

REFLECTIONS FROM A SOLITARY MEETING FOR WORSHIP

May 3, 2020

Often I find it useful to print out a spiritual sentence or phrase and post it somewhere on the wall where I can easily, and causally, see it. That helps to remind me of the message it conveys, but I also find that letting my eyes roll over the words, letting them float around in my mind in a non-intellectual manner, enables me to see something new in them that I don't see when reading the words in their full text. That has been true for a verse of the 143rd Psalm that I posted on the wall last week.

While the ideas in the verse immediately appealed to me, the more I've looked at it the more I've wanted to reverse the order of the second and fourth phrase. Somehow, when I do that it has much more significance for me. But I worry that by imposing my own conception I may be missing something important in the way the author worded it. My version is this:

*Cause me to hear thy loving-kindness in the morning;
For I lift up my soul unto thee:
Cause me to know the way wherein I should walk;
For in thee do I trust. — KJV Psalm 143.8*

I'll have to confess I don't think much about my soul; the concept of a soul doesn't seem to be part of my spiritual beliefs. So when I come to that line the phrase that comes to me that seems to convey the same idea is "open my heart to thee." During this time of self-isolation the spiritual practice I've been trying to improve is that of meditation. I've tried it before, but I've never been able to sustain it—either for a long enough time in an individual sitting or over time. However, rather than trying to empty my mind of all thoughts as I've done before, I have taken a different approach. Using the words of the Psalm, I have been trying to hear God's loving-kindness by opening my heart to God and trying to feel God's presence—feel it within me and also feel that I am being held in its loving embrace.

God's loving-kindness is always present of course. The difficulty is getting rid of all the distractions in my mind that prevent me from actually feeling it, from allowing it to permeate my being and transform my life. But consciously trying to open my heart to that presence each morning has enabled me to meditate longer and with a more positive attitude about what I'm doing.

The fact that I trust that God leads me on the right path is why I feel more comfortable with that phrase being last. But the word that grabs my attention most is "way." "Way" can have several different meanings. It can mean path or route—which is how I take it in this context—or it can mean *how* to do something, a form of

behavior. I've spent a good deal of my life looking for a spiritual path to follow that will lead me into greater harmony of God. I've at least discovered that I don't want something as definitively defined as a paved sidewalk with clear directional signs. What I want is something more like a dirt path meandering through the woods with occasional side trails to lead me down paths I haven't explored before that open up new experiences and unexpected discoveries. Quakerism is as close as I've come to that, but even its loose structure is often a bit more than I want.

However, as I've been contemplating this verse, it is the second meaning of "way" that has intrigued me. Maybe it's not as important which path you walk, as the *way* (the manner) in which you walk it. After all, there is no real destination, just a journey to be lived, and, who knows—perhaps to walk that journey with love, trust, and an open heart is itself the path, the way, to God.

* * * * *

REFLECTIONS FROM A SOLITARY MEETING FOR WORSHIP

May 10, 2020

Each day around noon I venture outside and take a two to three mile walk. It provides a break in the routine of my day, and a break from the monotony of being inside for extended periods of time. I live adjacent to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway so my walk takes me along Pennsylvania Avenue for several blocks until I come to the place where the freight train line that runs along the edge of the Schuylkill River in Center City emerges from its tunnel. Remarkably enough there are freight trains still running. For a short distance along the railroad line there is an area so wild and overgrown that it seems like part of a forest. Tall trees are surrounded by small bushes; fallen trees lie where they fell, all sorts of white and yellow and blue flowers cover the ground in the shade and in the patches of the sunlight that falls through the trees.

There are two paths through this mini-forest and to take either would be to feel totally out of the city were it not for the drone of cars and motorcycles on Kelly Drive and the occasional hum of a freight train. The upper path is longer and more frequently used, so I usually take the lower, which is shorter but so enclosed by bushes on both sides that it truly feels like another world. I also like this path because it comes out onto a wide lawn of grass at the edge of which is a bench where I usually stop and rest briefly on my walk.

