

AN OVERVIEW: THE QUERIES AS CORPORATE SELF-DISCIPLINE

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Queries, 1997 rev.

for Pendle Hill Monday Evening Lecture series, 4/7/1997

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This new Monday Evening Lecture Series is entitled "The Queries as Discipline". A working definition of a spiritual discipline is an activity we initiate in order to be present to God. A discipline is generally a regular practice that provides the space for paying attention to the divine teacher.

But before we examine how the Queries might be used as such a practice, it might be interesting to know where our queries came from, what earlier Friends had in mind, and how they used them. This is not so that we can imitate earlier Friends, but that, knowing the queries' derivation, we can make a more informed choice about our own use of them.

The 1972 edition of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice* pointed to London Yearly Meeting's specific queries in the late 1600s. But I wanted to know what had been the experience of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. So the past few days I've been over at the Friends Historical Library delving in the early Yearly Meeting minutes. I discovered that Friends did not start out with a series of Queries. They brought with them the experience of Friends' experience in Great Britain, and they continued in close communication with Friends in what Frederick Tolles described as a Quaker "Atlantic culture". Quakers here in the Delaware Valley started at their very first Yearly Meeting session in 1681 by asking for an account of the four particular monthly meetings in the area.

In other words, the function of the Yearly Meeting was to oversee the affairs of Truth in the whole area. In the next few years the Yearly Meeting came into unity and passed advice to the local meetings on such things as not selling rum to the Indians, and against the inordinate and unseemly taking of tobacco. In 1686 the Yearly Meeting requested that two Friends from each Quarter "that are capable to give an account of the affairs of Truth" should attend the next Yearly Meeting.

In 1687 the minutes began to record the reports by the Quarterly Meetings. In 1701 Friends united to ask that the Quarterly Meetings bring written reports on the state of the meetings. The following year they were specifically asked to bring reports of ministers and elders who arrived from Great Britain, were named, or died.

Thus far things had been relatively informal. But in 1703 Friends were asked to collect all the papers of Yearly Meeting advice to give them to a committee which wrote up one paper on discipline and one paper on practice. These were approved at the 1704 Yearly Meeting and hand copied for each Quarterly Meeting. I suppose this might be considered the first Book of Discipline. It had no Queries in it, as we think of them.

Two years later the Yearly Meeting's annual epistle to the Quarterly and Monthly meetings exhorted Friends to observe strictly the advices collected in 1704. Each Quarter was asked to name representatives to the Yearly Meeting who would bring an account of how things were going in the Quarter. A new advice was approved, not to have any wood or stone markers on graves, and to remove any that had appeared. Friends were asked to report the next year how this was accomplished. These requests were phrased as statements, not questions.

Friends must have been a bit lax because in 1709 the Quarters were reminded to send representatives with an account of the state of the meeting in writing so that Friends could truly know the state of the whole. As war

was impinging on them, Friends also were asked to bring an account of sufferings for faithfully upholding Friends' ancient testimonies against participation in war.

During these first three decades of the Yearly Meeting, the Quarterly Meetings brought questions of policy for definitive ruling. Questions were raised if a father and son could marry sisters (no), or if it were unlawful to hold slaves (equivocated), or about striped and colored cloth (the Discipline is already clear enough). The response to this last question indicates the authority seen as vested in the advices agreed upon by the Yearly Meeting.

In 1717 a suggestion was brought to make the Book of Discipline more public, presumably so that Friends in the hinterland would know what the rules were. Because, it seems to me, the advices had become a sort of rule book. After consultation at the Quarterly and Monthly meeting levels, in 1718 Yearly Meeting appointed a committee to revise and amend the advices. The following year the committee's work was approved and copied into the minutes. The epistle to the Quarterly and Monthly Meeting that year stated:

"This is called our Discipline, in the exercise where of persuasion and gentle reading, is, and ought to be our practice. And when any (after all our Christian endeavours) this perverseness or stubbornness, cannot be reclaimed, the Extent of our Judgement is censure or disowning such to be of our communion. And as this authority and practice is Christian, so is it laudable and reasonable in society, for the good and reputation of the whole body ought to claim our greatest regard and subordinately that of every member.

"Hence arises a care and concern for decency and comely order: in all our meetings for worship and business, as well as orderly walking, honestly, and plainness in the particular members of our society.

...

"And whereas, it hath been experienced, that in these meetings, great comfort, support & satisfaction hath been received and enjoyed, when the members have attended them in awe, humility & love, with no other views but the service of God, and the help and assistance of their brethren.

