

To Make Us Whole and Free

A Memorial Tribute

Selections from *Transcending Tradition:
Excerpts from the Writings and Talks of*

Marjorie Sykes

Discipline

When you have a focus, when you have any kind of clear purpose, you must, if you are serious about it, select those practices which will lead to the purpose being fulfilled. The real meaning of the word “discipline” is to select appropriate methods to reach a chosen goal. . . .

Discipline can be a very positive and joyful thing. This is one of the many secrets of Mahatma Gandhi. He really chose for himself a disciplined life. He just quietly made up his mind, “If I am to do this job on which I’m focussed, then I must prepare my body in vigour, my mind in vigour, my spirit in serenity.” And all that is popularly called his asceticism (the wrong word); his personal discipline (the positive word) was directed to that focus. And he was one of the happiest men, one of the greatest enjoyers of life that I have ever known. He was one of those who carried what most of us would feel enormous burdens of responsibility with a lightness and serenity and in many ways a real playfulness which sprang from a strong sense that this was not his burden, but was in line with the purposes of God.

*—From a talk at a Simple Living Conference, March 2, 1975,
Claremont Meetinghouse, Claremont, California, USA*

So often in home and school alike, children suffer from our misunderstanding both of the meaning of discipline and of the meaning of freedom. How often do we remember that “discipline” and “disciple” are closely related words? Any genuine discipleship is a freely chosen obedience; any genuine discipline is a “bondage” freely accepted, for the sake of the mastery to which it leads. When we talk about the “good discipline” of a school, do we really mean that the children are learning the freedom of mastery through obedience

to the natural laws of their materials? Or do we mean that they are learning to submit to an imposed order which is supposed somehow to be good in itself? Does “disciplining” a student mean teaching him the inherent laws of learning, or punishing him for breaking the arbitrary laws of authority? When we speak of “giving the child his freedom,” do we mean helping him to attain the hard-won freedom of mastery, or leaving him to an easygoing license which can only lead to enslavement and disaster? These questions go to the very root of a fully human education. . . . Along with the joy in achievement, there is the equally distinctive human joy in contemplation, the joy in beauty, the love of things as they are and people as they are, for their own sake.

—*From Education in Search of a Philosophy, 1976*

The word “discipline” is essentially tied up with its root meaning—learning: the recognized best method of setting to work to learn a subject, the disciplines of science, of artistic achievement, of learning to master a musical instrument and so on. And a *disciple* is one who sets him or herself to *learn* from the way of life of another. And it is therefore true that discipline and freedom go together; by accepting the discipline we are made free in that area of life to which the discipline relates.

—*From a letter, June 13, 1994*

There is a very profound teaching in India that in order to give yourself to God or to man, you must possess yourself, you must know yourself, you must rule yourself.

—*From “Quaker Fundamentals—an Asian Point of View,” 1975*

Sharing Our Faith

The living core of a religion is not to be sought in its outward observances, ceremonial, liturgy or festival (though it may be sought *through* them), nor yet in any intellectual world view which may emerge from its sacred writings; it is to be sought in the way it leads men, in the secret places of the heart, into the Presence of God. . . .

All *living* religion begins with this awed recognition of a Mystery and Power which is great beyond all comprehension, and yet is "nearer than breathing and closer than hands and feet." All *living* religion goes on from this to a twofold task: the human being is impelled to purify himself, to cleanse heart and mind and will, so that he may enter more and more fully into communion with that Reality and so fulfil the true purpose of his own life; at the same time he is impelled to share with other men his experience of the Mystery, and in so doing to use the words and symbols of his own age and country. . . .

It is through personal, individual friendship, and perhaps through that alone that we can really enter in any way into the inwardness of other men's experience of God. . . .

The quality of a man's living can only be truly known by sharing as a friend may, in the small concerns of every day. A friend does not judge his friend; he rejoices in whatever is "true, honest, just, pure, lovely and of good report"; he bears the rest as his own burden. An Indian poet's picture of the "Judgment" of God jolted at least one Christian reader into a fresh look at the meaning of the Cross:

O Love, Thy judgment-chamber lies
Within the wordless pain of love with sleepless eyes;
in heart's blood shed by friends,
In love's awaiting through the night that never ends.

