

My answer to the question: “What is or makes a Quaker?”

By Siepko Lok

Good question, as the saying goes, but not an easy one to answer. There are to begin with at least ten different types of definitions, and besides it may be difficult to find two Quakers who fit the same pattern. Even within my own Meeting I only have a vague appreciation of what kind of Quakers they are. Arbitrary decisions are unavoidable, but I am willing to try. Most of what I intend to say is based upon my experience as a Quaker for over 50 years, almost entirely with Quakers who are joined in the so-called *unprogrammed* Yearly Meetings (particularly in Britain and Canadian YMs). I will refrain from commenting on practices in other kinds of Yearly Meetings.

Quakers Defined

One way of describing Quakers is to describe the criteria they set for themselves. It is a descriptive definition, and a variation on defining a person's occupation by describing what the person is doing for making a living. There are three or four criteria with which most, if not all, Quakers would probably agree: (a) Quakers accept the notion that every person is endowed with something of the Divine; (b) Quakers try to live their lives in accordance with moral testimonies; (c) Quakers worship collectively in a silent meditative fashion; and for good measure

(d) Quakers seek the comfort of a social community. These criteria are not given in order of importance or logical sequence. For me, each is important in being a Quaker. If, as assumed, most Quakers go along with them, then quite likely there will be different interpretations. For sure, there will be differences in emphasis. I will give you mine.

Faith: It can happen, and has happened, that suddenly a person is overwhelmed with the sensation of being totally without anxieties and filled with an extraordinary sense of joy. The conscious is literally illuminated. It is total bliss. It cannot be explained. Sometimes during such a spell (which may last less than a minute) one becomes aware of what may seem to be a message. It happened to George Fox, who from then on believed in direct revelation. It can happen to anybody. This experience is the basis for Quakers to believe in the notion that there is something of God or the Divine in every person, good or bad. It may be only a spark that lies in a state of dormancy. This notion is one part of the faith of Quakers. It is an intrinsic part. The Divine inside can also manifest itself with a spontaneous outburst of compassion and energy. Cases are known of people running into a burning house to save a child without regard for their own safety. The nature of the Divine is not prescribed for Quakers, and they are free to decide for themselves the

Deity, if any, they prefer. It does not matter. It is a private matter. This freedom is an important part of being a Quaker. It is the beauty of being a Quaker.

Moral values: The other part of the Quaker faith is Altruistic Love, the kind Jesus taught without much success. For me it is the personification of the Divine. It is the antithesis of the selfish Ego, and it is the source of other values, such as tolerance, compassion, equality, honesty, justice (social as well as economic), and reverence for life (the basis for our Peace Testimony and our deep respect for all that is creation). Quakers believe that values must be lived to make them meaningful. They are moral activists. They are known for trying to live in accordance with these values, and often impress outsiders with their consistency and devotion in doing so. Without a strong moral commitment, there is little if anything to be gained during worship.

Worship: Quakers worship collectively in silent meditation. They seek unity with the Divine within, but already feel strengthened and filled with peace when inside a degree of harmony is reached. There is no external guidance. No religious authority serves as an intermediary. No mandatory theology. We are like the knights of King Arthur's court looking for the Holy Grail in a virgin forest, each on his own.

The Quaker form of worship is not easy, but one is free to use a ‘vessel.’ Again, as already mentioned above under Faith, the choice is a personal matter. Some may concentrate on the spirit of Jesus, others on the spirit of Buddha, or of Francis of Assisi, or on Mother Theresa, or someone else who lived to lessen the suffering of others. Some may dwell on the Bible, others on the Talmud, or on ethics in the Koran. It can be any religion or none. One can also follow the age-old practice of Yoga. There are many ways to the Divine. If one vessel does not seem to work, one is free to try another. It is important, however, to remain aware that the choice of vessel is relative, mostly to one’s place of birth and upbringing. The absolute Truth remains beyond our grasp.

Community: Although there may be a tendency to take for granted the time we spend together after Meeting for Worship and on other occasions, the importance of these shared minutes comes immediately to the fore the moment other commitments interfere. We need those minutes to maintain a sense of unity after worship where our thoughts moved in different directions. We

mingle freely, and converse without knowing what kind of vessel others have been using. There are no labels to tell us. It does not matter. We are united by our common faith in the Divine within. I may be guilty of idealizing, but if so than at least the ideal is something worth aiming at. We feel pleased and privileged with the realisation that it is quite possible to experience peace and harmony inside, not in spite of, but as a consequence of religious or spiritual diversity.

Synthesis

The above criteria and elaboration comprise my answer to the question: “What is or makes a Quaker?” They define for me a Quaker within the community of the *unprogrammed* Yearly Meetings, where each Quaker is an *individual* who pursues the spiritual quest in a way that suits him or her best. Each follows his or her own inner voice. All who are attracted by the Quaker approach to a spiritual life are welcome. Our Society is fully inclusive. There is nothing in this definition that intrinsically favours a particular religion. The religious freedom in this Quaker community, the spiritual diversity that results,

and the opportunities it offers to learn from each other, are its heart and soul. All of the above could be compressed in a few words: Quakers are a unified group of diversified spiritual seekers. As Jesus said: “Seek and you will find.” Assuming that no unforeseen obstacles get in the way, and assuming the editor’s agreement, I will pursue this article with further reflections. 🐉

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Victory

And there are days
aye, there are days
When darkness reigns
from ground to head
and all men’s evil deeds
hold sway, and Creation
wears a crown of thorns.

On days like these
defeat seems certain
women’s small hearts
a tiny shield
‘gainst massive sword’ —
but love will conquer,
yes, love will conquer.

Life is a force
produced by love
that passes on, yet
never dies.

A blade of grass
a drop of water —
immortal atoms:

you and I!

— Eva Lyman, Vancouver MM

Foundations of Faith

(Draft chapter of Canadian Yearly Meeting’s *Faith and Practice*)

60. We can define “ecumenical” as simply world-embracing. But deeper meanings have been distilling themselves into this world until now we can fairly say that an ecumenical encounter points towards an attempt to understand, an attempt at shaking off the stereotype with which we have approached another’s religion and moving from the shadow to the substance; of opening ourselves to the truth in another’s religious approach; and becoming vulnerable to the point where we may not return to our own faith in the same condition that we set out.

— Douglas V. Steere, 1965