

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
December 6, 2009**

## **The Great Guide on the Side by Donne Hayden**

I received an email from a former student this past week, one of those emails filled with beautiful pictures and reassuring sentiments, which has been making the rounds on email since at least 2007. It is the “legend of the Cherokee Indian youth’s rite of passage,” and goes like this:

His father takes him into the forest, blindfolds him and leaves him alone. He is required to sit on a stump the whole night and not remove the blindfold until the rays of the morning sun shine through it. He cannot cry out for help to anyone. Once he survives the night, he is a MAN.

He cannot tell the other boys of this experience, because each lad must come into manhood on his own.

The boy is naturally terrified. He can hear all kinds of noises. Wild beasts must surely be all around him. Maybe even some human might do him harm. The wind blew the grass and earth, and shook his stump, but he sat stoically, never removing the blindfold. It would be the only way he could become a man!

Finally, after a horrific night the sun appeared and he removed his blindfold.

It was then that he discovered his father sitting on the stump next to him..

He had been at watch the entire night, protecting his son from harm.

We, too, are never alone.

Even when we don't know it, God is watching over us, sitting on the stump beside us.

When trouble comes, all we have to do is reach out to Him.

Apparently this is not truly a Cherokee tradition; one writer who claimed to be Cherokee said he “spoke to two tribal teachers (what some would call 'holy men') and three other old ones and not one of them have ever heard of such an outlandish load of dung,”<sup>1</sup> But the story spoke to me this week because it reflects a different kind of truth than it intends: it addresses a human longing to know we are not alone in our trials on earth.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Cherokee\\_indians\\_rituals\\_and\\_rites\\_of\\_passage](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/Cherokee_indians_rituals_and_rites_of_passage)

More artless and charming examples of that longing appear in John M. Buchanan's editorial<sup>2</sup> in the latest issue of *Christian Century*, in which he mentions his favorite Christmas book, *Children's Letters to God*<sup>3</sup> and gives some sample letters. For instance:

Dear God,  
Are you invisible or is that just a trick?  
Lucy

and

Dear God,  
Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are, you'd better do something quick.  
Love,  
Harriet Anne.

Comparing this last letter with a prayer found in Isaiah 64:1: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down," Buchanan says, "It's the oldest, most authentic prayer in human history and as current as the latest neo-atheist best seller. Are you real? Where are you? Why is this happening to me? Please do something." Over and over, we try to discern the presence of the Divine in human existence.

All of these spoke to me this week because *discernment* has been uppermost my thoughts lately, as Ministry & Counsel labors to establish guidelines for discerning and supporting ministry within the Meeting, and as I participate in the Congregational Discernment Project at Earlham School of Religion. In that group we are using a book written by three Quakers titled *Practicing Discernment Together: Finding God's Way Forward in Decision-Making*,<sup>4</sup> According to Lon Fendall, "To discern is to hear and understand God's voice as articulated by the Holy Spirit, resident within us. Discernment is a necessary precondition for faithfulness to

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<sup>2</sup> John M. Buchanan, "God With Us," *The Christian Century*, Dec. 15, 2009, page 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Children's Letters to God*, compiled by Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall, illustrated by Tom Bloom.

<sup>4</sup> Lon Fendall, Jan Wood, & Bruce Bishop, *Practicing Discernment Together: Finding God's Way Forward in Decision-Making* (Newberg, Oregon: Barclay Press, 2007).

God's leadings."<sup>5</sup> It occurred to me, however, that we wouldn't need to worry so much about discernment if the Holy would simply announce itself and give clear instructions for precisely what we should do, or better yet, just *fix* things that are all messed up. What we long for is a *clearly present teacher*, who shows up and gives us the answers.

But it doesn't work that way. We human creatures must discern the best we can what is required of us in different circumstances, and most often, we must learn by trial and error. This does not mean we are alone, that the Spirit is not with us—only that we are responsible for our own learning here on earth. And in fact, learning seems to be one of our main purposes. One of the most powerful realizations of my life came when I read Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' research on near-death experiences. Some people who "crossed over" into death and returned to tell about their experience remembered being asked three questions as they evaluated and reviewed their own lives: Did you love? Did you serve? Did you seek knowledge? Those three questions gave me a marker with which to measure my life, a guide more realistic and user-friendly than more dogmatic instructions or doctrinal rules.

In discerning meaning in our lives, we tend to think in metaphors meaningful to our experience—for instance, a cook may think of life in terms of recipes, menus and master chefs; a carpenter in terms of blueprints, diagrams and master craftsmen. Because I was and always will be a teacher, I find myself thinking in metaphors of teaching and learning styles.

