

Who Do You Think You Are?

Quaker Spirituality as Self-Discovery

By Daniel A. Seeger

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Some time ago when I was visiting Quaker Meetings on the island of Jamaica, a little girl who was a member of one of the families which offered me home hospitality asked me to read a bedtime story to her.

She brought me a book entitled *The Shaggy, Baggy Elephant*. The story told of a baby elephant wandering around in the forest who became worried because his hide was baggy and wrinkled. He asked a monkey how he managed to have such tight skin. The monkey explained that because he swung in the trees, he got lots of exercise, and this kept his skin taut. So, the shaggy, baggy little elephant expended much energy swinging around in the trees, a very unnatural act for him, and even though he did this to the limit of his endurance, it was to no avail. The little elephant then spotted a hippopotamus which, although it was very fat, had very smooth, tight skin. He asked the hippo how he avoided having sags and wrinkles. The hippo explained that because he sat in the water all day his skin shrank and became smooth and tight. And so, for many, many days the shaggy, baggy elephant soaked himself in water, but this, too, proved to be futile.

Finally, the baby elephant met a herd of adult elephants, and when he saw how big and beautiful they were with their shaggy, baggy hides, he was filled with joy and lived with them happily ever after.

This children's story brought to me by the little Jamaican girl reminded me of an old Hindu parable about a pregnant tiger which, one day when seeking dinner, attacked a herd of goats. As she charged, she accidentally hit a rock and was killed. However, being close to term, her cub was born anyway, and this orphaned tiger cub took his place in the herd of goats. The goats raised him as one of their own, teaching him how to bleat and how to eat grass. Indeed, the little tiger assumed he was a goat.

One day another tiger seeking a meal charged the herd of goats. The young tiger who thought he was a goat felt no fear, for some reason that he could not explain, and he stood fast as the other goats fled in panic. As the charging tiger went past the cub, the cub let out a bleating sound at it. The hungry tiger was so stunned by this that he forgot about dinner, turned to the cub who had bleated at him, and said: "What

is wrong with you? You shouldn't be making sounds like that! Don't you know you are a tiger?" With that he grabbed the young tiger by the scruff of the neck and brought him to a pool where he could see his reflection. As he saw his image, the tiger let out his first real roar, a roar of joy and of recognition, and he lived happily ever after, chasing and eating goats.

I do not know exactly why a vegetarian religion has a parable like this, but there it is!

The little girl's bedtime story and this ancient Hindu parable both suggest still another legend, a legend from contemporary culture--the story of Tarzan, one of the best-known and durable figures of popular fiction. Tarzan first appeared in a magazine story in 1912, and has since been the subject of nearly thirty novels and dozens of motion pictures.

In the Tarzan legend we have the development of an idea very similar to the idea of the shaggy, baggy elephant and the tiger who thought he was a goat. In the case of Tarzan, a human child--indeed the child is actually the heir to an English peerage--is orphaned in the jungle when only a few weeks old. He is brought up by apes, thinking he is an ape. He makes the same sounds as apes make and lives as they do in every respect.

One might wonder, as Tarzan lives in this fashion year after year, if there are not moments when he is alone in the silence of the forest and when, perhaps, the mental accoutrements of apedom might fall away, and when he might get a glimmering from some deep and pure inner principle that something is not quite right--indeed that something is very terribly wrong. If this happens, the stories presented to us do not disclose it. Ultimately, however, after many years and when he is already a young adult, Tarzan is rescued from the jungle and brought back to the great manor house which is his birthright as an English lord.

Now most of us might imagine that if we were plucked out of our present position and established in a stately home of this sort we would experience the same kind of joyful and instantaneous recognition that the tiger cub and the baby elephant experienced. "Yes, of course, this is

where I belong!" But here the legend of Tarzan differs, for this joyful recognition of his own true nature does not occur in Tarzan's case. His accommodation with human society is only a very tentative and uneasy one. He is inclined to careen about the parapets of his great manor house in the moonlight, and to give vent to odd jungle sounds when he is trying to dine with the other lords and ladies. Ultimately, after a series of misadventures, Tarzan gives up on human society and returns to his life in the jungle.

