm thankful that I have the strength and joy in my commitments to our Meeting and am thankful for my family of Friends. Being a Quaker is a challenge! I love challenges. Religion and art is my thing.

Hildegard Herbster, 1986
Miami Meeting

At this moment in my spiritual journey I pause to try to make a statement of my faith. I know that I am only a child in this journey and that today's statement is different from the one I would have made a year ago and from one I might make a year from now. From my experience this far in my journey I believe that God is love and that this spirit of love is within me and at the same time envelops me. This spirit is caring and steadfast and, as I become more awake and aware, is increasingly persistent, teaching me that I must pay constant and careful attention to this inner guide. I know that when I am obedient, getting my self out of the way as far as it is possible for me to do so, I feel a deep joy. More and more, God becomes the single reality of my life, and my goal is to become whatever God would have me be.

Without understanding or needing to understand how this can be so, I believe that God is in each person and each particle of creation, and encompasses not only all that we know of the universe but even more than we can possibly imagine. I believe that God wills only good for us and that we are all one in God.

Dorothy Ann Ware, 1986
Clearwater Meeting

I am drawn to the Society of Friends for a number of reasons. For me, the most important is that I feel at home in the silence of Meeting for Worship. It satisfies my heart's longing for peace and I think enables me to live my life in a way that is more integrated, more whole.

My observations and readings lead me to think that I am also in harmony with Friends around the following:

As a group Friends seem to live what they believe and I am trying to do that too.

It appears that Friends are a more open system, allowing for a range of thoughts and beliefs which is a position that I also work to maintain.

I am a seeker of truth and divine guidance and I have faith in continuing revelation as do Friends.

I hold that simplicity, honesty, equality, and peace are important principles to live by.

Conceptualizing God as Inner Light is consistent with what I believe about the nature of spirituality.

Finally, I think that the structure of Friends Meeting for Worship, Business, etc., is one that provides for two natural forces that exist in humankind—a need for closeness with others and an equally important need to be autonomous persons.

**Alice Wald, 1986
Charleston Meeting**

My faith rests in an uncomprehendable God.

I have experienced God both within and without.

The record of the life and teachings of Jesus, in the Bible, has been one of the guides in my quest to reach God.

Knowing people of God and imitating them is another guide. I know I am becoming more in the Light, the more I work at establishing a constant relationship with God.

**Cathy Gaskill, 1987
Winter Park Meeting**

I see the Quaker experience as incorporating three spheres: spiritual, political, and social. Of course, these overlap. For instance, our dealings with others may be guided by our Spirituality. And, because of individual interests and personal needs these are balanced differently in each person. For some, the social aspect of meeting is important to the degree that the meeting becomes an extended family. For others, the spiritual component is pivotal because it gives them strength for their political commitments.

Recently I heard a Quaker woman in Texas tell a group of refugees that while Quakers believed in peace there was an increasing movement within the Friends which averred that the violence done to individuals by evil governments, such as the depriving of food, was equal to acts of violent self defense. I was appalled. It does not matter that one violence equals another, what matters is that it is in addition to the other. We are fundamentally a peace church and I have heard this echoed repeatedly in SEYM. Peace and our silent meetings are cornerstones of the uniqueness that is Quaker faith.

We are tolerant, and we are brave because of our tolerance. That is, we have the courage to face our own hidden bigotries. The early Quakers did it when they loved individuals who happened to be black while the masses despised the negro, and we are doing it today when we love individuals who happen to be gay when the masses treat them with contempt.

**India Aditi, 1986
Winter Park Meeting**

*If I am not God,
 what am I?
If Thee is not God,
 what is thee?
If Here is not Infinity,
 where is it?
If Now is not Eternity,
 when is it?*

The above expresses my current state of awareness. However, the following intimates my prediction of future states:

*on that final day
how shall I know I am dead?
I'll stop Becoming.*

Kenneth C. Leibman, 1987
Gainesville Meeting

I have come to believe that all life is holy, for there is nowhere that God is not. We "swim" in God. We "live and move and have our being" in God, who is "nearer to us than we are to ourselves." God is life and the life energy is love permeating the universe.