"This meeting doth therefore in brotherly love, exhort all friends, that are or would be accounted members of those meetings, that they come together, in uprightness & simpleness of heart, suitable to our calling and the Dignity of that power, which, as we so believe, rightly and meekly will provide and govern, in all our meetings: And there, wait for the spirit of meekness and Charity, which is the essential adorning which God will always beautify, and cloath his [?] Church withal, and without which none can be truly member thereof, nor really serviceable therein...."

The lengthy hand-copied document included advice and direction to overseers, dealing with personal differences, public scandal, offenses against the church, backbiting, disowned persons not permitted in meetings for business, none to oppose ministers publicly, burials, attending meetings, and the form marriage certificates should take.

The earliest printed book I have seen is a 1773 reprint of the holograph 1722 "Ancient Testimony of the People Called Quakers," bound in leather with "Rules of our Christian Discipline, extracted from the Minutes of our Yearly Meetings". It has no Queries in it. Instead, using some familiar language, it is a list of advices, organized in alphabetical order by topic.

However, in 1755, marking the reform movement so ably described by Jack Marietta, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Queries were revised with additions. Friends were directed to consider them once every three months, with answers to be prepared by overseers or other weighty Friends. There were 13 queries, covering the outward behavior expected of people professing to be Friends. Appended were four administrative queries and nine for ministers and elders.

In 1797 Philadelphia Yearly Meeting directed that *Rules of Discipline and Christian Advices of the Yearly Meeting* be printed. It included advices arranged alphabetically by topic heading, nine general queries, seven for ministers and elders, and three annual (administrative) queries. By 1806 sufficient changes had been approved that a new printing was ordered. It was also decided to prepare a selection of advices to be printed in sufficient quantity that all members could have their own copy. This seems to be the first time the advices were in general circulation.

Jumping ahead to an 1834 Orthodox *Book of Discipline*, there are 8 queries, to be answered in writing once a year by preparative, monthly, and quarterly meetings, as per the directive from 1806 (before the separation). There are also 5 statistical queries, which I will ignore. The queries are short and to the point. Accompanying them are advices, that spell out the received wisdom of the Religious Society of Friends.

Nearly a hundred years later, a Hicksite 1927 *Book of Discipline* offers 12 queries, to be considered one per month after reading the appropriate advices. But now only starred ones need to be answered in writing. These requiring answers involve aid to necessitous Friends, temperance and abstinence education, labor conditions and voluntary social work, learning about the problems of business and industry, civic activities, and peace. Not requiring written answers are the ones having to do with worship, the meeting community, and spiritual life.

One wonders why the latter were exempted. Was it because they were thought to be ephemeral, or less relevant, or more subjective?

The 1955 *Faith and Practice* was the joint effort of the merged Yearly Meetings, and returns to an earlier sense of the purpose and use of queries. There are 12 of them, and they are to be considered once a year, with answers formulated for the meeting's own records, although they may be included in the monthly meeting report to quarterly meeting.

The thing that interests me in 1955 is the explanation of the purpose of the queries: "first to enable individuals and Meetings to examine themselves in relation to the standard of conduct which the Society of Friends has established for itself, and secondly to indicate the nature of information which might provide the basis for reports from the Monthly Meetings to the Quarterly Meetings and from the Quarterly Meetings to the Yearly Meeting." (p. 90)

By the 1972 edition, this purpose has changed significantly. Now the Queries are seen as "a profile of the Quaker way of life and a reminder of the ideals Friends seek to attain." (p. 187) There is no longer any sense that Friends have a standard of conduct. Now there is only a reminder of the ideals which seem high and very difficult to attain. This edition offers 15 groups of queries, of which only a dozen are intended for corporate use. They are to be considered once every "one or two" years, and Friends are urged to be creative in their use of them.

Now we have the brand new revisions on which Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has been working so hard. I've been given a draft of the Queries. Their introduction continues the 1972 explanation, further refining it to state "the queries reflect the Quaker way of life, reminding Friends of the ideals we seek to attain." It adds that "Friends approach queries as a guide to self-examination, using them not as an outward set of rules, but as a framework within which we assess our convictions, and examine, clarify and consider prayerfully the direction of our lives and the life of the community." The language was chosen, it explains, to encourage "the probing-in-depth of an issue or a concern." It is interesting that we are not expected to probe ourselves in depth, or invite the Light to probe us, but rather to deal in depth with the outward issues.

To summarize, over the 315 or 316 years since the first Yearly Meeting in these parts there was active concern for the "affairs of Truth" with gradual development of advices which became definitive of the outward Quaker lifestyle. Queries were adopted to ascertain if the advices were being maintained. Then in

this century the sense of both corporate responsibility for the behavior of all Friends, and the sense of compulsion to maintain uniform behavior, vanished. Today we have lots of good questions that point to the ideals exemplified in Friends' tradition.