Here are three myths--one drawn from children's literature, one from Hindu culture, and one from modern fiction--which pose a series of questions to us. Are we not all Tarzans? Are we not afflicted with the same problem that he faced? Having been raised in a kind of jungle, are we not estranged from our own true nature?

In thinking about this some words I once read by Mohandas K. Gandhi, the great leader of the non-violent Indian independence movement, came to mind. Gandhi wrote that "People tend to become what they think themselves to be."

This sentence of Gandhi's underscores the importance of the conceptions about our human nature that we carry about with us in our minds and hearts. It calls our attention to the dangers of the many false images of human nature that are thrust upon us by contemporary culture, from the worlds of advertising and entertainment in particular. The other day I read that an *average* American child who watches an *average* amount of television sees the depiction of 3,000 murders by the time he or she is twelve years old. From everywhere, it seems, we are bombarded with the idea that human nature is innately violent, that our main preoccupation is with our sexuality, and that our chief purpose is the consumption of ever more nifty possessions.

If the disordered environment in which we are raised up warps and disguises human nature as it is really meant to be, how do we succeed in self-realization where Tarzan apparently failed? How do we come to perceive both the extent of our failures and the possibility of our greatness? How do we determine our real nature and destiny, how do we learn to give expression to it? Is it possible that whole populations,

acclimated to a way of life in which there is neither wisdom nor goodness, can nevertheless be completely satisfied with themselves as they are? Can humankind be lifted out of oppression without the oppression being lifted out of humankind, so to speak? Can people fashion a social order reflecting more wisdom and goodness than they themselves possess? How do we grow in wisdom and goodness? Can we foster such growth in others? Can there be social transformation without spiritual transformation?

Is it not true that behind the massive problems of our era there lies profound confusion about the meaning of human life itself? Who are we? Why were we born? What is the purpose of life on earth? These are age-old questions, assuredly, but never have the answers seemed so elusive as they seem to be now at the end of the twentieth century.

The fundamental truth which undergirds Quaker faith is simply that God, who spoke in olden time to His people through the mouths of prophets and apostles, and who gave the fullest measure of Himself through the person of Jesus Christ, still speaks; and we may, every one of us, if we will, hear that divine voice in a secret place of our hearts.

For there exists in each of us buried within the husk of the false personality induced by the jungle existence, something pure, perfect, and complete, something which corresponds to the highest levels of truth of the Creation, something which, once we get in touch with it, restores us to our own true nature and enables us to live in a new and different way. That this is possible is demonstrated again and again with every act of service, of witness, or of social change through which the divine order is affirmed and extended in human life.

But we must be aware that the origins of our capacity to render authentic service are as mysterious and as awesome as the generation of the universe itself--it is part and parcel of the same miracle. As soon as we claim this miracle as our own doing and our own creation, we have lost the track. We are simply increasing the disorder. Our personal egos are not miracle workers!

Even Jesus recognized this and claimed nothing for his own creatureliness. Once someone seeking advice addressed Jesus as "Good Master." Before answering the question Jesus said: "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God." (Matthew 19:16; King James Version). Again, on another occasion, Jesus said: "I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me." (John 5:30; King James Version).

This, then, is what it means to be fully human, to have found one's own true nature. It is to love, to be creative, and to be fruitful out of the very same source from which the Creator utters the eternal Word. It is to know that it is of no use for this Word to have become flesh in Galilee if it is not begotten unceasingly within ourselves. It is to seek a true simplicity of heart which can know at any given moment if we are acting so as to be at one with the great Creative Principle of the universe, or if we are not. If we are, then each present moment becomes "the fullness of time," the time when we ourselves, like Mary the mother of Jesus, serve as the bearers of the highest and most divine energies of the cosmos.

