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Visualizing a World of Innocence: Quaker Leaders and their Lives

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Emma Lapansky (Please attribute to the author all uses of this lecture)

Lacking a central authority figure in which to place its hope and center its prayers, Quakerism expanded from its Christ-centered roots to draw inspiration--and information from others whose lives modeled a road toward spiritual "perfection. This evening I'm going to invite us to explore some aspects of how various lives have been shaped, and may be used to shape our own lives as we make our own way in a continuing spiritual journey.

Over the next few weeks, several Pendle Hill speakers will be looking at the lives of a number of Friends who have "let their lives speak," Quakers whose leading or calling left a powerful legacy. We could certainly think of many others whose lives have been equally memorable--political and community theorists Kenneth and Elise Boulding, medical reformer Mary Calderone, mystic Thomas Kelly, peace lobbyist Raymond Wilson, writer Elizabeth Gray Vining. (And there are good brief biographies of each of them in Leonard Kenworthy's *Living in the Light*). But one could also choose others--for example, England's James Nayler, John Backhouse, or John Wilhelm Rountree. But the ones on which we will focus in this series are American, and that, I believe is of significance in how we see their interpretation of Quakerism.

The case I am going to make in this introduction to the series is that it is not just Quakerism, but Quakerism in the American setting, that influenced how these people lived out their religious faith. To be sure, I want to encourage us to remember that at all times since its establishment, the Religious Society of Friends has been an international religion, even while it has had an inordinate amount of independence at the local level, and hence what might be labeled "American Quakerism" is powerfully flavored by interaction with England--the land where Quakerism was born--as well as by Japan, the Middle East, South America and Africa--the lands where Americans have helped to establish it. But it is in America where Quakerism first met what we might call "modernism"--that is a social malleability and flexibility that was not much confined by convention or tradition.

Some of what I will say tonight are things I have said in other contexts in other talks, but I hope that those of you who may have heard those other talks will also find something new in tonight's presentation. So let me restate my underlying premise in a more overt way: Quakerism, as it has developed over the past three centuries has been the result of an organic and dynamic relationship between an individual and the Divine (an external entity), the Inward Light (that portion of the Divine which we can discern within), the family, monthly meeting, yearly meeting, larger international Quaker community, the local society, economy, and political situation, non-Friends, the demands of various stages of life (childhood, marriage partner, parenthood, breadwinner, citizen, elder--with a small "e",) and concurrent events (e.g., wars, religious or social upheavals, technological revolutions, natural disasters, scientific discoveries, economic booms and busts, etc.) One historian, David Potter, has characterized Americans as *People of Plenty*, and has suggested that much of the American national character--optimism, penchant for waste, enthusiasm, enterprising energy, adventurousness, and generosity, among other things--is deeply shaped by the plentifulness and variety of natural resources. Certainly an openness to technological innovation has characterized part of American development, and Quakers were among those who turned to America when European workers resisted such things as textile automation at the end of the eighteenth century. America, a labor-starved new country, was quite open to labor-saving devices in those early years, and remains so today. This is just one facet of the atmosphere in which American Quakerism developed.

Migration is another. The people you will meet in the next few weeks span the geographic space from New England to the Pacific, and their lives also stretch across such American events as the Second Great Awakening--that eruption of 19th century religious fervor that reshaped the familial, economic, intellectual, and geographic landscape of America--the birth of the Republican Party and Civil War, the rise of science

and “scientific” religions such as the Ethical Culture Society and Christian Science, two World Wars and a war in Vietnam, a devastating drought and economic depression in the early decades of the twentieth century, a century-long human-rights movement that culminates in the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. These are among the events that provide a backdrop for the development of Quakerism--and individual Quakers.

