

SOUTHEASTERN YEARLY MEETING OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

Annual Michener Lecture **2003**

Being Truthful



Heather C. Moir

FWCC Special Edition

1/19/2003

*The Thirty-third Michener Quaker Lecture in Florida
Arranged by the Dwight & Ardis Michener Memorial Fund*

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This pamphlet is a **Wider Quaker Fellowship**, Friends World Committee for Consultation, 2004 selection for worldwide distribution.

The Michener Lecture, ISSN 1534-5211, is published annually by
SOUTHEASTERN YEARLY MEETING PUBLICATIONS, under the auspices of
SOUTHEASTERN YEARLY MEETING OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS, a nonprofit
corporation founded in 1963. Address:

SEYM, P.O. Box 510795, Melbourne Beach, FL 32951-0795, USA
www.seym.org, publications@seym.org; 321.724.1162

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Printed in the United States of America on recycled paper.

Second Printing 2004, 3200 copies.

Cover and content layout by Lyn Cope-Robinson, SEYM Administrative Secretary.

Printed by Pioneer Printers, A Coastal Lithographer Company.

Content edited by the author; extemporaneous comments transcribed by David Robinson.

The text is Baskerville typeface designed by British printer John Baskerville of Birmingham in 1752. It was most notably used for the Bible, Aesop's Fables, and for works by Voltaire. The ITC contemporary font bearing his Baskerville's name was designed by George Jones in 1930. The decorative title font is Briosio™Pro designed by Robert Slimbach in Adobe's OpenType® format.

Subscriptions: Individual copies available through Quaker bookstores, or directly
from SEYM. Subscriptions available for \$6.00/year (includes shipping).

Postmaster: Please send address change to SEYM, P.O. Box 510795, Melbourne
Beach, FL 32951-0795, USA.

Requests for permission to quote or to translate should be addressed to Southeastern
Yearly Meeting Publications, P.O. Box 510795, Melbourne Beach, FL 32951-0795,
USA; e-mail: publications@seym.org

ISSN 1534-5211
Mp2003

Preface

Michener Lecture 1/19/2003

Thank you all very much indeed for inviting me here today to give the Michener Lecture. I have sat in this room and heard many eminent Friends speak on occasions such as this and I find it a bit daunting to be in their company. Particularly I remember Kenneth Boulding and Lawrence Apsey, and was deeply inspired by their messages. I can hardly hope to have the same impact upon you. Never-the-less I am grateful that you gave me the opportunity to think deeply about this matter, and the challenge has had its impact on me!

True leadings to speak in worship should be spontaneous, but when I have had to plan in advance I have found it wiser to commit my thoughts to paper. I would love to have the confidence that I could do this talk under the guidance of the spirit, without having to read it. However, in thinking about it so long I felt the need to put it into some order, and my notes became a script. I will read it unless the spirit takes over and compels me to do otherwise.

Being Truthful

Early Friends as exemplified by George Fox, were profoundly disturbed by the hypocrisy they saw masquerading as Christianity. They experienced the living presence of Jesus Christ. They read his words and the story of his life in the Bible. They knew within themselves that this was a message and an example to be taken seriously and followed wherever they might be led. They understood this to be the Truth, and Truth (they often capitalized it) was not to be bent and managed or dictated by others. It was to be an inward leading, and a light to follow, requiring the utmost diligence and submission. The reward would be the joy of assurance and the support of God's presence. They knew that Truth had to be both spoken and **lived**.

Wilmer Cooper, Elfrida Vipont Foulds, and other Quaker writers have found that explaining Quakerism could either be a lengthy and scholarly exercise, or it could be encapsulated in the word "integrity". Another writer I have long admired, Edward Grubb wrote "sincerity is the accord of outward act with inward motive". Integrity and sincerity are the antithesis of the hypocrisy against which both Jesus of Nazareth and George Fox had their harshest condemnation. I've been

thinking about truthfulness for a long long time, and I thought it would be easy to talk about, but in our present day it's not so simple. I chose today's title, "**BEING TRUTHFUL**" because I am convinced that it is not just a matter of what we say but of how we live. Our lives must speak of what we are. Our religion must not be only what we say we believe, but how it directs and grounds our actions. To be believable, we must both believe and be committed to our beliefs, and they need to be grounded in truth. (Do you remember the old saw about "how can I hear what you say when what you are is thundering in my ears?").

