

# Plain Speech: One aspect of Quaker thinking on simplicity

In Faith and Practice - a handbook as close to a catechism as is ever likely to be produced by Quakers - the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends queries: "Do you keep to simplicity and moderation in your speech, your manner of living, and in your daily work?" In all, Faith and Practice lists fifteen queries. Behind each is over 300 years of Quaker history and Quaker testimony, and 300 years of Quaker influence at work in North America and Europe (on what Frederick Tolles and other scholars call the "Atlantic culture").

by Maureen Korp

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Of the fifteen Philadelphia queries, the query for simplicity is one of the more interesting. The query carries with it the historic public identifiers once practised by Quakers - flat hats, the wearing of Quaker gray, and a "thee" and "thou"-ing mode of speech. Plain speech and dress are still Quaker concerns; but the question the query raises for Friends today is not one of external identifiers. The question concerns more specifically our continuing effort to understand "plain and simple truth." This is no small matter. As a people, we have no Credo to consult; and, in the unprogrammed meetings, such as those in Canadian Yearly Meeting, neither have we priests or ministers to consult. But we do have custom.

## Accustomed to Plain Speech

At the outset George Fox noted the importance of Friends' speaking truthfully, plainly and simply:

*"For the Lord showed me, that though the people of the world have mouths full of deceit, and changeable words, yet I was to keep to Yea and Nay in all things; and that my words should be few and savoury, seasoned with grace...."*<sup>2</sup>

Plain speech is characterised by several practices common among Friends. We avoid absolutely among ourselves and when addressing public figures the use of honourary titles of address, for example, Mr., Miss, Mrs., Ms, Your Honour, and the like - especially as applied to public personages. The children of Friends learn this manner of address early. Our children are introduced to adults by first name and last name. Both child and adult continue then to address one another by first name alone or first and last names together. No disrespect of the young for the old is intended or heard.

We express month and day with numbers, rather than names, and have done so for hundreds of years. Speaking of "third day, eighth month" handily avoids speech that once glorified Thor (Thursday, Thor's Day) and Caesar Augustus (August). For George Fox and his followers, their use of numerical dating was intended to be a bold statement. They opposed the rendering of "false honour," in whatever form it came, pagan or Christian. Numerical dating was not an example of seventeenth-century "proto-metrication." Plain speech is truthful speech; thus, we have no occasion in our lives for a "meta-speech" form - such as that used today in taking formal oaths of allegiance or making sworn statements. We strive to speak truthfully always. In many courts of law Friends are thereby excused from taking oaths. When we are called upon to give "sworn testimony," we may offer instead an affirmation that our witness is true. In most instances that will suffice.

In a Canadian courtroom today, for example, an affirmation, or "unsworn testimony," is regarded as having the same weight as sworn testimony. It was not always so. A few years ago in Canada, for example, there was provision in the Criminal Code for Quaker adults to give unsworn testimony in lieu of sworn; but there was no similar provision for Quaker children. There is now.

In the seventeenth century, there were no provisions in England and the colonies at all for Quakers - child or adult - to refuse to take oaths or swear allegiances. Approximately 15,000 of George Fox's followers were hounded by penal laws for not swearing oaths, for not paying tithes, for not being members of the Church of England. Five hundred people died in prison in England. In the American colonies, four Quakers were put to death on Boston Commons. Other Friends in England and North America suffered ear croppings, whippings, and tongue borings. Some were sold into slavery.

## You and Thou

The first Quakers were drawn from the ranks of artisans, farmers, and small merchants. Early Quakerism was essentially a gathering in of middle-class people – sober, sensible sorts from the north and west of England – people who were not impressed by the extravagant manner of the Cavalier dandy with his sweeping feathers, lace flourishes, and his grand use of a plural "you" as a singular pronoun. In seventeenth-century England, this usage differentiated the nobility from all others.. (It survives today in isolated instances such as the "royal we" and the "editorial we.") George Fox and his early followers refused to acknowledge "you" as a singular pronoun. They substituted in its stead "thou" – and, in the American colonies, "thee." Early Quakers had many reasons for this practice – social, grammatical, even theological. (My personal favourite is the argument that Adam and Eve addressed one another as "thou" when they were in the garden.)

In 1666 two of Fox's followers published a polyglot grammar which, the authors hoped, would demonstrate conclusively that "you" was the plural form of the pronoun and could not be used as a singular. The authors surveyed more than forty languages and claimed to find the same phenomenon concerning singular and plural forms of address::

— *"You to Many and Thou to One: Singular One, Thou; Plural Many, You" again and again "and how the word You to One came first from the Pope.....But to say the Plural in the Singular's place, you, for thou, this pleases our Priests, and School-masters, and peevish Magistrates: Thou's thou me, Cry they: and thus they have forgotten their Accidence."*<sup>16</sup>

In keeping with the times, the text of the grammar was fiercely anti-Catholic.

