LEADING and BEING LED

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Leading and being led: the words are simple enough. But for Quakers they have their most profound resonance as defining religious experience. Friends speak variously of being *drawn* to an action, feeling *under the weight* of a concern, being *called* or *led* to act in specific ways. We speak of *being open to the leadings of the Light*, of being *taught* by the *Spirit* or the *Inward Christ*. Extraordinary claims lie embedded in those phrases. They say that it is not only possible but essential to our nature for human beings to hear and obey the voice of God; that we can be directed, daily, in what we do, the jobs we hold, the very words we say; and that our obedience may draw us to become leaders in all spheres of human life—in the professions, arts and sciences, but also in discovering the ethical, political, social, and economic consequences of following the will of God.

To be a Quaker is not simply to subscribe to doctrines but to be convinced that one has known an ultimate reality which authenticates doctrine. It is to know oneself capable of being taught *now* by the living Spirit of Truth, capable of receiving vital direction in what one is to do. It is not only to be a follower of the teachings of Jesus but to have met the Inward Christ.

Our history is rich in examples of such religious experience, as our vocabulary is rich in ways of describing it, but that very richness presents dangers. One danger is that we may be so overawed at how powerful a leading must be that we never trust that we have been led. We may search so hard for the transcendent insight that we miss the small, quiet promptings to obedience in what is immediately at hand. Those meetings in which no one dared break the silence for decades lost their vitality from being over-awed. The longer the silence endured, the more sacralized it became and the more terrifying it became for anyone to imagine being led to speak. The opposite danger is that we do not feel enough awe. We domesticate the powerful language of religious experience and turn authentic witness into cliché. Every strong opinion or piece of self-will gets inflated into a *leading*. A long-time col-

league at Earlham College once got so tired of the pretentiousness of all the announced "concerns"—some of which appeared to be nothing more than irritation at the way faculty meeting was going—that he expunged the word from his vocabulary. Thereafter, whenever he felt exercised about something, he would announce that he "had a bother" about it.

As heirs to that rich vocabulary, our task is to recover its proper meaning, to free it from pretentiousness and to ask how it may help us understand and express our own religious experience. That requires looking at what our forebears experienced and then examining our own experience, to see where one throws light on the other. It requires exploring such questions as what it means, experientially, to have a leading; what some of the hallmarks and consequences are of being led; how we can tell when a leading is genuine rather than self-serving and self-deceiving; and where we might look for leadings today.

It is always well to start with George Fox, both because he first expresses the seminal insights which shape the Religious Society of Friends and because the heroic power of his life is so inspiring. Fox does not often speak of "leadings." In telling about "the dealings of the Lord" with him, he speaks of "great openings," times of vigorous religious exercise when God gives him an insight into truth which carries with it a transforming power. The first of these exercises begins with Fox's intense reaction to a trivial incident, the frivolous drinking of healths in a tavern. Unable to sleep that night, he tells us, "The Lord . . . said unto me, 'Thou seest how young people go together into vanity and old people into the earth; and thou must forsake all, Both young and old, and keep out of all, and be as a stranger unto all.'" "At the command of God," Fox breaks off all connection with his family and begins his seeking. What follows is a long period of alienation from human society, anxious search for meaning, temptation, sufferings to the point of despair, and stubborn passivity—"waiting upon the Lord." The early pages of Fox's *Journal* report his going from place to place to consult with priests, professors and dissenters, but these are wanderings rather than leadings, marked by temptations to follow human models and by tests of his capacity for waiting.

In the third year of these wanderings, he has a series of great openings, close together and in support of one another. First, reflecting on claims people make to be believers, he has it opened to him that no one is truly a believer who has not passed

from death to life. Belief is not a matter of opinions held but of a life so utterly transformed that it is like dying and being reborn. Second, he perceives that something more than university training is essential to "qualify" one as a minister of Christ. The third opening is that God does not dwell in buildings made with hands, but that the church is the people of God.

We who read about them with a knowledge of subsequent history recognize that these openings will help shape Quaker polity, our attitudes toward the authority of our leaders, and how we expect ministry to be expressed. But though powerful, they are, initially, fragmentary and largely negative—as much "closings" as "openings." They help clear away error, but Fox does not yet know *who* God's people are or what *will* make a true minister. Neither has he yet found himself in relation to God. He says, "Now though I had great openings, yet great trouble and temptation came many times upon me, so that when it was day I wished for night, and when it was night I wished for day."* Openings, sorrows and temptations all occur intermixed in this time of Fox's first searching.

Only after these three great openings does Fox first use his characteristic phrase, ". . . I was *moved of the Lord* to go into Derbyshire. . . ," and all this occurs before the great pentecostal event which changes him from Seeker to Finder, that moment when, having forsaken all human help, he hears a voice saying "There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition." Even after that revelation, Fox still passes through worse sorrows and temptations than he had experienced before. He still finds himself *moved* to do things which are inexplicable to him, impelled by a hint or by a call to testify to, or keep faith with, what has previously been opened to him—as when he speaks of hearing a bell or seeing a steeple and having it "strike at his heart" or when he feels commanded to walk barefoot in winter through the streets of Lichfield. Even for a great religious prophet, *leadings* can continue to be uncertain and ambiguous, an occasion for risk.

But George Fox is not our only pattern or example. Many whose lives speak compellingly to us had no such direct openings but came to their transforming experience through the ministry of other people. For some there is a long apprenticeship of struggle and confusion, while others are convinced by the peace and rightness of meeting in silent worship with God's people.

