

Friends and Secrets

By Donne Hayden

It may surprise you to know that in the 1920s and 30s, some Quakers were members of the Ku Klux Klan. One example is Orville Chance, pastor at West Elkton Friends Meeting from 1921 to 1924. Like ministers at many Quaker meetings of the time, Chance may not have been a Quaker but from some other denomination.¹ At any rate, he was pastoring a Quaker meeting at the same time he was a member of the local Ku Klux Klan. During Chance's tenure at West Elkton, the Meeting purchased a movie projector, and as part of its campaign to win and influence Friends, the Klan provided movies which were shown each week at the meetinghouse. Movies were still a rare and recent phenomenon, so "movie night" was a widely attended event; many local children saw their first movie at the Friends meetinghouse, some of which were probably Klan propaganda films.

One night, as people sat chatting and waiting for the movie to start, they heard a commotion from the back of the meetinghouse. As they watched in amazement, Pastor Chance led a procession of white-robed, hooded Klansmen in

¹ Pastored meetings were still relatively new (West Elkton Friends hired its first minister in 1897) and because Quakers had no seminary, nor other way of training ministers, meetings often hired preachers from other denominations.

full regalia, down the aisles and up to the front of the room. There he and one of the hooded men proceeded to talk about how the Klan supported Christian values, etc. This upset people, as you might expect; more Quakers were opposed to the Klan than supported it. The next morning, the clerk of West Elkton meeting went to the Indiana Yearly Meeting office in Richmond and complained about Orville Chance, who was soon out of a job. Old-timers in the Meeting remember people talking about how pointless the masks and robes were. In a town where everyone knew everyone else, everyone could tell who each hooded man was by his pants and shoes! (Most people had only one pair of shoes and one or two pairs of pants.) One woman in West Elkton remembered her father declaring that he would not be a member of any group or endeavor for which he had to cover his face.

His response is typical of those who hold to the Quaker testimony of integrity, which requires a person to be open and forthright and to speak the truth at all times. An explanation from Baltimore Yearly Meeting puts it this way:

Speaking the truth on all occasions has been a cardinal Quaker principle, and Friends believe the practice of taking oaths implies that a person might be telling lies on other occasions.... Many other activities commonly engaged in by the rest of humanity have been considered to be contrary to the testimonies of Friends. One example is gambling and speculation, because the gains therefrom are not earned through one's own labor and can cause serious loss to others; another is membership in secret societies because they are not open in their activities, are exclusive, and may tend to encourage the formation of conspiracies or may reduce sympathy for some

portion of society. (*“Early Quaker Testimonies,” History of Baltimore Yearly Meeting*)

As most of you know, early Friends spent quite a bit of time in English jails for refusing to swear oaths. When English authorities prohibited them from meeting to worship together, early Friends refused to worship in secret; instead they gathered openly, sometimes even in the street, preferring to be thrown in jail (again) rather than sacrifice their integrity by hiding what they were doing. Friends have, in general, also avoided joining organizations which require them to take oaths.² In most meetings, a person could be disowned for joining the Masons or the Klan or other “secret society.” Honest truth-telling and a dislike of secrecy have long been characteristics of Friends, who exemplify the idea that “what you see is what you get.”

Secrets are on my mind this week because of recent discussion of an incident that happened about three years ago at Cincinnati Friends Meeting. Many of us were not here at the time, but those who were speak of the incident as both puzzling and hurtful. I don’t know all the details, but the details I do know lead me to suspect the conflict was caused by a violation of the testimony of integrity and misuse of a Quaker clearness committee. In the interest of

² I understand the Masons, like the U.S. and British governments, have made allowances for Quakers and will accept affirmations in place of oaths.

preserving unity in the meeting and preventing its happening again, I would like to address the issue in general, though not in particulars.

First of all, the proper purview of a Quaker clearness committee is the a person's spiritual life and decisions that affect it, such as a "leading" to marry, seek membership in the meeting, or follow a vocation to better serve the Spirit. Clearness committees are not supposed to be therapy groups; they are not places to resolve anger, bitterness, personal conflicts, etc. If a focal person is stuck struggling with negative emotions, the committee should recommend the person resolve those issues before seeking spiritual discernment. Clearness committees are also not places to discuss what the focal person thinks other people should or should not do. Since a leading is the movement of the Spirit in a person's life, no one can have a leading for someone else. Quakers joke about people who claim to have "leadings" in order to get other people to do something, as in "I have a leading for you ..." (Quaker humor is subtle, so you may just have to take my word for it that it's a joke.)

A clearness committee functions at the highest level of spirituality—an individual's relationship with the Holy. It focuses on helping the individual discern whether or not his/her spiritual "leading" is a true one. Trust and truth are vital to clearness committees whose members may hear private matters which the focal person does not want shared outside the group. But a clearness

committee is not the place to hear secrets which, if shared, would be hurtful to someone besides the focal person.

