

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
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## “Elemental” Friends

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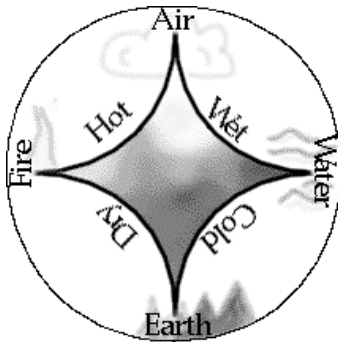


image from the Particle Adventure  
[http://www-pdg.lbl.gov/cpep/four\\_elem\\_ans.html](http://www-pdg.lbl.gov/cpep/four_elem_ans.html)

In January 2006, my last semester at Earlham School of Religion, I took a Quaker Beliefs Intensive course with Paul Buckley. For the required research paper, I focused on vocal ministry and wrote a paper I titled: “Fire, Earth, Water, Air: Four Ages of Vocal Ministry among Friends.” Reading the paper later, I realized I had tried to do two different things—first, present the history of vocal ministry among Friends, and second, compare periods of Quaker history using as metaphor the classical Greek and medieval understanding of the four elements: fire, water, earth and air.

I was reminded of that metaphor last Saturday during The Great Story workshop at Cincinnati Friends Meeting. One of the speakers, Michael Dowd, spoke of the difference between “day language,” which science uses and which describes things that can happen to anyone in the daytime, i.e., “facts,” and “night language,” which religion uses and which describes things that can happen to anyone in the nighttime, i.e., dreams, etc. *Day language* is objective and factual; *night language* is subjective and metaphorical. It occurred to me that the classical four elements come from a time when there was less distinction between the two. When

Plato “classified living creatures into genera and species, and divided them in every way until he came to their elements,” i.e., earth, air, fire, etc., he was using *both* day and night language.

The concept of religion as “night language” led me to remember the paper I wrote in Quaker Beliefs, and I was struck again by the aptness of the four elements (fire, earth, water, air) as metaphors to characterize the various periods of Quaker history and “manifestations of faith” so far among Friends. In the “day language” of science, of course, we know there are more than four elements; the current standard Periodic Table of Elements contains 117 elements. But the ancients were unburdened by this knowledge and could be simply wise, insightful and poetic, as they used “night language” to talk about the natural world they observed. For instance,

*“According to the Empedocles, a Greek philosopher, scientist and healer who lived in Sicily in the fifth century B.C., all matter is composed of four “roots” or elements of earth, air, fire and water. Fire and air are outwardly reaching elements, **reaching up and out**, whereas earth and water turn **inward and downward**.”*<sup>1</sup> [Emphasis mine.]

Twenty centuries later, however, we expect “day language” when knowledge is presented, so in his book, *Friends for 350 Years*, Quaker writer and historian Howard H. Brinton uses it to identify four periods of Quaker history, referring to them as “four different manifestations of religion,”<sup>2</sup> which he categorizes as follows: from 1650-1700, a blend of mysticism and evangelicalism; from 1700-1800 (the Quietist period), emphasis on inward-turning mysticism; from 1800-1900, conflict between mysticism and a new evangelicalism; and from 1900 to the present, rationalism and the social gospel.<sup>3</sup>

Different Quaker theology (“night language”) appeals to different folks in differing degrees, and these “categories” of historical Friends are still apparent in those of us who have inherited this history. For instance, I became a “convinced Friend” under the influence of the

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<sup>1</sup> Tracy Marks. “Elemental: The Four Elements From Ancient Greek Science and Philosophy to Poetry.” 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for 350 Years* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications, 2002), p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> Brinton, 214-215. Other scholars consider the Quietist period as spanning the eighteenth century and the first third of the nineteenth century.

first Quakers: Fox, Fell, Barclay and Penn “speak to my condition.” (To describe my inclination, I coined the word “FoxFellian.”) In their writings, I found expressions of my own theological understanding (couched in 17<sup>th</sup> century language and culture, of course), but others are “convinced” by writings from different eras of Quakerism. So let us explore the characteristics of Brinton’s four eras of Friends history and faith using the “night language” of the four ancient elements of fire, earth, water and air.