It is good to remember that the Religious Society of Friends in its worship and its governance is based on the experience, not just a theory, that the divine is present, and loves us, and will teach and guide us in the specific circumstances of our individual and corporate life. Furthermore, and this seems to me to be crucial -- at least in my own experience -- in order to be able to really live a Quaker lifestyle in love I must be changed, transformed inwardly. I must be empowered by the divine to respond in healthy new, loving ways to old challenges and behavior patterns, as well as to new opportunities.

Early Friends used the images of their old self being crucified and Christ being resurrected within them to describe this experience of transformation. The important thing is the experience: the Light shows us those parts of ourselves that are out of alignment with it, and also empowers us to change and come into harmony with it. On our own, under the force of our own will power, the expectations of the queries become a series of impossible hurdles. The temptation, then, is to change the wording to make them optional suggestions, or easier to attain.

Over the generations Friends have found that the Divine Presence, the inward Teacher, has taught certain things to us as a group. These lessons are not intellectual constructs but practical guides for daily living so that through our personal lives Friends might bear witness to the world of these teachings and to the love and power of God. As we all know, these testimonies had to do with our form of worship in expectant waiting, with plainness of speech and dress, with a lifestyle of honesty and integrity in business and domestic spheres, with peace, equality, and simplicity.

There was a well-defined lifestyle by which any Quaker anywhere could be readily identified. Those who made other choices could not be owned as part of the meeting and its witness to the world. For better or worse this is no longer the case. However, we are still concerned to live lives of faithful attentiveness. As Friends we are continually invited to bring more and more parts of our lives into harmony with divine love and truth. The queries offer us an opportunity to hear God calling us to a more faithful life.

Let's turn to this new document, the 1996 Philadelphia Yearly Meeting revised and enlarged, improved and updated Queries. As someone who moved from the Philadelphia area in 1960, and transferred my membership a decade or so later, I come to this with fresh eyes. I have not been involved in its creation or deliberation. As I read and reread these queries my initial response was "this was the work of a committee!" It was apparently a large, broadly-based, and very hard-working committee. There is something here for everyone. Every base is touched.

A Friend close to the process confided that she didn't like these new Queries because she felt overwhelmed by them. There are so many, making so many demands on her. When I first read them my suggestion for a subtitle for tonight's session was "so many trees: is there a forest here somewhere?" The danger is there are so many we feel it necessary to pick and choose which ones to pay attention to and which we can safely ignore. Being human, I suspect we will emphasize the ones that are easy or comfortable, and ignore the ones that prick us. All too easily the Queries might become the "optional extras" that are nice but are not considered firm obligations.

I think of John Woolman's example, when we are confronted with so much evil in the world, and so many demands on my attention. There are such complicated interconnections between the blouse I buy and the child who sewed in some other country. In Thomas Kelly's famous phrase, we are not asked to be crucified on every cross. But there is one cross that is mine. Woolman shows me the place to begin is to be still and ask God to show me what step I should take, now.

Let's look at the personal queries, those that are addressed to individual Friends. They point to areas in which the way I live my life is brought into greater harmony with what Friends understand God is teaching us. If I find I am unwilling or unable to change in a specific aspect, they offer an invitation to ask for divine assistance. A good and frequent prayer is "Thank you for your love. In return, I want to be more like you. But I can't do it on my own. I keep trying and failing. Please help me."

But sometimes that doesn't seem to work. Then it is time for the prayer of relinquishment. A friend of mine had struggled with overeating. She had tried every diet that came along. Finally she realized she was addicted to fat. This knowledge did not help her resist it. In desperation she prayed, "I don't understand, God. I've tried my best. If you want me to be a fat lady for Christ, I am willing to do what you want. Your will, not my idea of how things ought to be, is what I really want." Her craving for fat was taken away and from that day she has been enabled to eat sensibly, gradually losing weight, and now maintaining a healthy size.

I want to talk about the relationship between queries and advices. At least in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, first came the desire to know how the meetings were doing so that help could be extended if it was needed. At first the representatives at Quarterly and Yearly Meeting answered on behalf of their meetings, then the meetings themselves considered and sent answers.

Gradually over time the advices were considered and approved. They were the accumulated wisdom received by the Religious Society of Friends. The advices were written down and arranged in alphabetical order by topic. Then in the reform movement of 1755 formal queries were pulled together. A need was felt to arrest the decay of the Society. The advices became seen as rules, and the queries were formalized to see if the advices were being upheld in all their particulars.

