

When one of our daughters was very young, she carried with her a tiny, battered, old teddy bear wherever she went. For most of the time she appeared to quite forget its presence but if by some chance it went astray, she would immediately cease what she was doing and anxiously search until it was found. Very occasionally though, she would pause during her play, pick up her teddy and tenderly press it to her face, uttering a loud sigh of love and joy. Conceived in love, cherished and cared for, how touchingly small children demonstrate at times the wondrous flow of human love! No heart can bear an over-fullness of love; fullness of love must overflow to others, near and far.

In his epilogue to 'The seven Storey Mountain', Thomas Merton discusses the nature and source of this endlessly overflowing love, quoting from St Thomas à Kempis and St Bernard of Clairvaux. He states that an active life of loving outreach to others *'is undertaken as a result of an overflow of love for God in order to fulfil His will'*, for in our 'contemplation' of the Divine (Quakers would say 'worship') - we are filled with such an abundance of love that we cannot contain it and it flows out **through us** to all those in need. *'For Christian mystics it is the marriage of the soul with God... which gives a miraculous power...a tireless energy in working for God'*. Of course, most of us would not claim to be mystics, neither do Friends traditionally choose an austere, cloistered life of silent contemplation, but whatever language we use to describe the fact and effect of a truly centred and deeply gathered Quaker meeting for worship surely we would agree that it holds the possibility of the same moving and transformative encounter? The sense of unity and oneness which may be experienced within its deep well of stillness, arising feelings of wonder and love, of 'Something Beyond', an elusive sense of 'Presence', all this is redemptive and energising. A Quaker meeting when rightly held, can offer a profound experience of loving and being loved.

The important point for Quakers though is that our faith does not enclose us within communities of contemplation and prayer for the world but turns us out into the world to work with God. It is true that Merton does not really dispute this and actually points to it: *'it (the active life) is an added obligation (to contemplation)'*. But he then quickly adds: *'we must return as soon as we morally can....to the powerful and fruitful silence of recollection that disposes our souls for divine union'*. Essentially Friends would not dispute this either though we would put it slightly differently by claiming to be 'rooted in worship'. In other words, worship does not cease when we leave our meeting for worship but continues, consciously or not throughout our daily life, bearing us up in all our activity, the source of our vision of a better world. It is an enduring resource on which we instinctively draw when things become too difficult for us; and almost as an echo of Merton's words we find in Quaker Faith and Practice: *'our response to violence and injustice is to pray more deeply'*. (Gordon Matthews. 23:10.). As a Quaker community we respond to this call by regularly setting aside time for worship together - *'for rest, suspension of activity, withdrawal into the mysterious interior solitude....and fruitful silence of God...'*. (Merton). But the use of that adjective, 'fruitful', undeniably points us out once more into the world beyond our walls.

Our own Quaker Mystic, Thomas Kelly, writing in 'A testament of Devotion' describes the experience of continuity of worship throughout daily life, the sense of a calming, yet energising Divine Presence which remains constantly available if we would only pause to reflect and allow it space. For Kelly this Presence is by nature proactive too, for at times when our situation seems truly desperate, he suggests that it can unexpectedly *'steal upon us'*, bringing with it a sense of calm security and the serene assurance that despite our fears, all shall be well. We suddenly find ourselves in *'a new dimension of life'*, an extension of the present moment of time into the *'Eternal Now - the seat and region of the Divine Presence itself'*. Then - as Kelly puts it: *'One walks in the world yet above the world as well'*. This reassuring Presence is no imagined comfort source but a living reality testified for not only by Kelly - and George Fox three centuries earlier - but by people of faith, saints and mystics throughout the ages.

Too often however, this sense of a Divine Presence is crowded out by feelings of anxiety and stress, by our frantic overbusyness, we are - in the words of the chorus in an Easter play - *'too bowed down by the burden of being human'* to respond to its prompting.

The holocaust survivor Paul Celan offers us in one of his poems the image of a people feverishly digging to make sense of a loving God in a world where so often evil seems to prevail. British Friends have usually avoided theological arguments about God and the problem of evil; instead we claim to have encountered both in our worship and in our daily life a loving, creative and ever-present Spirit, a reality beyond the capacity of language, that has the power to transform us and through us, the world around.

The Religious Society of Friends is not an activist movement campaigning on God's behalf, it is a faith community activated by overflowing love. Love necessarily disciplines and channels its flow but the strength and direction of that flow depends on our personal relationship with the source from which it comes; the closer and more enduring our relationship, the stronger and wider its flow. 'Rooted in worship' means nothing if not rooted in that relationship. The message passed down by countless generations of Friends is that their 'good work' – their Testimony - was but the fruit of a worshipful relationship with the Divine and the nurture of its continuing Presence.

How can we in these modern times develop a similar sensitivity to this nurturing Presence? In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus sets before his disciples the example of a small child – tender, trusting openness, acceptance of vulnerability and dependency, unconditional love: *'You must change your life'*. *

In his poem Paul Celan has the line: *'Und das Singende dort sagt: Sie graben'*. God is still there, 'singing' to all who so feverishly toil. We too can be so pre-occupied with our digging – digging the foundations of the Kingdom - that we fail to heed the Singing, the Divine Presence, the overflowing Source of Love. We need to pause from time to time, to stand still and listen. Like the small child that pauses in its play and reaches out to its treasured toy companion. Our torn and wounded world so badly needs healing, a roof over its head and bread on its table, but it also needs to hear through us the Singer's song of joy and hope.

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* R. M. Rilke. 'Archaic Torso of Apollo'.

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