

**Introducing Quakers**

**Short essays on Quaker faith, practice and concerns**



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## What Being a Quaker means to me

*Jo Juchniewicz*

This talk will briefly cover

- what Quaker Meeting for worship means to me,
- what I like about the way Friends operate
- my sense of belonging within the meeting
- the values most Friends share
- things about peace which are practical and useful to me

**Meeting for Worship** is a precious time of the week. It is a bit like sitting beside a calm peaceful pool of water after running, during the week, beside a swiftly flowing river. It's a time to slow down, in body, mind and spirit and just be. I let go of the worries of the week. I let go of the lists of things to do, and about how little time there is and how much there is still to do and try instead to just be. During the silence of Meeting grows a feeling of unity with all those Friends who are present as well as those who are physically separated from me. I feel a calmness grow and a feeling of peace comes in. My mind, instead of racing furiously towards the future or replaying events from the past, becomes more focused on the present, now, which will never come again. I become more aware of the environment around me, and how beautiful it is. If there is spoken ministry I am able to give my full attention to it and to mull it over, thinking how it might speak to me.

When I visit other churches and experience other traditions I realise that the Quaker tradition is very important to me. Friends are remarkably free of ritual and ceremony, but symbolism is important. We are on the same level, we are all equal. We face one another, either in a circle or some other arrangement because that's how we need to be intellectually and spiritually too – open to each other. There is no one minister, no one person responsible for pastoral care, that is the role of each of us. We are open to the thoughts and insights of everyone in Meeting for Worship.

I like the way we are all responsible for each other, for ministry, for pastoral care. There is no one person who we pay to do that job, instead we take turns doing a whole range of jobs connected with running a meeting: from making the tea, to ministering during Meeting for Worship, to caring for children, to acting as treasurer, acting as convenor of a committee, speaking to school groups, writing letters to politicians, being on organising committees for conferences. Sometimes it's slow, but it all seems to get done through an inclusive committee system.

I am a member of Eastern Suburbs Local Meeting, and it is with this group of Friends, whom I see each week, that I feel a strong sense of connection and belonging. The group is diverse in age and experience, some are employed, some retired, some I have known for a very long time, some for a much shorter time, but we all have shared values which bind us strongly together. I know that if there is something which worries me, I can speak about it to this group and I will be heard with respect. I trust the wisdom and discernment of this group of people. In addition I feel a sense of belonging to the larger SA Regional Meeting and the Yearly Meeting although I have less frequent contact with them, the sense of unity is similar.

Quakers are not a creedal church, there is no one statement of belief that unites us all. However, all Friends are united in believing that there is something of God in each of us. We live in a society which is very judgemental and competitive. We often hear the terms 'winners' and 'losers' the 'beautiful people' the 'emos' and 'geeks'. Young people are constantly wondering which box they fit into and who is in the same box with them. As a secondary school teacher I find this way of thinking very disturbing. There are a number of young people who regard themselves as 'losers' because that is the message they constantly receive from those around them and from the media. If there is one thing I try to get across to my students it is that there is something divine and creative within each of them, that I will not give up on anyone. Of course Quakers are not alone in thinking this way. There are teachers from many backgrounds who are working hard to overcome the stereotypes our society constantly throws at us. Teachers have a hard time convincing young people that they have unique and wonderful talents within each of them.

One of the most practical ways in which Quakers have helped me is in their understanding of the word 'peace'. I used to think that peace meant the absence of war. Although that is the most obvious meaning, I now know that peace is a way of dealing with everyday conflict, at home, at school, at the workplace. Peace is not avoiding conflict, it is not pretending that conflict doesn't exist, it is about dealing openly and honestly with differences, speaking truthfully and moving towards a more just resolution. Sometimes a mediator can help each person to speak their own truth and to assist the truth of each to be heard when feelings and hurts are very strong. I now know that peace and justice always go hand in hand, it is not possible to have one without the other. Speaking out respectfully and listening respectfully are peaceful ways of interacting.

