

Living Our Faith

*How does Truth prosper?^[1]
Let your life speak.*

Friends testify through their lives. Subscribing to no creed, recognizing as authority only the direct experience of the Divine as we have found it within, Friends show forth our truth outwardly by the way we live. Our actions, not any profession of commitment to “notions,” are the mark of our understanding of the Divine. We hold ourselves accountable for what we say and what we do, our words and our deeds; no circumstance of our daily lives qualifies this essential allegiance to the truth we feel driven to seek, the truth we find in experience. We give the name *testimony* to this witness of who we are.

The testimonies that have been passed down to us embody much of what guides our practice. Quakers hold testimonies regarding simplicity, integrity, equality, peace, and community. Truth is the ground of all of them. Yet, because our experience changes as times change, our testimonies, like our understanding of truth itself, are not fixed but fluid. As a result of what we understand as continuing revelation, the testimonies have evolved in response to changing contexts, new needs, and new perceptions of our world. As was the case among Quakers historically, these changes initially are expressed as minutes in our monthly and yearly meetings; with time they become integrated into our practice. Such contemporary changes, for example, reflect our concern for our natural environment and our awareness of the human suffering and economic injustice experienced by migrant workers and immigrants who cross the borders of our country.

[Our] testimonies are the fruits of [our] spiritual foundation, not the foundation itself. . . . We are Quakers because we have encountered something within that convinces us we can be and should be at peace, live simply, be loving toward all or live any other witness that may rise from this experience.

Robert Griswold (2004)^[2]

Integrity

Let what you say be simply “yes” or “no”; anything more than this comes from evil.

Matthew 5:37

Friends consider integrity a way of life. In the stillness of worship we come into the Divine Presence and open ourselves to the Light; we hide nothing of who we are. In keeping with that openness of spirit, Friends express themselves with honesty in their dealings with others. Plain truth needs no decorative flourishes. We speak with simple clarity to reflect in our words the reality of our perceptions and thoughts.

Our experience tells us that things honestly said are no more or less true than words spoken under oath. Friends hold one standard of truth; therefore we eschew oaths. Friends have suffered imprisonment and loss for taking this position, but time and the law have recognized the justice of this view. In our country today we are free without prejudice to declare and affirm in courts of law and in other situations where an oath is usually required the plain and simple truth of what we say.

Friends do not want to deceive or exploit anyone. Therefore, we arrive at what we consider a fair value for buying and selling time, food, labor, material goods, and services. We do not try to gather any profit in excess of need or worth.

Friends attempt to behave with honesty in all our relationships. In speaking truth to others, we speak the truth in love.

Peace

From the earliest days of the Religious Society of Friends, its followers have testified publicly against war. In the Declaration to Charles the Second of England, 1660, Friends declared: “All bloody principles and practices, we, as to our own particulars, do utterly deny, with all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretense whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the world.”^[3]

In all human life there exists a Light that can lay open the spirit to what is Divine, the source of our being. Because this Light is a sacred reality, and because it exists in everyone, we have embraced an abiding witness against killing, even for the sake of peace. Our peace testimony arises out of an awareness that even though it may sometimes seem hidden away, the spirit of God is alive in all of us. The source of peace is peace within.

Our testimony, which is more than simply a position of nonviolence, has led us into political actions not always acceptable to the government. We offer advice and assistance to those who for reasons of conscience refuse to register for a military draft, resist cooperation with the military, or refuse to go to war. Nevertheless, when one of us joins the armed forces, though we may disagree with the choice, we hold our Friend in love. In keeping with our belief in the sacredness of that which is divine in the human being, most of us also oppose capital punishment.

Like the early Quakers, we take issue also with “the occasions” that lead to war. No one in this country can hope to avoid completely any entanglement in the causes of war. Still, we seek to be conscious of how our investments might be involved in practices that we do not condone or how some products are made under conditions adverse to life. Many choose vocations or avocations that aim to alleviate the fear and suffering that lead to violence—either through structural change or by promoting social and economic justice, both at home and abroad. Recognizing that a percentage of our federal taxes goes toward the military, some of us practice war tax resistance. We try to be aware of how our daily choices might contribute to such “occasions.” Further, we offer spiritual and usually financial support to those who refuse to pay for war or refuse to go to war. Such actions are the fruits of our experience of the sacred reality of the Light within that guides us to the truth. We struggle to understand how our belief in the sanctity of life influences our view of such life-and-death issues as abortion, the artificial prolongation of life, and euthanasia.