One historian has characterized George Fox as a man who imagined that humans might reach a state of perfect innocence--a place “above Adam and beyond falling.” That is, a place where temptation would be irrelevant, where one would not have to resist sin, because one would lose all interest in that which was not of God. Marge Abbott, in a book I recommend, refers to this as *A certain Kind of Perfection*. Abbott also offers us some of the array of Friends who have tried to develop a common language for expressing a faith that is based in experience, and is therefore uniquely experienced by each believer. Other Friends have also struggled with this question of language and concepts to describe what is often poorly accessible or expressible in mere words. Atonement, sacraments, missionaries, Christ, Bible, ministry--these are all words that are closely associated with the Christian tradition from which Quakerism emanates. But how do those words translate into a new experience, and a new world? What meaning or emphases in those concepts captures the “real” Quakerism? And does the fact that Quakerism grew out of Christianity mean that it must still be--after Continuing Revelation--a “Christian” religion? Friends remain divided on this issue, and who among us has not had a non-Friend talk about “Christians and Quakers,” as if they are two distinctly different entities. How exactly does one tell what behaviors mark one as Quaker or not. Lacking a central authority (I’m afraid I will keep repeating that refrain) Anthony Benezet, Abby Hopper Gibbons, Walter and Emma Malone, and Richard Nixon each have answered that question differently. And each annoyed and angered fellow Quakers as they did so, bringing upon themselves the accusation “they’re not *really* Quakers!”

So tonight I to remind us of an obvious thing: that religion occurs in social context. And I want to plough up our minds about some of the social context you will encounter in these next weeks of looking at this array of lives, with the idea that when we are looking at our own religious lives, we will need to keep focused on our own context as well. Let me start with the idea that religious frameworks are--among other things--about limited choices. For example, religious frameworks always contain prescriptions about gender and gender roles, about what work is honorable (such as the priesthood), and what work is forbidden (such as prostitution). Religion serves, and is served by, the class definitions of a society, as well as other markers of hierarchy and authority: the patriarch over families, the old over the young, the learned over the ignorant, the Weighty Friend over the meeting attender, etc.) Religions are also one of the markers of community and conformity. In every religion there are some behaviors that can result in ostracism or ejection. The Amish people have a word for it--shunning--but all religious communities do it. (Liberal Quakers tend to castigate those who are too ostentatious--unless they are apologetic about their excesses.) Catholics question the loyalty of those who don’t go to confession at least occasionally. Many Jewish communities frown upon those who marry out of the fold. Traditional Muslims denounce women who display too much of their bodies.

In every religion there are guidelines about the appropriate time, format, and configuration of a “conversion experience” or a holy ritual or event, rules about what kind/how much service is due one’s god or Gods--as well as what is due to one’s fellow humans. And one has only to read a few Friends’ journals to recognize the repeated themes of recognizing the hollowness in the outside world, to “standing in the Light” of one’s own shortcomings, then “growing into goodness” --to use phrases with which Friends are familiar--in order to see that there is something of a formula by which traditional Quakers have approached the question of acquiring innocence. Quaker stories, like other religious narratives, have a pattern within their uniqueness.

In each religion there are guidelines about the meaning of suffering, and how much of it is desirable to allow, or invite, into your life. Some religions encourage sacrifice, even self-destruction, or the jihad. Similarly, there are guidelines about how much and what kind of pleasure is to be condoned, and what are

the uses/abuses of punishment and atonement. Household management, martyrdom, guilt and self-flagellation, budgeting, worship, assignment and distribution of temporal power, the role of inter-theological intermediaries and religious leaders, uses of ritual diet, child-rearing practices, physical symbols, such as buildings, altars and vestments, limits on sexuality: when, with whom, and what kind--, assignment and distribution of labor and of property as well as notions of the human psyche and temperament--all are deeply intertwined in the colorful matrix of religion and society.

Let me take a minute and introduce you to a person born into a Quaker family, whom subsequent Friends have dismissed as “not really Quaker” and have omitted him from the honor roll that includes the Friends you’ll hear about in the next few weeks. Born in Moosehead, Pennsylvania in 1872, he was a lifelong member of the Society of Friends--though he came to be known as “The Fighting Quaker.” A summa cum laude graduate of Swarthmore, he then studied law with a Pennsylvania judge and was admitted to the bar in 1893, practiced law in Stroudsburg, and became involved in Democratic politics. (Now, remember, the Democratic party of the 1890s was NOT the Democratic party as it has become known since Franklin Delano Roosevelt transformed its image in the 1930s to the vision we have today of the social welfare party. In the 1890s, the Democratic Party was the party of the working people--sort of--but it was also the party of the South, the party that resisted the Abraham Lincoln Republicans. Without going into detail about his whole career, suffice it to say that this Pennsylvanian managed the campaign that got Woodrow Wilson elected in 1912. And remember Wilson’s record on race was abysmal.)