Notice that in describing matters discussed in clearness committees, I used the word “private,” not “secret.” Here is a good distinction between the two from psychotherapist Carol Kurtz Walsh who writes: “a secret is a need, thought, feeling or action . . . that if shared” can “negatively impact” another person and/or the relationship. Privacy, on the other hand, relates to an issue that concerns only an individual and does not affect another person or a relationship.³ For instance, the focal person in a clearness committee may not want anyone to know that s/he always secretly longed to be an airline pilot; or that as a child s/he once shoplifted. More serious matters may also be private, of course, and if others were to know them, they might feel sad for the focal person, but exposure would hurt no one except the person who wishes to retain his/her privacy. Secrets are different; in brief, *secrets have a negative and destructive potential that privacy does not have*. Though Walsh specifies that she uses these definitions for long-term personal relationships, I think the distinction can stand in larger contexts, such as Quaker clearness committees and governments.

Why do people keep things secret? Sometimes out of shame, because they are doing or have done something for which they think others will judge them

³ Carol Kurtz Walsh, “Privacy Vs. Secrecy,”
<http://www.ckwalsh.com/articles/PRIVACY%20VS%20SECRECY%20with%20illus..pdf>.

negatively. Another reason is to maintain control and power. The most obvious illustration of both these motives is the uproar about WikiLeaks, which made public 92,000 previously classified “documents relating to America’s involvement in Afghanistan,” almost 400,000 “secret United States military field reports,”⁴ and more recently, classified diplomatic communications. Whatever your opinion on this, one thing is obvious: governments do not like the broader public to know all that they are doing; they don’t like people knowing their secrets; it cramps their style. In some cases it may make no difference, but Jordon Stancil, who served as a Foreign Service officer in Jerusalem and Berlin, says in an editorial in *The Nation*: “. . . common sense . . . tells us that people are more likely to lie, exaggerate and distort when they know they won't be held accountable for what they said.”⁵ Withholding critical information leads to misperceptions, miscommunication and conflict, and this is as true for individuals, congregations, and clearness committees as it is for governments.

One of the most significant courses I took in seminary—Pastoral Care and Counseling in Family Systems—was based on the Bowen Theory of Family Systems, which “views the family as a self-regulating *system* . . . whose purpose

⁴ Misha Glenny, “The Gift of Information,” *The New York Times Style Magazine*, Dec. 4, 2010, <<http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/04/the-gift-of-information/?pagemode=print>

⁵ Jordan Stancil, “On WikiLeaks and Government Secrecy,” December 3, 2010, *The Nation* (<http://www.thenation.com>)

is to maintain itself.”⁶ The system is “held together by unspoken rules” that everyone in the family knows; individuals in the system are so intricately bound to each other that “a change in one person's functioning is predictably followed by reciprocal changes in the functioning of others.”⁷ Because church congregations share some of the dynamics of a family, pastors can use techniques from Family Systems Therapy to work with individual families in the congregation, as well as with the congregation as a whole.

Family systems theory emphasizes the power of family secrets; “. . . the key issue in family secrets is awareness—‘who knows,’ and ‘who doesn't know,’ as well as ‘who knows that so-and-so does or does not also know.’ Alliances and boundaries in the family are formulated on the basis of knowledge about the secret”. . . In effect, a secret isolates members of a family or group from each other.⁸ In studying family systems over several generations, researchers found that a secret continues to affect a family long after those who consciously knew and kept it have died. In some inexplicable way, secrets (i.e., things people don't talk to the kids about, such as Aunt Judy's illegitimate baby, Uncle Frank's

⁶ “Bowen Theory,” *The Bowen Center* website, <<http://www.thebowncenter.org/pages/theory.html>>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bonnie Eaker, *Unlocking the Family Secret in Family Play Therapy*, *Child and Adolescent Social Work*, Volume 3, Number 4, Winter 1986.

multiple marriages, Joe's suicide, Grand-dad's drinking or Ellen's emotional problems) often recur in a pattern that repeats from generation to generation, though individuals have no awareness that someone else in the family did such a thing. Some of these, like alcoholism or mental problems, can be explained through genetics, of course; but others, such as secretly bearing a child, seem unrelated to genetics. Whatever their source, until secrets are exposed, they retain a divisive, negative influence over everyone in the family system. The same is true for the congregational family system ...

Whatever else secrecy does, it includes some while excluding others, which gives a certain power—the power of information—to some and not to others. Whatever else secrecy does, it obscures; whatever else secrecy does, it makes bad behavior, misinformation, and dishonesty more possible. Whatever else it does, secrecy needs darkness and shadow. Let us do nothing which requires us to cover our faces or turn away from the Light.