

Elizabeth Gurney Fry: A Quaker Mess

by Barbara Birch

"The challenge of the shared priesthood is to realize our messiness before God and to surrender to Spirit as we are."¹

There is a lot of reevaluation going on these days as Friends reexamine our history and our venerable historic figures. In some cases, reexamination means that some iconic Friends lose their luster when moral inconsistencies emerge into the open. In other cases, stories of messiness flesh out our spiritual ancestors as humans and so lend greater depth and nuance to their spiritual writings. Chad Thralls' 2011 article 'embodied' Thomas Kelly for me, and my appreciation of his lyrical testimony expanded after I knew how he confronted his inner demons through surrender to Spirit.²

In this essay, I am trying to humanize the venerable Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845). Her messy humanity raises up what she accomplished despite signs of 'mental health issues'. The contradictions in her life also raise some interesting questions about embodiment and spirituality. Elizabeth Gurney Fry was a tireless prison reformer and recorded minister well known inside and outside the Religious Society of Friends. She was "a complex woman who lived in the constant tension between her role as a minister and her duties as wife and mother."³ In addition, she had to deal with ill-health, depression, anxiety, and alcohol/opium dependence throughout her life.

Exploring the paradoxes in Fry's lifeworld might help us better acknowledge our messiness together so that we can support one another humanely. Human messiness is the norm, not the exception; going and growing through inner conflicts can be life-changing. We might become more faithful Friends, our Monthly meetings might be more Friendly, and our Society might grow more welcoming if recognize the inevitable turmoil we experience and help each other uncover and grow the seeds of self-love and peace.

First, a little history. The first generation of Friends advocated for an embodied and demonstrative faith: The second coming had already occurred and Christ was present in convinced Friends as the Light Within. After the James Naylor debacle in 1656, Quaker leaders realized that they needed to show that they were not dangerous seditionists, so they began to eschew and discourage enthusiasms, embracing conformity to a strict code of behavior. Rufus Jones wrote, "As an actual fact of history, [The Society of Friends] soon

¹ Dandelion, Ben Pink, *Confident Quakerism* Pendle Hill Pamphlet #410 p. 28-29.

² Thralls, Chad, 'Strained, Breathless, and Hurried: Learning from the Life of Thomas R. Kelly', May 1, 2011 Friends Journal. <https://www.friendsjournal.org/3011052/>.

³ Cronk, S. "Elizabeth Fry by June Rose: A Review" Quaker History, Fall 1983, No. 2, pages 135-136.

became a very conservative body. What was planned to be a vital, growing body, expanding to meet the needs and aspirations of each new generation, very soon congealed into a fairly rigid form which persisted for long period..."⁴ Furthermore, Quakerism, influenced by Puritanism and Evangelicalism, took on conventional Christian and patriarchal values which contributed to a culture of perfectionism and disembodiment. By the time Elizabeth Fry was born, Quaker spirituality minimized the body, treating it as nothing more than an earthly container or "dust wreath" for Spirit to inhabit.⁵ This type of inflexible, disembodied, and repressive culture contributed to the mental health issues Fry experienced during her lifetime.

Even as a child, Fry was plagued by irrational fears, sadness, and panic attacks. Her chronic anxiety may have been the result of genetics because her childhood was to all appearances comfortable and loving. Her health problems continued into adolescence, when she started self-medicating with alcohol and laudanum. Laudanum, a mixture of opium and alcohol, was a common remedy for many ailments at the time. As Fry grew into adulthood, she felt conflicts between what she should be and do, and what she wanted to be and do. For example, she grew up in the worldly Gurney family but she also felt longings to be a plain Quaker. She wanted simple plain but "she loved, she needed, the best of everything: linen, muslin, meat and wine."⁶

The tension between 'Godly' behavior and 'unGodly' behavior was a constant in Fry's life. She wondered how God would judge her after death, and how the vain and worldly pursuits she enjoyed, like dancing and singing, might affect her chances at immortality. Her susceptibility to peer pressure and the external judgment of others, her difficulty forming opinions and setting her own boundaries, and her 'people-pleasing' are symptoms of social anxiety.⁷

Fulfilling the expectations of her time, Fry married and had many children and several miscarriages. She took no part in the budding feminism of her time. She handled her responsibilities as a wife, mother, and family member in the extended family she had through birth and acquired by marriage. However, Fry felt led to public work as a minister and prison reformer. At a time when women were supposed to love homemaking, children, and husbands, Fry set different goals for herself. Like other Friends, 'doing good' gave Fry a sense of worth and agency. Unfortunately, her public interests and career sometimes met with ambivalence from her family, relatives, the Quaker community, and the larger British culture.