Digression #1:

Truth then is a Quaker testimony. A lot of people ask me about the relative importance of Quaker testimonies; what comes first, second, third, and so on. And interestingly a friend of mine who doing research on the Quaker testimonies tells me that there is no sequencing to them at all. They appeared spontaneously out of a commitment to truth, and the truth was the truth of the Bible, particularly the New Testament. I was interested in that because many people know us perhaps best for our Peace testimony, but that is also grounded in the same truths.

Digression #2:

Recently I heard an author being interviewed who had recently completed a biography of Francis of Assisi. I don't remember his name, but I think the title was *Francis of Assisi*,

the Reluctant Saint. And what transpired in that was that Francis was really trying to ground his life in the life of Jesus Christ, and by many accounts, the person who has come closest to that in all history. I did not realize that he was a contemporary of the Crusades. He was appalled that war was being waged in the name of religion. He went off to see the Muslim counterpart, someone in leadership in the world of Islam. Both men found that the other was totally sincere, totally grounded in faith, a religious person who could not feel that war had anything to do with their religious faith. Both men tried to influence the powers of their day, and had a profound sense of failure. I had not known that about Francis, but I think that I will try to read that biography.

(Back to script)

My father used to say to me **“be as good as people think you are.”** When I was young this made no sense to me whatever, who on earth was going to think well of me anyway? Later on I learned that people **do** think well of Quakers, and Dad’s words became more of a challenge. Why do they think well of Quakers? That has a long history in commerce, science, education, and daily living, but it is founded on the honesty expected of Quakers, and the trust folk had in their word being solid and reliable, (no matter how crack-pot people thought them to be in their beliefs!) How many of us today deserve that recognition?

In 1957, when I was expecting my first child, I read an amusing book by H. Allen Smith titled, *“The Age of the Tail”*.

He postulated that as of that year children began to be born with tails. At first the doctors discreetly removed them, then realized it was wide-spread, and sent out enquiries to know whether this was happening everywhere. Acceptance came and life began to change. I was particularly struck by one passage and when I went back to read it again many years later, I discovered that what so deeply impressed me was but a tiny piece of his whole description of tail fashions and tail etiquette. It was that lying became impossible with a tail, because its droop instantly gave one away! Thus diplomacy, politics, public discussion, commerce, and advertising etc. took on a whole new look. Peace prevailed because the diplomats and generals could not lie! **Think about it: what a changed world this would be if lying were impossible.** Our ability to lie and its prevalence all around us has led us into wars, hatred, violence, domination, and most of the evils we see in our world. Oh yes, and it has brought us many of our great dramas and works of literature!

Sisela Bok, (wife of former Harvard President, Derek Bok) wrote an interesting book entitled "*Lying*". One of her conclusions was that lying is so prevalent that it devalues everything we say. In February 2002, the Pentagon was in a tizzy over reports that it would use disinformation to confuse enemies, which it probably does anyway. However the specter of being doubted in everything they put forward necessitated the dissolution of that whole department. When court witnesses are caught in one lie, their whole testimony is held to be unreliable. Advertising hyperbole certainly turns me

off, and I suspect it does for many others too. There is much “hype” in the News as well, which often gets the adrenalin flowing only to have to be toned down later. For instance “we have a brand new break-through in the treatment of cancer. More after this station-break.” Anticipation works up, and then comes an announcement of minimal significance, and the listener is once again left feeling a bit deflated. The same scenario can apply to national or international news items. “We have a breaking story...” but it is being rushed out before verification, and turns out to be a “man in the street” opinion, or a reaction to a previous item, not something new at all. It is as if the Media must portray everything as a stunning scoop or we will lose interest. I feel it is the scoop-mentality which lessens my interest! “Scoop” and “Hype” are not reliable Truth.

Friends long ago discouraged membership in secret societies. This is a testimony we don’t hear much about these days, but the centrality of “integrity” meant also refraining from having secrets, especially from family members, especially the deliberate secrets involved in secret society rituals where the secrecy is intended to accentuate the difference between insiders and outsiders.

Digression #3.

A very interesting speaker that I heard some years ago when our community had faced a number of teenage suicides, and their school counselor came to speak to us, and a phrase she used sticks with me: “Any community that

tolerates a culture of insiders and outsiders is a community at risk.”