Our society does not encourage peaceful interactions. It is not respectful to put yourself or to put others down, although our culture does this all the time. It is not peaceful to call someone a 'drop kick' a 'waste of space' either to their face or behind their back. To speak in this way is to deny that there is something of God in that person. Workplaces and schools are places where sarcasm, teasing and subtle as well as overt bullying are commonplace between adults as well as children. These ways of interacting are disrespectful, unjust, even violent. I believe that I need to be very alert to harmful ways of interacting, and when possible, do something about them. Quakers say 'peace is a process, a way of life' and I strongly believe this it so. By being aware of my own thoughts and feelings, speaking my truth and taking time to listen patiently and with my whole being to the truth of the other person I can be more peaceful. It is an ongoing struggle.

I am a Quaker because I find a sense of being at home among Friends, and I love Friends' way of seeking common ground and working with our strengths rather than our differences. I am a Quaker because this is a path which continues to reward, to surprise and to uplift me.

## Sincerity, integrity and challenge

*Adrienne Lovelock*

Being a Quaker means a lot to me. It's a challenge to the way I live my life. It's a reality check. Do I really mean what I claim to? Do I live up to the standards I set for myself? Is there a serious basis to what I claim to believe?

Quakers have no creed. There is not a list of things we are all supposed to believe. Because we have no creed, that means individuals have to figure out for themselves what they believe and what they think is the right way to live.

It's actually more of a challenge to have to do this for yourself. You can't hide behind what someone else has written down. You have to do what your conscience tells you. This is a challenge I like. The Quaker way is a very grown-up way to live!

I was brought up in a different church, and I'm not going to spend time criticising that church because I think it is an admirable church and at its best offers a great deal to the people who belong to it.

But I do remember spending long amounts of time as a child poring over lists of sins in my prayer book, and picking out the ones I'd committed that week. This was called 'examining your conscience'. It's probably not a bad idea to learn to recognise the impact of our actions on ourselves and others, but what a way to go about it!

Needless to say, I grew up with a strong sense of guilt! Guilt is largely unproductive. I saw my mother observing her religion out of fear, not joy. I gave away churchgoing in my early 20s and spent the next 20 years as a kind of daylight atheist.

Then, in mid life, I came to re-examine my values and what I wanted out of life. One of the things I did was to find the Quaker meeting house and go to a Quaker meeting.

I knew very little about what Quaker meetings were all about. I knew there was something to do with silence, but I still had no idea what was going to happen. I remember sitting there thinking, 'Whatever it is they do, they're going to start doing it any time soon.' Then, at about the three quarters of an hour mark, I remember thinking, 'I guess they're doing it. This must be what happens.' My first meeting was an entirely silent meeting.

But somehow, I thought this was worth exploring. I attended for several months, had a break, and then came back. I've regarded myself as a Quaker ever since, and became a member in 2001.

The Quaker way is so positive. Growing up with 'Thou shalt not' ringing in my ears all the time, it was a revelation to meet a group of people committed to walking cheerfully over the world.

Walking cheerfully! What a great thing to aspire to!

The quote from George Fox is one of my favourite pieces of Quaker writing:

Be patterns, be examples ... that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.

It's positive – and it's challenging.

Amongst Quakers, I've found commitment to things I think are important. The Quaker testimonies of Peace, Simplicity, Equality and Truth speak very powerfully to me.

All my life I have been a pacifist. I have always said that what all the countries in the world needed to do was to work together for total global disarmament. I was told that I was naïve; that was never going to happen so therefore it is a stupid thing to hold out as an ideal. Naïve or not, it still seemed to make sense.

The idea that it is ok for the good guys to have the weapons so they can keep the bad guys in order has always made me wary. I often wonder whether having the weapons doesn't make you one of the bad guys. In any event, it's a policy that hasn't brought peace and stability to the world and isn't likely to in the future.

So when I met Quakers and realised that here was a community that espoused pacifist views, I felt less like a crackpot.

I also felt challenged to find a way to work toward peace and disarmament. Being an armchair Quaker just isn't possible.

The Quaker way comes from within. What you do is less important than why you do it. An early Quaker called Margaret Fell said that 'Outward things are easily done'. She was right. To me, the Quaker way is a challenge to be sure that I know why I do what I do, and to see that what I do aligns with my ideals.

It's no good espousing the Quaker testimonies and acting contrary to them. The Quaker way challenges me to ask myself whether what I do lives up to the standard I would like to live by.

Much more productive than sitting in the back pew going through a list of sins and thou-shalt-nots, wondering if I've missed anything that I should be feeling bad about.