But our hero declined the appointment as secretary of war because of his Quaker beliefs. He was unsuccessful in his bid for Senate in 1914, and later he did accept Wilson’s appointment as “Alien Property Custodian” when World War I began. In this role, he seized millions of dollars of property and funds owned or owed to Germans or German Americans in the United States. In 1919 he was appointed Attorney General, and in this role he led the government assault on political radicals, engineering the “Red Scare” of 1919, and personally taking part in operations where federal officials kicked in the doors of private homes and offices of “suspect” organizations, rounding up aliens and agitators and having them deported for nothing more than their suspected beliefs. Congressional investigations failed to bring him down, but he retired in 1921, though he went on to campaign for the Catholic Al Smith in 1928, and for the liberal FDR in 1932. Clearly this fellow falls into the “go figure” department.

Who knows the name of our Quaker hero?

When I tell this story, most people say: “I didn’t know A Mitchell Palmer was Quaker!! What about abstention from political involvement? What about race relations? What about civil liberties?” Since his death in 1936, the Quaker communities have mostly “forgotten” that he was a member of our group--the equivalent of the Amish shunning. Since we are so dependent upon charismatic leaders for our sustenance and our direction, we dare not claim one who seems so inimical to what we think of as our best ideals. However, I think the best way to explain this fellow is that he lived up to his Quaker beliefs: was zealous about pursuing where his leadings took him--even against the expressed traditions of the religion he embraced. In this respect he is the essence of Quaker tradition.

I tell Alexander Mitchell Palmer’s story to get us into the question of what we can learn from lives, and to raise for your consideration some of the central tendencies and tensions that have characterized Quaker belief and practice over the years. I’m sure there are those in the audience who will disagree with me, or feel that my assessment is incomplete, but accepting that, I proceed. I think one of the central issues for Friends has been the question of Continuing Revelation vs. unchanging Truth, the balancing of Biblical scriptures and/or the writings of founding Friends with the precept that the only Truth one should accept is the one that an individual comes to experientially. Hence, Fox could tell Penn to “wear thy sword as long as thou canst,” knowing that until Penn experiences the sword as uncomfortable, removing it would simply constitute conformity to a behavior, without inward conviction. So could 17th century theologian Margaret Fell counsel that “it’s a dangerous thing to lead Friends much into the observance of outward things which

may be easily done. For they can soon get into an outward garb...but this will not make them into true Christians: it's the spirit that gives life...[To be} all in one dress and one color: this is a silly poor Gospel.”

The very fact that I am quoting Fell is another part of the issue for Friends. Lacking a central authority, we turn to the lives of those whom we feel represented the best of Quakerism (not A. Mitchell Palmer) for our instruction, our touchstone, our inspiration. But in the nineteenth century, Joseph John Gurney worried that Hicksite Friends reliance for inspiration on the lives and writings of early Friends would upstage the importance of the Scriptures. Hence, Gurneyite Friends established the Friends Bible Association, to make sure that every Quaker home had a Bible and to encourage them to read it, and joining with other Protestants in the years of America's Second Great Awakening in the middle of the nineteenth century, they started Sunday Schools to assure that Christianity would be re-energized. But Friends are still not unified on what should be the proper place of the Bible, or other authorities vs. Inward guidance in religious worship and practice. Like the Progressives that would follow at the end of the nineteenth century, the followers of Elias Hicks had language that sounded remarkably like the language of the Transcendentalists of 1830s New England--language that said that if you could only provide the right environment, a righteous human soul would follow. Emerson said that “nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of the human soul,” and Thoreau “went to the woods because he wanted to live deliberately, and confront only the essential things of life.”

Similarly, we are not unified on the issues of another important tenet of our faith: the uses and limits of non-violence. Today we range all the way from those who can accept a calling to a “just war,” to those who cannot eat flesh of any sort, because it is procured by violence against God's creatures. We have been leaders in alternative to violence training, but within our own communities, we continue to struggle with what we really mean by this.

