

Why “Meal with a Theme”?

by Hubert Morel-Seytoux

The membership of churches, and of places of worship in general, is declining. The reason is likely due to some level of disappointment among the members. Individuals may break from their original church because of the gap they sense between its “professed” belief (as George Fox would put it) and the contradictory behavior of the presumed disciples of the faith. How could religious leaders insist that in schools the commandment “Thou shall not kill” be posted on its walls while at the same time supporting and even promoting the expenditure of \$ 716 billion for the so-called annual “defense” budget? It seems that the first reason for this break was the disparity between a professed ethical code and an actual behavior.

The second reason is more intellectual. The individuals were often asked to recite beliefs which their personal human experience rejected as incredible.

Both heart and mind are involved in that rupture. We should rejoice at that break as a move away from hypocrisy and superstition. However there is a huge negative side to it. Before the separation the individual belonged to a community. Now the individual is isolated.

In a recent book “Disenchanted Lives” (2018, reviewed in the last issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine) the author, E. Marshal Brooks, reports interviews with ex-Mormons. In one case, as a result, one former member lost a long-life friendship and attempts to revive it were rebuffed on multiple occasions. Former members seem to be completely ostracized. In addition one states: “I miss feeling I have something to fall back on. Even if it’s all just make believe.” (page 107).

All of us know from experience the need and value of having a supportive community within which we can feel the warmth of genuine human friendship. These “exiles” need a new spiritual home. There is evidence in our own midst that there are such exiles looking for a spiritual home. Once in a while such individuals drop in and attend our “Meeting for Worship” at Redwood Forest Friends Meeting. They experience the hour of worship, possibly have conversations during snack time and then they leave. How much of that experience teaches them about Quakers and Quakerism? Most importantly does it provide an answer to the question: Could it be my spiritual home?

Obviously they could not get an answer to that question unless they learned more, not so much about Quakerism but about Quakers, because what they need is not so much a new ideological “ism” but rather and much more importantly, a community. What does one learn about Quakers during an hour of silence? Unless one is already a seasoned Quaker, it may be silence, plain and simple.

So the idea came to create an opportunity for these “exiles” to meet over a meal, say once a month, with some Quakers and **talk!** However the talk would have a focus. The

participants would read before the meeting some material (essays, pamphlets, articles) written by contemporary Quakers about current issues. During the meeting participants would describe their understanding of the reading through the light of their personal experience. Through that communication then gradually a tangible sense of what constitutes a community of Quakers may emerge. In one of his books Albert Camus quotes an author who said: "Nobody has ever thought except upon the thoughts of others". This is a lesson in humility and a practical instruction. You can sharpen your thoughts only by friction with the thoughts of others.

"Meal with a theme" is not so much a religious education activity, though certainly in a way it is, but rather a form of Outreach. The hope is to help these exiles find a spiritual home, be it a Quaker one or not. When you look at what caused this exile, it would seem that the Religious Society of Friends is a very plausible candidate for the new spiritual home. The lack of a doctrinal creed and at the same time the presence of a strong behavioral creed, the Testimonies, may appeal to the mind and heart of these exiles.

Meal with a Theme started in October 2018. Since then the group, meeting roughly once a month, has studied the following pamphlets or articles:

(1) October 2018. Pendle Hill pamphlet #450 "Money and Soul" (2018) by Pamela Haines, 34 pages.

(2) November 2018. Pendle Hill pamphlet #152 "Quakerism and Christianity" (1967) by Edwin Bronner, 21 pages.

(3) January 2019. Pendle Hill pamphlet # 427 (2014): "Radical Hospitality" by Lloyd Lee Wilson, 34 pages.

(4) February. Discussion of the January/February 2019 issue of *Western Friend* ("on Weapons").

(5) March. Pendle Hill pamphlet # 14 (around 1942) "Religion and Politics" by F.W. Sollmann, 63 pages.

(6) April. A combination of :

(a) "Friends' Struggles through the Years" (2004) by Ron Mock (It is about the Peace Testimony), Wider Quaker Fellowship. (11 pages) and

(b) "Quaker Peace Testimony in Times of Terrorism" (2003) by Robert Griswold. Friends bulletin 2003. (18 pages).

At the end of the April meeting because there was so much material to review and assimilate the participants decided to continue reading the same material for May. There was also a discussion of whether it would be worthwhile to share our varied perspectives on the topic by writing an article for *Western Friend*.

(7) May. Again the same combination as in April with in addition

Margery Post Abbott's FCNL (2014): "A Theological Perspective on Quaker Lobbying", 48 pages.

The participation at "Meal with a Theme" changes from meeting to meeting. In the May meeting there were 3 members of Redwood Forest Friends Meeting, one individual whose recommendation for membership by the Clearness committee was read at the last Meeting for Worship and 3 persons interested to hear about Quakers.

(8) June. "The Undivided Life: Being Spiritual and Political" 2016, by Diane Randall. FCNL. 32 pages.

(9) July. Pendle Hill pamphlet # 456 (2019) "On the Spirituality of Lightheartedness", by Helen Steere Horn, 26 pages.

(10) August. Pendle Hill pamphlet # 454 (2018) "The Healing Power of Stories", by Michael Bishop, 29 pages.

(11) September. Reprint by Quaker Universalist Fellowship from an article in Friends Journal. (1984) "The place of Universalism in the Religious Society of Friends or is Existence Possible", by Daniel Seeger, 15 pages.

Four Friends House residents, members of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation, attended.

(12) October. Pendle Hill pamphlet # 455 (2019) "Trying to be Truthful", by Chel Avery, 30 pages.