

Leading And Being Led

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PENDLE HILL PUBLICATIONS
WALLINGFORD, PENNSYLVANIA

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This essay, a companion piece to *Quakers and the Use of Power*, Pendle Hill pamphlet 241, 1982, seeks to examine the nature of religious leadings and where we should be looking for such leadings today. The author is grateful to Western Yearly Meeting of Friends, Plainfield, Indiana, for the invitation to present the Quaker Lecture in 1979, which produced a first version of this essay; he is especially grateful for the intellectual stimulation and spiritual fellowship of Friends of Mid-Coast Friends Meeting of New England Yearly Meeting, Damariscotta, Maine, whose invitation to lead an adult discussion group in fall, 1984, significantly influenced this final version.

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Leading and being led: the words are simple enough. But for Quakers they have their most profound resonance as defining religious experience. Friends speak variously of being *drawn* to an action, feeling *under the weight* of a concern, being *called* or *led* to act in specific ways. We speak of *being open to the leadings of the Light*, of being *taught* by the *Spirit* or the *Inward Christ*. Extraordinary claims lie embedded in those phrases. They say that it is not only possible but essential to our nature for human beings to hear and obey the voice of God; that we can be directed, daily, in what we do, the jobs we hold, the very words we say; and that our obedience may draw us to become leaders in all spheres of human life — in the professions, arts and sciences, but also in discovering the ethical, political, social, and economic consequences of following the will of God.

To be a Quaker is not simply to subscribe to doctrines but to be convinced that one has known an ultimate reality which authenticates doctrine. It is to know oneself capable of being taught *now* by the living Spirit of Truth, capable of receiving vital direction in what one is to do. It is not only to be a follower of the teachings of Jesus but to have met the Inward Christ.

Our history is rich in examples of such religious experience, as our vocabulary is rich in ways of describing it, but that very richness presents dangers. One danger is that we may be so over-awed at how powerful a leading must be that we never trust that we have been led. We may search so hard for the transcendent insight that we miss the small, quiet promptings to obedience in what is immediately at hand. Those meetings in which no one dared break the silence for decades lost their vitality from being over-awed. The longer the silence endured, the more sacralized it became and the more terrifying it became for anyone to imagine being led to speak.

The opposite danger is that we do not feel enough awe.

We domesticate the powerful language of religious experience and turn authentic witness into cliché. Every strong opinion or piece of self-will gets inflated into a *leading*. A long-time colleague at Earlham College once got so tired of the pretentiousness of all the announced “concerns” — some of which appeared to be nothing more than irritation at the way faculty meeting was going — that he expunged the word from his vocabulary. Thereafter, whenever he felt exercised about something, he would announce that he “had a bother” about it.

As heirs to that rich vocabulary, our task is to recover its proper meaning, to free it from pretentiousness and to ask how it may help us understand and express our own religious experience. That requires looking at what our forebears experienced and then examining our own experience, to see where one throws light on the other. It requires exploring such questions as what it means, experientially, to have a leading; what some of the hallmarks and consequences are of being led; how we can tell when a leading is genuine rather than self-serving and self-deceiving; and where we might look for leadings today.

It is always well to start with George Fox, both because he first expresses the seminal insights which shape the Religious Society of Friends and because the heroic power of his life is so inspiring. Fox does not often speak of “leadings.” In telling about “the dealings of the Lord” with him, he speaks of a series of “great openings,” times of vigorous religious exercise when God gives him an insight into truth which carries with it a transforming power. The first of these exercises begins with Fox’s intense reaction to a trivial incident, the frivolous drinking of healths in a tavern. Unable to sleep that night, he tells us, “The Lord ...said unto me, “Thou seest how young people go together into vanity and old people into the earth; and thou must

forsake all, both young and old, and keep out of all, and be as a stranger unto all.”¹ “At the command of God,” Fox breaks off all connection with his family and begins his seeking. What follows is a long period of alienation from human society, anxious search for meaning, temptation, sufferings to the point of despair, and stubborn passivity — “waiting upon the Lord.” The early pages of Fox’s *Journal* report his going from place to place to consult with priests, professors and dissenters, but these are wanderings rather than leadings, marked by temptations to follow human models and by tests of his capacity for waiting.

In the third year of these wanderings, he has a series of great openings, close together and in support of one another. First, reflecting on claims people make to be believers, he has it opened to him that no one is truly a believer who has not passed from death to life. Belief is not a matter of opinions held but of a life so utterly transformed that it is like dying and being reborn. Second, he perceives that something more than university training is essential to “qualify” one as a minister of Christ. The third opening is that God does not dwell in buildings made with hands, but that the church is the people of God.

We who read about them with a knowledge of subsequent history recognize that these openings will help shape Quaker polity, our attitudes toward the authority of our leaders, and how we expect ministry to be expressed. But though powerful, they are, initially, fragmentary and largely negative — as much “closings” as “openings.” They help clear away error, but Fox does not yet know *who* God’s people are or what *will* make a true minister. Neither has he yet found himself in relation to God. He says, “Now though I had great openings, yet great trouble and temptation came many times upon me, so that when it was day I wished for night, and when it was night I wished for day.”² Openings, sorrows and temptations all occur intermixed in this time

of Fox's first searching.

