

inspiration



1 INSPIRATION: OUR FAITH



Experiences of the Spirit

1.1 *'Spirit Now' was the theme of Australia Yearly Meeting's summer school 2001*

We affirm that the Spirit is everywhere and always accessible.

We affirm that the Spirit is shaped by the mysteries and contrasts of the ancient Australian landscape, the climate, our rivers and oceans.

We affirm our need to be open to the Spirit in Indigenous cultures.

We affirm that ordinary experiences of life — imperfections, yearnings, birth, suffering and death, nature, beauty, art and science — are the Spirit.

We affirm that the Spirit is in goodwill, in small acts of kindness and in being utterly truthful.

We affirm that being held in the Spirit is a way through brokenness, darkness and sorrow.

We affirm that the Spirit is breath, hope, light, love, dancing, singing, laughing, creativity, wholeness, connectedness, focus, integration, courage, journeying and leadings.

We affirm that the Spirit is unsettling, paradoxical and doesn't necessarily follow our timing.

We affirm that the Spirit is in all our ways of living and working.

We affirm that the Spirit shines through our connections with, and support for each other, and our community.

We affirm the need for stillness to listen in silence to the Spirit.

We affirm the utter availability of the Spirit of God.

Australia Yearly Meeting 2001

1.2 Quakers don't look to a leader or a book for the answers; we turn to the Spirit. Listening to others who are experienced and reading books where people have explored their experience with the Spirit provide important ground work for all of us, but in the end we come back to George Fox's 'What canst thou say?'

Our authority is the Spirit. This is a huge and exciting challenge for us. We need to practise our faith by learning to let go of our burning passions and our daily concerns; learning to get to that place within us where we are centred, where we listen to the Spirit. This is what we practise in meeting for worship and what we practise in meeting for worship for business. In that centred place our decisions will flow from the Spirit.

Jenny Spinks 1995

1.3 And when all my hopes in them [priests and preachers] 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.

George Fox 1647

1.4 No matter how immense a concept one can describe, God is bigger. The best I can do is say I believe God is Spirit, way, way, way, beyond male or female. To give any of the attributes of humankind to God is too limiting. God is involved in the entire universe and yet still able to be a personal friend, comforter and help to us individually. God's nature is love and if we can submit our will to God's, many things are accomplished. Not always the way we would expect, or in the time frame we would like. But the solution is always more appropriate than anything we could have dreamed up ourselves.

Elaine Polglase 1997

1.5 Thomas Muntzer (born before 1490, died 1525) described the Holy Spirit in terms of the inner Light, a concept of great comfort to Quakers. Perhaps the illumination is reflected from an external source (that is, a transcendent God, up there away in heaven), but more importantly it is inherent (that is, part of our deepest being, internal, behind even our unconscious selves). Not quite the same as the conscience either, which arises largely from upbringing. Nor the same as ecstasy, which can be induced by drugs, or mania, as well as religious fervour. Two words which better indicate the flavour of the inner Light are 'inspired' and 'connected'.

Most people would modestly deny having been inspired to the degree that Jesus was, say, or even Shakespeare or Beethoven. But it is not uncommon to be able to recall rare peak moments of amazement, of discovery, intuition or creativity, which make you aware of intensities of living beyond the everyday. This is what being inspired means, as though you are infused by the energy of an invisible hypnotist, maybe from within oneself. A sudden view of sublime beauty, the 'ah-ha' experience of abruptly overcoming a significant problem, examples of extreme self-sacrifice, great danger, death, uplifting oratory, certain music — such awaken responses quite out of the ordinary. There is a profound consciousness of deeper levels to life, which is at the root of the religious quest. All can be negated by preoccupation with the ephemeral, but it often leads to a hunger to live in harmony with almost unknowable, underlying, eternal, powerful forces. A feature of the inner Light which contrasts with the significance of rare peak experiences is the sweetness of lives we see lived quietly in harmony with it.