Simple observation of human existence makes it clear that humans are compelled to learn—we learn everything we can, about science and the natural world, about mathematics and music, about art and relationships with others. We seek to know what lies beyond us, what is greater than we are, and specifically for each of us, what we are to do in any given

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<sup>5</sup> Fendall, et al, page 1.

circumstance. Most of all, perhaps, we want the learning to be easy, we want help, we want guidance, we want someone to give us the answers. We want the Holy Spirit to have a particular teaching style that, when I was a teacher, popular educational jargon referred to as the “sage on the stage,” i.e., someone with all the answers who simply poured information into students, like pouring water into waiting, receptive and empty containers.

Instead, I have discerned that the Spirit’s teaching style is more like what we called a “guide on the side.” Such a teacher uses the Socratic method, leading students with questions rather than answers; such a teacher uses the inductive method, the discovery method, walking *with* students through learning experiences, supporting students in individually in discovering the best “answers.”

This teaching style is based in part on research into how human beings learn and remember what they have learned. In a workshop for teachers that I attended in the 1980s, I wrote down the following statistics:

In studies of human brain growth and development, researchers discovered that we humans remember  
15% of what we read  
50% of what we see and hear  
75% of what we say when we talk  
90% of what we *do* when we are actively engaged in a task

This means, of course, that we simply learn better by *doing* than by hearing about what someone else has learned. We can listen all day to someone talk about how to play the piano, or how to play basketball, or how we should treat each other, but in terms of learning, nothing takes the place of personal experience. In the words of a contemporary education writer:

knowledge does not come packaged in books, or journal, or computer disks (or professors' and students' heads) to be transmitted intact from one to another. Those vessels contain information, not knowledge. Rather, knowledge is a state of understanding and can only exist in the mind of the individual knower; as such, knowledge must be constructed--or re-constructed--by each individual knower through the process of trying to make sense of new

information in terms of what that individual already knows. In this constructivist view of learning, students use their own existing knowledge and prior experience to help them understand the new material; in particular, they generate relationships between and among the new ideas and between the new material and information already in memory.<sup>6</sup>

This is true not only of the physical classroom, but for all knowledge we acquire as humans. Life is one long lesson, the structure and content of which we must discover for ourselves. We can only reach a state of understanding by going through the process “of trying to make sense of new information” in terms of what we already know, through *discernment*. Though we may use information we have received from others in that process, information alone is not enough. Learning is experiential, and one of our lessons comes in discerning the presence of the teacher, which leads me to the conclusion that Quakerism is a spiritual learning style based on the discovery method. Discernment of those gentle” leadings” with which the Holy Spirit guides us in our learning process is a key element in our life’s lesson, the element which enriches the rest of the learning experience.

One of the sources I’ve been reading on the subject of discernment, and one I recommend, is Brent Bill’s book, *Sacred Compass*. In it, he quotes a Thomas Merton prayer, which echoes the longing in the prayers of the children I mentioned earlier. “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going,” Merton writes,

I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Allison King, quoted by Charles Nelson in “More on Sage vs. Guide,” *Explorations in Learning: Notes on Writing, Teaching, and Learning* blog. May 15, 2007. Accessed Dec. 5, 2009. <<http://secondlanguagewriting.com/explorations/Archives/2007/May/MoreonSagevsGuide.html>>

desire. And I know that if I do this, you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my [trials] alone.<sup>7</sup>

I discovered this week a teaching & learning model that reflects my own greatest experiences as a teacher, and one I find compelling in thinking of the Divine Teacher and me, its student. The model comes from a physicist at the University of Colorado, a man named David Hawkins. Here is how he describes it:

Imagine a triangle. In one corner is the teacher, in another the student, and in the third was X, the object/course being studied. The relationship between teacher and student was formed in the process of “uncovering” the meaning or nature of X—the object of study. It was, I immediately recognized, a diagram that my parents had described as Talmudic study! It worked best if the X was of genuine interest to the teacher—something he felt was revealing, useful, and particularly so for the students he was teaching. But also for himself. While they were not equals in terms of knowledge or wisdom, the best lessons were those in which they were equally interested in hearing about the X and from each other. The course of study was an open road depending on how they heard each other. They might, over the course of time, discover that they agreed about baseball or Mozart—or disagreed. But the burning question was how they understood the X before them.<sup>8</sup>

I love the idea that the Holy Spirit engages with us in “uncovering” meaning in our lives, remaining flexible and genuinely interested in the problems we face, the choices we make and the outcomes and how we respond to them. I love the idea that the Spirit is learning along with me, that together we explore, reveal and understand Creation.

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Merton, quoted in Brent Bill, *Sacred Compass: The Way of Spiritual Discernment* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2008), page 17.

<sup>8</sup>Brent Bill, *Sacred Compass: The Way of Spiritual Discernment* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2008), page 17.