Joan Myers

In Search of Pendle Hill and George Fox

by David Douglas

I am lost. I had set out to climb Pendle Hill, and now I cannot even find it. Time is running out as well. I am due back at the Brontë Parsonage on Haworth Moor in two hours to pick up my wife and daughters.

When I first heard of Pendle Hill in the northwest of England, I had assumed it to be a rolling Lancashire moortop, easily accessible by foot. I should have known better. I sought Pendle Hill because of its role in George Fox's life, and he had completed the ascent only "with much ado." As he recalled later in his *Journal*, "it was so very steep and high."

An hour earlier I had at least caught sight of Pendle Hill in the distance. Snow-dusted and cloud-catching, the limestone ridge soared above small villages near its base, rising out of the lesser hills like the back of an enormous whale.

"Moved of the Lord to climb it" in the spring of 1652, 28-year-old George Fox, son of a Puritan weaver and a mother "of the stock of the martyrs," looked out into northwest England. "From the top of this hill the Lord let me see in what places He had a great people to be gathered."

❖

The vision from Pendle Hill would orient the rest of his life.

George Fox, solitary wanderer and disillusioned seeker, had paced restlessly about England, like a fast walker to a dead end. Dissatisfied with tepid answers to his fervent questions, stung by incongruous lives of preachers, he had found, he bemoaned, no one to "speak to my condition." Five years before Pendle Hill's commissioning vision, Fox's anguish with churchmen reached a climax:

> I cannot declare the great misery I was in . . . when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do; then, O, then I heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition;" and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy.

❖

Empty-handed and wearied, Fox encountered Christ in a series of revelations he called "openings." Like Julian of Norwich's "shewings," these were not second-hand rumors of religion but experiences of the immediacy of divine love. Reaching the end of his rope, Fox found it attached to God.

❖

The ecclesiastical landscape through which Fox had wandered left little room for such first-hand experiences. Many Puritan churches held "that God had spoken to man through the Scriptures and in the finished work of Christ," wrote the Quaker historian William Charles Braithwaite.

David Douglas lives in Santa Fe, N. Mex., where he writes on religious and environmental issues. A Presbyterian, he heads the nonprofit organization WATERLINES, which works with communities in developing countries to provide clean drinking water.

"They believed that He would speak again in judgment at the second advent; meanwhile man ought not to look for further direct communication."

It is arid terrain familiar to travelers from any age; thirsting for living water, they are handed empty canteens. Fox sloughed off doctrines like road dust. He turned his back on pastors or, to their consternation, confronted them in midservice, indicting them for barren rhetoric. Seeing parishioners like sleepwalkers, he roused and prodded them.

I who lean toward decorum and quiet voices would have frozen at hearing George Fox rise behind me. This man means not to let us sleep.

❖

By the time he stood atop the 1,830-foot-high Pendle Hill, Fox had exchanged a private vision of a self to be saved for a great people to be gathered. As the Quaker writer Elfrida Vipont Foulds added, "It was as if he had suddenly received a new sense of direction in his wandering life."

I do not seek my own vision (I tell myself) as I drive narrow back lanes towards Pendle Hill. I go instead lured by Fox's story and his legacy of the Religious Society of Friends. I once assumed that "Friends" derived from the Quaker hallmarks of compassion and witness for peace. But the term originates in "Friends of the Truth"—truth being found, wrote Fox, "in God's voice speaking to the soul," in an encounter with one who said "I no longer call you servants but friends." (John 15:15)

I think of three Quakers in the southwestern United States during the 1980s, welcoming a 16-year-old boy from El Salvador, a survivor of a massacre who was unable to enter legally into the U.S. They pressed on him coffee and blankets. All half-expected a constabulary knock at the door, handcuffs for the refugee. Years did not separate them from early Quakers. I watched their quiet attentiveness, their obliviousness to the risk (born of their faith or their history—or both?). In the refugee's eyes I detected a hint of repose: he knew he had landed among friends.

❖

The Quaker movement may have been founded at Pendle Hill, but now Pendle Hill cannot be found by me. A curving road of hedges has led me down past farms into jangling Lancashire towns, more industrialized than they had appeared from a picturesque distance.