Only after these three great openings does Fox first use his characteristic phrase, "...I was *moved of the Lord* to go into Derbyshire...", and all this occurs before the great Pentecostal event which changes him from Seeker to Finder, that moment when, having forsaken all human help, he hears a voice saying "There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition." Even after that revelation, Fox still passes through worse sorrows and temptations than he had experienced before. He still finds himself *moved* to do things which are inexplicable to him, impelled by a hint or by a call to testify to, or keep faith with, what has previously been opened to him — as when he speaks of hearing a bell or seeing a steeple and having it "strike at his heart" or when he feels commanded to walk barefoot in winter through the streets of Lichfield. Even for a great religious prophet, *leadings* can continue to be uncertain and ambiguous, an occasion for risk.³

But George Fox is not our only pattern or example. Many whose lives speak compellingly to us had no such direct openings but came to their transforming experience through the ministry of other people. For some there is a long apprenticeship of struggle and confusion, while others are convinced by the peace and rightness of meeting in silent worship with God's people.

Consider the example of William Penn. At least ten years elapsed between the first and second times he heard Thomas Loe preach. In the intervening years, he had been dismissed from Oxford University for dissenting from the Established Church, and he had traveled and talked with many kinds of believers. There was ferment in his soul, but he was no Quaker. Even after his second encounter with Thomas Loe, when a voice told Penn to stand up in Cork meeting so that others might be helped by seeing him in tears, he was not yet fully convinced in the faith. The

first time Penn was arrested, it was for threatening to throw an intruder down the meeting stairs. The Friends who intervened to prevent violence must surely have been troubled about how this new enthusiast was going to fit into the Society.

Or we might take another familiar example, that of Robert Barclay, the most intellectually rigorous of early Friends. In a well-known passage of *The Apology*, Proposition XI, Section 7, a work of careful argumentation, he explains how he came to Friends:

Not by strength of arguments, or by a particular disquisition of each doctrine, and convincement of my understanding thereby, came [I] to receive and bear witness of the truth, but by being secretly reached by this life; for when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me, and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed.

Taken together these three examples sketch in outline what it means to have a religious leading. First of all, the leading is directed inwardly. The tight control we may have kept on our inner doubts becomes loosened, and confusion threatens to overwhelm us. We may feel emptiness and separation from other people, and, like Fox, feel required to act out those inner experiences by withdrawing from ordinary human encounters. Perhaps we give physical expression to our restlessness by wandering from place to place. We may become burdens to ourselves and to others. Through all this turmoil we become aware of a great longing to know what can be depended on, and we

recognize that our desire to know what is true is greater even than our desire to be comforted. We learn in some detail about our own condition — both what it is and what it might become. As a consequence we learn that we can persevere.

Perseverance requires patience and courage, which are essential for clearing away false solutions to our needs. During his time of searching, various advisers urged George Fox to get married, join the army, sing hymns, use tobacco and have his blood let. Many of us have received similar advice, if indeed we haven't offered it to others. Such advice is based on the assumption that we are merely going through a phase which will work itself out if we do not take ourselves too seriously. And such advice misses the point entirely, for we know that, even if what we are going through can be charted on some developmental scheme as adolescence or mid-life crisis, that does not account for it. For us it is an ultimate test of meaning, a test whether we can live with integrity and find a human fellowship rooted in what lasts.

A second hallmark of a leading is that we recognize that our endurance comes as a gift, an opening. The waiting is still painful, but our capacity to resist false answers gives us some assurance a true one will come. A third hallmark is that we learn about people. As we come to know our own condition, we come also to know the condition of others. We see that others experience the same kinds of temptations, the same sufferings, the same longings. We receive another opening then, that we are part of suffering humanity, so whatever may comfort us will have to be for all humankind. We cannot come to the ocean of light except through the ocean of darkness.

We often use the phrase "that speaks to my condition" when what we mean is "I agree with that." For Fox, to have one's condition spoken to was to learn a hard truth or be

brought to judgment. Another favorite phrase, “speak to that of God in them,” has been similarly softened by later Friends. For Fox, *that of God* might be totally at odds with what one was doing or saying. The well-known Epistle of 1656, in which Fox exhorts Friends to be patterns and examples, in order to “walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone...” begins:

In the power of life and wisdom, and dread of the Lord God of life, and heaven, and earth, dwell, that in the wisdom of God over all ye may be preserved, and be a terror to all the adversaries of God, and a dread, answering that of God in them all, spreading the Truth abroad, awakening the witness, confounding deceit, gathering up out of transgression into the life, the covenant of light and peace with God.⁴

To answer *that of God* in God’s adversaries means being a terror and dread to them; it means speaking to what lies imprisoned in them. Elsewhere Fox speaks of going over the heads of persecutors by reaching the witness of God in them and of appealing to that of God in our opponents so as to throw them into confusion. That sounds a bit like the advice to love your enemies because it will drive them crazy, and so it should, for what Fox means is that the Inward Christ works to lead us first to judgment, then to reform and conviction of the truth.

To know our own condition and the conditions of others is to have a realistic view of human frailties and also to know the witness within each of us which can lead us out of error.

A fourth hallmark of a leading is that we feel ourselves increasingly under obedience. A gathering power of conviction within us sustains our courage and patience and then points us to first steps in a reordering of our lives.

And as we persevere in obedience, we may find that the steps we feel drawn to take become bigger, more defined. We feel more clearly led. At the outset of his search, Fox did not know what would speak to his condition; all he knew was what would not. Penn was a clumsy seeker for more than ten years before he was ready to follow his leading, and even then he stumbled on his way. Barclay might well have thought that nothing could satisfy him unless it had intellectual cogency, but the meeting began to define his condition for him even as it spoke to it: he wanted the evil in him weakened and the good raised up.