(Back to script)

There's another kind of secrecy which has severely exercised many Friends. Friends were divided over being part of the “Underground Railroad”. This was partly over acting in civil disobedience, but it was also partly because of adherence to honesty. Fortunately the bounty hunters were frequently not very smart, and could be deflected from their pursuit of a fugitive slave by a clever or non-committal answer. However, protecting children from having to answer dishonestly about visitors in their home was quite another matter. My aunt and uncle (Corder and Gwen Catchpool) lived in Berlin during the rise of Hitler and of Nazi power, trying to keep a mediating Quaker presence in Germany. Their four children went to school in Berlin, and were evidently questioned about Jews in their home. I don't know details, but the older girls were sent back to England to school, and eventually the younger girl and boy as well. How do you bring up children to be truthful when it might put others in peril? Gordon Browne told me that at the Friends World Conference in 1967 at Greensboro, NC, some French Friends told him of how they had sheltered Jewish children during the years of occupation. He asked whether they had been questioned and what had they answered, and they told him “of course, and we denied knowing anything about it”. Gordon asked “what about the Quaker commitment to truth”, and their

response was that under that kind of oppression and with such evident brutal consequences they “could not afford the luxury of a clear conscience”. My sympathies are with them but it is hard to be entirely comfortable with that response, and I don’t know how I would have dealt with it. Many times pacifists get asked “what would you do if a loved one were being brutally attacked?” There is no good answer to this, except to pray constantly that when a time of testing comes, one would be enabled to do the right thing and live according to one’s most deeply held beliefs. The same must apply when others are in one’s safe keeping.

The Quaker testimony against Oath taking, is derived both from a protest about the content of the Oaths required of them, and the principle of taking oaths at all. More Quakers were jailed and their property distrained as a result of their refusal to take oaths than for anything else. The reason was their claim that they were committed to truth and taking an oath could not make something truer without implying that the rest of what they said was less than truthful. There cannot be a double standard of truth. Quakers are generally allowed to affirm but this is also an implication that without it one might be lying. This nowadays is often administered in one quick form “Do you swear or affirm that...”. When I became a US citizen in 1961, the oath of citizenship was a real difficulty for me. I readily got exemption on religious grounds from the clauses relating to national defense and military service. But I was brought up short by the realization that to refuse an oath altogether

I was claiming a standard of truth telling that I wasn't sure I could live up to. Did it mean that I never exaggerate? or belittle? or over-emphasise? dismiss? make fun of? fantasize? . Suddenly this whole business of committing oneself to truth took on immense and daunting proportions. But I think that is what my Quaker forebears were advocating.

Earlier, as a teen-ager at Westtown during the war, I had to register as an alien. I had forgotten but when I came back to teach there, one of the teachers remembered taking me to Philadelphia to register, and apparently I had balked at "swearing" and someone had to go off and look up the law about affirming. It took a long time and the teacher wanted me to hurry it up, and then thought "no, she is a Quaker, she should do what she feels is right" and eventually it worked out. I don't think I even thought about the implications, but I knew what Quakers do. Now I see that as sticking to a piece of Quaker dogma rather than to the spirit on which it is based. We need to be careful not to be trapped by custom and usage rather than the truth behind it.

The second piece of the court-room oath is that one will "tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." Most of us don't know the whole truth, we can only tell what we know, so again the substance of the oath is unacceptable. Even after accepting the oath many are not really allowed to tell what they know except as filtered through the lawyers questions. Defendants are often required to plead "not-guilty" because punishment following a guilty plea is so

harsh. Is this doing those who are guilty a service? Must they then continue to maintain their innocence? And what does this do to their hope for forgiveness and rehabilitation? I find these troubling questions. I **hope** that court-rooms are places dedicated to truth, and discovering what really happened, but since my experience is limited, and affected by what I have seen on TV, I am not sure that the pursuit of truth in the justice system is always as pure as it should be!

What about truths that may hurt or give offence? First and foremost we must be loving. Then in the framework of love and support, the truth can be shared. But often this comes in the form of being asked for an opinion. It is important to recognize this and refrain from coming across too emphatically. One of the classic examples is being asked to comment on someone's personal appearance. I was brought up to avoid personal remarks, but many don't regard compliments as personal remarks. This is a pity because some take a lack of compliments as criticism, and start looking for reassurance. I remember when I was teaching at Westtown, a young student who came in tears because no-one had complimented her on her attire, and she had taken great pains to wear the smartest things, regardless of fit and appropriateness. What she really needed was assurance about herself that had nothing to do with her dress. A loving hug was going to be much more comforting than anything said about her appearance, as well as some support over other things affecting the way she viewed herself and her relationships. I would prefer **not** to comment on personal

appearance, and save compliments for work well done, good attitudes, kindness and helpful considerateness. If I do make an appreciative comment about someone's appearance, I try to remember to say "please forgive a personal remark, but....".