Because we do not think of peace as merely the absence of war, we try in peacetime to remain aware of the great disparities in well-being and livelihood all over the world, these being a primary cause of violence among nations. We find it important to address and alleviate manifest injustice wherever it occurs. We believe that peace without justice is not true peace.

Simplicity

Simplicity is making sure there is always enough in reserve to answer the call.

Elizabeth Moen-Mathiot at the Colorado Quaker Women's Retreat, late 1980s

To Quakers, simplicity is a spiritual quality that denotes an inward centeredness, a singleness of being that is responsive to the Divine within. Simple living is a creative act that frees us from extraneous concerns and enables us to devote attention to the Divine. A simple life is often hard to achieve. It means consuming or collecting nothing in excess of what is needful for our health and well-being and understanding what that is. What is needful may differ from one person to another, but in general it means that which is not extraneous in terms of time, possessions, speech, and activities.

Simplicity is at the root of what we call *plain speaking*. In the interest of declaring readily and easily our true meaning to one another rather than hiding or obscuring it, we try to avoid judgmental, pretentious, and ornamented language.

With regard to time, simplicity means handling important matters first, allowing them an appropriate share of our time, and taking care not to overcommit ourselves. Rather than rushing from one engagement to another, simplicity leads us to be deliberate in our choices about how we spend the precious gift of time. It guides us away from rigidity regarding the demands made on the hours of our days and encourages us to arrange a right apportionment of time to our religious life, our family, our work, our friends, and ourselves. Flowing through every decision we make concerning our priorities is an awareness of how we are serving the Divine within ourselves and other human beings.

Early Friends wore unadorned, plain dress out of a desire to observe simplicity and be free from vanity. Although most Friends no longer wear Quaker plain dress, we do dress simply without ostentatious display. Moreover, although we may affirm the human urge for self-adornment, we do not call attention to ourselves by what we wear.

Simplicity is also expressed in our stewardship of our material resources. It implies consuming no more than we need and can afford, not spending beyond our means, providing what we require for our well-being in every sense. We understand that poverty distracts from the life of the Spirit as readily as

overabundance does. The measure of deprivation or overabundance is, to some degree, different for different people.

Simplicity also implies the responsible use of what we have and avoiding poisoning our environment. When we have ordered our lives according to our reasoned understanding of what we really need, we become not confined or limited by our choices but freed by them.

In its essence, simplicity means keeping at the deep center of our lives a sense of the Divine, a daily awareness of the Light within us, so that all other matters fall into their rightful place.

The increase of business became my burden, for though my natural inclination was toward merchandise, yet I believed Truth required me to live more free from outward cumbers and there was now a strife in my mind between the two; and in this exercise my prayers were put up to the Lord, who graciously heard me and gave me a heart resigned to his holy will. Then I lessened my outward business, and as I had opportunity told my customers of my intentions that they might consider what shop to turn to, and so in a while wholly laid down merchandise, following my trade as a tailor, myself only, having no apprentice.

John Woolman, *Journal*^[4]

John Woolman never let the demands of his business grow beyond his real needs. . . . His outward life became simplified on the basis of an inner integration. . . . He yielded to the Center and his life became simple.

Thomas Kelly^[5]

Equality

Being then desirous to know who I was, I saw a mass of matter of a dull gloomy colour, between the south and the east, and was informed that this mass was human beings in as great misery as they could be and live, and that I was mixed in with them and henceforth might not consider myself as a distinct or separate being.

John Woolman, (1772)^[6]

Quaker history bears witness to how we have acted upon the belief in the essential equality of all humanity. From the earliest days, men and women were equally regarded and equally charged with responsibilities for the care of others and themselves. Also from the beginning, Quakers have paid the same deference and courtesies to everyone. They have also refused to use honorifics and titles or to bow or doff their hats because these actions would presume a superior/inferior relationship based on a person's secular position. Likewise, recognizing the equality of all people regardless of race, they strongly opposed the inhuman institution of slavery. In more recent times, Friends have asserted the equality of homosexuals and heterosexuals.