No signs alert drivers to Pendle Hill or the Quakers. When I asked directions from a farmer atop Haworth Moor, his only response had been, "Aye, Pendle Hill, it's the witches you'd be interested in then," referring to an alleged coven during the early 17th-century when witch-hysteria triggered the hanging of several women living near Pendle Hill. My tourist map fails to distinguish between major and minor roads, and I have forgotten the name of the village nestled at the base of Pendle Hill that would offer easy footpaths leading to the summit. (It is "Barley," I learn much later, along with the name of the indispensable guidebook: *The Birthplace of Quakerism: A Handbook for the 1652 Country*, by Elfrida Vipont Foulds.)

Thirty minutes of frenetic driving brings me only to a town somewhere northwest of Pendle Hill. I stop to ask directions. No one knows. Finally, a large, bright-eyed woman in her 60s nods when I mention the name. Shifting her shopping bag, she beams a broad smile and begins talking, rapidly giving me apparently precise instructions, but in a Yorkshire accent so thick as to be like Gaelic to me. I thank her, she smiles and moves on, and I point my car toward the nearest incline.

THE QUAKER MOVEMENT MAY HAVE BEEN FOUNDED AT PENDLE HILL, BUT NOW PENDLE HILL CANNOT BE FOUND BY ME.

Fox once wrote reassuringly, "I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love which flowed over the ocean of darkness. And in that also I saw the infinite love of God; and I had great openings."

Temptation being what it is, Fox might have begun with the experience of divine love only to disappear into the mists of quietism, like some ancient seeker of the Holy Grail inclined to "follow wandering fires, lost in the quagmire," as one chronicler of the Grail Legend observed, "and leaving human wrongs to right themselves, cares but to pass into the silent life." But as Fox and other Quakers made clear, transcendent visions are not the goal. "Let us be quite clear that mystical exaltations are not essential to religious dedication," wrote the 20th-century Quaker Thomas Kelly. "The crux of religious living lies in the *will*, not in transient and variable states. Utter dedication of will to God is open to *all*. . . . Where the will to will God's will is present, there is a child of God."

Fox's vision from Pendle Hill proved less private theophany than prophetic call. His legacy meant cells visited, hospitals cleansed, hungry fed, slaves freed, and wars spurned. The view from Pendle Hill linked heaven and earth.

❖

From my readings of Quakerism over the years (readings that skimped on roadmaps), one line in particular, familiar to every Quaker, resounds from George Fox. He wrote it from jail, his prison letter, in the tradition of St. Paul and Martin Luther King, Jr., far outlasting his prison bars.

"Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, 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 every one.*"

Whether we meet strangers, adversaries, or friends, we are to discern the "Light of Christ" within them. As Jessamyn West noted, "The truth Fox worked to bring to others was the possibility of a oneness with Christ, and those who experience this 'oneness' would demonstrate it by growing 'loving'." Such recognition, undermining our penchant for scorn and contempt, runs far deeper than mere mutual respect or humanist creed, and perhaps has been practiced with the surest touch in our time by Mother Teresa.

"To answer that of God in every one," becomes a charge to the hearers, a benediction, and finally, one hopes, a way of life.

❖

I follow a slender road leading upwards, in the general direction of Pendle Hill. A sign promising a "View" reveals moments later only a mobile home park, commanding an airy perspective indeed but without giving a hint of Pendle Hill.

As I drive fretfully on, suddenly my luck changes. Around a corner a country inn appears, and beside it a sign declaring

"Footpath." I park the car and enter the inn, encountering a genial pubkeeper and his wife. Though dubious about my spying Pendle Hill from the moortop above, they assure me of a splendid view of Yorkshire's dales, and—pointing to a table by a wood fire—hot soup and a sandwich on my return.

I quickly set off up the hill on an ancient stone footpath ("part of an old Roman road," explained the innkeeper), delighted to be out of the car, walking briskly up the high sloping pasture as air and sunshine pour over me.

Knowing time is short, calculating the hour of rendezvous with my wife and daughters, I occasionally break into a run up the hill. I pass dry-stone walls that enclose farmers' cottages and sheep-grazing lands, then open fields of heather with pools of clear water in the grass. Voices of other hillwalkers echo over the distance, along with the low churning of a tractor. Climbing higher, beyond the walls, I reach what turns out to be a false summit, with a higher rise of moorland yet beyond that. Pendle Hill remains hidden.

I stop and turn around, breathing heavily. In the clear noon sky, I can see 40 miles into Yorkshire and Lancashire. Green and yellow fields spread with sun run toward the Irish Sea. The disappointment I feel for missing Pendle Hill begins to be eclipsed by the realization that I am looking out on nearly the same view Fox did, the same dales, moor, and sun-stroked land. For the first time in hours, I stop moving and stand quietly as the wind rolls lightly over me.

