

A LIFETIME OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT by Cheryll Pitt

INTRODUCTION

Tony Philpott asked me if I would speak at one of our third Wednesday Quaker Universalist Group Worship and Sharing meetings which he convenes and has clerked for years. My immediate reaction was to ask myself what I could possibly say which would be of interest given the “rock star” status (in QUG circles) of most of our speakers. However, after some deliberation I realised that my spiritual development had taken many twists and turns over 70 years. Vocalising these meanders could assist others in their journeys.

My story starts in very early childhood and extends to my present life at over 70 years old. I pass through those angst-ridden teenage years, university life, early marriage and a subsequent very busy family life. Quakerism was an ever-beckoning hand that I couldn't resist throughout my life, drawing me irresistibly back with its strange magnetism.

CHILDHOOD

I had a free-range childhood, looking back I had a huge amount of freedom. We lived in a row of six two ups two downs, at 5, English Cottages, two miles from the nearest very small town of Merstham in Surrey which had one row of shops. We had no inside toilet, we used an earth closet at the end of the garden, and no electricity. My parents were renovating it. I was a 50's child and so rationing was just finishing. I used to take off into the fields and woods, build camps and knew all the wildflower names before I went to school. There were three other children in other hamlets and my brother.

I was inculcated with some of the Quaker values without realising it. A simple life and sustainability were a given, plastic was just coming into use, it was all brown paper bags, absolutely nothing was wasted, certainly not food. I had next to no toys except the big wide world and my imagination. I learnt to read and write as soon as I possibly could because it was the key to me living in my own imaginary world. I was at one with the environment. My Dad was a radar engineer and was keen to teach me about Physics when I was older. He saw that I was keenly interested in finding out, for example, why a rainbow existed. There was no question of me being a girl and not being worthy of such explanations. Equality was also part of my life.

However, speaking the truth at all times was a bitter pill to swallow. My freedom was curtailed by my very loving mother. She had a stick that she used to stir the washing in the copper that was used to heat water. If I told a lie or committed some other misdemeanour out came the stick and the painful consequences. The corollary was that one day I vowed to be a perfect being in appearance and behaviour. I was very shy and sensitive and so this was not good I fear.

My first brush with religion was in attending the Sunday School, just four children run by the elderly lady who lived in No 6 and ran a general store in her front room. We met in the long, single storey brick built modern chapel opposite the row of cottages. All I remember is giving her a list of things I thought would make Sunday School enjoyable, none of them were adopted needless to say.

My brother and I stayed with my great aunt (now dead) in Southend in the holidays. She was a Seventh Day Adventist and no work was done on Saturdays, not even cooking, we spent most of the day at church. We were members of the Sunday School there. I can't say I learnt much of a spiritual nature from that experience.

AS A TEENAGER

We then moved away from this idyll up the hill to a detached house; I went to a Girls' Grammar about 1.5 hours' journey away which I was desperate to attend. I was a very conflicted teenager. I viewed religion as being my path to becoming this perfect being. I wasn't questioning in the way maturity brings but looking for a divine revelation.

I attended Chaldon Church, a tiny C of E church of Saxon origin, buried in the countryside, just me, an elderly lady and the vicar. There was a scary mural on the wall where the saintly were climbing a ladder and the not so were being burnt in hell. I scuttled off after every traditional service and so needless to say my spiritual development was nil and no revelations came.

My friends at school were attending a Russian Orthodox church in London. We all went on an Easter retreat: incense, icons and copious painted eggs and a charismatic leader. However much I stared at the beautiful icons no inspiration came.

My family saw a lot of Aunty Anne and Uncle Denis (both now sadly dead) and their children, they were birthright Quakers. My Mum was very impressed with the way they lived out their beliefs. Aunty Anne was to play a pivotal part in my eventual return to Quakers. I started going to a Quaker MH in Carshalton, the peace and things that were said seemed to help my teenage angst. A constant battle in my head between my wish to be perfect, please my parents and the opposing forces of various boyfriends which dragged me in the opposite direction.

UNIVERSITY DAYS

I went to Imperial College in London, lived in a whole series of unsuitable dwellings where the stairs were propped up, the bath was in the kitchen, next door to a squat in the East End of London, finishing with living at the top of a house in Addison Gardens next door to a prostitute. I therefore imbibed a lot of life. One of my favourite sayings is don't moan, do something about it. I was part of the Community Action Group at university and developed a social conscience. I did soup runs under the bridge at Strand Palace hotel where I learnt that most of the folk there were mentally challenged or had

spiralled into destitution. I also visited an elderly lady who was housebound each week, riding my old black bike through London.

I stayed on to do a PhD, met my husband in my third year, drawn together by a love of hill walking, archaeology and camping. My husband lived in hall, and we were friendly with the wardens of the hall, born-again Christians, as the result of that we attended a church in South Kensington and were married in a church. I was also attending a London MH. We moved to Devon after my PhD.

QUESTIONING

There then followed the era of mature questioning. My husband and I read books by Richard Dawkins and “Who Moved the Stone” by Frank Morrison. Both of us agreed that we could no longer truly believe in a religion where supernatural beings featured but acknowledged that Jesus was a charismatic historical fact with an enduring philosophy. We had other well-rehearsed issues with our former beliefs: how would all the human beings that evolved eons ago ever be saved, weren’t they deserving etc etc....

I was still looking for a framework that could guarantee a life that was as best as it could be. We joined the Humanist Society and went to their conference in Bristol, but to me it was a sterile philosophy, concentrating on education and the issue of not having compulsory religious education, seeming to say that human beings were the most salient forms of life. I went back to the Quaker Meeting at Plymouth, we moved to Farnham and I became a Member with my children attending MfW. However, in the 80s Quakerism was very different, I found at Farnham at that time that the ministry was focussed on Christianity with all the difficulties for me in truly believing. I resigned. I didn’t have the maturity to see that it may have been just the MfW where this culture prevailed.

COMING HOME

I still had a great need for spiritual guidance to answer now the big questions, as Tony Philpott says in his book from “From Christian to Quaker”: who am I, why am I here, how can I live my life for the best, what happens when I die? I joined a Kadampa Buddhist meditation group and read many books by Geshe Elsang Gyatso but had great difficulty with the idea of rebirth. I even asked a Sri Lankan friend to bring back a book on rebirth from Sri Lanka for me to gain an insight. I could identify with many of the tenets but not rebirth and the idea that for example concentration camp victims had brought their fate on themselves.

I read books on Taoism and Confucianism.

In my late 60s I then went to Chichester Quaker Meeting and came home, I was drawn back there every week, I found true Quakerism was alive, I was totally accepted, the

ministry was rich, I found the Friends were a well-spring of stimulating ideas born of careers in the law, medicine.

EPILOGUE

I to my astonishment that there were Friends who had the same problems as me with “God” and “Spirit” at Chichester Meeting. I struck up a relationship with a 90-year-old called Gill Wilsher who founded the Quaker Peace Caravan. She was a source of wise counsel.

I read Tony’s book several times, “From Christian to Quaker” I broke the back of it. I realised rather late that one could take inspiration from all faiths. I wanted to join but could I and not be hypocritical? I talked to Aunty Anne in Cornwall and visited her, now 90 years old, she was also a source of great wisdom, and said Quakerism is a way of life not adherence slavishly to beliefs.

I rejoined and also started attending our Worship and Sharing. I am still on a spiritual journey but have found my “tribe” at last after a lifetime.