At the moment of greatest emptiness or greatest need, God begins to turn all those separate openings to good account. One learns, directly or through the mediation of others, that there is an answering to the human condition, if only one will trust it, and, in this leading to the truth, one may find one's greatest gifts enhanced and focused. When Penn was finally made serviceable to the truth, it was as statesman and courtier; when Barclay made his contribution, it was as a theologian. The fullest expression of one's fundamental leading may be to do what one does best.

I would like to speak personally here. I believe I was led into the Religious Society of Friends and, in the process, into a complex of religious, social, ethical and political commitments. My first encounter with Quakers came when, in high school, I went to weekend work camp. There I met people who were doing work of social importance out of religious conviction. They were dedicated to humble service to the poor and dispossessed. They spoke of answering that of God in even the most despairing and hardened persons and of making a society which met human needs justly and graciously. Their lives testified to a depth and integrity which touched me, and I wanted to know more about them.

At the end of the weekend, I went to meeting for worship for the first time, and that seemed to be the fulfillment of all the implied meaning in the lives which had touched me. Sitting in silence did not come naturally to me. It was a long hour and I felt more anxiety about staying awake than refreshment from the quiet. I was grateful when anyone spoke. Gradually, however, I found myself becoming more at ease in the silence, at peace with myself.

Now, more than thirty years later, I realize that the ministry in that meeting would seem thin to me, but then there was something behind the words which was reaching me, something like the “secret power” Barclay describes. I left that meeting sure that I wanted to become a Quaker.

My first leading, then, was through the evident goodness and effectiveness of a group of Friends and the peacefulness of a meeting. My only worry — it will be familiar to many convinced Friends — was that these people were too good for me to associate with. But as I began to attend meeting regularly, to read and discuss the implications of Quaker belief, I found myself struggling with one particular problem of belief, the peace testimony. Nothing in my experience or my understanding of the world made non-violence and pacifism seem reasonable commitments. The testimony seemed to be an integral part of the faith, but for many months I could neither accept nor reject it.

The issue came to focus when I was trying to determine whether I could call myself a conscientious objector, recognizing that such a step would mean forswearing violence for the rest of my life. For weeks I felt haunted by the question, torn by my unfaithfulness if I did not accept the peace testimony and terrified at its irrationality and danger, if I did. This long period of constant worry culminated in one sleepless night which I spent arguing with myself, going over the arguments of others, praying

for guidance and being afraid that I might have my prayers answered. Finally, early in the morning, I knew I had crossed a line. No new arguments fell into place, nothing became more rational, but somewhere I had changed and I knew that I would have to declare myself a conscientious objector and give up reliance on force to accomplish things — *for the rest of my life.*

When I acknowledged that the commitment had been made, I did not feel any inner peace. I knew my decision would cut me off from some members of my family and might even require that I go to prison. I also knew that I had been led inevitably to this choice, but I felt frightened at what had happened to me. Suddenly I was utterly defenseless in a violent world, and for a long time I went through my days fearful of what it meant to have disarmed myself.

Since then, there have been a number of times that I have been in some real or potential danger — at peace actions, working in the ghetto, or confronting irrational or violent people. In those times I have not been without fear, but I have never since felt the fear I felt when I first made the commitment to give up reliance on violence to protect me. I believe that when I became convinced of the peace testimony, I was given a leading which, in effect, immersed me in terror and the stuff of violence so that I could know my condition and work with it. I was tested and strengthened in conditions of safety before I was ever tested in real conflict.

My experiences are not unique. Many Friends could report similar and more profound experiences of being led into an initial act of faith by the loving support of a community and then finding that the deeper commitments come through anxious struggle to let go of one's protections outside of faith.

For many Friends the clearest experience of being led

occurs when they speak in meeting for worship. Here too I believe my experience is both very common and analogous to other kinds of leadings. I speak easily in many situations, but I speak neither easily nor often in meeting for worship. It takes a long time for words to be given me. The first time I ever felt moved to speak, I thought something was physically wrong with me. The meeting was very deep, by which I mean that I was aware simultaneously of both an intensity of attention in myself and a sense of being at rest. The silence was not the absence of sound but something full of energy, like the quiet we might experience in an artist's studio or a library when a number of people are present, each concentrating on his or her own work. There was this difference, though, that in the meeting for worship this energy was pooled, gathered, shared by all of us. Each of us might be as concentrated as an artist or scholar, but we were concentrated together, on the same thing. The meeting had a center to which we were each directed.

Each person who spoke seemed to know what it would help me to hear. Some gave me my half-formed thoughts sharply clarified. Others said things startling in their newness which seemed, as soon as I heard them, as dependably right as the oldest truth. After a time, the thoughts and images which had come into my mind, modified, clarified and intensified by what others had said and by the silence in which we met, began to take on a new pattern. Phrases and images arranged themselves, first in clusters, then in a loose sequence. They began to take shape as a message, a brief set of words I felt I should share. As I found myself feeling that I was given words to say, and was about to stand, my heart began to pound and I had trouble breathing. It did not feel like stage-fright or fear of making a fool of myself; instead, it felt like a physical weakness. I was so shaken that I did not speak, but after

meeting ended I felt depressed, as though I had failed at something.

A few weeks later the experience repeated itself. Again I felt intensity and peace, a sense of rightness and a sense that I was to minister in the meeting. Phrases and images played through my mind, arranging themselves in a right order — not one of argument or exposition but of association which had greater meaning for me. Once again, as the message reached the stage where it seemed to be not fully articulated or complete but only fully given, I felt the heart-pounding weakness. This time I stood up, however, and the weakness stopped as soon as I began to speak.

