

Romans 12:6-8 (NIV)

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a person's gift is prophesying, let her use it in proportion to her faith.

If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let her encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let her govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11 (NIV)

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit.

There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.

All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

Elders & Mentors

by Donne Hayden

In a Spiritual Companionship Workshop at Community Friends last week, the subject of “spiritual mentoring” came up, a phrase which implies a relationship in which one person has more wisdom or experience or knowledge than the other, a phrase which implies some level an imbalance or inequality in the relationship. In fact, the Friend at Community Friends who organized the workshop decided to call it “Spiritual Companionship” partly to avoid the term “mentoring” because people objected to such an implication. One Friend suggested that a *false* humility, i.e., refusing to acknowledge our own gifts even though we know we have them, he said, and thus refusing to use our own ability to mentor others, has led Quakers at large to a form of paralysis. We not only do not claim our own gift of acquired wisdom, but we discourage

anyone else from being identified as wiser than others in the meeting. We don't even have elders any more.

In the past, though Friends were “firmly committed to the principles of equality,” they “nevertheless recognized that some were leaders in a way others were not”¹ and in every Quaker meeting, certain people were identified as “Elders.” This practice began among the first-generation Friends who urged that “one or two who [were] most grown in the power of the Life” be identified to help guide the meeting; “most grown in the power of the Life” was early Friends-speak for “farthest along on the spiritual path.” We’re talking about spiritual power here; spiritual depth. Later, one Friends began “recording ministers,” it was recognized that “serious, discreet and judicious Friends who [were] not ministers” were necessary to help things run smoothly in the Meeting and to offset the power of recorded ministers. “The Elders were ‘not ministers’ precisely because they needed to evaluate and instruct those who were ministers.” Elders helped keep ministers on the right path, kept them from “outrunning their guides” or becoming too full of their own “fire.” And while it is true that many Quaker Elders were older people, it was entirely possible for responsible, grounded, spiritually-attuned persons in their 20s or 30s to be named “Elders” in the meeting. “Elder” had more to do with degree of responsibility than with age. Eventually, this position of Elder began to be misused; after the first-generation of Friends, during the Quietist period, the Elders became the “policemen” of the Meeting who were there to see that Friends kept to plain speech and plain dress and did everything according to Quaker discipline. This was a distortion of what was originally intended by the first Friends; it wasn't *really* what they were intended to do, but then,

¹ All quotations in the paragraph come from an article by Pendle Hill, “A Quaker’s View: Elders” on the West Hill Meeting website, Oregon. <http://www.westhillsfriends.org/QVWelder.html>

a lot of things happened during the Quietist period, I think, that wasn't intended by the first Friends. These Elders "demanded conformity to Quaker standards — and disowned anyone who failed to comply." Many negative things happened in the late 18th and the 19th centuries, lots disownments and Elders who were wielding power. Not spiritual power, but political power in the meeting. This occurred, I think, because being an Elder became more about earthly authority in running the Meeting, more about the form than the substance, less about accumulated spiritual wisdom.

Eventually Quakers did away with "officially recognized leaders." They don't record ministers any more, and they don't have elders. When they did this, however, they encountered another problem. This was, according to a writer whose *nom de plume* is "Pendle Hill," that "Without designated leaders to articulate and enforce a Quaker standard, some meetings lost their sense of unity. Everyone became equal, but 'tolerance' was the only value that everyone could support." There's nothing wrong with tolerance, but it is not *all* there is, especially in a spiritual community. As Pendle Hill says, "Parameters on theology or even outward behavior became somewhat gray." Gray, dull and lifeless, I might add.

The exchange last week at Community Friends about mentoring and eldering led me to thinking about the feeling I have that in the Religious Society of Friends, it is somehow politically incorrect and unacceptable to suggest some may have gained in spiritual stature and understanding more than others. I want to acknowledge that there are some old people who are no wiser than they were when they were 18, and there are some young people who are incredibly wise. But most of us who are older understand that we have acquired *something* along the way that we did not have when we were younger; we like to call it wisdom. But the

suspicion of anyone who might be recognized as somehow a spiritual elder or superior may be attributable to Friends' experiences with Elders who abused their position, or maybe it is related to the American suspicion of authority and insistence on individual equality.²

Not only are elders no longer valued by American culture-at-large for their accumulated wisdom, they also encounter that culture's resistance to the suggestion that *anyone* is superior in *any way* to someone else. We make the mistake in the U.S. of assuming that being "equal" means being the *same*. The best expression of the error in this assumption comes in a Kurt Vonnegut short story titled "Harrison Bergeron." Here is the first paragraph:

THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else. All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.³

In the story, to assure that everyone is really, truly equal, the Office of the "Handicapper General" requires people of above-average intelligence, grace, beauty, athleticism, or anything else above average, to wear some sort of device to make them unable to use their gift or talent, (which might thus create "inequality"). For instance, Harrison Bergeron's mother, Hazel, is of "a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts." But his father, George, was born with above-average intelligence, so he "had a little mental handicap radio in his ear" which he "was required by law to wear . . . at all times."

² My generation is perhaps at least partly to blame for this; we are the ones, after all, who in the sixties, embraced the idea, "'Never trust anyone over 30," attributed to Jerry Rubin (who was 30 when he said it). Even at the time, the statement was not intended to refer to spiritual wisdom, however, but to those in power who sought to convince young men to fight and die in Viet Nam. It includes several assumptions that even at the time we would have acknowledged as untrue, such as that all people under 30 could be trusted, or that all people older than 30 were dishonest hypocrites. We are all older and wiser now and regretting some of the stamps our youth left on American culture, such as a tendency to dismiss wisdom acquired through long life experience.