In this age of "Celebrity Worship", we need to remind ourselves and our young, that celebrity is not a goal and is often very fleeting. Too many so-called celebrities either can't or won't distinguish between real achievement and blatant self-promotion. Happiness comes from working hard at some task, and cheerfully hoping that it makes a difference in the lives of others, either by example or by a measure of improvement in their condition. Dependence on adulation or praise is a risky course.

There has been much discussion lately about Quaker core beliefs and what such a diverse group has in common. I suggest it is that we are less concerned with defining what we believe, after all to define is necessarily to limit, but that our beliefs are acted out in what we do. One recent writer to the Friend says we are overly concerned with determining God's will, rather than our **wont**, wont here meaning our habit, which should be based on Jesus' example.

The dedication of early Friends to truth impresses me deeply. My life doesn't begin to measure up to the faithfulness of a Mary Dyer, even to her death on Boston Common in 1660 or of a Mary Fisher carrying her message to the Sultan of Turkey in 1656. Despite many obstacles, she

finally reached the Sultan's military camp and was brought to his presence. There she stood in silence waiting for the words to be given, and then spoke up about the loving presence of God, and the message of Jesus Christ. When she had finished the Sultan asked her "what think you of our prophet Mohammed?" and she answered "Him I know not, but Christ, the true prophet, the son of God, who is the Light of the World, and enlighteneth everyone coming into the world, Him I know. If what Mohammed teaches is true and comes to pass you will know that the Lord hath sent him". (I paraphrase of course) Mary Fisher was respected for sticking to her truth while respecting that of others. I find that an inspiring example.

John's gospel records what I grew up calling "the seven great I am's". Jesus likened himself to the seven (or nine) answers to the deepest human needs. "I am the Bread of Life", I am the "Light of the world", "the Gate for the sheep (Door in some translations)", "the Good Shepherd", "the Resurrection and the Life" "the Way the Truth and the Life" and finally "I am the True Vine". The Way, the Truth and the Life appear to be inseparable. That may be symbolic, and as Quakers we are looking not for symbolism but the reality behind the symbols. I'm confident this is the reality, the Way **is** Truth and Life, or the Truth **is** the Way and the Life, or the Life **is** the Way and the Truth. Each depends on the quest for the other two. The Way **is** Living Truthfully. John's gospel also has Jesus saying, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the Truth

and the truth will make you free". After his listeners protest they were not in bondage, Jesus makes clear that living in ignorance or sin or the absence of truth is bondage. Truth is the Way forward and the breath of new Life.

How do we persist in trying to live truthfully despite our known shortcomings? One of the blessings of our Christian/Quaker ethic is that there is always another chance to do better. What we aspire to may seem impossible, but every time we stumble we can be lifted up for another try, and are given the strength and equipment to do what God asks of us. I'm sure that is the meaning of Jesus' words, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light", (an "easy yoke" is one that fits and does not chafe or blister. It is the great enabler, to undertake seemingly impossible tasks.) There are other words from which I take comfort. Douglas Steere said, "If you feel dried up and unfruitful, remember dried fruit can be as nourishing as fresh, and an acceptable offering to God". James' epistle (3:17) says, "But the wisdom of God is first pure and then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy, and the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace." Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, (13:1-4) "If I could speak in any language and with all eloquence, but had no love, I would be only a noisy beeper¹ or a clanging bell. If I had all the gifts of prophesy and understood all mysteries, If I had the faith even to move mountains but had no love,

¹ "Did Paul really say 'beeper'? Of course not, but gongs were what was used to summon people... like a beeper today. So I liked the words which I read somewhere, possibly in *Friends Journal*."

I would be nothing. If I give away all my goods to feed the poor and though I burn myself out with good works, if I have no love it is all worthless and gets me nowhere.”

The hypocrisy that so disturbed Jesus and later George Fox and his followers, is not just the failure to practise what we preach, but the failure even to try. They saw Jesus’ message being preached and then totally ignored as if it had no relevance to daily living, and that led them to seek it for themselves. They found God to be accessible, comforting, attentive, understandable, and enabling. They found the elevation of the Christian ethic to a distant unachievable level attainable only by a saintly few, to be a denial of Truth. So having begun with some words from my father, I am going to conclude with a saying of my mother’s. She often said **“Hard as I may try, my practice may not always match my precepts, but I will not water down my precepts to match my practice”**.