## The Lamb's War

Unlike other new religions of the seventeenth century, Friends did not withdraw from the world. Early Quakers were actively engaged in the reform of society and religion. In the 1650s, George Fox and his followers undertook a campaign they called "The Lamb's War." There were several goals – conversions or "convincements" not the least of them. One intrepid Quaker woman, Mary Fisher, for example, walked all the way from England to the court of Mohammed IV, sultan of Turkey. She arrived in 1659, was received at court, and was heard, in good Islamic fashion, as someone who spoke truthfully of what she knew.

Friends also sought to increase their numbers through a public practice of a silent and not-so-silent witness directed towards the English nobility. This witness concerned simplicity. The witness took several forms; most memorably that of a refusal to render "hat-honour" to anyone. As far as Friends were concerned, removing one's hat in the presence of another, no matter how lofty the social status of that person, was a courtesy due only to God. For George

Fox, bowing or not-bowing might have been matters of little consequence, as Elbert Russell notes, "except for the fact that the upper classes attached great importance to them."<sup>4</sup>

Early Friends were hardly meek about their faith and their social customs. Hugh Barbour writes of Friends in the seventeenth century: "Their way of life was part of their warfare and a demonstration of their message. Standards were aggressive, not defensive; they were called Testimonies and were seen as instruments of conversion."<sup>5</sup>

### Friends' Speech

For Quakers, truth is factual. It is observable and experiential. Truth is something "plain and simple." Truth can be apprehended by anyone who will choose to come and sit quietly in readiness for what Friends call "an opening" in a "meeting" with others. Such openings do not appear in every meeting, but they do in many. Friend and non-Friend (Attender) alike sitting in meeting may have the uncanny experience of hearing someone else rise in meeting and speak that which one has been thinking upon silently, privately. When a meeting pulls itself together in this fashion, we say it is "gathered."

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What is said will be said plainly and simply and is understood by all. The meeting as a whole bears a responsibility for what any one person speaks in quiet speech, in short and simple speech, for that is the "sense" of the meeting.

Such expressions as "opening," "gathered," "silence," "sense" are words with particular meaning for Friends. So, too, "centred" and "concern." When Friends use such words today to express our beliefs, we are using the words in the sense of what they meant to Friends in the seventeenth century. There is, thus, a continuity of thought which is wonderful. This is "plain speech" today – without a "thee" or a "thou." Plain speech is speech centred on a continuing, activist meaning.

The road from the seventeenth century to today was not without its potholes. A number of Quaker historians have noted that by the eighteenth century Friends' insistence upon the wearing of "plain" dress and the use of "thou" and "thee" was serving more and more to separate and formalize the beliefs of the second- and third-generation Quakers in a less-than-helpful way. In the eighteenth century such isolating practices were regarded more positively. They were seen as a "hedge" protecting Friends and the

meetings. In 1777, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, for example, appointed committees to visit each monthly meeting "within the verge." The committees were to impress upon the meetings the importance of plainness of speech.

The meetings went further. They established Friends' schools everywhere in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States to educate their children and to foster the continued use of "Biblical" language.. In this task, the schools failed. In others they succeeded.. The schools were also commonly charged with instilling in Quaker children a manner of speech fostering "directness of address" and "clarity of enunciation." Here the schools were more successful. But the hedge did not hold. By the end of the nineteenth century, plain dress and speech of the old-fashioned "thee" and "thou" sort was fast losing ground everywhere.

Without question, "directness of address" and "clarity of enunciation"

continue to be valued today in the practice of Friends. We are urged to be careful of our speech and to be "as accurate as possible, without exaggeration or omission."<sup>6</sup> We are also urged to write and keep reflective journals. It is no surprise then to see that we, as a group, number many among our membership who are journalists, writers, diplomats, mediators, and teachers. We are a people who value clear and "plain speech." Perhaps the loss of the traditional "thee" and "thou" and the wearing of "Quaker grey" is just as well. By the mid-twentieth century, Friends had become known for so much more. As Campbell Stewart writes of Friends in the twentieth century:

They could only be thus widely recognized [for leadership in abolition, suffrage, war relief, refugee relocation, mediation, etc.] when [their] dress and speech were not noticeably different from that of their fellows.<sup>7</sup>

Still, I cherish my memory of an elderly

Quaker woman I encountered many years ago. She approached me smiling, with outstretched hands, saying, "Is thee a Friend?"

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#### **Footnotes**

1. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Faith and Practice p.195.
2. George Fox, quoted in John William Graham, "George Fox," New Appreciations of George Fox: A Tercentenary Collection of Studies, p.32.
3. George Fox, et al., A Battle-Door for Teachers & Professors to Learn Singular & Plural unpagged.
4. Elbert Russell, "George Fox as a Pioneer," in New Appreciations of George Fox, p. 95
5. Hugh Barbour, The Quakers in Puritan England p. 160
6. Faith and Practice p 20
7. W.A.Campbell Stewart, Quakers and Education as Seen in their Schools in England p. 227