³ Kurt Vonnegut, "Harrison Bergeron," *Welcome to the Monkey House* (New York: Random House, 1998).

Vonnegut describes the “mental handicap radio” as being “tuned to a government transmitter. Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like George from taking unfair advantage of their brains.” When brain waves indicated too much was going on, a horrible screeching noise or siren would go off in his ear to distract him from whatever he was thinking. George also must wear “forty-seven pounds of birdshot in a canvas bag” padlocked around his neck. At the beginning of the story, George and Hazel are watching ballerinas on television who

were burdened with sashweights and bags of birdshot . . . their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in. George was toying with the vague notion that maybe dancers shouldn't be handicapped. But he didn't get very far with it before another noise in his ear radio scattered his thoughts.

I have often thought of the truth in this story, i.e., that this is where extreme insistence on equality leads us: the only way to ever make human beings entirely equal in gifts and talents is to make them so at the lowest level.

We have an odd contradiction going on in our society, though. We want to insist everyone is equal, equal before the law and so on. And we have no trouble acknowledging that some people are better at baseball than others; some people are better at computer games; better at chess, better at gardening, better at bookkeeping, better at beekeeping. Why is it we are willing to recognize someone's musical gift or IT wizardry or political savvy or athletic prowess, but we become dismissive of the idea that one person may be wiser than another? Surely wisdom qualifies as a gift to be recognized along with other gifts, but, and maybe this is just my perception, Americans don't seem to value wisdom and accumulated knowledge very much.

I remember when I was a teenager, and my grandmother (who was only 36 years older than me) said she hated getting old because people talked to you like you were stupid. And they talked loud at you. Twenty years later, my mother, who sold advertising for a weekly newspaper, hated answering machines when they first came out. She was known to either hang up or to leave a message something to the effect, "I don't talk to machines."

As my parents grew older, they struggled more and more with the onslaught of technology in every aspect of life. Both were extremely intelligent and competent adults, but they were not tuned in to technology, so anything to do with computers confused them. As they got older, more and more of everything had to do with computers. It occurred to me that mine was perhaps the first generation in the history of humankind in which older people's accumulated knowledge and wisdom lacked practical value for survival. If you think about every previous generation, those people who lived past a certain age could be counted on to know how to do some things you really needed to know how to do—they had trial-and-error experience with farming, hunting, building, canning and preserving, making things from scratch.

But as technology increased, the things my parents knew how to do, and they did know how to do a lot of things from scratch, were no longer of any value. The respect and honor previously given to elders dissipated into impatience because they weren't fast enough. Those who weathered the storms of life and acquired valuable knowledge in how to survive ceased to have value because what they knew had nothing to do with computers, automated banking, cell phones, etc. Instead, in our culture, elders are often viewed as burdens, and increasingly as we Boomers age, a source of income for geriatric services. One quick example of this will serve. An American health-care worker attended a conference in Scandinavia on geriatric health care.

The American gave a presentation on nursing homes in the U.S. and the costs associated with extended care for the elderly. When he finished, he was met with stunned silence. Finally one of the Scandinavians asked in disbelief, “You mean you make money off your old people?”

It seems we have come to that; there’s a lot of money in old people these days, but not because of their acquired wisdom.

Surely a more significant equality comes from being valued as a child of God, recognizing that, unlike human beings, the Divine loves and values all of us equally, at all ages and all levels of ability. To human beings, one person may be more valuable or more important than another; but not to the Divine One. This is equality that counts. This is equality that should keep one person from treating another badly, from hurting another, from ignoring or disdainning another.

Back to the Friend who suggested that “false humility” keeps Friends from stepping forward and offering to be “mentors” for others. Quite honestly, I believe that *true* humility is one aspect of wisdom, which decreases our own sense of self-importance. Rarely does a wise person assert that she or he has the gift of acquired wisdom; rarely does such a one step forward and offer to “mentor” others, not from false humility but from true humility, a characteristic valued by Friends. To illustrate, here is a quotation from *The Quaker Way of Life* written in 1952 by William Wistar Comfort:

The Quaker instinctively shrinks from any violent action or word which will inevitably thrust him forward in the public eye. He prefers to be in the background. In a good cause he would rather be at the bottom of the heap than waving a flag on top. Anything which throws any doubt upon the disinterestedness or integrity of his motive, he shuns. This preference has undoubtedly tended to keep the Quakers out of public life, and has inclined them to exercise their influence from the comparative obscurity of private life. Any public office which would require a noisy and obtrusive campaign, a display of violent and vituperative language, a list of promises and engagements which cannot be kept, is plainly outside their competence. [This

was written before Richard Nixon was president.] This objection does not hold for any office of trust and administration for which their fellow-citizens may draft them and in which they themselves feel that they can preserve the delicate points of ethical conduct on which they are sensitive. (57-58)

Perhaps acknowledging the gift of acquired wisdom should come from outside the person, and we should be a bit suspicious of someone too willing to put him/herself forward in confidence that she/he would be a good mentor. May I suggest that a Friend with true humility will probably agree to “be drafted” as a mentor, though might not “sign up” somewhere as a mentor. But surely “elder” and “mentor” are words we need to retain in our vocabulary; surely elders and mentors are worthy of acknowledgment and respect in our spiritual lives.

At that same workshop last week, a young man came with a specific request for information about finding a spiritual mentor. He identified what he thought such a mentor would be: someone older and farther along on the spiritual path. Two seats down from him in the circle was a Friend in his 80s who gave me chills when he spoke, his words were so filled with spiritual power, clarity, depth, insight, wisdom. But the young man did not notice the elderly Friend. And so the young man went away dissatisfied, because no one could help him find a spiritual mentor.