

## 2. Children of the Light

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The Early Quakers called themselves *Children of the Light* among other names. They saw themselves as God's 'children' and knew that Jesus loved little children best of all.<sup>26</sup> In the 17th century, children were at the bottom of the social stratum, and Quakers understood 'living like little children' to mean living as the weakest and the most vulnerable did. Thus they sought out meekness and humility as Jesus taught them to:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.  
Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.  
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.<sup>27</sup>*

## **Children of the 17th Century**

Childhood as we know it, did not really exist in 17th century England. The average life expectancy was just under 40 years, largely because of the very high levels of childhood mortality. Approximately 14 per cent of children died before they reached the age of one. The first few weeks of life were the most dangerous, and statistically, life became safer as each month and year passed. Poor sanitation, disease and accidents were the most common causes of death for children.<sup>28</sup>

Children were vulnerable to illness, accident, abuse, poverty and exploitation. Childbirth itself was extremely dangerous and many women had more children than they could physically or economically manage. Young babies were often sent to wet nurses, especially if the mother needed to work. Wet nurses were paid per child, and some women fed up to 10 babies at a time. Many of these babies died from inadequate nutrition and starvation. Baby farming was another common, but unregulated practice, where a woman would be paid to care for a baby during the first few years. Many of these children were neglected, exploited or abused.

Unwanted children were often killed or abandoned, and as a consequence, there were large numbers of children living on the streets. Children who were lucky enough to remain in the family home were expected to contribute to the family income, or provide for themselves as soon as they were able. Children took on adult responsibilities and faced dangers that would be considered neglectful in our contemporary Western society. There was little time for indulgences; children needed to work to keep the family alive.

## **The status of Quaker children**

Quakers believed that God spoke directly to everyone, without the need for an intermediary or a church. The Light of God was within all, regardless of class, gender, race or even age; that included children as well as adults. Original sin did not exist, and therefore baptism was redundant. Quaker children were treated as spiritually autonomous individuals, distinct from their parents, and with their own personal relationship with God.

George Fox urged young people to consider themselves as 'the great work of God'. Religious education was taken very seriously among Friends and parents were urged to carefully nurture the 'seed', and to be good models for their tender 'lambs'. The ministry of children was taken as seriously as that of adult Quakers:

*Thus the Light was not understood as something that emerged in adulthood, as a product of education and maturity, but God was present and active in the child from the beginning. True ministry could flow from child to adult, as well as from adult to child. Children were brought to Meetings as a matter of course, and all parents were urged to bring them.*

Helen Bayes, 2003

Despite the affection that the early Quakers had for their children, family life was often greatly disrupted by the political and spiritual activities of the parents. Children witnessed a great deal of violence first hand, much of it directed against their parents and sometimes themselves. They were expected to take on responsibilities such as running the family home on their own, while their parents travelled in the ministry or were taken to prison.

Some children were born in prison, or lived with their imprisoned parents and cared for them while they were dying. The well-known story of the children of Reading Meeting is a moving testimony to the bravery of these children and also an illustration of the confidence they felt in their own leadership during this difficult time:

*It was May 1662 and a law had recently been passed outlawing the meeting of Quakers, but the community continued to meet. One evening the adults were seized and taken to prison, and the children woke to find that they alone were responsible for the running of the meeting. They couldn't get inside the Meeting-House as it had been locked up by the police, so they gathered in a granary that belonged to one of the families. They began meeting as usual, but were soon interrupted by the King's soldiers. Sir William Armorer, Justice of the Peace, and Equerry to the King was shocked at the sight; "Quaker brats, holding a conventicle of their own, as if they were grown men and women! Having stopped the earth and gaoled the fox, must we now deal with the litter?" The soldiers beat the boys with sticks and punched and hit them until 'they were black in the face', and the girls were driven away. Even after this frightening experience, the children continued to meet for worship in Reading every Sunday.<sup>31</sup>*

What is remarkable about these Quaker children is not how much responsibility they carried, but that their wisdom was listened to, without discrimination. Children of any age had the potential to be leaders in the Quaker movement, provided they listened for God, and lived up to the Light.

## A young movement

From an early age, George Fox was clearly a different child from his peers. At the age of 11, he knew ‘pureness and righteousness’, and described himself as a serious child, ‘being more religiously inward, still, solid and observing beyond his years’.<sup>32</sup> He was well read, especially in theology, church history and the Bible. In his early teens, he stopped going to church because he didn’t agree with the theological teachings. Instead, he spent his time walking, reading and thinking. He also fasted, and spent many hours in stillness and silence, often walking at night, as he sought a direction for himself. He left home at 19 years of age to continue his search, and was convinced in his early twenties, after the revelation that Christ spoke to him directly:

*As I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those esteemed the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, oh, then, I heard a voice which said, “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition”; and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.<sup>33</sup>*