Edward Linacre 2000

1.6 At last, after all my distresses, wanderings and sore travails, I met with some writings of this people called Quakers, which I cast a slight eye upon and disdained, as falling very short of that wisdom, light, life and power, which I had been longing for and searching after. After a long time, I was invited to hear one of them (as I had been often, they in tender love pitying me and feeling my want of that which they possessed). When I came, I felt the presence and power of the Most High among them, and words of truth from the Spirit of truth reaching to my heart and conscience, opening my state as in the presence of the Lord. Yea, I did not only feel words and demonstrations from without, but I felt the dead quickened, the seed raised; insomuch as my heart, in the certainty of light and clearness of true sense, said: 'This is he; this is he; there is no other; this is he whom I have waited for and sought after from my childhood, who was always near me, and had often begotten life in my heart, but I knew him not distinctly, nor how to receive him or dwell with him.'

What shall I say? I have met with the true peace, the true righteousness, the true holiness, the true rest of the soul, the everlasting habitation which the redeemed dwell in.

Isaac Penington 1667

1.7 My motive for taking the inward journey was not curiosity, nor was it a wish for intellectual enlightenment, nor in order to gain power. Neither was it remedial. It was simply that the world had failed me and, being earth-empty, I longed with my whole strength for the eternal love, the eternal truth that I felt was hidden in God himself.

To long for and listen for the divine spirit may be called prayer, or meditation, or communing with nature. This I did every day for short or long periods until, one evening out of the listening silence a vibrant voice sang: 'Come unto me..... O come unto me.....' and my soul trembled, and my heart melted at the love and truth in the tones.

Ruth Sansom 1971

1.8 I had a very religious boyhood and youth. When I went to university, I studied philosophy, partly because the philosophers were the only ones in the university who spoke about God in a serious way. But they were very strongly atheist. They were good, friendly, highly intelligent, and helpful, but they were unrelenting in their atheism. Moreover, it was often implied that there was something dishonest about religious belief, that it involved deliberate self-deception.

I pursued my religious enquiries in this context for years, and in my seventh or eighth year, when I was well into my Ph.D., studying alone in the library, I felt that I was flooded by God's life, so that it was within and around me, powerful, undeniable, loving, peaceful, and joyful. The experience lasted about twenty minutes. It happened again next day, also for about twenty minutes.

There was a slightly curious aspect of the experience, or rather, my reaction to it. The experience was not overwhelming in the sense that it made me incapable of doing anything else. After I had been wondering at it delightedly for about fifteen minutes, I asked myself what else I should be doing, a question that embarrassed me.

It was only later that I realised that the experience wasn't meant to occupy my whole life, and that it could co-exist simultaneously with ordinary mundane pursuits. Since then, I have sometimes been aware, for days at a time, of God's love and peace within, in a less intense way, as I went about

my daily business. This experience was never as engulfing as the ones in the library, and at its strongest, was exactly as Friend Marmaduke Stevenson wrote in 1655:

I was filled with the love and presence of the living God, which did ravish my heart when I felt it, for it did increase and abound in me like a living stream, so did the life and love of God run through me like a precious ointment giving a pleasant smell.

Reg Naulty 1999

1.9 I was convinced before I ever heard of Friends. I was convinced that I could experience God in my life directly. This happened at a time that I needed a push, a ‘prompting’, and it came unexpectedly, but in a way that I knew somehow was from God.

Convincement seems such a good way to describe the process. It could be compared with conversion, but to my mind the latter implies that you were turned away from God, and now you are turning back. Friends believe we are always with God, and so we cannot be completely turned away. Convincement is a recognition of something that you may have always suspected was there within you, and outside of you at the same time.

Convincement is not necessarily something that happens in a blinding flash. It can be a slow process, a testing time, but at some point, there is a part of you that says ‘I know’. Certainly not ‘I know it all’, and definitely not ‘I know, therefore I am right’, but perhaps ‘I know enough to keep going’.

