

**Notes:**

**Quakers on Quaker History**

**Western Friend Connect – Workshop Meeting Room – 10/26/2017**

**Participants:**

- Jim Anderson – Chico Meeting (Chico, CA)
- Michael Burnside – Independent (New Orleans, LA)
- Claire Cafaro – Fort Collins Meeting (Fort Collins, CO)
- Arthur Keggereis – Orange Grove Meeting (Pasadena, CA)
- Mary Klein – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Val Liveoak – San Antonio Meeting (San Antonio, TX)
- Joe Magruder – Berkeley Meeting (Berkeley, CA)
- Anthony Manousos – Orange Grove Meeting (Pasadena, CA)
- Eric Moon – Berkeley Meeting (Berkeley, CA)
- Dan Mudd – Pima Monthly Meeting (Tucson, AZ)
- Janet Murphy – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Doug Smith – Reno Meeting (Reno, NV)
- Karen Street – Independent (Northwest WA)
- Jim Summers – La Jolla Meeting (La Jolla, CA)
- Jay Thatcher – Corvallis Meeting (Corvallis, OR)

**Introductions: Each participant's particular interest in this topic**

- A new student of Quaker history. Wants to hear from others who have more information.
- Have produced some books of Quaker history. A long-standing interest.
- My monthly meeting has been studying Quaker history by reading the works of “weighty Friends.” It’s been very interesting.
- I don’t have membership in a Quaker meeting, but have studied at Earlham College. Being among living contemporaries can be difficult, and it’s fun and enlightening to find like-minded Friends in Quaker history.
- Always want to learn more about context of our Quaker experience today.
- Currently in the MDiv. program at Earlham School of Religion. I am working on getting a better foundation in Quakerism.
- An attender in our meeting, who is a Conservative Friend, runs a class a couple times a month on reading old Quaker texts. It’s interesting, but part of me wonders why we’re spending so much time on things that happened long ago. So I’m wondering tonight how to get more balance with that view.

- I'm most interested in the schisms in Quaker history. I've gotten more exposure lately to Evangelical and Conservative Friends. It seems our meetings are fragile and susceptible to schism, and I wonder if something in our history can reveal why.
- I'm interested in history generally and how difficult it is. Rufus Jones stands as a good example of how uneven historical memory can be – the magazine articles he published show an unevenness in the quality of his thinking that isn't revealed in the typical works we read about him. I'm also interested in the psychology of history.
- I've always been interested in Quaker history, even though my reading has been sporadic. I attended a Friends Historical Association conference on Friends and native peoples last year, and I saw Quaker historians struggling with our history and how to view it in the present tense. Vanessa Julye's book is also relevant here. How well did Quakers methods serve us in the past, and how well they can serve us now?
- For the last year, our meeting has been reading about Quaker women of the Nineteenth Century, women from all branches of Quakerism. Liberal independent Friends are not the only ones in the stream of Friends' thought. Evangelical Friends have taken this thinking in a different direction, but we both have similar roots.
- My pressing interest is to see continuities from the past that move toward the next century. I'm looking for themes that will carry us forward.
- Quaker history has helped inform my understanding of my struggles with Quakerism and the struggles of my meeting. I've loved opportunities to "get close" to historical Friends – as when I attended a workshop at Ben Lomond Quaker Center by Paul Buckley about Elias Hicks. Historic documents can help us understand the tensions of today, understand what we're missing, and can give some guidance.
- I don't spend a lot of time thinking about Quaker history, but a couple weeks ago, I gave a presentation to a group of Presbyterians about Quakers and the Reformation. I often find myself sharing what I know about Quaker history. As a co-founder Friends Peace Teams, I have a lot of contact with Friends in different branches.
- I'm interested in developing a better understanding of what the identity of "independent Western" Quakers is. This label seems to fit me and the members of my meeting better than any other.

**Query One:**

What benefit do you gain personally from the study of Quaker history?

- I relate more dynamically to the radical Quaker roots described in early Quaker writings than I can with current meetings. Also, as I view Quakers throughout history, I see they have held witness to our common humanity and the way that we are all connected. That is acutely needed today – a framework for our connection. Quaker history speaks to this better than contemporary practices among Independent Western Quakers.