I never speak in meeting for worship without that feeling of intensity, clarity, being given something to say and feeling, at the same time, a heart-pounding weakness. So far as I know, I have no control over its occurrence. I have come to trust it as a negative sign of leading, without which I should not speak. It is no guarantee that I have understood my leading, and it certainly is no infallible guide to the quality of my response to a leading. How convenient it would be if we could just tell each other to speak when the heartbeat quickens painfully, and we will be well led! I know only that I should not speak in meeting without feeling impelled and awed by what I am doing.

The hallmarks of such a leading are that one feels a command is given one, that the command and the capacity to follow it come from a source of power far beyond one's own limits. We may misunderstand what we are to do, but we know we must wait on that power and do our best to be faithful to it.

A leading does not come to us simply so we may have one. Eventually its inwardness takes outward form and affects the rest of the human community. When we are led to the truth it is so we may live by it and do something with

it. But as the examples of seasoned Friends often show, the struggles over leadings do not cease, nor do the possibilities of outrunning one's lead.

The private leading must be tested against the experience and collective leading of the worshipping community, not only to check the excesses of the willful or the mistaken, but also to give the support and strength of the religious community to what might otherwise be a lonely, ineffective witness. At its best, such testing strengthens the testimony of both the individual and the group. Very early in Quaker history, therefore, the community of faith had to find means to discern the true from the false leading and help the individual test the validity of his or her inward experience.

In *The Quakers in Puritan England*, Hugh Barbour describes four major tests which Friends came to apply to leadings: moral purity, patience, the self-consistency of the spirit, and bringing people into unity.⁵

Moral purity would be demonstrated by "not fleeing the cross," obeying calls which were difficult, humiliating, contrary to self-will, but which come simply as tests of our obedience. In *No Cross, No Crown*, Penn writes, "There is a lawful and unlawful self, and both must be denied ... There is no room for instruction where lawful self is lord and not servant."⁶ Even the lawful self — our natural goodness, our wish to help others, our healthy minds — needs to be placed under obedience. Hugh Barbour says "The Light is the active power of the new life, and the master that man obeys."⁷

Not every leading demands such self-abnegation, but patience is a sound test, since "self-will is impatient of tests."⁸ So our church structures evolved to deal with the authoritarian Friend, who gives his meeting the ultimatum, "love me, love my leading," and the apocalyptic Friend, so sure that she alone knows the urgency of the times, as well as with those too at ease in Zion. Friends learned to

wait in silent worship. The networks of meetings and committees became channels for the individual to submit leadings to the scrutiny of more seasoned Friends and to wait for clearness to proceed.

The test of self-consistency of the spirit rests on the principle that the Light will not contradict itself by leading different people to conflicting actions. In the Epistle of 1656, Fox says people should be led with the spirit to God, “and do service to him and have unity with him, with the Scriptures and one with another.”⁹ By this test, if a number of Friends have received similar callings, or if there are biblical analogues to the action one feels called to take, those are evidence that the spirit is consistent.

This test also examines the consistency with which the individual keeps faith with his or her leadings. So a meeting today might labor with a Friend whose business solicits military contracts or one who actively opposes corporate polluters but disconnects the catalytic converter on his own car, arguing that the self-consistency of the spirit should lead each of us to self-consistency in our witness.

St. Paul tells us that the fruits of the Holy Spirit are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”¹⁰ These are fruits of healthy human fellowship, where each serves the good of the other because all serve the same master. Where an apparent leading brings discord, every member of the community is obliged to examine himself as well as his neighbor, to see how unity may be restored. This might mean urging greater patience on those eager for action, but it might equally well mean encouraging the slow to change to heed the witness of those more socially concerned.

Where there is conflict between freedom and authority, says Isaac Pennington, let there be a “dedication of all spiritual gifts to the meanest member of the fellowship.”

To the risk that such an approach will allow the irresponsible to proceed unchecked, Arnold Lloyd develops Pennington's argument thus:

When, as in a meeting for worship, the Spirit moves anyone to speak, the same Spirit moves in others to be subject and give way: 'and so everyone keeping to his own measure in the Spirit, here can be no disorder, but true subjection of every spirit; and where this is wanting, it cannot be supplied by any outward rule or order set up in the Church by common consent.'¹¹

Probably no one better illustrates how leadings ripen by being subjected to these four tests than John Woolman. Two contrasting examples from his *Journal* show how Woolman submits himself to the tests of leading and how these tests help a concern reach its proper form.

His visit to the Indians begins with "inward drawings" to them in fall, 1761; in winter, 1762, he first shares his feelings with his several meetings and "having the unity of Friends," he begins arrangements in spring, 1763, to travel that summer. He speaks of having "given up to go" and feeling "unusual sadness" as the time approaches. While on the journey, he reflects on the dangers facing him — death or captivity by the Indians — and examines both his fears and motives rigorously. Though he fears he is physically too frail to bear the demands of captivity, he knows he has acted out of a sense of duty. But he closely tests his motives "lest the desire of reputation as a man firmly settled to persevere through dangers, or the fear of disgrace from my returning without performing the visit, might have some place in me." Though he finds some weakness to regret, "yet I could not find that I had ever given way to a willful disobedience."¹²

Woolman is mature and seasoned in the truth, but even so he is not selfless by nature. He becomes so by probing and acknowledging every tincture of self-will and then offering it up to God. Out of such rooted self-knowledge comes the glorious passage in the *Journal*:

Love was the first motion, and then a concern arose to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of Truth amongst them.¹³

This perfectly summarizes the characteristics of a true leading. It begins inwardly, as a process or motion of caring whose direction and object are unclear, so a time of waiting must occur, during which Woolman rigorously examines himself, learns his limitations and frailties but also his strengths, and achieves patience and perseverance. From that patient waiting a concern arises and becomes clarified and directed until it leads to an action on behalf of others.