Quakers have long affirmed what the laws of our country have explicitly ruled—that none of the categories that make us distinctive as individuals shall stand in the way of our realizing our lives fully and freely. Women and men are equal. All races are equal. All people are free to choose whatever religion speaks to their needs. No one person shall be subject to another, nor in regard to spirit does any person hold rank above another. Because we believe that the Light shines in the early years of life and in the last, we value and respect youth and age equally with other stages of life.

Yet not all human beings have just and equal means and opportunity to become what their gifts could enable them to be. Friends seek to empower those who are oppressed and to find ways for more equitable distribution of the resources and wealth of the world.

Community

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations against another; but praying one for another and helping one another up with a tender hand.

Isaac Pennington, (1667)^[7]

It is not possible to be a human being without being part of a community. We are born into a community, even if it is only ourselves and our mother. We grow up in a community, learning language, culture, and

about the Spirit. As Friends, we know that the Spirit comes to us not only as individuals, not only as members of a community, but as the very foundation of community, moving a meeting at times as one person. The Spirit guides us when we worship in community and when we do business in community.

Although we best know a sense of spiritual unity within our families and in our meetings, we look outwards and try in love to include others in our community—our neighbors near and far, the people we meet as we go out into the world, even the very living, breathing Earth that feeds us and clothes us and that we care for in our turn.

There is a reciprocal nature to our relationships in community, but the love of God takes us beyond exchange and contract to covenant and commitment. We care for those who need us, whether they are able to return the care or not. We care for the prisoners who have harmed us, for they also are beloved of God. We have compassion for those in power, even when we disagree with their actions, for we know they are human and carry within themselves the seed of love. We care for migrants who have left home and family to seek a new life in a strange place. We care for all we love and all we might come to love.

Community calls us sometimes to set our own interests aside when the group is led in directions we may not understand or appreciate. Community also calls our Friends to hear our own leadings and help us follow the directions of the Spirit. Each of us is precious, and when our communities are at their best, we are supported in our individuality as well as our commonality. Children are precious because they need our love and care and give us light and joy, giggles and tears. Friends in their teens and twenties are precious because they need to be upheld as they move from dependence to independence to interdependence and give us the gift of believing in our highest ideals. In the middle years, Friends are precious because they need to be plugged in to the Spirit when the busyness of life takes over, and they give us steadiness and long-term commitment. Elder Friends are precious because they need to be remembered even as they share with us in remembrance the very lives they have lived and the truths they have discovered.

Friends carry their sense of community beyond the reaches of the family and the meeting into their careers and their political activities. Our communities can be nurseries where concerns grow in shelter and plans are prepared for addressing those concerns. Hard choices and difficult actions can be considered within the meeting community so that Friends do not have to feel alone, even when they act beyond the scope of the meeting's leading. In many cases, a leading for one Friend becomes a leading for the whole community.

Community is shelter, a safe place to grow, an arena for action, caring, and love—powered by and united in the Light.

^[1] In 1682, monthly meeting representatives answered three queries, including “How has the Truth prospered amongst you since the last yearly meeting and how are Friends in peace and unity?” (*Quaker Faith and Practice*, Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995, 1.04). “How does Truth prosper among us?” became a census question. Less certain today of our identification as a community with the Truth in its entirety, we answer a little differently: “Let your life speak.”

^[2] Robert Griswold, *Creeds and Quakers: What's Belief Got to Do With It?* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Pamphlet #377, 2005), p. 17

^[3] The complete text of the declaration is included in Appendix 3.

^[4] John Woolman, *Journal*, abridged in *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings*, Douglas V. Steere, ed., (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), pp. 176–177

^[5] Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 94.

^[6] Woolman, *Quaker Spirituality*, p.234.

^[7] Isaac Penington, *Letters*, ed. John Barclay, 1828, p 139; 3rd edition 1844, p. 138 (Letter LII, to Friends in Amsterdam, dated Aylesbury, 4 iii [May] 1667).