From this young man’s revelation, grew a movement of mostly young, charismatic men and women who risked their lives to ‘live adventurously’ as Quakers. Leutke-Stahlman, in her book; *Seventeenth Century Remarkable Quaker Youth*, lists a surprising number of young men, women and even children who contributed to the growth of Quakerism.<sup>34</sup>

Edward Burrough was convinced at the age of 16 after hearing George Fox speak publicly. He was forced to leave the family home after becoming a Quaker, and went on to become an influential preacher and advocate for Quakers in public life. He successfully convinced King Charles II to issue a temporary writ to stop the persecution of Quakers in New England.<sup>35</sup>

William Penn was 13 years of age when he heard the Quaker Thomas Loe say that God could speak directly to the hearts of men and women. Young William felt a sense of déjà vu: he knew it to be true. Later, when he was 15 and at Oxford, Penn was fined for holding private prayer sessions and refusing to attend services at the Puritan chapel. He joined the Quakers when he was 22, against his father’s wishes.<sup>36</sup>

James Parnell was convinced at the age of 15 after meeting George Fox in prison. He was described as a very impressive speaker, but it wasn't his voice or his physical presence that carried weight. His small body would often shake and tremble as he spoke in front of large crowds. People teasingly called him 'the quaking boy' or 'little James'. On one occasion, a man was offended by what he said, and struck him on the face shouting: *take that for Jesus Christ's sake!* James replied: *Friend, I do receive it for Jesus Christ's sake.*<sup>37</sup> At the age of 18, James was imprisoned and suffered terribly from neglect. He died shortly afterwards.

Elizabeth Fletcher was 14 years of age in 1653 when she first met Fox. A year later, she travelled with Elizabeth Leavens to preach in Oxford. It was very dangerous for women to travel on their own, so the two Elizabeths wore their hair loose and dressed as men. When they arrived in Oxford, their public preaching angered the scholars so much that the women were beaten and dragged to the water pump, where water was poured over their heads and necks and into their mouths until they almost drowned:

*Then they took one of them and bound her Knees together, and set her upon her Head, saying 'They would pump at the other End', after which they tied them Arm to Arm, and dragged them up and down the College, and through a Pool of Water, and then they threw Elizabeth Fletcher, who was a young Woman, over a Gravestone into a Grave, by which she received such a Blow on the Side, as she never recover'd to her Death, which was not very long after.*<sup>38</sup>

Later, the women were arrested and ordered to be 'whipt out of the city'.<sup>39</sup> A year later, Elizabeth Fletcher went again to Oxford, this time stripping off her clothes as a sign against the hypocrisy of religious people there.<sup>40</sup> This was not something she found easy to do.<sup>41</sup> Like many other Friends who went naked as a sign, she felt humiliated and frightened by what she felt she had to do, but she did it anyway.

### **A brief word about nakedness**

A number of early Friends practised public nakedness as a metaphor for the spiritual truth of simplicity and vulnerability against the hypocrisy of state and church power. In *Isaiah* 20, God commands Isaiah to take off his sackcloth and walk barefoot and naked for three years. For Isaiah, as well as the 17th century Quakers, nakedness didn't always mean total nudity; it meant removing your

outer garments so that your underclothes were visible. Elizabeth Fletcher, Robert Barclay, Solomon Eccles, William Sympson and others felt led to follow Isaiah's example despite their embarrassment and fear. Public displays of nudity were often interpreted as a great blasphemy, especially if demonstrated by women, and attracted a violent response from audiences.

You may have seen the YouTube music video of Jon Watts in Meeting, suddenly becoming inspired to minister. He takes off his clothes – not all of them – and runs out into the sunshine and through the trees. Others from the meeting follow him and it becomes a Meeting for Worship for Semi-Naked Running!<sup>42</sup> This song was inspired by a pamphlet *Clothe Yourself in Righteousness: But First Get Naked* written by Maggie Harrison about nakedness as ministry as practised by the early Quakers.<sup>43</sup>

Maggie and Jon have been inspired by the commitment these early Quakers had to make a stand against social injustice, even at the cost of their own dignity and safety. They ask: if we were called to shed our clothing and stand naked before God and before each other, what would we do?

### **What do these stories mean today?**

The important thing about these stories is not that early Quaker children and young people were extraordinary, although to us they seem so. It is that they were part of a loving, supportive movement that empowered them, acknowledged their gifts, and guided them spiritually and practically. Children and young people learned about their Quaker faith through responsibility. They understood that the Society valued them<sup>44</sup> and they felt as though they belonged.<sup>45</sup>

The passion and theatricality of the early Quakers reminds me of the peace movement in the 1970s, the environment movement today, and the political protests of the 'Arab Spring'. Political and social change is so often driven by the energy and organisational skills of the young, combined with the support and experience of older activists.

What would our community be like if we gave our young people the support that these young people had? Do we have the strength to hold them as they act radically according to their leadings? Do we give children and teenagers the tools to act with love and courage? Most importantly, do we provide a loving community from which their energy can spring forth into the world?