Service has always been an important part of Friends' belief structure, but in many times and places, service and loyalty *within* the Friends communities has vied for status with service to, for, and with “the world's people.” By the last decades of the nineteenth century, British Friends were down to fewer than 15,000 members. Their “quietism”--that is, their concern with maintaining a pious and pure community within the world of Friends, had led them to pray quietly, and to eject any person who did not follow the rules of conformity--particularly marriage “out of unity.” Meanwhile, American Quakerism--especially the form of it that had been invigorated by the recommitment involved in moving whole meetings out of the South to avoid the contamination of slavery--was growing like wildfire. Inspired by the energy of Methodists and other Protestants on the frontier, Quakers held camp meetings, baptized their members as an outward sign of membership in the community, and carried the idea of a “released, or public” Friend to its logical conclusion: paying a leader to eschew all other concerns, such as making an economic living, and devoting himself or herself to specialized training for permanent ministry. Hence, the pastoral meeting. These western Quakers even allied themselves with the Holiness movement that offered an immediate transformation to the innocence envisioned by Fox. Such religious “syncretism” as it is labeled by anthropologists, is common in frontiers. Mormons kept moving from New York to Ohio, Illinois to Salt Lake, in search of a place of religious purity, but in the old South, French Catholicism blended with slavery and African religion to result in the subversion of Catholic saints with dual names drawn from West African traditions.

And on the frontier, Methodist women converted to Quakerism because Friends were more accepting of women's leadership, a path had been broken, which would lead this form of Quakerism to grow and expand across the world--a reality that was not lost on east coast American Friends who had NOT been growing in numbers. In turn, these declining east coast folks sought common ground with their western neighbors, in a formal conference in Richmond Indiana in 1887. In this meeting, which brought together several different varieties of Orthodox Friends, sanctions for out-marriage were relaxed, as was resistance to baptism, as American Quakers, like British Friends, deemed it more sensible to try to keep their communities alive than to worry too much about the details of its life. The Richmond Conference in 1887 was the culmination of the attempt by Rufus Jones and others to re-find the unity in Friends belief and practice. The

fact that it was held in Indiana, not Philadelphia, Baltimore, or Rhode Island, is a reminder of the shift in the Quaker center since the 18th century, when Nantucket, Philadelphia, and North Carolina were the strongholds of Quaker membership. By the end of the 19th century, Quakerism was all but Nantucket, and the meeting, one of the most vigorous since brought there by the Starbuck family in the 17th century, would soon be laid down. But it is no surprise that eastern “old Quaker” names like Wattles, Coffin, Buxton, Hicks, and Jones would reappear in leadership roles in trans-Appalachian America, particularly in service to black refugees and disempowered Native Americans, and in taking Quakerism to distant destinations abroad. At the same time, Quaker schools--originally established as bastions of “guarded education” to protect the innocence of Quaker children until their inner selves were capable of ignoring temptation--now opened themselves to non-Quaker students: a combination of a survival technique, since there were not enough Quaker children enrolled to keep them afloat, and a pro-active outreach campaign to expose more children to Friends principles.

Here I would like to digress a moment to illuminate a couple of points that I glossed over in pursuing the main road of my talk: innocence and outreach. I believe that we can demonstrate that part of Friends religious belief and practice stems from a really very revolutionary notion of human nature, one that runs counter to most of Protestantism, certainly to the Calvinist Puritan-based theology. And that is this: Quaker theology seems to be based in the notion that children are born innocent, not in sin. It follows then that, unlike the Puritan notion that the parents’ job is to use firm punishment to “break the child’s will to God,” the parents’ job is to protect the child’s innocence until it becomes solid enough to *ignore* not *resist* temptation.

My second digression: outreach. There is one historian, Alan Tully who suggests that, pursuant to their withdrawal from politics in Pennsylvania during the mid-eighteenth century crisis about providing leadership and materials to make war, Friends in America contented themselves with sub rosa education of the public--the “Quakerization of the public discourse.” This is certainly consistent with the Friends Council on National Legislation position that one can accomplish a great deal if one doesn’t worry about who gets the credit.

So I invite you to consider those ideas as well as you look ahead at the lives of the Quakers you will examine over the next few weeks.

