

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
February 7, 2010**

*“O Friends! Keep close to the light in you”
“Stand still in the light, and submit to it”
“Never give over seeking, for the light shines over all
which believe in, and walk in the path of the just,
which is as a shining light”*

—George Fox

“Permission to Shine”

by Donne Hayden

For the past two sessions of the Quakerism 101 study group, we’ve been reading about *the Light* in Quaker thought and practice. Philadelphia Friend, Shirley Dodson, who developed the curriculum for *Quakerism 101: A Basic Course for Adults*, summarizes from the writings of various “weighty Friends” essential qualities of the Light, as understood by Quakers. If you are new to Friends, you may not be aware of all that simple word communicates; even if you have been around a while, you still may find surprising some of the qualities Friends have traditionally associated with the Light.

You are not required to agree with anything I say today, but as you are in a Quaker meeting, you should probably know the tradition. To review and refresh our understanding of the Light, then, here are some of the essential qualities of the Light from Shirley Dodson’s summary, with some of her comments (mostly in italics) and mine mixed in (mostly in brackets).

The first thing to understand is that for Friends, the Light is divine.

The Light is Divine – *refers to God and God’s work in our lives; it is not reason, conscience or emotion although it works through these – not “natural” but “supernatural”* [This I take to be in response to people who cannot believe in God because they don’t like the idea of something “supernatural,” meaning beyond the known physical and material universe. One

of the best expressions of this occurs in an article I read earlier this week, in which the writer said: “We humans see only a tiny fraction of all the light that God made, yet we persist in the presumptuous notion that only what we see exists—that only a 300-nanometer piece of the spectrum is real.”¹ Not all Quakers do so now, but Quakers traditionally have believed in something that transcends the material world of nature—we call it the Light and we recognize it as divine.]

The Light is Single – *one and indivisible; not my Light vs. your Light, but each of us has the Light “in measure” [i.e., each of us has some of the Light, a certain amount, and however much we have, we need to heed it and live up to our highest measure of Light. This “oneness” of the Light is the basis for what Friends recognize as a “gathered meeting.” Dodson says it is inaccurate to refer to the Light as a “spark” because “this implies separate lights”].*

The Light is Unifying – *the Light brings us into unity within ourselves and draws Friends together into a single body.* Again, this unifying quality of the Light underlies the Quaker Meeting for Worship and the Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business.

The Light is Universal – *the Light works in the life of every person, and has from the beginning, whether a person knows it or not [and whether or not the person acknowledges it. In the bulletin today, I have given you all a much fuller explanation of this universal aspect of the Light in excerpts from “The Inward Light” written by Samuel D. Caldwell, former General Superintendent of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and one of Dodson’s sources. He is someone we would refer to as a “weighty Friend.” Here is the first paragraph of his essay:]*

¹ Adam Thomas, “Living by the Word,” commentary on the Common Lectionary, *The Christian Century*, February 9, 2010.

[The] Light is unequivocally universal [writes Caldwell]. *It is freely given by God to each and every human being who comes into the world, regardless of race, sex, nationality, philosophical orientation, religious creed, or station in life. It is the divine birthright and inheritance of all, not the privileged possession of a few. . . . Now it can readily be seen from these characteristics that the Quaker concept of the Inner Light is radically universalist in its thrust. As such, it offers a strong challenge to many of the exclusivist assumptions of conventional Christian faith.*

[This is one thing Friends got in trouble for from the beginning; one heresy we were accused of from the beginning. Some Friends have given up this Universalist interpretation of Christianity. Evangelical Friends now accept more orthodox and traditional understanding of Christianity, such as the idea that to be “Christian,” you must do certain things, say certain things, believe certain things, “Accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior.” This Meeting is probably more like the early Friends in its understanding of Christianity. I encourage you to read the rest of what Caldwell writes about Quakers, Christianity and Universalism.]

The Light is Eternal – *existed before time and will exist forever.* [It is outside time.]

The Light is Pure – *perfectly good, unerring and infallible, although we may misinterpret its guidance,* [but the Light itself is always good. If you are following something and it leads you to hurt someone, you are not following the Light but something else.]

The Light is Unchanging – *our awareness of the Light changes, but the Light itself does not.* [It hasn’t changed since George Fox and the early Friends described it, experienced it and held it up for all of us to see.]

The Light is Personal – [It is a personal Light. This is something contemporary people have trouble accepting. Why would God bother with me? Surely God has a universe to run, so why would God pay any attention to an individual? However, Friends came to the recognition that it is personal through *experiencing* it as personal. If you think of it as ***one*** Light—***one*** ***Light***—some of it is in each of us, then it's no different than my being concerned about my little finger. It's *part* of me—why would I not be concerned about my finger? We are *part of* the Light; we are not separate from it, so of course it is involved with us; it is *in* us. Caldwell explains it better, I think.]:

The Light is no mindless, purposeless, undifferentiated force or power. It is the mind and will of God . . . who indwells our souls. To claim, as we do, that we are led or taught by the Light is to accept by inference that the power by which we are led or taught is capable of actively leading or teaching us. This requires a personal or theistic conception of the Spirit, which Friends have traditionally held. [The Light is engaged with us.]

