

OCTOBER DISCUSSION

By Robert Griswold

Reading the proposed online discussion for October at Western Friend has jolted me into a response. Being too ancient for modern technology discussions, I am resorting to a piece of written text.

ONE: What benefit do I gain from the study of Quaker history?

The “benefit” for me has been an understanding of the essential purpose of early Friends. These Friends wanted share their discovery that human beings are universally flawed by their culture and that there is a remedy for that flaw. Human culture universally generates human beings who construct a self or ego that becomes the operating agent of their lives directing their behavior. Early Friends knew from their own direct experience of Divine Reality that guidance by the self and other-created self was the cause of the all the disasters that befall humankind. To correct this flaw, it is necessary to be willing to surrender this self (reach a point of despair that self can work) and sit silent, humbled and open until an inward awareness of Divine Reality comes to guide and comfort. And then, to make this the constant practice of one’s life, alone and with others. This is the “pearl of great price” and there is no other “benefit” nor should we seek one.

TWO: How does your own view of the “essential purpose of Quakerism” guide your reading of Quaker history?

I have no interest in the “essential purpose of Quakerism”. My lack of interest is because no such thing exists. Quakerism is a mere abstraction that allows us to pretend to be talking about something. It has no definition that Quakers share. In philosophy this is called reification – giving something substance where there is no substance. Quakers can have a purpose (see above) – Quakerism cannot.

I no longer read early Friends writing trying for an intellectual understanding. What I seek is a relationship with the experience they reveal to fit what has been revealed to me in my experience of the Divine. The intellect lives in words, but words are merely pointing devices. Grasping words in the intellect does not reach to an experience of the sacred as early Friends made clear.

Aside from that, my experience in speaking with Friends (this being un-programmed Friends) leads me to be doubtful that most have more than the slightest familiarity with the basic writings of early Friends or even of contemporary Friends. Many do get “Quakerism 101” but that is never sufficient for knowing you are a Quaker. Fox’s epistles must be read, reread and reread until we get past the words. Who do you know who has read all of William Sewell’s, *The History of the Rise, Increase, and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers*? The study of early or late Friends writing is hard work and most Friends seem not up to it. Thus, they are not guided by it.

THREE: Which aspects of Quaker history might offer the most vital help to Friends today?

There are no such “aspects”. Shopping around is what we do best in our consumer culture because it is what we are trained to do. Serious study is outside the realm of what is expected of us as good consumers. Quakers who wish to be serious must be prepared to undertake serious study.

Robert Griswold is a member of Mountain View Meeting in Denver, CO (IMYM).