Fry experienced a lack of personal agency over her body, emotions, time, work, movement, social status, and money. To survive in this alienating environment, Fry continued using alcohol, seemingly without awareness of the irony of her dependence. "Nevertheless, Betsy [Fry] was firmly convinced that for herself drink was a necessity for health. 'I sometimes

⁴ Jones, Rufus, 'We must help Answer our Prayers' *Friends Intelligencer* 4-6-1946. Extract reprinted in *Friends Journal* January 15, 1963

⁵ Jones, Rufus, *Practical Christianity*, page 31 retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/practicalchristi00jone/page/n13/mode/2up>

⁶ Rose, June, (1980) *Elizabeth Fry*. St. Martin's Press New York, NY. p 28.

⁷ Skidmore, Gil *Elizabeth Fry: A Quaker Life*, Rowman Altamira, 2005 page 43

think of leaving off malt liquor and wine....but it appears almost impossible if I do that to be well,' she wrote in 1802. She knew drink made her feel heavy, languid, and stupid but apparently did not connect her own 'medicinal' intake with the cheap gin or beer that gave temporary oblivion to the labouring poor."⁸ Alcohol dependence is both a symptom and a cause of disembodiment. Alcohol numbs the senses, closes the mind, and interferes with awareness of Spirit.

Fry's faith was double-edged. On the one hand, she enjoyed a little more freedom than many women of her time and place, but the contradictions between the strict standards of plain Quaker culture versus the life of freedom, purpose, comfort and pleasure she craved caused her constant internal discord. Her journals are filled with self-improvement checklists to be a better wife, mother, and Christian. She confided only in her diaries, which her daughters carefully edited after her death.

It is unclear whether the alcohol and laudanum helped Fry cope with fears, anxiety, and depression, and enabled her ministry, or whether they ultimately caused her more harm than good. Fry's biographer June Rose thought that by the end of her life, "... the wine and opium she took daily to allay her anxiety and soothe her pains were almost certainly contributing to her physical and mental distress.....Because she was forced to be inactive, her need for drugs increased; yet while she was ill there was little hope of a return to public service that could lift her out of her depression."⁹ In today's world, Fry could have found relief in the drugs that many people take with less danger of addiction and social opprobrium. She may have avoided the patriarchal perfectionism and rigid social rules and boundaries that sucked away her sense of embodiment.

Fry is an enigma. Freedom from addiction is associated with positive embodiment; sobriety keeps the union between mind, body, and spirit open, so that Spirit can with courage and joy. Yet Fry, despite her dependence on alcohol, was recognized and is still recognized as a spiritually gifted minister. However, messy paradoxes like this may be common. Lately I came across what might be a similar puzzle. Matthew 11:18-19 says, "For, when John came, neither eating nor drinking, people said, 'He has a demon in him'; and now that the Child of Humanity has come, eating and drinking, they are saying, 'Here is a glutton and a wine drinker, a friend of tax collectors and outcasts! And yet, Wisdom Sophia is vindicated by her actions.'"¹⁰ These comments are usually taken to mean that the people of the time were disappointed in both John (the Baptist) and Jesus because they lacked credibility.

The verses make a slanderous allegation: that neither John nor Jesus was a good prophet, and certainly not messiah material. The gossip alleged that John was mentally ill and Jesus was a glutton and heavy drinker. The gossipers judged John as insane because he lived ascetically and preferred isolation, and they condemned Jesus because he overconsumed food and wine at gatherings where he ate with sinners and outsiders of polite society. The insults imply that an 'unbalanced' human like John or a 'disorderly' human like Jesus were

⁸ Rose, June, (1980) Elizabeth Fry. St. Martin's Press New York, NY. Page 49.

⁹ Rose, June, (1980) Elizabeth Fry. St. Martin's Press New York, NY. Page 201.

¹⁰ *A New New Testament: A Bible for the 21st Century* by Hal Tausig, (ed.) Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Boston, MA : 2013.

flawed and therefore anything they could say is flawed as well. Anything such sinners would try to teach us must be suspect.

Most Bible commentators assume the gossip was not true. John lived an ascetic life as a spiritual discipline, and Jesus was temperate and sober. But suppose the gossip were true? And does it matter if it were true? Are prophesies and testimonies suspect if they come from messy humans? Part of the gossip is not slander. Jesus did eat with tax collectors and other “dregs of society.” No one denies that. On the contrary, a main tenet in Jesus’s forgiving ministry to messy humanity is that all are deserving of love and forgiveness.

It is interesting to consider that John was mentally unstable and Jesus overate and overdrank at times. The heretical ideas of John as mentally ill and Jesus as an occasional glutton and drunk put a different light on the final words of the verse. “And yet, Wisdom Sophia is vindicated by her actions.” Elizabeth Fry may not be an enigma at all if her ministry is justified by its results.

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