The Light is Saving – *if we follow the leadings of the Light within, we will be brought into fullness of life and right relationship with God, ourselves and each other.* [When Quakers use the terms “save,” “saving,” or “salvation,” they are not talking about being kept from the fires of hell. Instead, they refer to being in “right relationship”—a loving relationship, a Light-filled relationship—with each other and with the Divine.]

The Light is Guiding – [This goes back to the sense of the Light as being personal. In the Gospel, Jesus says “The measure you give will be the measure you receive,” and if you look at the antecedent for “measure,” you will find that he is talking about *attention*. If we pay attention,] *the Light will guide, nudge and lead us into a more meaningful, richer life.*

The Light is Resistible – [This is our free will.] *we are perfectly free to ignore the guidance of the Light, which can't force us to do anything.* [It also will not punish us.]

The Light is Persistent – *God starts with us, again and again, where we are. If we continually disobey the leadings we receive, our perception of the Light may dim, but we can't completely extinguish it* [Any time we turn toward it, the Light is there, open and receptive to us. We can't be completely separated from it; whether we pay attention to it or not, it is still within us]

The Light is Empowering – *if we seek to follow where the Light leads us, we will be empowered to do what is required, even if we start out feeling inadequate* [This refers to our response to a call or leading. If we feel called to do something, even though we may feel inadequate, and if we obey and follow the Light, “way will open,” or as Joseph Campbell phrased it, “doors will open you didn't know were there.”]

The Light is Ineffable – *the Light can't be fully understood and described; words are insufficient.* [In all these preceding words, the full meaning of the Light is merely hinted at. We cannot understand it completely nor define it fully.]

The Light has come up in several variations this past week aside from the focus on it in Quakerism 101. For instance, I was reading a commentary on two passages of scripture from the Common Lectionary. (For those who don't know, the lectionary is essentially a “schedule” of scripture readings, each Sunday over a three-year period, used by many, if not most, Protestant churches. That's why you'll find the same scripture readings in many churches on any given Sunday.) The two passages of scripture were from the lectionary for next Sunday,

Feb. 14. The first was Exodus 34:29-35 which begins *“Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.”*³⁰ *When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.”*

The second passage is Luke 9:28-36 which begins: *“Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.”*²⁹ *And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.”*

The commentary on these two passages by Adam Thomas, an Episcopalian from West Virginia, was about light, and was beautiful and moving—I wished I had written it. Here are some of the best parts:

“Jesus gives the disciples the gift of seeing him as God sees him—a glorious being of dazzling white light. Instead of reflecting the blues and reds and yellows of the visible spectrum, Jesus reflects God and shows himself to be luminous.”

Pointing out that up on Mount Sinai, Moses had not seen God’s face, but only God’s back, Thomas concludes, *“So Moses isn’t shining because he saw God on the mountain, Moses is shining because God saw him.”* I would like to add that Moses put himself in a position to be seen.

Early Wednesday morning, while I was driving from Richmond, Indiana to the office here at the meetinghouse, I listened to a CD of Neil Douglas-Klotz reading in Aramaic, the language

Jesus spoke. The first reading was “Invocation of the Light”² Klotz’s translation of Matthew 5:16: “*Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*”

Klotz called his Aramaic version of this verse, “Permission to Shine.” Klotz translates directly from Aramaic into English, without going through the Greek or Latin and then into English. Quite honestly, though I see that Klotz opens the interpretation of the lines in his version, I get lost in abstractions like “the consciousness of knowing.” It’s not that I can’t understand it—it’s just not very pretty. Not as pretty as “permission to shine,” for instance.

Listening to the words in Aramaic, however, I thought, “These sounds came from the mouth of the Teacher.” *These sounds*. Not the English sounds I’ve grown up associating with him. The first track on the CD ended with these words spoken in Aramaic: *Ninhar nurakun qedam bneynasha*: “Allow the sacred light of your being to illuminate all of your communities, inside and out.”

“*Permission to Shine*”

Let the light of your being,
the consciousness of knowing
your real Self,
radiate and illuminate
the human beings
you find before you,
as well as the community of voices
you find within.

When they see and feel
your atmosphere of ripeness,
your ability to act
at the right time and place,
they will be reconnected in praise
to the song and harmony
of the Parent of All,
the nurturing Force
that re-creates the cosmos
each moment,
unfolding a universe
of sound, vibration, and light.

—Neil Douglas-Klotz
from the Aramaic Words of Jesus

² Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Blessings of the Cosmos: Wisdom of the Heart from the Aramaic Words of Jesus*. (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2006), pp. 1-5.

In his commentary on light images in the lectionary passages, Adam Thomas wrote, "Too often we cede our light to the glossy detritus of the world and forget that we are the ones God made to shine." If we seek the Light, "stand still in it," and "submit to it," as George Fox urged us to do, I believe we will *find* it, and standing there, discover our "permission to shine."