No concern could evidence greater humility or openness: Woolman feels called to learn before teaching, to receive as well as to give. Because he is rooted in love, he wants to know the conditions of others as well as his own. The concern for the Indians steadily gathers force until it is discharged in the successful completion of the trip. There are searchings along the way, but we who look at the whole episode in Woolman's life can see it as a wonderful example of a leading coming to fruition.

His concern for the Barbadoes is quite a different experience. It begins in bodily weakness and exercise of mind over "my fellow-creatures in the West Indies" but finds no vent in action. Instead, Woolman remains under the burden to be "resigned" if led to go to the Barbadoes.

Persistent waiting and praying bring no greater clarity, but after a year Woolman feels a duty to “open my condition” to his monthly meeting. Subsequently, at quarterly and spring meetings, he feels no clearness to say more than that he feels required to be resigned to travel, but he receives certificates to travel, if his exercise should develop into such a leading. Some months later, he consults a shipowner about passage, in case he should be further led, in the process enunciating some of the urgency he feels.

His exercise roots back some fifteen years, when he sold the products of slave labor in his shop. Having become ever more troubled by the evils of slavery and other forms of oppression, “it hath seemed right that my small gain from this branch of trade should be applied in promoting righteousness on the earth. This was the first motion towards a visit to Barbadoes.”¹⁴

Because trade in slave-goods subsidizes travel costs, Woolman believes he should pay extra “as a testimony in favor of less trading.” The shipowners accept this arrangement, but Woolman still does not feel clearness to board the ship. He returns to his lodging to wait for further leading where, finally, he is convinced that his obedience consists in returning home to await “some further exercises.” In a few weeks “it pleased the Lord to visit me with a pleurisy” to the point of death, but in that same spirit of resignation he does not send for a doctor. Eventually he feels drawn back to life by “strong engagements ... begotten in me for the everlasting well-being of my fellow-creatures. I felt in the spring of pure love that I might remain some time longer in the body.”¹⁵

Such, in brief, is Woolman’s exercise concerning the Barbadoes. As he tells it, the story seems unsatisfactory, uninformative. He appears to be over-scrupulous, an unnecessary burden on his meeting and others. All that work to remain resigned, all that anxiety about paying

passage on a trip that was never to be taken — it would seem that Woolman simply mistook his leading in this case, except for two events, described out of sequence in the *Journal*, which frame this time of resignation.

First, in the turmoil of waiting, an incident from his past comes to his consciousness, something morally unfinished which calls for restitution. The law governing the freeing of slaves required the former owner to maintain them if they should fall into need, so it was the custom for those wishing to free their slaves to keep them, essentially as indentured servants, until age thirty. Once, as an executor of a Friend's will, Woolman had thus indentured a slave and had applied the money to the Friend's estate. He had, in short, behaved like a shrewd, enlightened businessman: the slave would eventually be free and the estate would be protected in case the ex-slave should later be chargeable to it.

But as he looks back on this transaction, Woolman feels troubled. The young man had been sold for nine years longer than was common for whites to be indentured, which now seems unjust. Though he had derived no benefit from the sale, he feels called to use his own money to redeem the last half of the nine years.¹⁶ His exercise concerning the Barbadoes presses him to a self-consistency before he can take a further step. As Wendell Berry reminds us, "One must begin in one's own life the private solutions that can only *in turn* become public solutions."¹⁷

Not until two and a half years later, while he is on his mission in England, does Woolman fully tell us about the second framing incident, the dream-revelation which came in his illness. In the depth of his sickness he forgets his name and tries to find out who he is. He sees a mass of dull, gloomy matter and is told that this mass was "human beings in as great misery as they could be, and live, and that I was mixed with them and that henceforth I might

not consider myself as a distinct or separate being.”

Later, hearing a voice proclaiming “John Woolman is dead” he remembers that he once was John Woolman and wonders what the voice can mean. He then has a vision of oppressed people blaspheming the name of Christ because those that oppress them are Christians and claim to act in His name. He searches for a meaning to all these mysterious revelations until he feels a divine power prepare him to speak: “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ ... liveth in me ” The mystery now stands clear to him; there is joy in heaven over a sinner who repented. “*John Woolman is dead* meant no more than the death of my own will.”¹⁸

If the dominant theme of the leading to the Indians was learning and being of use, the dominant theme of the Barbadoes exercise is making restitution. Even after years of seasoning, Woolman finds unconsidered past actions which must be brought into consistency with his mature understanding. He must redeem a slave, redeem the profit he made from slave labor, redeem himself as one worthy to be led by God. He believes he must be resigned to taking an arduous journey to Barbadoes but finds instead that the arduous journey is inward, into past motives and behavior. “Visited” by illness, he loses himself and finds himself. He knows himself totally mixed with the dull matter of suffering humanity, but that is what it means to be crucified with Christ, to live only as Christ lives within him. He knows, finally, what it has taken a lifetime of patient, suffering obedience to learn, that his will is finally entirely absorbed in God.

It takes some decompression to return from the depths of Woolman’s religious experience to the relative shallows of our own. His example is instructive and inspiring, but “be like Woolman” may not be helpful advice to those of us

still struggling to be *ourselves* with integrity. Perhaps more apposite advice for us is “be like members of Woolman’s meeting”: help each other to be faithful to leadings; learn with and from one another how to listen and probe and wait; bear with one another’s confusions and short-comings; persist in expecting the best from one another; practice speaking the truth in love.