- I've studied Quaker history insufficiently. It's easy to focus on the "great deeds," the deeds of faithfulness of Friends throughout our history. I'm more interested in the inner life of Friends and how that motivated the deeds, and how that worked within their meetings, where particular Friends did or did not get support for their ministries. Apart from Woolman's Journal, I haven't encountered much that presents the motivations of Friends whose actions have become important to us. It seems that texts about Friends are a split between ones that consider the acts of Friends and ones that consider the spiritual lives of Friends, which motivate the acts.
- I ask myself what it means to be an American and what would it be like if I knew nothing about what happened in this country for the last three hundred years. Or I think about my own identity, the person I think I am, and what that would be if I knew nothing about what had occurred in my life before yesterday. It seems the identity I am claiming would be superficial. I have that idea about Quakerism. Our culture generally doesn't see history as relevant. I identify with Quakerism and I love it – a community that has existed through time and I am a member of that. So it feels personal to participate in this larger community and learn what it means to live Quakerism now.
- I've written a lot of Quaker history, but I'm not an historian. Everything has come out of an intense need I felt to understand my place in this history, the ongoing story, of Friends and Western Quakers. It helps to learn about deeply flawed individuals who accomplished great things. Right now, I'm trying to understand the prophetic impulse that created the Quaker movement in the seventeenth century and how George Fox managed to create a prophetic movement. Who was George Fox, and how did he do what he did? How does this relate to current crises we face?

**Query Two:**

In *Friends for 300 Years*, Howard Brinton argues, "The theory and practice of the Society of Friends . . . can correctly be termed 'Quakerism' in so far as the essential purpose is preserved." (1965) How does your own view of the "essential purpose of Quakerism" guide your reading of Quaker history?

- Reading Quaker history has given me good guidance to support mystical experience and spiritual life. Where we get into trouble is when that history gets into actions. We have a lot of history to unlearn, like Vanessa Julye has done for us with *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship*. The story of the feather over the meetinghouse door, the story of the treaty made and never broken, and the stories of the underground railway – we keep holding these up to our kids and to ourselves as how to do things, but there were probably things in these histories that never happened, and maybe they're not doable. That really gets to be an obstacle. It seems one of the steps we can take is to listen to the voices we haven't listened to in the past – other branches of Friends, dissidents in our meetings, Native Americans, African Americans – expanding who we listen to, especially people around us right now.

- I've run into a lot of people who resist any allusions to Quaker history, and I think they are objecting to the way some Friends use history as normative, claiming that "John Woolman would agree with me, Friends." Other Friends resist that whole idea of history, essentially saying that the only Quakers who count are the ones sitting here right now. For me, reading history gives me a sense of needing to be tender about "the facts" – what are facts and what aren't, what's real and what's not. Howard Brinton is the most unlikely "historian" of all times; his fields of study were math and chemistry. I was one of those Friends who "gobbled up" *Friends for Three Hundred Years* when I first came to Friends. But that's not history. That's history telling us how wonderful we are; there's a place for that kind of sentiment, but there's only so far you can go with it – "Your ancestors were wonderful, and you can be wonderful, too; end of discussion." To try to be real about what was factual historically, I turn to primary sources. And there are lots of them available online. What enabled those Friends to be Quakers, and what will enable us to be Quakers, is to be *in our time*. The key questions are: What are our times? Where do we find ourselves in our time? How do we open ourselves to the Spirit and say, "What kind of Quakers do you need us to be, God?"
- The prophetic and mystical traditions of Quakers are what I resonate with most in terms of early Quakers. Being a Quaker today is about living and speaking to the dehumanizing, compartmentalizing, destructive forces that are the dominant culture, the economic structure of our lives now. A combination of evolutionary theory and integral theory (people being at different stages of consciousness development) helps me make sense of history. I start from the Neolithic revolution twelve thousand years ago and consider our time today, which helps me make sense of different people's views of history.
- [This comment was added via email after the online conversation had ended.] I think it is very important to recognize when Friends' leadings and actions have been looked at differently than they were when they were actually happening. It's not so much revisionist history, but rather the need to be humble about our attempts to mend the world, to recognize when perhaps the fabric needs more than a patch. Vanessa July's work has that aspect, as do the recent reviews of Friends' roles in Indian boarding schools, and the long-coming rejection of solitary confinement as a means of rehabilitation (penitentiary). I wonder if anyone has done any work on this.

### **Query Three:**

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

- Our meeting's study sessions about Quaker history began with a request from a newcomer. The "old timers" resisted, but eventually agreed to study biographies. What stands out to me, in three years of reading, is Quaker process – how it was used and/or misused in people's lives. A few years ago, I was gratified to see the young people in the Occupy movement using a similar process. So I think it's alive and well. In Quaker history, I see Quaker process as a gift to the world.