I mention this because fairly recently, when Lake Erie Yearly Meeting was considering the relationship between our sexuality and spirituality, the physical and the holy in it, the immediate response was to form an ad hoc committee to draw up some queries. Our monthly meeting took the same tack. To their surprise (not being aware of the relationship between advices and queries) none of these committees were very successful in drawing up queries. They couldn't agree on what they were asking about.

Let me underline that. Queries were to check how Friends were upholding the already agreed-upon testimonies. They were not invented as a technique for figuring out what our opinion is on a given subject. Early queries were quite straightforward and brief. It has been only in this century that the advices in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting seem to have withered and their content put into expanded queries.

You might be interested to know how a few other unprogrammed Yearly Meetings have dealt with advices and queries. Britain Yearly Meeting's new *Quaker Faith & Practice* (approved in 1994) has the advices and queries mixed together. There are 42 of them, some purely declarative, some a mix of question and statement. The Introduction says the Queries "should continue to be a challenge and inspiration to Friends in their personal lives and in their life as a religious community which knows the guidance of the universal spirit of Christ, witnessed to in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth." (1.01)

It seems clear to me that there is no expectation that these will provide a corporate discipline. I'm told they are most often used in ecumenical work, and that on occasion they are borrowed as themes in local church sermons.

The 1985 *Faith and Practice of New England Yearly Meeting of Friends* takes a more traditional path. It has advices grouped under twelve headings corresponding to the dozen queries which immediately follow. The purpose of the queries is "to assist us to consider prayerfully the true source of spiritual strength and the extent to which the conduct of our lives gives witness to our Christian faith." (p. 211) Monthly and Quarterly meetings are expected to read the advices and queries at regular intervals. There seems to be no expectation of regular written responses.

It is interesting that among unprogrammed Friends only the Conservative branches still seem to expect the discipline of regular written responses to the queries.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's new Queries seem to be among the most lengthy of any Yearly Meeting's. I have not seen a draft of new advices, but in the 1972 edition they follow the Queries and take less than half the number of pages. I find this curious. Friends still have quite firm ideas about what members should be doing with their outward lives. But we no longer seem to have the spiritual authority to collect this as advice to our Religious Society.

Instead sometimes we write questions whose answers are implied by the way the questions are worded: "Am I aware of the place of water, air and soil in my life? Do I consider with care the necessity of purchasing substances hazardous to the environment? Do I act as a faithful steward of the environment in the use and disposal of such hazardous substances?"

Sometimes we write totally open-ended questions that give the implication that whatever one thinks or responds is acceptable: "When a member has lifted up a concern, how does our Meeting respond?" or "What does our Meeting understand to be the meaning and implication of our testimonies of simplicity and integrity?". At first glance this reminds me of a certain conversation with Alice:

"`When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, `it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less.'

"`The question is,' said Alice, `whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'

"`The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, `which is to be master -- that's all.'"

(Through the Looking Glass, chapter. 6)

Here the definitions of simplicity or integrity are saved from being a matter of personal taste or choice by the need to gather a sense of the local group's understanding of it. But no longer, apparently, is there a sense by the whole Yearly Meeting, let alone the entire Religious Society of Friends, of what constitutes a Quaker lifestyle of simplicity and integrity.

The question of a loss of spiritual authority is a serious one. But perhaps it is not the topic for this evening's discussion. Let me give another example pointing to its absence: the new version of the old advice against the use of alcohol. Now there is no directive that Friends are those who do not abuse their bodies, wherein the Spirit dwells, by the use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. Instead there is the broad and somewhat vague, "Am I temperate in all things?" followed by a warning but not a prohibition: "Am I open to counsel and advice on overindulgence? Do I take seriously the hazards associated with addictive and mood-altering substances?"

What smoker does not know already that there is a health risk in the use of tobacco? Are we unable to say "This addiction is wrong. How are we helping each other to be open to God's power to overcome it?" Are our meetings not so filled with the power of God that we have an intoxicatingly live substitute for the dominant culture's numbing addictions?

The topic for this evening is specifically to inquire into the Queries as corporate discipline. Let me describe for you the experience of my meeting, which may also be the experience some of you have had, particularly in years past. For the nearly 30 years that Cleveland Meeting was a member of Ohio Yearly Meeting (Conservative), we answered the queries in writing and sent the answers to the Quarterly Meeting which summarized the responses from the monthly meetings and forwarded them to the Yearly Meeting. The Yearly Meeting, in turn, summarized the answers from the quarters.

