

Topic: Exploring the Quaker Spiritual Search Through Poetry

As both a poetry major and Quaker, I have observed that Quakers and poets follow a very similar spiritual path. Quakers sit in silence every Sunday, looking inward for divine inspiration to deliver a message to the Meeting. The same can be said for poets, who must look into themselves for creative guidance. I intend to write a series of research-based poems that seek to answer the question, “What makes Quakers ‘break the silence’?” I will travel to the Quaker Collection archive at Haverford College to look at letters, diaries, and meeting records in which Quakers specifically reference their experience of feeling divinely led to take a stand, whether literally to stand and speak in Meeting, or figuratively, to pursue social activism. Finally, I will write a series of poems in conversation with the spiritual paths of those I study, as well as my own. This project may serve as a basis for a senior thesis in Creative Writing during the next academic year.

From both a contemporary and a historical perspective, the experience of being a Quaker, a member of The Religious Society of Friends, is that of continual self-questioning. Quakerism began in England in the 1650’s as a dissenting Christian religion, essentially based on the belief that every individual has equal access to communication with God. This eliminated the need for one preacher or priest, and resulted in the format of most Quaker Meetings as un-programmed, hour-long gatherings in silence. Members of the Meeting meditate or contemplate in the silence, listening for their “still small voice,” or “inner light,” as it is often called, for divine guidance. Based on whatever divine message a Friend may or may not receive during Meeting, that Friend may or may not decide to stand and deliver the message, breaking the silence of the meeting. This relationship with “divine leading” is not only required of Quakers every Sunday in meeting, but it is also required of them with regards to social activism. Over the centuries, Quakers have been spiritually led to denounce slavery, demand rights for women, become conscientious objectors, and, of course, to break off and form Quakerism in the first place. In my experience, some Quakers describe literally hearing a voice within for guidance, others describe it as epiphany, and still others say they have simply found themselves suddenly standing to give a message, as if their body had decided for them. I want to look at how these leadings have manifested over the years.

So far, the overlap between people who are Quakers and poets is minimal. Partly because Quakerism is a relatively new religion, and partly because traditional Quaker values considered serious pursuit of the arts too “worldly,” there is only one well-known Quaker poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, and even he is better known for his political career. Thus, while there does exist a lot of well-renowned spiritually minded poetry, there is little from a Quaker perspective. Places like Pendle Hill, a Quaker study center in Pennsylvania, occasionally offers programs linking Quakerism to spiritual poetry, but they must turn to poets such as Donald Hall and William Stafford, who share Quaker values such as pacifism. My project is also relevant right now because this is a time when Quakers could benefit from insight into the process of being spiritually led to action. Quakers have been criticized for their lack of action against the Iraq War, and a member of my own meeting, Francis Brown, member of the Friends Historical Association (FHA) was recently the spearhead of a large ecumenical Peace Conference held in Philadelphia on the subject. The FHA recently had an entire meeting, whose

minutes I read, devoted to brainstorming how to get more young people involved in Quaker history and make the FHA more relevant. I see my project as one way of doing so, since it will use historical information to help define the process of feeling “led” to do something, a mysterious concept that Young Friends continue to struggle with.

Through my resulting series of poems, I will endeavor to answer the question, “What makes us break the silence?” through the lens of Quaker historical documents. I anticipate finding insight from some of the better-known historical figures through their writings, and I will be especially interested to find out from direct accounts of “ordinary” Quakers’ journals and letters. How do Quakers, including myself, define “divine leading,” and do they do it differently in 1650 than, say, 1920? What leads us to certainty as to the mysterious question of, “When should I speak in meeting?” I anticipate there will be differences, but I hope to find common threads that have lasted over the centuries. I also hope to connect this to my own experience in Quaker meetings with delivering messages.

To conduct my research, I will first stop in Wilmington, Ohio, to attend part of the Conference of Quaker Historians and Archivists, attending presentations on Quaker history. I will then proceed to my hometown of Downingtown, Pennsylvania, for four weeks to spend time at Haverford College Library’s Quaker Collection Archives. The collection is less than an hour-long train ride from my house, and is open to public use. Also, my mother is associated with the FHA, one of whose prominent members is Emma Lapsansky-Werner, Emeritus Professor of History at Haverford and Curator of the Quaker Collection, who can help guide me on best using the archives for my purposes. I will examine primary documents such as letters, diaries, journals, writings, and minutes from Quaker Business Meetings, which document the collective decisions that Meetings have made over the years. Because of the large number of available documents, I will study representative samples spanning the history of Quakerism, to glean a sense of how descriptions of spiritual leading have morphed over time. Also while in Pennsylvania, I plan to attend at least one meeting of the FHA, and, of course, my own Meeting. For the remaining four weeks, I will return to Evanston to continue reading primary Quaker documents available online through sites such as qhpress.org, and to spend time working on the resulting series of short poems.

This project comes out of my passion for spiritually minded poetry, which I have had the chance to study this past Fall in a 300-level English course entitled, “Poetry and the Spiritual Search.” I am also a poetry major, so I am confident that I have the skills necessary to craft this into a meaningful project. I have been a member of the Religious Society of Friends for most of my life, which gives me a background of knowledge and experience to execute a project involving the Quaker spiritual search.

The research I conduct for this project, and the resulting writing, will hopefully contribute to my writing a senior thesis in Creative Writing, which involves an ambitious manuscript of fifteen to twenty pages of verse. In becoming more involved in the preservation and documentation Quaker history, I also hope that my work will be relevant to the FHA, in their efforts to reach out to younger Friends. They are even considering hiring a Young Friend as a liason between them and the Young Friends community, which this project may prepare me for. From this project, I hope to marry poetry and Quakerism, the two greatest spiritual practices in my life.