I believe that our sense of being separate one from another and from God is our misperception, and this false sense of separateness is the source of fear and of every evil (error or ignorance).

I believe we all walk our own path (like the prodigal son) toward self-realization of our spiritual reality and oneness. And though we may be in different places, we are where we should be for growing into that reality. We teach and we learn from one another, and as we give we receive.

I tend to believe in reincarnation because it makes of this earth experience a fair and a just one, and places the responsibility for our actions and our consequences squarely on ourselves, and that feels right.

I feel—in prayer and meditation and silent worship—that God's healing love is channeled: And I find that in the silence I feel a connection with that spirit of God within me, and the more aware I am of that holy presence the more peaceful I am, the more harmony I feel around me.

Finally, I believe that life (consciousness) is ongoing, that all life is tending toward wholeness, and love, and forgiveness will bring it into being.

Mary Dee, 1987
Palm Beach Meeting

As I look back over my life, I find that it has been gradually drawing closer to God. I have always felt the nudge of Spirit to go into a certain path. Sometimes I would follow the nudge and grow closer to God. Other times (most of the time) I have been absolutely certain that I can handle the crisis and ignored the spiritual nudge. As a matter of fact, I got very good at ignoring the nudge. Then, I had a Biblical "Job" experience. At age 46, I lost my job, my reputation, and had to move back home with family. After the shock wore off, I was humbled and heartsick. I finally asked God for a measure of his everlasting and healing Love. I was embraced by the Spirit, lifted up and transformed. I was filled with Love, Light and Trust. I understood that God is always present with us but I had spent most of my existence dwelling on past hurts and slights or worried about the future or, even worse, absorbed in busy-ness. If I could stand still in the present, I would find God present and His Love for me manifest. From this experience, Love has called me closer and closer to God. I am filled to overflowing with God's love for everyone and all of creation. I have tried to let Love be the first motion in my life and have humbly ministered as way opened, and learned to accept that Love and ministry from wherever it comes to me.

I was fortunate a few years ago to participate in an ad hoc committee charged to come to some clarity regarding an item of great concern for the yearly meeting. As the committee convened it was clear we needed to try another approach to come to clarity on this great concern. It was also clear that none of us were called to clerk this committee. We settled into worship to find clarity. After a while, we stayed worshipful and shared our Light with each other. The worship felt right-ordered, so we continued in worship. After a period of time, we felt clear that this worship time was the way forward, letting the Inner Light be our Guide and our clerk.

In worship, we lost track of time and experienced a gathering into God's love for all of us, all of his creation. It became clear over time and several meetings that we were blessed with both new understandings and openings. We were reminded that we could not focus on the "wrongs" of the "other" without looking at our own behavior and our tendency to judgment, moral outrage and "other-izing" (my

words for us vs. them). We struggled to find ways to be a loving witness. Participating in this process of extended worship and worship sharing opened us as a group. Our openings were both simple and deep. They were:

- ***Love God and love one another.***

We are each called to Love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, and we are called to love everyone, especially those with whom our measure of the Light may differ.

- ***Avoid judgment; seek forgiveness.***

We are called to be mindful of judging others and rather seek their forgiveness instead. We are called as well to be forgiving of those who judge us.

- ***Listen and seek healing.***

We are called to be about the process of listening to and helping Friends heal who are hurt by discrimination and division, as well as called to promote spiritual healing of all Friends through deep listening, forgiveness, and love.

These openings that we received from the Spirit on the surface offered no particular guidance on the resolution of the yearly meeting's great concern. However, continued prayer and discernment by the committee brought clarity that following these openings were where God had called us to do our work.

The ad hoc committee had done its work and reported back to the yearly meeting. However, the openings we received have stayed with me. Through continued prayer and discernment, I am called to the greater action of love, forgiveness and healing, as well as the challenge to avoid judgment. This is a difficult and rewarding calling. It is extremely hard to avoid judgment; however, it is easy to listen and forgive, even easier still to love as I am loved by God.

**Phoebe Biers Andersen, 2012
Tallahassee Meeting**