

Experience

An experience of Divine Reality changes us from fearful, wounded, and lost people into a safe, healing, and compassionate people on a meaningful journey. With this experience we come to be aware that we are at home in the world and at peace. It isn't good enough to *think* we've found the path, or to *believe* we have found the path, or to *hope* we have found the path. We have to find the path and stay on it. And, to have this *experience*, we have to stop and wait and be silent, inside as well as outside. George Fox writes:

Stand still in that which is pure, *after you see yourselves*, and then Mercy comes in. After you see your thoughts and temptations, *do not think* but submit. Then the Power comes. *Stand still in the light and submit to it*, and the other will be hushed and gone. Then contentment comes. When temptations and trouble appear, *sink down* in that which is pure, and all will be hushed and fly away. *Your strength is to stand still.*⁴

And Isaac Pennington uses these words:

The main thing in religion is to receive a principle of life from God, whereby the mind may be changed, and the heart made able to understand the mysteries of his kingdom, and to see and walk in the way of life; and this is the travail of the souls of the righteous, that they may abide, grow up, and walk with the Lord in this principle; and that others also, who breathe after him, may be gathered into, and feel the virtue of, the same principle.⁵

One of the great obstacles for many in coming to this experience is that it is ineffable. There is a powerful and intimidating thread in our culture that says, "If it isn't material or I can't capture this experience in words (or other media) so that it is rationally or scientifically explainable, then it doesn't exist." This statement in itself is a faith statement (those who make it cannot prove their statement true by using their own standards), though those who follow it don't often recognize that fact. It is also a defensive position. A follower of this faith will say, "You can't prove to my satisfaction that your inner experience is real," and they will be right. Is that a sufficient argument against the reality of that experience? Consider that you may have had a thought of a deceased relative this morning. You can't prove that. Does that mean it didn't happen? The inner experience you need will never be provable by verbal argument. You need not worry if your experience is not able to satisfy everyone's assumption of what constitutes proof. The person who is steadfast in a determination not to admit of the possibility of spiritual experience may indeed never have this experience, but that may only prove their determination. The experience we seek is beyond verbal description.

What is at work here is what has been forgotten. We have forgotten that we did not create ourselves and that there is something more fundamental about us than the ego we have assembled. Our bodies are composed of elements that were forged in the heart of stars and then spun forth. The mystery of our existence is not explained by any plans or projects our egos may devise or by the efforts of our intellect. We are a part of a Reality that includes ourselves but is greater than we. As a part we can never comprehend the whole. What we can do is let go of our

notional life, quietly open, and be. If we do that we will find that we have a Guide and that we need not fear. Our life will be grounded, and we will own it while we have it.

A second great obstacle to spiritual experience is the notion that it can be taught. I do not mean to disparage learning in its place. But teaching and learning take place in the head, and it is the heart that has to know and be sure. Naomi Remen said it well: "Spiritual experience is not taught: it is found, uncovered, discovered, recovered."⁶ What we all need is found within, uncovered from its load of self-deception, discovered to be our rightful inheritance, and recovered from where we left it as children. "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).⁷ The Light is within. We can look anywhere and everywhere outward and never find it.

Friends understood from the beginning that teaching depended on words and that words by themselves were not adequate to lead to a spiritual life.

In fine, this light in every man is the means to come to the knowledge of God. And seeing all external signs must needs presuppose this knowledge, therefore itself must need be immediate, without any external sign: that signs must presuppose such a knowledge, is undeniable; for these signs must either be words or effects. . . . If words, we see at first an impossibility in the thing itself: for words are created and finite, and God who should make known himself by them, uncreated and infinite: and therefore here is so infinite a difference, that here is no manner of agreement, nor any thing in the words by which they might be capable to do it.⁸

Early Friends spoke of being "convinced." What did they mean by that? Convincing, or being convinced, or convincement (as it was often expressed) sounds like the outcome of a debate or an argument before a jury leading to the acceptance of a doctrine. This understanding doesn't make much sense for we know that a key part of the spiritual life of early Friends was the avoidance of creeds or formal doctrines. What happened to early Friends was something entirely different. They were convinced first that they were in a condition that needed to change and second by their experience of the Inward Light. They were shaken, moved to tears, and yes, they quaked. It was this experience that caused them to be convinced, not the intellectual absorption of a doctrine.

It is inward experience rather than intellectual exercise that provides knowledge of who and where we are. It is inward experience in which we put our faith and trust in the Inward Light, and doing so over and over strengthens the life of the Spirit. We can make this knowledge our friend and daily companion (and let belief and notions be distant cousins we visit rarely). The proof of our knowledge will appear in the life we lead. As Jesus said, "By their fruit you will recognize them" (Matt. 7:16). Many before us have found their way to this experience of the Light, and it is as available now as it was in Fox's time. We can't afford to stop short of this experience of the Spirit. If we have not had such experience, or have had only vague intimations of it, we must be patient and wait in openness until it comes. We have nothing better to do.

When we open ourselves and wait, the experience that comes to us leads us into a covenant of peace with all of creation.