Interest group re radical inclusiveness

Room 207 tomorrow for open session with Committee

Experience of becoming a new Quaker at a quarterly meeting theology interest group. Discovered someone had similar view that was “out in the left field.”

Drawing the boundaries. What about religion of exclusivity or one that advocates violence; how to honor that as coming from God in any sense. Has to include love and respect for everyone and support one another in our spiritual quest.

Drawing the boundaries: we do well to look at our boundaries, unwritten and unspoken, not clearly aware of them and we have them. Pedophile at MMM. We have theological boundaries: “going to hell because not recognize pure virgin birth...” and other concepts. Traditionally worked as descriptive rather than prescriptive society—who we are, not who you ought to be. If you are in unity with this come on in. Just because you cannot belong (like a professional organization) doesn’t mean you are inferior.

Society and the Church. Separate ourselves from church-iness. More an accident of history than something consciously, like the term Quaker. Want to make sure we don’t forget about what a church really means. Early Friends considered themselves to be the true Pauline church, body of Christ to act in this broken world. Can’t just have all the eyeballs. A whole lot of cerebral cortices sitting here. Cut from the same cloth as Joel Bean—although not sure about being called “Beanite.” Get that whole body back together again.

I am writing down what I want to know, to take away for personal inspiration. When in doubt go to your experience. If I’ve done anything as a Friend that matters—raise Quaker children. How do we lose them, is another interest group. There is a junction between radical inclusiveness and a way to help youth retain their identity as Friends. How difficult to explain Friends’ belief is anything you want, said his junior Friends. There are few places where belief and religion are so close—most usually action and religion. Not always good. Might not be able to identify the basic credo of people in your meeting but you know who they are by their actions. We have someone in the meeting who is Quaker but hasn’t applied because she doesn’t think that the meeting would be ready for an atheist member. “We may already be there and not know it. Our fellowship may extend to you because you are our Friend.”  Don’t know if all are comfortable crossing the boundary of not believing in God. To tell people that Quakerism is more than doing whatever you want and that we may be ready to be a whole lot more radical than we think we are.
We have a member who is an atheist, he is on our Ministry and Oversight, he is a very good Quaker. He does wonderful work with the meeting. “I probably don’t believe in the God that you don’t believe in, either.”

Live out spirituality together: tied into benefits and drawbacks. A basic way is in the silence of unprogrammed meetings. Within the silence many are struggling to leave away the thoughts of the week to get deeper into the silence. “Silence has settled over meeting” and when that happens I think members are inclusive. Dignity of silent and that if one becomes silent long enough one becomes______. Sometimes silent when we should speak up.

Trying to define a Quaker. Not here because of doctrine. Quakers were the nicest and most active and loving and honest people I knew, and capable. So I wanted to be like that and wanted to be part of that group. I still have membership in another state. Friends always on the go doing things, too busy being Quakers to talk about being Quakers. Other religions in other lands not the only ones who have the concept of what one does is what one is rather than what one believes. It’s why don’t have a clear definition, why it seems like we can be do anyone. By action, not by belief we know what Quakers are.

Third query what this means to our meeting. It’s more than consensus, what some have called unity. The group needs to agree that there is a force outside of themselves that will guide us to this unity. Hard for me to see how an atheist can fit into this framework.

Became a member 20 some years ago when I believed in a personal God and now I am a non-theist. To me the definitions go together fine. I don’t believe in a personal God. Quaker means there are values I believe in. To me Quaker is a set of values. I would like to see more queries re relationship to God, how Quakers see themselves relating to God. Don’t talk enough about that. Should be aware of and think about.

Saw example of inclusiveness as Friends arrived in expanding the circle and it became an oval. Boundaries changed, no way to say here is a boundary. We were not familiar with the God in Christ language—people spoke of their experience with God and Christ, not in “belief.” In that experience we saw things we could relate to, and in speaking of ours they could find things to relate to. Beyond the words that describe.

First yearly, first meeting last year. Grew up in environment indifferent to religion. New Quaker worship group last August. I was struck by the silence. Read in journals and about the debates re Christian basis, turned me off. Someone spoke this morning about professing Christians who didn’t uphold the teaching. Like the description given of non-theist Friend. Might have joined AFSC but thinking they were “missionaries” I joined the Peace Corps. I could be an attender. Friends could maintain their historical roots.
Two thoughts. Religious Society v Church. Why was the distinction made? When I think of The Church I think of an authority. We as a society are making the decisions about what we are doing. Grew up as Unitarian—Quakers before then—why come here? I couldn’t find the guidance among Unitarians. Quakers have that variety and so I could come in at one place, listen to people, and grow. I didn’t have to be like them, all give me the opportunity to grow. That is one of the gifts of the diversity, radical inclusiveness.