(Rabindranath Tagore, Balaka)

...The relationship of natural and spontaneous friendship offers some hope of overcoming these barriers; by days, months, years of intimacy we learn each other's religious language, we get some glimmering of the emotional content of words and symbols; we come to understand the standards and disciplines of personal conduct and the faith that inspires them; we take off the masks of convention and reveal ourselves as we are. . . .

The majestic worship of the Hebrew Psalms takes on a new dimension when one hears the great hymns of the Quran Sharif on the lips of a sincere and sensitive worshipper. Again and again, listening to the singer, I have thought of what C. F. Andrews recorded long ago of his talks with his Muslim friends. "You will never understand it," they would tell him, "this power and warmth of religion among us, till you can feel in your own heart the poetry and music of the Quran Sharif. There was never music in the world before like that." . . .

I honour the Muslim who kneels and bows in prayer when the time comes, in the crowded railway carriage or by the dusty bus stop. I thank God for the directness and simplicity with which they speak of Him who is a part of their lives. I know that my own reticence is more often due to false shame than to true reverence, and that in this matter my friends in India are closer to the secret of Jesus and to the simplicity and naturalness with which he spoke of the Father. And the Quaker who fears "empty forms" may nevertheless learn much from the disciplines of prayer and fasting which are very far from being empty forms in the East. . . .

The central purpose of all religion, of all worship, is salvation; it is to make men *whole* and *free* by turning them away from the self-centredness of the "natural man" and enabling them to find their True Centre. . . .

We all know the fruits of the Spirit, and recognise the beauty of holiness, in our own ancestral tree. . . . [T]he flowers of unselfish living may be found growing in other men's gardens and rich fruits of the Spirit may be tasted from other men's trees. They spring from the same Holy Spirit of Truth, the same seed of God, whose power moves us through Christ. . . .

The power of Jesus Christ over the lives of men is the power of a wholly integrated, wholly God-Centred personality; it is the power of the Seed of God grown to maturity in the soil of an incarnate human life.

It seems to some of us to run counter to the whole tenor of Jesus' life and teaching to suppose that when he said, "No man cometh unto the Father but by me," He meant that there is no other way to know God and the power of His Spirit except by conscious discipleship of Jesus Himself. We have not so learned Christ. We interpret those words to mean that whenever any man comes to the Father (comes to know God as a trustworthy, loveable Friend), he is led by the same Spirit that was in Jesus, to whom it was as food and drink to do the Father's will. . . .

It is true that Jesus confronts men with the need to choose. But the choice is not between Hinduism and Christianity, or between any other rival systems of thought; the choice is between self-seeking and self-giving, between saving one's life to lose it and losing it to save it "unto Life Eternal." . . .

Before so great a mystery, we who are friends share, with no reserve and no pretence, the things which are our comfort and our strength. We rejoice if anything we have can be of use

to a friend; we take with eager gratitude his treasure which speaks to our condition. We do not desire that all should take the name of Quaker or the outward name of Christ. We do desire that all should be guided by "that Spirit which is pure and holy," and that God will speak to them in whatever language, and through whatever symbol, can best bring them to the True Centre of their lives.

—*"Friends and World Religions" Study Booklet: Sharing Our Faith, Friends World Committee for Consultation, 1959*

Growing into Saints

It is the fundamental business of *every* religious association to help its members to *grow*, to grow in their response to God, to *grow into saints*. What is a saint?

Sainthood is not *negative*, it is not a pale sort of ineffective harmlessness. True holiness, as it is recognised in all religious traditions, is a shining, glowing, positive thing, a thing of intense energy, of selfless beauty. The saint dwells in the life and power of God.

