

Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting  
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## “What Fruit Ye Bear to God”

by Donne Hayden

Last Tuesday during a meeting of the group at Community Friends discussing Quaker mysticism, Eileen Bagus, the facilitator/teacher, mentioned guidelines for knowing whether or not a person was hallucinating, indulging an ego-centered desire, misinterpreting dreams, etc. or having a genuine mystical experience. The test? Simple. The fruit of the Spirit. This is a reference to Paul's letter to the Galatians in which he lays out clearly what the Holy Spirit produces: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, Tediency, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22).

The next day at the Ministers' meeting in Wilmington, I asked a room full of Quaker ministers and clerks what they thought about mysticism and whether or not their congregations were open to it or skeptical of it. We had a lively two-hour discussion on the subject, and near the end, one of the more conservative Friends asked, “How do you know it's God and not Satan who's giving a person dreams or visions or messages? For instance, what about this from 2 Corinthians 11:13-15: ‘For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness.’”

Thanks to the discussion the night before, I had an answer for him. “You know by the fruits of the Spirit,” I said, and because he knows the Bible, he knew exactly what I referred to and seemed to find this a satisfactory response. Applying the “fruit-of-the-Spirit” test to an experience allows us to measure it by what it produces. In the case of visions, dreams and such, does the experience produce a fruit of the Spirit? i.e., “love, joy, peace, Tediency, kindness, generosity,

faithfulness, gentleness.” If it does, then it is a direct encounter with the Divine. On the other hand, does an experience result in *anyone* being hurt, physically, mentally or emotionally? Does the experience cause hatred, sadness, anger, impatience, cruelty, stinginess, betrayal, brutality or loss of self-respect? For instance, when a President of the United States believes that God told him to wage war on another nation, he is probably not listening to the Holy Spirit. If a voice tells me to do something to harm another person, then I might need to seek psychiatric help.

The “fruit-of-the-Spirit” test is central for Friends in determining whether or not a person has “a true leading.” If you feel led to serve, to manifest love, compassion, kindness, etc., with *no thought* of whether or not you will be recognized or rewarded for doing so, that is an indication of the Spirit moving in you. If you feel *compelled* to do something for the good of others, and you will do it *even if no one notices or pays you*, that is the Spirit. It often happens, of course, that people who do good, creative sorts of things *do* receive recognition. But if you *expect* to receive reward or recognition, your “leading” may be your own ego speaking to you. Don’t misunderstand me—there’s nothing wrong with doing something good with an expectation of being recognized for it—but it is probably *not* a leading of the Spirit. Doing something good anonymously is one way to ascertain you are acting completely from the Spirit. (I’m always irritated with myself when I do something good and anonymous and then spoil it by thinking, “Did you see that, God? Pretty good, huh?”)

For the sake of argument, now, let’s think about having a lot of money, the “fruit” of the material world. I can only imagine this, mind you, but I can apply my experience with having lots of *stuff* (which is especially on my mind right now as I contemplate moving for the third time in a year). Having a lot of money includes having lots of stuff. A fancy sports car, for instance. Of course, there may be periods of pure enjoyment like speeding through the countryside with the

top down, or perhaps knowing people covet your car. But have you ever come across a sparkling sporty car parked on the line *between* two parking spaces, thus effectively taking up both of them? The owner is worried about scratching or denting the prized car. And he or she needs a garage because both hail and sun are bad for the paint. So to protect one valuable possession you need other possessions. And you must take care of all of them, which may lead to anxiety, stress, concern with where to put them, store them or use them. But let's say you have soooo much money that someone else can do all this kind of worrying for you. I worked for a man like that once.