Radical inclusiveness. I don’t don’t believe that theology and dogma and beliefs are the most important piece. I think the process that allows for inclusiveness way outweighs that. There has to be space to allow that process to work, which is what leads to people believing in Quakerism is everything to everyone. I have always felt comfortable with a process that allows people to flourish in diversity within a boundary.

Benefits: shows a profound respect for human individuals and individual discernment. Free to explore. Drew me. Boundaries: my own experience is that there is a distinction between atheist and non-theist (non personal relationship v belief in the absence of transcendent anything). After five years I sought membership because I felt out of place because I believe in God. I can go back and forth among the “kinds” of God but talking about my relationship with God seemed to be out of place.

Grew up Left wing, want to have a theory, want it to make sense. Trouble making statement or asking question to get group going. People having discussion without action isn’t what I want. Sometimes feel that way about Quakers, that there is no follow through. Want Friends to explore things that unpopular sometimes.

Live out together: Wonder about the power of the silence. So drawn to the silence, born Catholic, aware of the almost hermit monk orders that are called to silence. I think sometimes that is what I am called to in Quakers. Drawn to Buddhism, that has a particular approach to silence. It’s different but I still experience it as a call to silence. The sense of fellowship and what happens when we come out of the silence is striking about Quakers. Uniting in bringing the testimonies into the world, which is a rich tradition, it’s like “Engaged Buddhism.” Quakers offended to be called “engaged Buddhists.”

Members of my membership committee. What mattered was whether we all shared the peace testimony. Another came up in Jewish tradition who believed in singled God. Also someone who was a former communist. He though guided by collective unconscious. These people didn’t necessarily know what each other believed but we were able to worship together and do business—being guided and worshipping—togeather.

I am reminded of the story of the blind men and the elephant. To me the elephant is like God (or whatever word fits for a particular individual) and each of us is the
blind person when we don’t understand someone else’s concept of the divine and we don’t think they are talking about something different. The humanist doesn’t see the Christian point of view is connected to their own as the ear is not connected to the leg. God and spirit is so huge than none of us know all of it. So we don’t recognized where another person has come to know it’s part of the same thing. It seems to me we are pretty good at doing that, but sometimes we don’t recognize our attachment to our own way of understanding and how that gets in the way of recognizing another understanding. Sometimes we don’t see how our own emotional baggage gets in the way of our understanding. We have not solved how we deal with that. Hard when each person really deeply knows what they know and each is trying to find their Truth and each Truth doesn’t really look the same. Process of continuing the discussion until we find how they are the same or they shift toward one another. We have some members who have withdrawn in part for this reason, and that process is still unfolding. It’s painful. Back to the blind person and the elephant.

I am a very different person 26 years after my first Quaker meeting. Grateful for no membership requirement. We talk a lot about seekers. Hungry to hear about the experience of finding. What’s the essence: right here right now, call it the inner silence and inner guide. Can be manifested in different words by different people who are very different than I am but when we are worshipping together, we are submitting ourselves to be open to be changed together. Not just what we want, it’s a difficult discipline. The longer I am it the more I understand it and the harder it gets. Fox et al had an encounter with God and were changed by it. The testimonies are both fruit and practice—accomplishment and practice.

Active for a little over 12 years, new to this yearly. Very different experience. A very good one, in many ways. Intimately familiar with one other Faith and Practice. Now familiar with ours and it is a gem. I have had breakthroughs in my relationships with testimonies. Because of my own theology I have had a lot of people tell me I’m a “whatever you want” person. Not really the truth. Boundaries: where they are is an active question everywhere in Quakerism. For me one of the things that is most important and powerful is our process as Friends. Expectant waiting and how we do business together. There are other groups that do collective decision making but our process is different. Believer or non-believer, non-theist continuum, Christian or pagan—red herrings around the real issue. How do we talk to one another about the truth of our experience and hear one another. Not threatened by Evangelical or atheist if those messages comes from “this is my experience.” The power of Quaker worship is that people can be in communion without sharing of belief.

Ten minutes left.

Pose a query. As we have become more and more inclusive in many ways. Thinking in terms of the Society of Friends, what about our history. How much of Quaker
history do we begin to exclude as we begin to widen the circle of inclusiveness? (my paraphrase)

If the whole of the divine is the elephant—is Quakerism about one part of the elephant or the whole elephant. Raises large theological question.

I think of Quakerism as having a spiritual base and use the word God. Haven’t been good at articulating what they means to me. Feel moved to try. I have faith that there is Light and connectedness for me to find really everywhere, including in the painful places and difficult people if I approach life with love, humility, awe, reverence, patience and openness. And I accept that people come to that in many ways.

Been very touched by the care and respect by which all have spoken, serves us well and for the Discipline Committee. The edge on the boundary on atheism is our tough place. When I am challenged to ask people for more information and listen openly. Provided a wonderful opportunity for us to speak with another with affection as well as respect.