When I first participated in this process, I can remember a few Friends in Cleveland fussing about not making our responses too revealing: they did not want to admit to failings, or air our dirty linen to the quarter. This of course, was directly opposed to one of the original purposes of the queries. [The assumption in the 18th century was that the meetings examine themselves to see how well they were upholding the standards of Friends, and if there was difficulty, then the quarterly or yearly meeting would send help.]

Gradually, as some Friends in my meeting retired and moved away, and new people came who didn't realize we were supposed to put on a "nice" façade, Cleveland's query answers got increasingly honest and searching. An interesting thing happened in response. The other meetings in the quarter, in varying degrees, began to move past their traditional formula responses and also began to respond at more depth and honesty. Often individual Friends would thank representatives from Cleveland for our answers. I am told that since Cleveland has been disowned, the other meetings are reverting to their safe, formula responses.

What did Cleveland Friends get out of the exercise of responding to the queries? A great deal, I think. Sometimes folks would complain about the seeming archaic language and issues that did not seem germane to our late 20th century lives. But on closer examination, we often found fresh springs of truth that enlarged our understanding of ways we were being called to faithful living.

The rhythm of annual grappling with the same dear old questions provided a familiar structure, a discipline, in which we looked, together, at each of the areas in which earlier Friends had been called to witness. Like any discipline, considering the queries and writing a response is an activity we initiate in order to be present to God. It is a regular practice that provides the space for paying attention to the divine teacher. If not done attentively, it can grow stale or become a dull, dead routine or ritual.

My guess is that too often this is what has happened over the years with the queries in general, and why their use as a regular discipline has fallen into disuse in many meetings. We found that the queries provided the excuse, as it were, to take a piece of the spiritual life of the meeting and examine--wrestle with--our understanding of how we are called to live as Friends.

Sometimes the discussion of the query was the high point of a monthly meeting. In fact, the most recent query we discussed came at the end of a rather tedious, long-winded, not particularly well grounded, meeting for business. The query we were considering was simply, "How do we recognize what we are called to be obedient to?" As people spoke to it, the silence deepened and lengthened between speakers.

Finally the speaking ceased altogether and we were wrapped together in quietness and love. The clerk ended the meeting, but we were loath to leave. We were in the presence of God, and found it good.

The brochure mentions the use of queries as corporate self-discipline. First, what is *corporate self-discipline*? Do we have an oxymoron here? Group/self? As Friends, I think we grope for an understanding that the group is greater than the sum of its parts, but is dependent on each individual doing his or her part. In this age of extremes of rampant individualism and mindless mass consumerism, we sense that being part of a vibrant faith community offers a third alternative.

Careful and prayerful consideration of the queries can be the outward structure that melds the individuals and the faith community. If the intent of our meetings and of Friends is to grow ever deeper in our relationship with the divine, and we have chosen the Quaker path as our way, then the queries offer a checklist of how faithful we are as we trudge along on our journey, together. There is a Quaker way. It is not quite the same as any other way. This is not to say other ways are not valid, only that it is probably counter-productive to try to walk on several paths simultaneously.

Yes, we can learn from other faiths. Yes, we can worship with others. Yes, we can give thanks that God has taught diverse peoples in diverse ways, all with the same underlying message of love, and drawing humans

God-ward. But we have chosen one way, the Quaker way. The queries help us stay on our path and deepen within it.

Our Quaker way is predicated on the expectation that the divine will teach us, inwardly. We will be taught individually and we will be taught together, as a faith community. Our responsibility is to be teachable, and not a stiff-necked, stubborn, self-righteous people. A humble opening of ourselves to be searched by the divine through the queries is one way to remain teachable.

A new query reads: "Is there a living silence as we worship in which we are drawn together by the power of God in our midst?"

We could answer, "yes, sometimes, and we try to have it happen more often." or, "no, not really, but we have good pot lucks".

Or we could prayerfully consider what makes a "living silence". What does it really mean to "worship"? Are we really "drawn together"? What is it like? What is the lasting result?

George Fox continually referred to the "power of God" or the "power of the Lord". What is our experience of this power? If we haven't experienced it together, what is hindering its bursting forth among us? What is God trying to teach us, in our meeting, today, through our consideration of these things?

Then, after prayerful consideration, and after every momentous time in our meetings for business, we ought to stop and ask "what have we just experienced together? What have we learned just now, that we must not forget? How do we incorporate it into our personal and meeting life? How do we teach it to newcomers? How do we tell other Friends about it?"

Queries can provide an opportunity for a corporate discipline of paying attention to what God might have to teach us.