People who have found this secret, the secret of their true human nature, respond easily and immediately whenever the sanctity of life is threatened. From a place very deep within themselves something very effective is mobilized into action. And whenever a company of such people, acting out of a true simplicity of heart, gathers to serve the world and its future, misery and confusion are lessened, and even vanquished, and the universal order of reality that is contained within each human being and within the whole cosmos is affirmed.

Such service is rooted first and foremost in self discovery, in knowing what it is that we are meant to be. Thus our first work is work on ourselves, to be sure we are not molded by the jungle in which we live. That is why the well-known Friend Rufus Jones once said that, "the first step in the rendering of service is the spiritual preparation of those who would serve."

This is all well and good, but how do we establish this communication with the divine? Is it something we can do for ourselves? Can we lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps? Can we simply dial some number and make the connection?

There is a paradox here. No one can will it to herself or himself to have Divine guidance or inspired leadings. Such guidance and such leadings are due solely to the operations of God, and are not experiences human beings can churn up from within themselves through their own creaturely efforts. At the same time, paradoxically, it is only those who undertake some spiritual effort, who strive, and who prepare, who are likely actually to achieve some spiritual progress.

As Vivekananda once said: "the winds of God's grace are always blowing, but we must raise our sails."

From a Friends perspective, the three keys to raising our sails are silence, obedience and unity.

The Quaker leaders Fox, Barclay, and Penington are quite clear that in order to hear the Divine voice we need to be still. Another Friend, Caroline Stephen, has written, "The silence we value is not the mere outward silence of the lips. It is a deep quietness of heart and mind, a laying aside of all preoccupation with passing things--Yes, even with the workings of our own minds; a resolute fixing of the heart upon that which is unchangeable and eternal." Isaac Penington encourages us to still what he called, "the wanderings and rovings of mind." Robert Barclay commends us to repair to that measure of grace within ourselves which can be sensed if we refrain not only from outward words, but from inward thoughts and desires. George Fox advises, "Be still and silent from thy own wisdom, wit, craft, subtlety, or policy that would arise in thee, but stand single to the Lord, without an end to thyself." Elsewhere he writes, "Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God."

Indeed, to the extent that we can lay down our preoccupations with cravings, with transient concerns, with our businesses, with our special likes and dislikes, with all the accidental, phenomenal and passing

things which preoccupy us, we begin to make a space within ourselves where universal and eternal things can be heard. Thus through inner silence we become poor in spirit, and becoming poor in spirit brings us closer to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Or, as it is written in the Tao Te Ching: "The truth awaits eyes unclouded by longing."

Another concept closely linked with inner silence, at least in the faith of early Friends, is apt to be out of fashion nowadays. This closely linked concept is the concept of obedience. When early Friends referred to Meeting for Worship as being based on silence and obedience, the word obedience was not added as an ornament. Early Quakers perceived that the spirit which moved so fiercely in their hearts did not stop at giving them some sort of bracing feeling of spiritual uplift. It went further and laid upon them things that were to be done. Here attention and obedience are linked. The silence is not only a releasing, a letting go, a centering down, but it is also an opening to the Guide which lays upon us changes in our priorities, and tells us of things to be done, and done promptly.

But it is important to make some distinctions here. A leading that grows out of silence is not the same as an all-too-human impulse which may grow out of the agitation, anxiety or outrage which follows upon the reading of the latest issue of *The New York Times*. It is very important to keep this in mind.

It is especially vital that the link between silence and obedience be kept intact, and that the busy-ness and activity does not begin to be carried along by its own momentum, a momentum which may seem to allow little time for the still, small voice of calm and quietness. Whenever we feel that we are such totally committed activists that there is no time for corporate Meeting for Worship, for personal periods of silent meditation each day, and for devotional reading, we know that we are in trouble.

Finally, I mentioned "unity" as the third aspect of the Quaker approach, although I might have expressed it as "peace" or "love." No

matter what term we use, it is the essential realization that we live in a universe, not a diverse; that the basic substance of this universe is love; that that of God in everyone, and indeed in everything, connects us to the entire cosmos; and that awakening from our sense of separateness is what most spiritual traditions define as the fundamental issue of life itself. "God is love," we read in the Second Letter of John, "and one who dwells in love dwells in God, and God dwells in her, or him."