We each have to find our own ways to be obedient, patient, free of wilfulness, morally consistent, open to the insights of others. How we test our leadings will not be in the ways of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, but what we test for — moral purity, patience, the self-consistency of the Spirit, and bringing people into unity through the gifts of the Spirit — are still the essence of the religious life.

Tests of discernment must be applied with discernment. Even when the Society’s authority was greatest and Friends most nearly of one accord in matters of faith and practice, these tests could not be rigidly applied. Today, when neither the meeting’s authority nor the general agreement of Friends can be taken for granted on any subject, every test must be sensitively applied. We are more likely than our predecessors to recognize that the group as well as the individual stands under scrutiny when we examine a leading. The individual can be rightly led, and the meeting stagnant and unfaithful, but even then the obligations to keep fellowship may require waiting for clearness to proceed, so that the individual’s faithfulness will help the group to grow.

Meetings frequently have to weigh the leadings of a couple to be wed, and marriage committees are sometimes hard-pressed to feel confident about recommending that the wedding be allowed. On occasion, elders or a clearness committee are asked to counsel with members considering divorce or other radical changes in life. Some meetings

are asked to weigh the right ordering of a member's political action or vocational direction. Sometimes members will ask a meeting to use its property in very different ways or even to divest itself of property, and the meeting must test whether to follow that leading. At other times a meeting feels called to counsel members who have not invited such involvement but who are acting in ways which trouble the fellowship. We can no more prevent someone from doing as he or she feels led than the first generation of Friends could. At most we can, like them, only decide whether to keep or break fellowship, expressing unity with the Friend who reports a leading, expressing lack of clearness, or repudiating his or her actions.

Even within these limitations, however, the substance of the traditional tests can carry weight, for they offer us ways to raise two sets of questions: Is this the right action, for this time and place? Is this person rightly prepared to undertake the action? The first question points us to considerations of the self-consistency and fruits of the Spirit; the second points us to questions of the moral purity and patience of the individual.

The first obligation of the person who has had a leading to the truth is to test it; the second is to testify to it. *Test* and *testimony* are an on-going, recursive process, continually refreshed in worship. One might describe all the activities of Friends under the simple heading of *testifying to the truth*. Earlier generations of Friends were clear about that: whatever they did as a specific testimony took its primary validity from its function of turning people to the Inward Teacher. All true leading points but in a single direction, to the Light of Christ, who is both Inward Teacher and the Truth to be taught.

Even when we are led by the Light to a concrete calling or task — to write a book, to found a holy experiment, to establish a school or hospital, to teach or preach, to aid the

poor and outcast — the leading points through these signs of obedience to the source of the leading.

To be led to the Inward Teacher is to find fellowship with others and a calling for oneself. It is to serve one another and thereby become “not servants but Friends.” Leading comes to and through the fellowship in the gathered meeting; it is not only available to the individual seeker, the religious genius or the spiritual adept. We share in it and mediate it to one another.

The community of finders, those who are led by the Inward Teacher, is also led to create instruments and institutions which facilitate the following of truth. The development of institutional forms — committees, meetings, schools, and others — is itself an expression of the testimony to truth, not a falling away from perfect inspiration. For human beings, by their nature, must create social means — that is, means which involve a human community over time — to express the truth.

How can we fulfill a calling as peace-makers if we value spontaneous impulse over steadiness and consistency? Mediators between adversaries have to be dependably there, always available, always at the work of listening and interpreting. To create the conditions of social justice, we must create new economic and social patterns, not *no* patterns; we must be part of networks of groups and individuals who sustain one another’s witness by testing, clarifying, correcting and affirming them.

How can we obey the leading to educate the young without considering the need to found a school? And how can we obey the leading to found a school except through finding appropriate, effective means to educate people? That will mean choosing teachers and pupils, creating courses of study, finding or building a place of study, gathering resources which will enable the school to come into being and fulfill what is, by its nature, a long-term commitment.

It also means substantiating the original inspiration through sustained study of education itself and continual return to the spring of inspiration, the Inward Teacher.

Because the Spirit is self-consistent and its fruits bring the community to peace, a number of *concerns* and *testimonies* arise to address areas of human activity in which it is to be expected that God will always seek to lead people into obedience. These Quaker testimonies which arise from the nature of the Light of Christ, says Howard Brinton, are Community, Harmony, Equality and Simplicity.¹⁹ They play their part in shaping a history and tradition to which we can turn for guidance, example and precedent.

Tensions invariably exist between waiting for a process to clarify itself and acting in time to be effective, between hectic impatience and torpid inaction, between the dynamism of sensitive individuals who feel called to an unprecedented expression of a testimony and the conservatism of a tradition-bound group reluctant to support anything unrespectable.

Tensions also arise between the competing claims of different testimonies. Each generation of Friends faces new calls to obedience, and the old responses will be inadequate if we follow them only because they are traditional. By the same token, the testimonies are not so elastic that they can stretch to cover every personal "bother" which afflicts a special interest group.

Consider the testimony for simplicity: What are its appropriate expressions today? Some Friends think simplicity means having a few things of high quality, and for them the social concern and esthetic choice overlap. Some think of it as personal style, often revealed in choice of clothing. But does that mean dressing like the Plain Friends of a past generation, or wearing sturdy work clothes and jeans? Plain dress, like the best jeans, is long-lasting

but expensive. What shall one do in the name of simplicity of dress? Buy cheap clothes that do not last or remove the labels from excellent “designer” clothes? It is hard to avoid ostentation even in our simplicity.