❖

Fox looked over this same scene from his loftier vantage and saw men and women waiting "to be gathered," to be yoked together by Christ into a people of prayer who would wait upon the Lord.

They would know persecution. "Friends," wrote one of the best known ones, William Penn, "suffered great hardships for their love and good will, being often stocked, stoned, beaten, whipped, and imprisoned."

Defiant, iconoclastic, tipping his hat to no one, disturbing decorum, dismissing oaths, and rejecting taxes, Fox offended and frightened. He himself was brought before the courts 60 times in 36 years, spending a total of 6 years in different prisons for heresy, plotting against authority, attendance at prohibited meetings, as well as refusing to take oaths or carry arms.

More than 15,000 Friends faced legal sentences in the early decades; jail would imprison thousands, and death took the lives of hundreds in prison. "No cross, no crown," William Penn perceived, commemorating those who laid down lives instead of principles.

With Fox's emphasis on the inner life, with rejecting pastors, doctrines, and sacraments while seeking out this mystical union, how did he hold himself accountable—and urge others to—so that it did not become untethered exaltation leading to spiritual anarchy?

For Fox, as for John Wesley nearly a century later, the answer lay in part within the community, a gathering of kindred souls, with trust that God would not let someone deep in prayer get too far away. The weekly meeting would provide the framework.

From his vantage on Pendle Hill, Fox might have glimpsed the folds of northwest England where the first meetings would be held: villages such as Sawley, Settle, and Sedbergh, and far out of sight, Ulverston's Swarthmoor Hall, home of stalwart Margaret Fell, the "mother of Quakerism" (and eventual wife of George Fox), whose manor house would provide a harbor for early Quaker meetings.

"Quakerism is peculiar in being a group mysticism," wrote Howard Brinton in *Friends for 300 Years*. The meetings would take place each week as Friends gathered to listen, to wait upon the Lord in the corporate stillness.

Joan Myers

Accountability is one hallmark of a true visionary: after recognizing the inner flame, to create boundaries to check it from becoming wildfire. In the Quaker sense, to test the voices in the tincture of silence.

❖

The Quaker movement began here. Or near here. It is probably just as well that I cannot climb Pendle Hill, cannot find the exact spot where God granted Fox a vision of a people to be gathered. Here, at a distance, I can only approach the outskirts of the story; disorientation keeps my presumption in check. Fox descended from Pendle Hill not with sudden faith—faith he had known before—but with clearer purpose that seemed validated by God.

Fox's message would be echoed in the 20th century by such spiritual descendants as Thomas Kelly (writing in *A Testament of Devotion* that "continuous renewed immediacy, not receding memory of the Divine touch, lies at the base of religious living") and Elton Trueblood. "We believe," Trueblood once noted with words simple in phrasing but staggering in significance, "that Christ can be known now as truly as He was known by the disciples."

It is nothing less than the essential rediscovery of each age, indeed each day.

❖

I wait in the noon sunlight. I hear distant voices of people—an older couple walking dogs on the high moorland. I listen for a more proximate, intimate voice, but, though I am unusually attentive, there is none. I receive no commissioning vision from this hill, and I begin the descent down through bracken and heather to my car and lunch.

Fox walked down from his Lancashire hill to speak God's word, to disturb the contented, to draw people from darkness to light. He would speak of the nearness of Christ to thousands in streets, hillsides, fields, prisons, cottages, and mansions.

As I walk down, a question comes to mind from this pursuit of Fox and Pendle Hill: Am I willing to speak to even one person?

That is what I am left with in the sun of northern England. Not a commissioning but a question. ❑

About the Wider Quaker Fellowship

Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, works to facilitate loving understanding of diversities among Friends while we discover together, with God's help, our common spiritual ground, and to facilitate full expression of our Friends' testimonies in the world. Friends World Committee's Wider Quaker Fellowship program is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

This article appeared in the June 1999 issue of *Friends Journal.* Reprinted 2000 with permission.

Friends Journal is an independent magazine serving the Religious Society of Friends.
Please direct inquiries to: *Friends Journal,* 1216 Arch Street, Ste. 2A, Philadelphia, PA 19107-2835
Telephone: 215-563-8629 • Fax: 215-568-1377 • E-mail: FriendsJnl@aol.com

WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP

a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation,
Section of the Americas

1506 Race Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102-1498 • USA
Tel. 215-241-7293 • Fax 215-241-7285
email c/o Americas@fwcc.quaker.org