Let's call him Ted Wilson (not his real name). When I knew him, he owned a chain of savings & loan offices which he bought to have something to do after he sold his chain of token-operated gas stations to a Japanese corporation for millions of dollars. He hired me to write radio and newspaper advertising copy for the savings-and-loan company. After I had been there a few months, I came to understand how Ted operated. He wanted to control people, so he offered them money, expecting them to follow his advice in all matters, including their personal lives. Everyone knew that if you made Ted mad, you wouldn't get a Christmas bonus that year, or be invited to use the company jet—there would be some financial punishment. He completely alienated his own daughter, in spite of the money he threatened to *not* leave her. My supervisor, his nephew, secretly despised Ted, all the while flattering him and giving every appearance of being a loving nephew. No matter how friendly and fond his employees or family members seemed to be, Ted never knew if they really cared about him. With good reason, he was suspicious of everyone's motivations.

(Once during really bad hailstorm, Ted had just gotten up from his desk chair and come to the door of his office when a hailstone the size of a softball broke through the skylight above his

desk and smashed into his chair. My immediate thought was “A sign from God!” So I asked him jokingly, “Did you find a note attached to it, Ted?” I don't think he understood or appreciated the joke.)

I never knew a richer man, nor a sadder man. Though Ted was rich in the fruit of the world, i.e., money, he was a pauper when it came to fruit of the Spirit.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers to the “fruit” produced by our words and actions when he tells the disciples how to spot phony teachers: “You will know them by their fruits,” he said, pointing out that grapes are not gathered from thorns, nor figs from thistles. “In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.” So just as sweet, edible fruit does not grow on poisonous trees, qualities like goodness, kindness, and compassion do not come from someone motivated by greed, revenge, or hatred.

No matter how attractive the tree may appear to be, you will know it by its fruit. Let's take the example of honey-coated criticism. I once heard a comedienne say that in the South you can say any sort of terrible thing about someone if you just add “Bless his heart” at the end. “She's a meddling old biddy, bless her heart,” or “He's an real jerk, bless his heart.” But the fact is, no matter how sweetly someone says something awful, it is still awful. On the surface, a fruit may appear to be a fruit of the Spirit, while inside it is poisoned with animosity. In his poem “The Poison Tree” William Blake is eloquent on the topic of poisonous fruit that *appears* sweet:

*I was angry with my friend:*

*I told my wrath, my wrath did end.*

*I was angry with my foe;*

*I told it not, my wrath did grow.*

And I water'd it in fears,  
 Night & morning with my tears;  
 And I sunned it with my smiles  
 And with soft deceitful wiles.  
  
 And it grew both day and night,  
 Till it bore an apple bright;  
 And my foe beheld it shine,  
 And he knew that it was mine,  
  
 And into my garden stole  
 When the night had veil'd the pole:  
 In the morning glad I see  
 My foe outstretch'd beneath the tree

The narrator of the poem speaks as someone who cultivates the appearance of friendliness while undercutting someone he considers an enemy and seeking that person's destruction. The only way to *truly* know the narrator is by his fruit, which is poisoned with hatred.

Consider the people you spend time with—never mind how they seem on the surface. What grows in you because of your association with them? Does their fruit leave behind seeds of anger? Criticism? Judgment of others? Self-indulgence? Competition? Gossip? If we don't find fruits of the Spirit in a relationship, we must decide whether or not to continue, whether or not to participate in propagating such fruit as it produces. Not that we should be mean to the person—one response could be that every time she or he says something spiteful, hateful, or critical—even about someone else—we can respond with fruit of the Spirit, such as pointing out with love and compassion something good about the person.

George Fox told early Friends that God requires of us “the fruits of his Spirit, of the light, of the gospel, of the grace, and of the truth.” “. . . look into your own vineyards,” he wrote, and “see what fruit ye bear to God.” What would happen if we applied the “fruit-of-the-Spirit test” to *all* our words and actions? What “fruit” do I produce when I speak? What effect do my actions have on others? Do I make people around me feel better or worse? Do I speak words that encourage or disparage? Do I seek to resolve differences in love or do I seek vindication? Do I consider what long-term effect my words may have on someone? Is my fruit poison or nourishing? Does my fruit contain seeds of hatred or seeds of love? Does it contain seeds of dissension or seeds of community?

Let each of us look into our own vineyards and see what fruit we bear, what we produce and offer to God as harvest from our lives.