What does the testimony mean at a time when industrialized societies identify unlimited supplies of energy with personal freedom and mobility? The industrialized world may be fearful of nuclear energy, but it wants hair dryers, electric typewriters, computers and advanced medical equipment in abundance. It is fearful of acid rain but uses coal in order to be less dependent on oil and nuclear power. What does the testimony for simplicity mean when people are fearful that the good things of life are being lost and will never be given back?

What are we led to do, to express our commitment to the testimony? Shall we be satisfied if we have reduced our own dependence on gasoline? Shall we respond to the prolonged energy crisis by joining the anti-nuclear movement or by experimenting with soft technology and alternative energy sources?

Take another test case: We see prolonged deadly famine in much of Africa and terrible problems of hunger in the Third World and industrialized nations alike. In America we see our richest farmland given over to raising grain which will go primarily to feed cattle, whose tender, fat-marbled meat we can enjoy. In many third-world countries, the best farmland and most efficient agricultural methods are used to produce luxury exports for economic elites — including ourselves. How do our testimonies for simplicity, for peace and social justice, lead us to respond? For some, an appropriate response will be to embrace vegetarianism; for others it will mean avoiding all imported luxury foods and trying to become self-sufficient producers of their own food. Still others may find themselves drawn through these actions into developing alternatives to the

economic systems which have produced such agricultural and business policies.

We know that our testimonies have bearing on these problems, but there is no automatically correct way to apply them. The leadings which come must be appropriate to our skills and knowledge, our strengths and our sense of integrity. We may be called to different actions in relation to energy use, but we will each have to discover, from examining our own consciences and testing our leadings against those of others, both what we are called to do and how we can speak to those who fear that their personal freedom is being eroded, so that they recognize that their freedom consists of more than consuming luxuries.

I will never be a competent farmer, so I am unlikely to be called to change farming methods, but I eat three meals a day, and I go shopping for food, and those are occasions to be more faithful to the testimonies. I can fast, to remind myself of the importance of food, and I can contribute to relief agencies. And I am a voter and have it in my power to be well-informed and active in issues of world hunger and right sharing. There too I have opportunities to be faithful to my leadings.

How can we be led when testimonies seem to be in tension? Consider the complex issues surrounding abortion. For some, the matter revolves around the right of human beings to make choices about their bodies. They see opponents of this right of choice for women as defenders of an oppressive patriarchal system that has always treated women as dependents or as property. Laws forbidding abortion perpetuate that oppression, particularly against poor, uneducated women who will have to choose between bringing more children into a life of poverty and the ills which accompany it, or risking their lives at the hands of backstreet butchers. From this standpoint, support for the right of women to choose whether to bear children is

consonant with the testimonies for equality, social justice and peace.

For others, the abortion question revolves around the sacredness of all human life. For them, arguing that a fetus is not human at the moment of conception is simply casuistry. Abortion prevents choice in the most defenseless of humans, the fetus, and it is murder. For people holding this view, the testimonies for social justice and peace are also at issue, and the sacredness of God-given life is paramount. How can a pacifist condone the taking of life? Begin to make exceptions to the principle that life comes from God and can only be taken by God, and there is no telling where we will stop.

In this society's debate about abortion, the arguments become more elaborate and heated. Each side accuses the other of inconsistency and moral blindness; "Right to Life" and "Freedom of Choice" — each embodying an important principle to be affirmed — become mindless slogans, war-cries with which we attack our opponents. Friends meetings and organizations are also torn by this debate and find themselves on opposing sides from their understandings of what a Quaker position should be.

How can we be open to a leading on abortion? We might begin by acknowledging that we do not, in our own wisdom, know how to resolve the contradictions inherent in the problem. We might try to imagine the suffering of women who choose abortions but wish they could have kept their children, of women whose only escape from worse poverty is to terminate a pregnancy, of women who grieve for the children they have lost. And we might also try to imagine the pain of death for those small sparks of life, the fetuses. We might then try to put ourselves into the situations of our adversaries, asking what we can learn from their sincerity and insight, and live for a time with the pain of indecision, the turmoil of taking seriously every conviction

sincerely held, and admitting the inadequacy of each.

We might also examine our own longing to be on the familiar, comfortable side, gathering with old friends under the liberal, conservative or radical banner, and then try to separate our love for our friends from an automatic agreement with their views. We might determine to stop using the testimonies to bolster our prejudices and stock responses or to piece out our weak arguments with high-sounding phrases.

Does this mean settling for inaction because there is something to be said for both sides and the truth might lie somewhere in between? Does it mean letting the most passionately concerned have their way, on the “Love me, love my leading” principle? Or does it mean the meeting must become primarily a social club, where it is bad form to discuss religion or politics?

None of those things need happen, though they are ways that meetings compromise themselves out of such difficulties. If we start, however, with the conviction that we are gathered to be led by our Inward Teacher and that our actions must follow from this, though the waiting will continue to be frustrating to us and irritating to those who want our support, what actions we are finally led to take will be better-rooted, more deeply considered, more tender in their understanding, and possibly more significant.

Earlier generations of Friends testified to the need for social, political and economic justice — though they would not have used those terms — as inescapable consequences of following the Light of Christ. Only with the benefit of hindsight can we say that their leadings were clear. The examples I have offered from some of those Friends may have power to give us deeper insights into our own lives, but they come to us relatively free of agony or shock. For most of us, the leadings we have had are unlikely to have some miraculous opening. If God has spoken to us, it has

been in the voice of someone familiar and close to us, or it has been, in part, through the historical tradition we have been given or chosen for ourselves.