Now, I'm not going to pretend about this: I live a middle class life. I have a middle class job, with a middle class income; I live in a middle class house in a leafy suburb and my life is far from hard. But within that I challenge myself, being a Quaker challenges me, to find a way to live simply, and to use the gifts and resources I have to do good.

Living simply isn't about refusing to have possessions, or living a life of self-imposed discomfort. It's about concentrating on what is important, and doing the right thing for the right reason rather than focusing your life on acquiring possessions and luxuries. It's about using the resources we have to do good, and making sure we don't consume more than our fair share to the detriment of others.

I think it's the Simplicity testimony that challenges me most on a daily basis, to live a sustainable and fair life. Water use is one of the things very much on my mind these days, making my home water-thrifty, catching rain water, making sure I don't use more than my share.

There's another piece of Quaker writing I'd like to share with you, a quote I have pinned up on my pin-up board by my desk at work. It says,

Live adventurously. When choices arise, do you take the way that offers the fullest opportunity for the use of your gifts in the service of God and the community? Let your life speak.

Being a Quaker *is* an adventurous way to live. Adventurers find new ways to do things. Adventurers rise to challenges. Adventurers take calculated risks. Adventurers don't just follow the way things have always been done: living adventurously is about taking each new day as a new possibility.

I'm glad I'm a Quaker. The Quaker way gives me inspiration and support, and it gives me challenge. What being a Quaker means to me is that I can live a fuller and hopefully more creative and effective life.

## Why am I a Quaker?

*Dorothy Scott*

Because in the Religious Society of Friends I find, to use an old Quaker term, that which 'speaks to my condition', and that which also speaks to what I believe to be the collective condition of humanity in an era in which the spirit of the age is one of fear and despair.

That in 1772 a Quaker could have such visionary insights as the following gives me hope about the capacity of human beings to choose to cherish the earth rather than to destroy it and to choose peace rather than war.

The produce of the earth is a gift from our gracious creator to the inhabitants, and to impoverish the earth now to support outward greatness appears to be an injury to the succeeding age.  
(John Woolman, 1772)

These words call upon us to live simple, environmentally sustainable lives. They remind us that what we tend to take for granted are indeed bountiful gifts, and that we have an obligation to share these gifts with those who come after us.

The Religious Society of Friends does not just offer an ethical framework through its testimonies of simplicity, peace, equality and integrity, for humanism could equally arrive at similar principles. It is the ethical framework and the primacy of the personal spiritual experience offered by a deeply mystical Christian tradition which I find so distinctive and nourishing.

Perhaps it is helpful to give an example of personal spiritual experience. For as long as I can remember I have been drawn to observing falling leaves. I was never sure why but watching a falling leaf took me into a different state of mind, albeit fleetingly. It was like I entered a moment when 'reality' was suspended and I became aware of a presence of something profound. I recall a few years ago observing a leaf falling slowly and silently from a magnificent oak tree, drifting sideways as it was caught by the gentle breeze, and eventually landing softly on the ground, lost in a carpet of glorious autumnal leaves. It was a sublime moment in which I felt an inner peace and a complete acceptance of death and the transitory nature of human life.

For some time I have seen each life like a leaf on the tree of humanity. I later learned that this was a metaphor that has been used in the Quaker tradition. This served to strengthen the power of the metaphor and to make more meaningful the mystery of why I had been long attracted to watching falling leaves.

Each leaf is only one of many. In a meeting for worship it is not about individuals meditating. It is a collective experience of transcendence. Quakers do not aspire to become so immersed in the inner world that they lose sight of the outer world. To the contrary the Quaker spiritual experience is the stimulus for putting Quaker principles into practice.

Each leaf converts Light into energy to sustain the tree and the tree is sustained by its leaves. When it is time for the leaf to fall, it fertilises the soil which then sustains the roots of the tree. Thus a reciprocity of sustenance exists between the individual and the society, and between past, present and future generations.

When this reciprocity is weakened, and individuals do not feel held by their community they become alienated and give back less, sometimes even behaving in violent and destructive ways. This diminishes the precious reservoir of social capital which we have inherited and from which we all need to drink.

When I have an awareness that I am a leaf I can step back from the immediacy of a pressing situation and draw upon something deeper so that my responses to situations are less egocentric and have greater generosity of spirit than would otherwise be the case. I imagine that for many Christians the symbol of the crucifix fulfils some of the function which a leaf does for me.