| <b>Classical Element</b> | <b>Tendencies and Characteristics</b>  | <b>Period in Quaker History</b>  |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| Fire                     | Energy, enthusiasm, impulsive acts, innovation, risk-taking, prophecy, inspiration, excitement, growth, idealism (Think: George Fox, Margaret Fell, William Penn, the “Valiant Sixty”)   | The First Age of Quakerism (1650-1700)   |
| Earth                    | Stability, practicality, solidity, and security; unchanging, rooted, fundamental, foundational (John Woolman—he approached social change “like a rock,” i.e., unyielding, relentless, outlasted those who resisted)  | The Quietist Period (1700-1800)  |
| Water                    | Marked by change and emotion, flux and fluidity, constant movement, spirituality, matters deep & absorbing (Friends that come to mind for that period were the passionate Anti-Slavery Friends: Charles Osborn, Levi Coffin and Achilles Pugh, Martha Wooten, Lucretia Mott. Evangelicalism swept through all denominations on the continent during this time, including Friends.) | Nineteenth Century (1800-1900)   |
| Air                      | Characterized by lofty concerns and matters of the intellect, communication, debate, judgment and balance (Friends like Rufus Jones, Thomas Kelly, and Parker Palmer exemplify this; the influence of the social gospel is apparent in the formation of the American Friends Service Committee; rational thought/ “day language” is characteristic of many Friends today.)         | Twentieth Century (1900-present) (Keep in mind, however, that Brinton’s book was first copyrighted in 1952.) |

**The Age of Fire:** Brinton refers to the first fifty years as a time “characterized by a *fiery* zeal to spread the message”<sup>4</sup> [italics mine]. This quotation from William Penn best expressed the message they were zealous about:

*For the people called Quakers, the foundation of all religious belief is this: God, through Christ, has placed a guide in each person to show them their duty and provided each with the ability to follow that guide. In every nation, race, and religion, there are those who follow this guide - these are the people of God - and those who live in disobedience to it are not God's people regardless of what they say. This is the Friends' ancient, first, and unchanging principle. This is the testimony they have made and will continue to make to the whole world.*

—William Penn  
“Primitive Christianity Revived” (1696)

In the earliest gatherings, Friends waited “for the Lord” in silence, but they were waiting for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit they believed was experienced by the disciples at Pentecost and described in scripture as “tongues of fire” descending on the gathered people.<sup>5</sup> Here, for instance, Edward Burrough uses language from the Book of Acts to describe how early Friends experienced worship, moving from silence to vocal ministry: “*While waiting upon the Lord in silence as we often did for many hours together . . . we received often the pouring down of the Spirit upon us and our hearts were made glad and our tongues loosed and our mouths opened ... and the glory of the Father was revealed.*”

**The Age of Earth:** In the early 1700s, the fiery energy of the first Friends gave way to the practicality and rootedness of second-generation Friends and the age which eventually became known as the Quietist period. The Society of Friends having been formed, it became important to organize and preserve what existed, and in fact, certain organizing activities

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<sup>4</sup> Howard H. Brinton, *Prophetic Ministry*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 54.

<sup>5</sup> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2: 1-4)

(setting up meetings for business and women’s meetings) began in the last days of Fox and other founders of the faith. During this time Brinton says, “there was no change in theory regarding the nature of inspiration and ministry, but there was more waiting in silence for the moving of the Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> This was a time of conformity and little risk-taking in vocal ministry, he claims, as “The creator gave way to the conservator, the pioneer to him who devises techniques and disciplines for holding ground which has been gained.”<sup>7</sup> This Quietist Period that Friends are so fond of was good, but it was not as vital; it held, and was necessary to hold what had been created by the earliest Friends. English Friend Gladys Wilson says the change occurred in part because of a “shift of attention from ‘the power of the Lord’ to the emptiness of man.” In this shift, she continues, “Quaker worship ceased to be Pentecostal in character, and the moving of the Spirit became largely paralysed.”<sup>8</sup>

Friends withdrew more and more into insular communities, building “a hedge” between themselves and the world. To return to the four elements imagery, this was an era when Friends constructed and tried to maintain a rock-solid foundation for and/or wall around their faith. The wall of isolation and control, the dam of stony silence they built around their community, however, gave way to the floodwaters of evangelicalism and social change that swept in with the nineteenth century.

**The Age of Water:** In the mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century, evangelicalism swept across America like a great flood. It was a time of fluidity, of evangelical revivals and emotional responses during worship. Inspired, Spirit-led vocal ministry through an instrument chosen by God not man, was fundamental to Friends identity, and for some, the rigid, controlled silence of the Quietist period was repressive and deeply dissatisfying. A desire for change resulted in Quaker meetings having “revivals” that lasted sometimes as long as two weeks. For North American Friends, this led to division between those who clung to Quietist traditions and those

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<sup>6</sup> Brinton, *Prophetic Ministry*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Gladys Wilson, *Quaker Worship*, 51.

attracted to the vitality of evangelicalism. Brinton identifies the resulting factions as the “liberal, non-authoritarian and non-doctrinal group,” the “evangelical, authoritarian or doctrinal group,” and a group between the two extremes “properly called Conservative because historically they continued to be nearest to Friends of earlier time.”<sup>9</sup>

In the late 1800s, many Friends once again expressed their faith more openly as first-generation Friends had done. By this time, however, writes Gladys Wilson,