Note, If I have used anyone else’s words without attributing them I apologise. I have absorbed many thoughts from reading the writings of others, and have not been accustomed to recording all that influenced me along my way. Let me just say I am grateful to all who have enriched my thinking and have thus contributed to the above essay.



About the Author



Southeastern Yearly Meeting was blessed to have Heather Moir as clerk from 1981-1984. She encouraged Quaker process with her gentle role modeling and was an initial contributor to its first *Faith and Practice*. So with a great deal of anticipation, SEYM gathered to hear and participate in her Michener Lecture and Workshops held in the Orlando Meetinghouse, 1/19/2003.

Heather Moir grew up in a family that lived the traditional Quaker testimonies. She was the fourth of five children of Jack and Ruth Catchpool who began their married life as associate wardens of Toynbee Hall a settlement house in the east end of London modelled on Jane Addams Hull House in Chicago. Her mother qualified as a physician and surgeon during World War I. Heather's childhood home in Welwyn Garden City, England, was always full of visitors, often from abroad, with overlapping Quaker and youth travel concerns—her father was the founder of the Youth Hostel Association in Great Britain, and her parents headed adult education programs in this planned "greenbelt town".

Heather spent much of World War II in Northfield MA, with her mother and two siblings, her younger sister was born there on Christmas Day 1940. From 1943-1944 Heather attended Westtown Friends School in PA. Returning to England in 1944 she attended the Mount Friends School in York, and then went on to receive a Bachelor's degree in Botany and Diploma in Education from London University. As a schoolteacher, she was a delegate to the Friends World Conference in Oxford in 1952. She returned to Westtown as a teacher in 1956, where she met science teacher John Moir. They were married in the Friends Meeting House in Welwyn Garden City in 1957, and moved to Florida for John's continuing marine biology studies. Heather was active in Miami Friends Meeting and its Peace Center as well as the League of Women Voters, Cuban refugee relief, PTA and Cub Scouting with their four sons. Heather became clerk of Miami Meeting in 1978, the same year as the terrible loss of their oldest son John, at 20 years of age.

Heather became a representative to the Friends World Committee for Consultation, attending her first annual meeting of FWCC in Wilmington, Ohio in 1978, and the Triennial at Gwatt in Switzerland in 1979. She helped organize the first Regional FWCC conference at Greensboro NC, in 1980. She served on the executive committee of FWCC, Section of the Americas, from 1981-1984. From 1984-1989 she served as Clerk of the FWCC, Section of the Americas, and in 1991 became Clerk of FWCC, preparing for and presiding at Triennial gatherings at Ghost Ranch NM in 1994, and at West Hill College, Birmingham, England in 1997.

Since 1989 John and Heather have lived year-round at Chocorua NH, in the old farmhouse left them by John's aunt, where the family had long spent summers and Christmas Holidays. Heather is now active in North Sandwich Friends Meeting in NH, serving as clerk from 1989-1992, 1995-1998 and 2001-2004. She has also served on the personnel committee of New England Yearly Meeting, the Permanent Board and on the NEYM FWCC Committees. In addition to her travel to FWCC meetings, Heather attended the opening of the Quaker Center in Soweto, South Africa in 1987, and the Middle East Yearly Meeting at Brummana in Lebanon, and the FWCC European and Middle East Section Meeting in Prague in 1994. In 1996 she went to Cuba with a group of NEYM Friends, and in 1991 she attended the Friends World Conference in Holland. Heather's long-time concern for Small Meetings of Friends has led her to develop two workshops on this subject, and she is still trying to assemble a small, but encouraging booklet for Friends in Small Meetings.

Heather is also active locally on the boards of the Tamworth Community Nurse Association, and the Tamworth Foundation, and involved in various community services. Joining John in his keen interest in antique autos, she is a member of the Mount Washington Valley Old Car Club. They are proud grandparents of three grandsons, two in California and one in Florida!

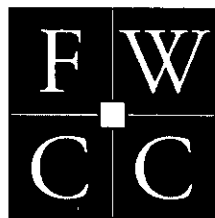


About the Wider Quaker Fellowship

The Wider Quaker Fellowship program of Friends World Committee for Consultation 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.

The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows number approximately 3,000, in nearly 100 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and even active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. The Fellowship does not charge a subscription fee, but depends on donations from its readers and other supporters to cover costs.

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for the
WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP
a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation,
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Friends World Committee
for Consultation

SECTION OF THE AMERICAS

Comité Mundial de Consulta
de los Amigos

SECCIÓN DE LAS AMÉRICAS

ISSN 1534-5211
Mp2003

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www.seym.org