Men and women grow into saints through the insights and disciplines of their own religion, but there comes a time when the tradition that has guided them is transcended, and they know, as we on the lower levels do not know, the "glorious liberty of the children of God." The Saints belong to the world; they are the exclusive possession of no tradition. "The saint," says the Christian scholar, C. C. Martindale, in a striking phrase, "*has been* a Christian." One could say, equally truly, "the saint *has been* a Muslim, *has been* a Hindu, *has been* a Buddhist." He has reached, by one of these pathways, the goal of life. The path is not the goal.

Those of us who are still on the journey need the paths. The Society of Friends is one path, for some of us it is our path. But the goal is the life of the saints in God, a life not of passive "sinlessness," but of overflowing compassion, of humble service, of inward power and peace. . . .

Is not the secret of fellowship between adherents of many faiths that each should be able to see the others as fellow travellers, by varying paths, to that same goal? What other permanent basis of inter-religious fellowship can there be?

—From the Friends Quarterly, Vol. 10, 1956

Judgment—A Quaker View

There is a Judgment, and a very real Judgment, which is part of our direct religious experience. We are judged when, in the presence of great physical, moral or spiritual beauty, we fail to respond, and "choose darkness rather than light." We judge ourselves whenever, in the presence of beauty, truth, love or goodness, we realize the ugliness, falsity, selfishness and impurity of our own lives. As the Quaker "Advices" put it, "It is His light that shows us our darkness and leads us to true repentance." These are present judgments, part of our daily lives. We may perhaps hope that beyond death, on some other plane of experience, the essential "we" may see more clearly, judge ourselves more truly, repent more fully. But just as only that truth which we ourselves *see* to be true is a living truth for us, creative and operative in our lives, so only the judgment which *we* feel to be just has power to turn us into new paths. Jesus did not "judge" Zacchaeus; he judged himself—and turned.

—From The Friendly Way, July 1968

Marjorie Sykes (1905-1995) was born in Yorkshire, England. The daughter of the headmaster at the local school, she graduated from Cambridge with an English degree. In 1928, she went to India to teach at a Madras girls' school, of which she later became the principal. It was at that school that her knowledge and love of the Indian way of life deepened, and also that she came in contact with, and then joined, the Society of Friends.

Starting in 1939, she became involved in the "innovative educational and social experiment" of Santiniketan, in Bengal, at the invitation of its founder Rabindranath Tagore. She would later translate many of Tagore's works into English. In these years, she taught at the Women's Christian College in Madras, setting up a nursery school for children of working mothers in her home in the slum area. It was also at this time that she adopted her daughter Rani, an orphan from Kotagiri in the Nilgiri Hills.

Marjorie Sykes took active part in Gandhi's non-violent Indian independence movement, and after independence worked at his ashram, training teachers in Gandhian social reform. She was also asked to convene the "Peace Army"

Committee to train India's nonviolent "peace soldiers"—an alternative to police and military. In 1964, she carried these experiences to the United States and Canada, where she served as consultant to the civil rights movement.

On her return to India, she continued her work for nonviolence. She also played an active role among Friends, both in India and abroad.

A writer as well as a teacher and peace worker, Marjorie authored books, articles, and letters, for many years serving as editor of the Indian-based Quaker journal The Friendly Way. On retiring to England, she continued to write.

Gopal Gandhi, director of the Nehru Centre in London, writes of her, "Marjorie Sykes was . . . a compass, recommending the way to a life of personal fulfilment in unselfishness and care for fellow humans. . . . There is a Sanskrit saying which describes the attributes of a person such as Marjorie: manasyekam vacasyekam karmanyekam mahatmyam ('Of single purpose in the mind, in words and in action is the truly great soul')."

Transcending Tradition, an overview of Marjorie's shorter writings, was compiled by Martha Dart. A member of Claremont Meeting, Martha first met Marjorie in India in 1967 "and has enjoyed her friendship ever since." She has written a biography of Marjorie, *Marjorie Sykes: Quaker Gandhian* (co-published by Woodbrooke College, Birmingham, and Sessions of York, England, 1993).

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