But to return to my main argument: In both Britain and the U.S., service to disfranchised non-Friends--African Americans, Indians, war victims, urban poor, prisoners, and laborers--became the rising hallmark of late 19th century Friends. As all religions in the western world struggled to remain relevant in a secularizing world--in Darwin’s world--such things as the Young Men’s Christian Association, the Ethical Culture Society, and Christian Science competed for the spiritual loyalties of the “modern” generation.

Before I leave this question of relationships between tending the community within versus reaching out, I want to suggest a simple--and I do mean simple, even oversimplified--dichotomy between various ways of handling the myriad challenges faced by Quaker communities. It was often the case that Hicksite Friends--deeply involved as they were in African American and women’s rights--found themselves working with non-Friends on their projects. For a long while, they maintained the distinctiveness of their lives by preserving the “plain dress” costume--and outward statement of their inward specialness. They often maintained it much longer than their Orthodox counterparts, though they were more likely than their Orthodox counterparts to include non-Friends in their social circles, while Orthodox Friends, who looked more like the “world’s people” maintained the plain speech among themselves, and kept a quite closed social circle. I’m sure you will be able to point out numerous exceptions to this very general rule, but I use this example only to get your juices flowing to think deeply about the multivariate aspects of Friends’ lives, when you listen to, and try to give perspective to, the biographies you will hear in the next weeks. Friends behave differently at various stages of their lives--as someone’s child, or spouse, or parent or as an aging self--and we behave differently when we are facing economic ruin than when we are economically flush, when we are

surrounded by those who share our ideas and habits vs. when surrounded by those who do not. I'm not suggesting that we can predict who will react how, only that these factors are among those that help to shape our perspectives and priorities.

All religions have ritualistic behaviors. For some the ritual involves artifacts: a mezuzah, sacred chalice, or rosary. Even those of us who seek to escape prescribed texts and ritual behavior have prescribed texts and rituals for *avoiding* ritualistic behavior. I think here of my own unprogrammed Quakerism, which thrives on "spontaneous" spoken ministry messages in the context of silent meetings, but in which the person who is spontaneous too frequently, too lengthily, or too provocatively may be "elderred" into a conformity of shorter, less frequent "spontaneity." And though early Quakers shook, shouted and were often incoherently overcome with the messages of God, unprogrammed Quakerism in today's world is almost universally marked by a modulated voice and a well-proportioned academic oratory. A little poetry or singing is OK, but liberal Friends prefer that you not invoke too long or form a prayer to Christ or God, lest we offend the atheists, agnostics, or members of other religions who are a welcomed and treasured part of the openness of our group to the reality of "that of God" in everyone. But we "tolerant" liberal Friends are firmly *intolerant* of, and have difficulty seeking "that of God" in political or economic or religious conservatives.

Yet few Friends are true anarchists--and A. Mitchell Palmer's fanaticism about staying within the confines of capitalist conformity is not all that far-fetched. I often explain to my students that Quakers have been religiously radical, and politically reformist, but not very often revolutionary, sometimes willing to establish alternative small communities, but not usually involved in social overthrow. An 1892 description of British Quakers still has some resonance today: "Quakers ask protection from power; they never seek to subvert power...Penn had the ear of Charles II...Shillitoe prayed with the Emperor of Russia...Quakers were not spies against freedom, but honest reporters of wrong done." [\[1\]](#)

This leads me back to the questions of power and authority. There is a thin line between mystical knowledge and heresy. Who confers authority? How does one discern true authority from fanaticism? How does the community reinforce it? Resist it? Test it? In some religions, authority is conferred by a recognized conversion or anointing ritual. Nineteenth century Quakers, for example, lacking a central authority, and lacking theological schools, developed a tradition known as "recorded ministers" or "elders" to define those whose spoken ministry was consistently pleasing to the constituency. But for every religion, authority--what credentials one needs to have the authoritative word--is constantly being negotiated. Hence Catholics had Vatican II in the 1960s, and Quakers also, in the mid-nineteenth century, established Earlham college because they began to worry that the lay ministry was not well-enough informed, and then, in 1960, established Earlham School of Religion because of concern about a not-well-enough-focused leadership among Friends.