*Quakers had lost their rich conception of the worth of man, and were instead obsessed by his ruined, fallen state; they had lost their vivid sense of having a universal message, and had become a timid, exclusive, peculiar people, too busy nurturing their own souls to be concerned in saving other people's; the positive mysticism of the early days had become negative mysticism, and the real prophetic element had largely disappeared.*<sup>10</sup>

Among Midwestern Friends the evangelical influence prevailed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century into the present. In the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some meetings eventually hired ministers and added music and scripture-reading to services. Such programmed worship and focus on personal salvation left “small leeway for spontaneous, prophetic ministry.”<sup>11</sup>

**The Age of Air:** Howard Brinton claimed that the decline of “a prophetic type of ministry in the twentieth century” is “due primarily to the high degree of intellectualism and secularism which appeared in all religious groups.”<sup>12</sup> With other Friends, Brinton bemoans what has been lost in vocal ministry in the centuries since Fox and the other founders spoke powerfully and passionately. “The ancient fervor is replaced by a deliberate, sometimes a conversational tone,” he writes, “Having less depth it is delivered more easily, hence more frequently.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Brinton, *Prophetic Ministry*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Wilson, 73-74.

<sup>11</sup> Brinton, *Prophetic Ministry*, 17.

<sup>12</sup> Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years*, 97.

<sup>13</sup> Brinton, *Prophetic Ministry*, 17-18.

My explanation of the problem is that, while the first Friends shared a theological understanding, contemporary Friends are all over the place theologically. I'm not sure we have some one thing we all believe. Reaction against the heavy-handed use of Christian doctrine by the Religious Right has left more liberal Friends uncertain of what vocabulary to use when and if they feel a call to spoken ministry. Going back to the distinction between "day language/night language," some "night language" that could be so rich used as metaphor and to speak prophetically has been co-opted and used as "day language" by literalists. This has left us wondering how to speak about matters of faith—we need new "night language" to speak "prophetically" out of the silence.

Contemporary Friends have inherited this history with its various "manifestations of faith." Do any of the earlier manifestations of Friends' faith "speak to your condition"? Are you attracted to the fiery mysticism of the first Friends—Fox, Fell, Barclay, Penn, *et al*? Does the quiet, stable, earthy and inward-turning mysticism of John Woolman speak to you? Are you stirred by heart-felt and emotional evangelicalism of traditional Christian doctrine embraced by Friends like Elton Trueblood or Wilmer Cooper? Are you more lofty ("airy") and rational in your approach to faith, dedicated to serving the oppressed and fighting injustice like the brilliant 20<sup>th</sup> century mystic/activist Rufus Jones? Perhaps the different elements are blended evenly in you, or some stronger than others, some absent entirely

**The Fifth Age of Quakerism:** It occurs to me we may be moving into the next "age" or "manifestation" of our faith. To return to the ancient Greeks and classical elements for a metaphor, according to Xenocrates, Plato included a *fifth* element:

*" . . . he classified living creatures  
into genera and species, and divided them in every way  
until he came to their elements,  
which he called the five shapes and bodies,  
aither, fire, water, earth and air."*

Referring to “aither” as “quintessence,” Plato described it as “the material of the stars, forming heavenly bodies and pervading all things.”<sup>14</sup> Here is another reference to “aether” as a fifth element from “The Life of Apollonius of Tyana” by Philostratus in 220 CE:

*And they allowed Apollonius to ask questions; and he asked them of what they thought the cosmos was composed; but they replied: "Of elements."*

*"Are there then four" he asked.*

*"Not four," said Iarchas, "but five."*

*"And how can there be a fifth," said Apollonius, "alongside of water and air and earth and fire?"*

*"There is the ether," replied the other, "which we must regard as the stuff of which gods are made; for just as all mortal creatures inhale the air, so do immortal and divine natures inhale the ether."*

*Apollonius again asked which was the first of the elements, and Iarchas answered: "All are simultaneous, for a living creature is not born bit by bit."*

*"Am I," said Apollonius, "to regard the universe as a living creature?"*

*"Yes," said the other, "if you have a sound knowledge of it, for it engenders all living things."*

Perhaps the airy fourth age of Quakerism will end with the coming of a new age: “Quaker Quintessence,” celebrating an ethereal understanding of the oneness of all life and Spirit. Perhaps we are emerging from a focus on the intellect—which prefers day language— into a spiritual reality where, though we value all the “elements” of our faith so far (for none is “first” or above the others, but “All are simultaneous”), we recognize the necessity of “night” language to speak of higher Truth and the soul.

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<sup>14</sup> Lawrence M. Kraus, *Quintessence: The Mystery of the Missing Mass in the Universe*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000), page 1.