- History is under the control of humans, unlike the mystical experience, which is under the control of God. If you suffer a mystical experience, you don't know when you'll suffer the next one – it could be years. While you're waiting, you can ask your neighbors about their mystical experiences and share yours, but that only gets you so far – few neighbors, few having mystical experiences, or few willing to share. The world of literature and history give you mystical experiences that other Quakers have experienced. You can learn from those. It's a gift to connect with someone who has had those experiences.
- What we can learn from Quaker history and apply to today is a better understanding of the Quaker method of seeking truth and living it out. That's the purpose of Quakerism, and the methods of doing that. That is Quakerism's unique contribution to the issues of today. History shows instances of how certain people and in certain times applied the methods of truth-seeking to their circumstances. Another aspect of history worth studying concerns the costs of Quaker divisions. How can we reconnect without losing the distinctive discoveries of different branches? The relationship of Liberal Quakerism to science and secularism is another important area of study. How did this arise and what are the unexplored contradictions that we are trying to live out?
- The most useful elements of Quaker history for me are in examples, in biographies and journals. I have been inspired in my Quaker work around militarism by a biography of Corder Catchpool, *Indomitable Friend*. Catchpool drove an ambulance in World War One as a conscientious objector. Bert Bigelow's book, *The Voyage of the Golden Rule: An Experiment in Truth*, is another example. This has transformed a number of people who have read it, who are trying to work against militarism.
- What I find most inspiring in our Quaker history are examples of spiritual and moral courage, more than I've found in other religions. I also find history most relevant if I have direct contact with a remnant of that history. For example, I went to a Methodist youth camp on Shelter Island. I went there recently and did a forgiveness ceremony there, then visited a space where Quakers worshiped on the island. It was just a circle of benches in a grove of trees, because Quakers were exiled to Shelter Island and forbidden from having a meetinghouse. The history I learned in school said our country was built on religious freedom. It never occurred to me that this sort of religious oppression had happened. Another example is Bill Lovett, who is over ninety. He told me the story of his life with Quakers. He went over with me the chart that shows all the schisms among Friends in America over the decades. He could tell me the different meetings he attended during his journey across the U.S., and where they showed up on that tree. It gave it meaning to me, not just words on a paper. I have trouble reading things like George Fox's journals; they seem like the words of a madman. It's the concrete examples of Friends standing up with their moral conscience that make me want to learn more about how those experiences came to be.

- The last few years, the more I learn about the Religious Society of Friends, the more confused I get. George Fox thought he was ushering in the Second Coming of Christ, and some Friends today think that did happen, within us. The broad range of beliefs among the different branches, and within each of the branches – the differences between what is happening with Friends in Kenya and in California – it's almost more than you can imagine; they are totally different worlds. Quakers have a process that is held among most branches of Friends. That's what is vital to hold onto. The testimonies merely emerge through individuals involved in the process. I also wonder, from a Quaker Heritage standpoint, "Where are our Quaker ministers and elders today? What roles do they play in the world?" These are things I struggle with.
- History has helped me appreciate our differences and difficulties. It's easy to have a romantic view of the past, rather than seeing it as fraught with difficulty. For example, we hold the Underground Railroad as an example of something that all Quakers did in the 1800s. Actually, being involved in that was a good way to get read out of meeting, including Hicksite meetings. The Friends on the cutting edge were taking risks not only in the broader society, but within the Society of Friends also. This should temper how we think about Friends who take similar risks today.
- We hold a great debt to Quaker heretics, to paraphrase Rufus Jones. Prophetic Friends are often not appreciated in their own times. A book published recently about Benjamin Lay, who was a precursor to John Woolman, tells about a Friends with a very different methodology. He was quite confrontational with his meeting, did things that were deliberately provocative. We might not like to read about that. I didn't like the Larry Ingle's biography of George Fox the first time I read it, because it didn't present the familiar narrative about Fox as a mystic. Ingle pointed out that Fox may have suffered manic-depression, and I resisted that. But now I appreciate that view. I like the kind of history that causes me to rethink my view of our place in our culture. The shock of reading Vanessa Julye's book was a healthy shock for me.
- What I wrestle with are the differences between the meetings of George Fox's time and our meetings today. The differences are obvious. Early Friends were a group of almost medieval Christians. My meeting today includes agnostics, Buddhists, an occasional atheist, Jews, Four-Square Christians. Looking at the changes over the years explains these differences incompletely. The commonalities are – worship and a shared sense of unfairness in the world. In meeting, I can think about "us" and "we," and I can think about "we" in the broadest sense possible. That is vital today.
- Kenneth Boulding wrote about love and veracity, and Quakers' relationship to diversity. He talks about love without unity. Quakers are diverse, and it's hard for some of them to speak out loud about views that are not in unity with "the party line." It goes back to listening. In retrospect, it seems that early Friends were more in agreement about theology and public stances than we are today. It's critical for us to hold the way open for "a third way," beyond the extremes, beyond "us" and "them." In one of these video-chats, some of the participants had voted for Donald Trump. I think it would be hard for them to speak in meeting. I just hope we hang onto our heritage of listening to each other with love and staying open to the possibility that the person I disagree with might have a piece of the truth.