It can be a difficult line to tread — assurance in one’s belief and a heart that is open to the Light whatever its source.

Michael Jones 2000

1.10 It happened one night in October 1960. I felt I had experienced something very basic and important, something which seemed very real and genuine, personal, liberating, caring, practical, not at all ‘airy-fairy’ — goodly, godly, God. An experience of what’s beyond the cloud of unknowing. What I had read about and not understood, something many people had experienced, in their own existential way, and tried to describe (the indescribable) in their own words which were often off-putting — vision, miracle, voices from heaven, a Damascus Road experience. I was sure that it was what I had searched for, intellectually, and not found. And now, when I was not expecting it, it had found me, hit me on the head, opened my eyes, in a mystical way — almost laughably appropriate for a so-called hard-nosed scientist! Lots of things about my life seemed to fall into place and into perspective. I had to a large extent been trying to live life along Old Testament lines, according to rules, but now it was the New Testament perspective, ‘the good news’ that I was experiencing. But where, then, did Jesus Christ come into it? I couldn’t figure that out; but lots of things about him and about the New Testament seemed to come alive, to be understandable, to be very simple, common sense. I felt that he, or his influence, or shadow, or spirit was definitely involved — so closely that I couldn’t see it, like spectacles close up to the eyes.

Malcolm Whyte 1991

I.11 I spent a couple of weeks on the west coast of Scotland roaming the hills and taking photographs. One day I was sitting on top of a small hill, every blade of grass feels clear in my memory. In the far distance are the Scottish islands and down below me is a small bay with cattle wandering around. Below, to the right is a dilapidated wall. The sky is full of puffy summer clouds. I am sitting and feeling warm. Suddenly I feel connected to everything in the universe. The energy of everything in the universe is passing through my body.

This was one of my life's major turning points. After years of rejecting God, because of my experience in the Church and my scientific training, I still recognised this experience as a fundamental recognition of the importance of my spiritual life. It was so overwhelming the only thing to do was cry tears of connectedness.

Drew Lawson 1995

I.12 The phrase 'Spirit of Place' reminds me of my reflections when I sit on the back verandah at home, looking over the gum tree valley behind and below our house. One morning I had a powerful sense of love and tenderness in the air, streaming through the gully and around the suburb and throughout the world. I pictured how it would be if everyone was touched by this spirit and if we all sat silently on our back steps, as a community of neighbours, worshipping this tender goodness together.

As I came out of this meditative moment, my mind put words to it. With great wonder, I thought, 'It's a spirit of holiness.' I thought I'd discovered something. Then I realised that 'the Holy Spirit' is one of those phrases from my Anglican childhood that I had rejected as hackneyed and meaningless. Now my perception of holiness was fresh and personal. I felt God was very lovingly tickling my ribs and laughing at me.

Sue Wilson 1996

1.13 Integrating transcendent experience into ordinary life is a lifelong task. For most of us such experiences are rare, or occur in clusters, and our lives need time to catch up. Unexpected encounters with the divine are apt to take some getting used to. We have to accept the authenticity of the experience, despite its otherness; and then let go as it unsettles our complacency and rearranges our lives.

Ursula Jane O'Shea 1993

1.14 'God' has become the spiritual force it is, through the cumulative strength of the love, courage, wisdom and goodness that has been expressed through all the stages of evolution in however small a degree. The stilling of our spirits in the attitude of mind known as prayer is the switch that tunes us to 'God'. To me 'God' is power, not person. We add to the stature of 'God' by the way we meet adverse circumstances, by the expression of love, unselfishness, service and compassion. Those of us who are weaker can draw the leaven for our spiritual growth from what has been given to us. Thus everyone has a part to play in the ever-continuing creation of that omniscient force to which we give the name 'God'.

Nancie Hewitt 1982

1.15 There is a Divine Center into which your life can slip, a new and absolute orientation in God, a Center where you live with Him and out of which you see all of life through new and radiant vision...

Thomas Kelly 1938