Consider the example of William Penn. At least ten years elapsed between the first and second

times he heard Thomas Loe preach. In the intervening years, he had been dismissed from Oxford University for dissenting from the Established Church, and he had traveled and talked with many kinds of believers. There was ferment in his soul, but he was no Quaker. Even after his second encounter with Thomas Loe, when a voice told Penn to stand up in Cork meeting so that others might be helped by seeing him in tears, he was not yet fully convinced in the faith. The first time Penn was arrested, it was for threatening to throw an intruder down the meeting stairs. The Friends who intervened to prevent violence must surely have been troubled about how this new enthusiast was going to fit into the Society.

Or we might take another familiar example, that of Robert Barclay, the most intellectually rigorous of early Friends. In a well-known passage of *The Apology,* Proposition XI, Section 7, a work of careful argumentation, he explains how he came to Friends:

> Not by strength of arguments, or by a particular disquisition of each doctrine, and convincement of my understanding thereby, came [I] to receive and bear witness of the truth, but by being secretly reached by this life; for when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me, and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed.

Taken together these three examples sketch in outline what it means to have a religious leading. First of all, the **leading is directed inwardly.** The tight control we may have kept on our inner doubts becomes loosened, and confusion threatens to overwhelm us. We may feel emptiness and separation from other people, and, like Fox, feel required to act out those inner experiences by withdrawing from ordinary human encounters. Perhaps we give physical expression to our restlessness by wandering from place to place. We may become burdens to ourselves and to others. Through all this turmoil we become aware of a great longing to know what can be depended on, and we recognize that our desire to know what is true is greater even than our desire to be comforted. We learn in some detail about our own condition—both what it is and what it might become. As a consequence we learn that we can persevere.

Perseverence requires patience and courage, which are essential for clearning away false solu-

tions to our needs. During his time of searching, various advisers urged George Fox to get married, join the army, sing hymns, use tobacco and have his blood let. Many of us have received similar advice, if indeed we haven't offered it to others. Such advice is based on the assumption that we are merely going through a phase which will work itself out if we do not take ourselves too seriously. And such advice misses the point entirely, for we know that, even if what we are going through *can* be charted on some developmental scheme as adolescence or mid-life crisis, that does not account for it. For us it is an ultimate test of meaning, a test whether we can live with integrity and find a human fellowship rooted in what lasts.

A second hallmark of a leading is that we recognize that our **endurance comes as a gift,** an opening. The waiting is still painful, but our capacity to resist false answers gives us some assurance a true one will come. A third hallmark is that **we learn about people.** As we come to know our own condition, we come also to know the condition of others. We see that others experience the same kinds of temptations, the same sufferings, the same longings. We receive another opening then, that we are part of suffering humanity, so whatever may comfort us will have to be for all humankind. We cannot come to the ocean of light except through the ocean of darkness.

We often use the phrase "that speaks to my condition" when what we mean is "I agree with that." For Fox, to have one's condition spoken to was to learn a hard truth or be brought to judgment. Another favorite phrase, "speak to that of God in them," has been similarly softened by later Friends. For Fox, *that of God* might be totally at odds with what one was doing or saying. The well-known Epistle of 1656, in which Fox exhorts Friends to be patterns and examples, in order to "walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone. . ." begins:

> In the power of life and wisdom, and dread of the Lord God of life, and heaven, and earth, dwell, that in the wisdom of God over all ye may be preserved, and be a terror to all the adversaries of God, and a dread, answering that of God in them all, spreading the Truth abroad, awakening the witness, confounding deceit, gathering up out of transgression into the life, the covenant of light and peace with God.*

To answer *that of God* in God's adversaries means being a terror and dread to them; it means speaking to what lies imprisoned in them. Elsewhere Fox

speaks of going over the heads of persecutors by reaching the witness of God in them and of appealing to that of God in our opponents so as to throw them into confusion. That sounds a bit like the advice to love your enemies because it will drive them crazy, and so it should, for what Fox means is that the Inward Christ works to lead us first to judgment, then to reform and convincement of the truth.

To know our own condition and the conditions of others is to have a realistic view of human frailties and also to know the witness within each of us which can lead us out of error.

A fourth hallmark of a leading is that **we feel ourselves increasingly under obedience.** A gathering power of convinction within us sustains our courage and patience and then points us to first steps in a re-ordering of our lives. And as we persevere in obedience, we may find that the steps we feel drawn to take become bigger, more defined. We feel more clearly led. At the outset of his search, Fox did not know what would speak to his condition; all he knew was what woud not. Penn was a clumsy seeker for more than ten years before he was ready to follow his leading, and even then he stumbled on his way. Barclay might well have thought that nothing could satisfy him unless it had intellectual cogency, but the meeting began to define his condition for him even as it spoke to it: he wanted the evil in him weakened and the good raised up. At the moment of greatest emptiness or greatest need, God begins to turn all those separate openings to good account. One learns, directly or through the mediation of others, that there is an answering to the human condition, if only one will trust it, and, in this leading to the truth, one may find one's greatest gifts enhanced and focused. When Penn was finally made serviceable to the truth, it was as statesman and courtier; when Barclay made his contribution, it was as a theologian. The fullest expression of one's fundamental leading may be to do what one does best.

* Quotations from *The Journal of George Fox*, John L. Nickalls, ed. (Cambridge, 1950) pages 3, 9, and 263 respectively.

This is the first ⅓ of a pamphlet of the same title published ©1985 by Pendle Hill, Wallingford, PA 19086 pamphlet #264.

Reprinted in 1986 by
Wider Quaker Fellowship, a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation (Section of the Americas)
1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102 USA