I would also describe myself as a Christian, not because the notion of the resurrection or eternal life have any special meaning for me, but simply because I am inspired by the teachings of Jesus and by many whose lives have been inspired by these teachings. It is in nature rather than scripture or religious worship that I most powerfully experience the Light, or what some would call God. God is a word I tend not to use because of its association with the notion of a personal God, but I am very comfortable using the word God when this is the language of another person with whom I want to communicate at a deeper level. I am not very interested in labels, but perhaps I would describe myself as a 'Transcendentalist Quaker'.

I also can experience the Light in religious worship, especially in the silence of a Quaker meeting, as well as in music and hymns of more conventional forms of worship. At first the silence in the Quaker meeting for worship was not easy for me. While I felt I had 'come home' in a spiritual sense when I first began to attend Quaker meetings for worship nearly seven years ago, it took me some time to feel deeply

comfortable with the silence and for my thoughts to stop racing. Reading from *Quaker faith and practice* at the beginning of the meeting helped me to 'centre down'. At first I tended to see the silence as giving salience to the words spoken rather than as the essence of the meeting.

The first time a Quaker 'spoke to my condition' in a direct way, in a way that was transformational, some may even say conversional, was not by his words but by a description of his deeds. I was in York in 2000, a place with a rich historical Quaker connection. One morning I walked past a modest little cottage with a small plaque on the wall saying that this was the place that an American Quaker, who had been deeply committed to the abolition of slavery, had died. He had died well before the abolition of slavery. I was deeply moved by this example of how humans can make sacrifices and commit themselves to sowing seeds which they will never see grow into trees and bear fruit in their life time.

At the time his name, John Woolman, meant nothing to me. That I assumed, so incorrectly, that this was someone forgotten by history, made his commitment to the cause of the abolition of slavery even more powerful. I resolved at that moment that when I got home to Australia I would make contact with Quakers.

I returned and several months passed. Life's pressures were greater than usual. One Saturday morning while I was shopping I met a group of Bahá'ís, gentle souls, doing outreach work. These are the Quakers of Islam, I thought – universalist, peace-loving, liberal and upholding the equality of women.

They also have experienced terrible religious persecution, and paid a heavy price for their liberal faith just as Quakers once did.

As I drove home I thought I must make contact with those Bahá'ís of Christianity and so I did. There I found my spiritual home and several years later I was accepted into membership, although not without some angst about whether I was 'good enough' to be a Quaker. A growing and rather comforting realisation that Quakers were not as perfect as I had idealised them to be, helped lessen this!

John Woolman, who remains for me the essence of Quaker faith and Quaker practice, continues to speak to my condition. Had they existed in his day, I am sure he would have embraced the Quakers of Islam as brothers and sisters.

In 1762 he wrote:

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages, hath different names; it is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren.

Such words of spiritual inclusiveness and enduring wisdom have the power to be bridges of understanding and to bring peace on earth.

## **My Quaker way**

*Drew Thomas*

My Quaker way began about twelve years ago. From the time Mum and Dad sent me to Sunday school at around the age of seven, I've known that part of my journey has been about spiritual searching. It's been a journey of several stages – and a couple of times lost in the wilderness! Moving through Baptist, then Uniting, then Baptist, then Uniting worshipping communities gave me a rich range of experience, and an important, if basic, biblical knowledge. I became highly involved, leading worship services, and undertaking the role of elder. My final stage before the move to Quakers was within a group that forged their own worship each week. I, and many others, found deep satisfaction in services that allowed for long periods of contemplation.

For me, though, there was still a sense of seeking for something different. A casual 'how's your weekend looking' conversation with a work colleague led to an invitation to attend a Meeting for Worship. I went with some trepidation – sitting still, and in silence for long periods has yet to become my forte. What I found was a paradox – that less is more. The complete silence of Meeting, broken only by occasional utterances, and the deep sense of connection – in our language 'gatheredness' – provided me with a space and texture within which I could meet the Spirit.

Surviving the first experience, I went on to explore the practices, processes, and faith of this Quaker community – which provided me with a sense of having come home. Not the end of the journey – but a base that has continued to offer me challenge to continually explore.

It's that tradition of, and challenge to, continually seeking that holds me firmly and loosely to this group. It's my journey – and my discoveries. The mix of autonomy and responsibility can be un-nerving: there's a shortage of certainty on this path.