Even a single cell of the human body, if examined closely, can be shown to be dependent for its existence on the energy from a body as far away as the sun.

The sense of unity, of reconciliation, and of love which ought to permeate all our activities, even our most militant social change project, and indeed which should permeate our very being, rarely finds adequate expression outside of Scripture or extraordinarily mystical formulations.

What do we find when we look at the sermons of Jesus as given to us in the Gospels? One could not develop an outline for them the way one might of a philosophical treatise. They are, indeed, often quite disjointed. One can scarcely imagine them as being given except with lengthy periods of silence interspersed along the way--the silence of wisdom listening. The silences and the sentences evidently touched those who experienced them so deeply that they came to believe that only Jesus himself would be capable of creating such an impact upon them. Yet there is hardly anything in these sermons to be proven or disproved. One either had ears to hear or one did not; what was said became, either suddenly or gradually, self-evidently true, or it did not. Responding to such truth is, in essence, what is known as mystical insight.

But care must be taken in cultivating the mystical capacities which exist in each and every human being not to turn our backs upon the world. It often happens when civilization reaches a state of advanced disorder that certain sensitive and gifted persons lose any joyous faith in the future and in the concrete tasks of life. A profound distress at the state of affairs, and an insatiable desire for an infinite good, cause them to flee from society. Alas, if we go into the silence of the desert, the monastery, or the commune merely to get away from situations we

dislike we will find neither peace nor solitude. It is not God's purpose to give us mystical visions merely so that our isolated selves can enjoy a bracing feeling of spiritual uplift; spiritual uplift we may indeed get, but the essential purpose is to make us partners in the creative process.

The prophet, on the other hand, in comparison to the reclusive sort of mystic, is a social creature. She or he is involved in the world, stirring things up. While prophets do know how to "be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him," (Psalm 37:7; Revised Standard Version) they do not remain in stillness, but respond to a divine commission which drives them forth into affairs. They are thus reformers and creators, and not recluses. But to the extent that the prophetic personality neglects the life of the spirit, it becomes shrill and imperial, intolerant, angry, despairing, violent, and even self-pitying. In short, in spiritual substance the prophetic personality can become identical with the very conditions it seeks to address. Prophecies of doom are definite The Good News.

There are Friends who wish to define Quakerism as being wholly within the prophetic tradition, and others who wish to define it as being wholly within the mystical tradition. Actually, it is the genius of the Religious Society of Friends that it holds these two aspects of spiritual life in a dynamic tension, constantly taking care to slip neither into a mystical quietism, nor into a prophetic activism lost to the sight of love. For it is only thus that we are drawn to the ideal of poise, balance, harmony and peace which is the natural destiny of the Creation and the unique product of love.

In his many wonderful paintings entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom* the Quaker artist Edward Hicks charmingly symbolized for us an ideal of sanctity which involves the reconciliation of opposites. As Friends we have as our vocation the harmonization of two profound movements of the soul, the prophetic and the mystical, an extraordinary passionate involvement in the whole life of the human race, together with a silent, luminous detachment from it, a profound outward movement coexisting with an equally profound inward movement. This ideal of blending total involvement with total detachment is by no means easy to effect. It is, nevertheless, a magnificent calling to which we are summoned. Let us

always seek, with humility and persistence, to perfect our gifts for carrying it out.

We can perfect our gifts for this service simply by taking the Lord as our shepherd. For truly to take the Lord as our shepherd is to release our personal wants and needs, to become inwardly silent, and thus to clear and to heal our hearts and our minds. Then do we become as serene as the still waters, which reflect the glory of the sun and of all the creative energies of the universe; then do we fear no evil; then do we find calmness and confidence in the face of our enemies; and then, finally, are we enabled, as mystics and as prophets, to leave in our wake a trail of goodness and of mercy all of the days of our lives.