Our ways to meet the needs for social, political and economic justice must be different, in an age of industrialization, multinational corporations, totalitarian regimes, threat of nuclear war, and what a former Earlham student called the military-industrial-educational complex. I am reasonably clear about some things — products I must not use, societies I must not support, energy sources I must oppose, investments I must not make, the outlines of stands I must take on abortion and many other subjects. I dimly discern some ways I can order and focus my life in relation to such issues, but often I do not see a single clear leading for myself. The multitudes of witnesses indicate the complexity of our problems. The simplest truth requires subtle and sophisticated expression, or we falsify it.

The appropriate forms of testimony — now as in the past — will have to come out of testing: testing the individual's leading against the experience and wisdom of the group; testing the present against past examples; testing the wisdom of the worshipping community against the witness of other faiths and communities; testing the principles of faith as we have known them against the demands of a new time and new conditions.

There is an account in George Fox's *Journal* which reads like a parable of what it is like to have a leading. In 1648, while Fox is at Mansfield, there is "a sitting of the justices about hiring of servants; and it was upon me from the Lord to go and speak to the justices that they should not oppress the servants in their wages." Fox goes to the inn where the justices are sitting, but he finds a company of fiddlers in attendance, so he goes away again, planning to return when he can have some serious talk with the

justices. When he returns the following morning, however, they are gone, “and I was struck even blind that I could not see.” He asks where the justices have gone and, learning that they will be in a town eight miles away, “my sight began to come to me again, and I went and ran thitherward as fast as I could.” Fox reaches the justices this time, delivers his message, and is received kindly. And that is the end of the story. No improvement in the servants’ wages or the justices’ administration of law is reported.²⁰

But something important has happened. Fox receives a strong leading from God, but he delays in acting until it appears the chance is past. Then he loses his sight, until it appears that he has not lost all chance to be obedient to his leading. And most significant of all, his sight comes back as he runs.

What happens to George Fox in a miraculous way happens to any of us in more ordinary fashion when we turn away from a leading. If we ignore an insight, we are less able to perceive the next one. If we are not open to leadings, we will be less able to know them when they come. But even when we are obedient, we will not always know where we are to go or how far. Like Fox, our sight will come to us as we go. We will be able to see the way only as it opens. The consequences will be out of our hands and perhaps will never seem to have borne fruit, but that will not matter because we will know that we did what we were called to do — to follow our lead.

Notes

1. John L. Nickalls, ed., *The Journal of George Fox* (Cambridge, 1950), p. 3. Hereafter cited as *Fox’s Journal*.
2. *Fox’s Journal*, p. 9.
3. In commenting on the manuscript of this essay, Hugh Barbour stresses the importance of distinguishing

“openings” from “leadings” in a way which I have scanted. He says “openings” have a truth-character - “It was shown me” - and if confirmed by others become testimonies of a permanent character, whereas “leadings” - “I was moved” - equally demand obedience, but once only, in a given situation.

This is not an absolute, unalterable sequence, however: at times a leading brings an opening; at other times the opening precedes a leading. In either sequence, the eventual consequence may be a testimony of the whole Society. Fox has a leading to refuse an army commission. He does not speak of an opening in this connection, but we may say that he has had it opened to him, in the *General Epistle of James*, where wars originate. (*Fox’s Journal*, p. 65) His leading eventually becomes the Society’s Peace Testimony.

4. *Fox’s Journal*, p. 263.
5. Hugh Barbour. *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven, 1964), pp. 119-122. (Reprinted by Friends United Press, Richmond, 1985). The importance of this book cannot be overstated. One chapter is especially valuable. In “The Terror and Power of the Light,” Barbour examines the Quaker experience of the Light in those two interconnected aspects: the terror which comes as the Light searches out and reveals our unredeemed selves; the power which comes when we have been plowed up, harrowed and planted with the Seed of New Being. Barbour is especially adept at showing analogues between this experience and modern ways of encountering inner truth in existentialism and the therapeutic en-counter in psychiatry.
6. “William Penn’s *No Cross No Crown*,” edited by Anna Cox Brinton, in *Quaker Classics in Brief* (Pendle Hill, 1978), pp. 9-10. A reprint of an abridged text of *No Cross No Crown*, edited by Ronald Selleck, was published by

- Friends United Press in 1981. A reprint of the full text was published by Ebor Press (York, 1981).
7. Barbour, p. 110.
 8. Barbour, p. 120.
 9. *Fox's Journal*, p. 263.
 10. *Galatians*, 5122-23, *Revised Standard Version*.
 11. Arnold Lloyd, *Quaker Social History* (London, 1950), p. 22.
 12. Phillips Moulton, ed., *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* (New York, 1971), p. 130. Hereafter cited as *Woolman's Journal*.
 13. *Woolman's Journal*, p. 127.
 14. *The Journal of John Woolman*, introduction by Frederick B. Tolles (Secaucus, 1975), pp. 177-179. The Moulton edition reads: "it hath seemed that the small gain I got by this branch of trade should be applied in promoting righteousness in the earth. And near the first motion toward a visit to Barbadoes, I believed the outward substance I possess should be applied in paying my passage." (pp. 155-156).
 15. *Woolman's Journal*, pp. 159-160.
 16. *Woolman's Journal*, p. 153.
 17. Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America* (San Francisco, 1977), p. 23.
 18. *Woolman's Journal*, p. 186.
 19. Howard Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years* (Pendle Hill, 1965), Chapter 7.
 20. *Fox's Journal*, p. 26.