I had the great fortune to be encouraged to attend a Quaker intensive learning process called 'Meeting for Learning'. A week long retreat, a supported journey through the following year, and a subsequent week long retreat. For me, a luxurious and life-shifting immersion in the Quaker story of seeking, learning, living, and worshipping, and an opportunity to connect with some of the significant Quaker writers. Also, two week long experiences of living in an intentional Quaker community, with a lovely rhythm of worship learning, and personal exploration – and – a full day silent retreat in the middle.

There is more that sustains my connection to Friends. I both celebrate and advocate for the Quaker way of corporate decision making – we call it 'Meeting for Worship for the conduct of Quaker business'. The title contextualises our decision making with a worshipping environment, and our process for seeking an agreed way forward is about spiritual discernment, rather than, as sometimes portrayed, consensus. Elaborating on that difference is a longer conversation than this paper permits.

There's much more – suffice it to say that my comfort at having 'come home' is continually enlivened by the challenge to keep seeking.

Let me close with a quote from Parker Palmer, one of my favourite Quaker writers:

Seasons are a wise metaphor for the movement of life, I think. It suggests that life is neither a battlefield nor a game of chance but something infinitely richer, more promising, more real. The notion that our lives are like the eternal cycle of the seasons does not deny the struggle or the joy, the loss or the gain, the darkness or the light, but encourages us to embrace it all – and to find in all of it opportunities for growth.

*(Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation)*

## What being a Quaker means to me

*Peter Webb*

Being a Quaker means many different things to me.

It means trying to live my life being the sort of person I want to be.

It means truth and simplicity.

It means being free to choose what I believe, and taking responsibility for that choice.

It means being peaceful, and it means being fearless.

It means trust, respect, equality, and love.

It also means being part of a loving and tolerant and diverse community of like-minded people, all of whom are friends, and some of whom are very close friends.

It means nurturing the divine spark within myself, and seeking out and responding to that spark in others.

It is a way of living.

Having said that, I must say that I am as prone as anyone else to selfishness, greed, lack of compassion, disrespect, bad temper, and any other basic human trait to which we all, to some degree, subscribe. I can be as callous and as icy-hearted as the next person.

Nevertheless, I cling to ideals, and try to deal with the less desirable parts of my nature as best I can.

Quakers say that they believe that there is something of God – whatever that word means to different people – in everyone. So they wait in patience and silence, to try to clear their minds of the ceaseless rattle of daily affairs. Then the spirit within can be heard, and Quakers trust the spirit to lead them in right ways – ways guided by truth and love.

I came to Quakers in search of a spiritual home – not to convert myself to a different way of life, but with the hope that there would be some compatibility with my own sometimes half-formed beliefs, and that I could find some spiritual nurture there. But being with like-minded people, especially ones of such goodwill, provides an on-going interchange of ideas which help sharpen my focus on what I really do and really don't believe.

Perhaps my contributions to that interchange help others to do the same – I don't know. I hope so. But trusting the spirit in me to respond to the spirit in others, and believing them to do the same, helps to strip away the barriers we all put up amongst ourselves; and we can get to know one another more truly.

So I find my own truth. It is a spirit-led truth, and is right for me. The spirit prompts others differently, according to their needs, natures, and experience. The need of each person to find his or her own spiritual pathway is acknowledged and respected – sometimes even admired – by others. We all do what we can in our own way, and trust to the truth of the spirit in others.

So no-one tells me what I must believe. I seek that from within myself. I feel totally free to decide my own truth, and I accept total responsibility for that choice. It also means total respect for the individual ways of others. We are all equal partners in the chess game of living. It means living fearlessly. I stand in awe of no-one, and, equally, I look down on no-one. There is no need for people to wear a mask. It is a form of living simply.

It means living in peace – for how can the divine in me respond to the divine in another with violence? It will not tolerate inequality, denigration, disadvantage, social exclusion, or prejudice. It must respond with loving recognition, and respect others who seek their own truth in their own way – speaking directly and truthfully to one another, and behaving with integrity and honesty in daily life.

As a Quaker, I feel a responsibility to be a guardian of human compassion and dignity in a world which is being shockingly violated by deceit, greed, inhumane violence, and the lust for power.

And that is what being a Quaker means to me.



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