Until recently, most Quaker schools had Quaker leadership and a Quaker board of trustees, and that helped to hold a Quaker center. But now that is changing. Now only the boarding schools--Westtown, George School, and the like, have anything close to one-third Quaker student population, and often non-Friends teachers, administration, and boards. Quakers have been in the minority in Quaker schools for more than a century. Until relatively recently, most Quaker schools had a Quaker patina on the curriculum. This ranged from Haverford's ban on literature and fine arts until well into the twentieth century to required Meeting for Worship in most Quaker schools. But this patina, too, began falling away in the 1960s.

Friends have taken a good deal of leadership in Native American rights, women's equality, justice for African Americans and immigrants--despite A. Mitchell Palmer, and have given leadership to many human rights causes. And we have done so in creative ways. It's unusual for a modern-day Meeting to "release" a couple to take on traveling ministry and then assume responsibility for raising the couple's children. But the old Quaker meetings did just that. Though it is not unusual, in today's setting, for a Quaker school to provide a free or reduced-rate education in return for a parent's service to the Quaker community. Our challenges and

solutions in the modern world are different from those of the “old” Quakers, and thus the lives of others can tell us only so much about the choices we have to make in our own lives.

In 1890, British Friend Caroline Emelia Stephen, watching the atrophying of Friends communities, tried to make Quakerism intelligible for non-Friends in a little book called *Quaker Strongholds*.^[ii] She wrote: The notorious disinclination of Friends to any attempts at proselytizing...probably account for the very common impression that Friends’ meetings are essentially private--mysterious gatherings into which it would be intrusive to seek admission. Many people, indeed, probably suppose (if they think about it) that such meetings are no longer held; that the Society is fast dying out...” Other British Friends, concerned with the same image of Quakers, joined John Rountree and others in developing Woodbrooke, the Quaker study center near Birmingham, England. Rountree was concerned that “for the last fifty years the Society of Friends so far from leading as it did in the seventeenth century, has been an unintelligent spectator on the greatest revolution in religious thought since the time of the Reformation.” He insisted, as did the people you are to encounter in the next few weeks, that religion must speak to the here and now, must respond to the circumstances in which it finds itself, and must take its center from that, as did traveling minister Rachel Hicks or mid-western Holiness leader Hannah Whitall Smith.

So let me restate my underlying premise in a more overt way: Quakerism, as it has developed over the past three centuries has been the result of an organic and dynamic relationship between an individual and the Divine (an external entity), the Inward Light (that portion of the Divine which we can discern within), the family, monthly meeting, yearly meeting, larger international Quaker community, the local society, economy, and political situation, non-Friends, the demands of various stages of life (childhood, marriage partner, parenthood, breadwinner, citizen, elder--with a small “e”,) and concurrent events (e.g., wars, religious or social upheavals, technological revolutions, natural disasters, scientific discoveries, economic booms and busts, etc.). Friends long-held belief in the possibility of innocence--in being “Above Adam and beyond falling”--reinforced by American optimism, 19th century Transcendentalism, Hicksite idealism and Orthodox traditionalism, has offered a context to these exemplary American lives that may help us, in today’s world, contemplate the limits and opportunities of our own lives.

I’ve outlined some of the central tenets of Friends belief and practice--Inward Light and “that of God”, non-violence, continuing revelation, service, education, sacraments--outward markers of inward belief, radicalism, independence of spirit and the relationship to authority. I’ve suggested that each has many meanings and facets, and may be turned in the light like a prism to exhibit many different shafts of light. I’ve not even touched on other Friends testimonies: simplicity, integrity, the melding of secular and sacred behavior. Those will have to wait for another talk.

Nevertheless, while we investigate individual Friends’ lives, and their meaning within the wider framework, I would encourage us to remember that what unites Friends--from Margaret Fell to A. Mitchell Palmer, from James Nayler to Hannah Whitall Smith to Richard Nixon--is our insistence that staying true to the Inward Light is of paramount importance. Sometimes the Inward Light can overwhelm common sense. But the tension--sometimes creative, sometimes destructive--between individual leading and community discipline, has been Friends vitality--and our undoing--since the 1650s.

Suggested reading:

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[\[1\]](#) Smith, p. 96