On this particular day, about a week ago, it was very windy. I like the wind. I like feeling the air that is always present but invisible to see or touch. And so I was quite content. As I approached the bench I noticed that the wind was blowing the petals of

the last of the blossoms off the cherry trees that mark the edge between the forest and the lawn. When I got closer I saw that the ground around the bench was covered with a remarkably even distribution of the white petals, almost like newly fallen snow. As I wandered back under the large cherry tree I saw that the entire area beneath it and an adjacent tree was totally covered with petals that seemed much more pink in the shade, but again looked like freshly fallen snow. It was extraordinarily beautiful and I think it would be accurate to say that “my heart did leap for joy.”

When I sat on the bench the wind continued to blow petals in my direction. They floated gently in the air then settled on the ground before me. It felt like I was sitting in a snow flurry without the cold. The windy day had kept other people away, and so I sat there alone, looking out at the beauty of the scene before me—the wide green lawn, the trees, the blue sky with white clouds floating by—feeling quite peaceful and serene. The wind blew some petals on to my pants and shirt, and I imagined that if I sat there long enough I might become as covered as the ground and merge so totally into this natural environment that I would be virtually invisible to passers by. It was a very pleasant thought.

Recently I’d been listening to Louis Armstrong sing the song, *What a Wonderful World* as an antidote for the world we’re living in right now. As I sat there I could not help but think of the song and some of its lyrics. “I see skies of blue, and clouds of white, the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night.” But as I thought of this song a wave of sadness suddenly washed over me. The world is such a wonderful place and we are so blessed to be able to be alive on earth, why is there so much hate? Why can’t we get along? Why does it take a crisis like the present one to bring out the goodness in people? Why can’t we be this way all the time?

Like many others I am wondering what we will learn from all this. We will go forward to something new and better, or back to the old normal? I know I can’t do much about what nations might learn or even what our country as a whole might learn. But Lao-tzu reminds me that it’s more important for me to take care of my own little corner of the world:

*I you want to awaken all of humanity,
Then awaken all of yourself;
If you want to eliminate the suffering in the world,
Then eliminate all that is dark and negative in yourself.
Truly the greatest gift you have to give
Is that of your own self-transformation.*

So the real question is what I am going to learn from this and how will it change my life. How am I going to go forward to something better rather than back to my old normal? One thing I know for sure, I miss the people I love. I will take them less for granted in the future, and express my love for them more frequently—and with abundant physical affection! As for the rest, I'm only beginning to get a sense of some answers, but at least I'm asking a good question.

* * * * *

REFLECTIONS FROM A SOLITARY MEETING FOR WORSHIP

May 24, 2020

Opposite the chair where I sit for my Sunday morning solitary meeting for worship are two bookcases filled with spiritual books. The one on the left consists almost entirely of books about Jesus, indicating the dominance of his teachings in my spiritual life. The one on the right contains an extremely diverse collection of books indicating my general interest in comparative religion and things spiritual. Each speaks to me in a different way. Today it is the books about Jesus that attract my attention. When I look at them I feel more confused than knowledgeable, and wonder how I would summarize his message based on all that I have read.

Jesus himself gives a very simple answer to that question. When asked by a lawyer (as the gospel of Luke calls the man) what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus mentions only two things: love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. For me, the word "love" is used in relation to so many different things it has lost its meaning. In the context of these statements, it doesn't really tell me much of practical usefulness, and so I search for other words that convey the same spirit, but provide what I think is a clearer sense of what Jesus means or at least what his statement means to me.

It's difficult for me to figure out how to apply the human concepts of love to my idea of God. For me God is something like an energy field that permeates all creation and encompasses all creation as well. It is an energy field with a special kind of intelligence that gives order to the universe and also influences our individual lives. While it may sound strange to say this, I've always found the concept of The Force in the *Star Wars* movies to be a good approximation.

When I think of an alternative word for love in this context, the one that comes immediately to mind is "trust." To trust first of all that God exists, and then to trust that God is a constant presence in my life that brings only good. To me that is the "leap of faith" and once I accept that, all else follows as a natural consequence.

To trust in God's presence and goodness is to trust that all the events and experiences of my life are purposeful and meaningful, and intended to help me along my spiritual journey. It means, as I said in another reflection, to trust that I am being led, to be willing to float in the stream of my life and confidently accept where the current takes me. It also means to trust that the people who come into my life are messengers sent from God to also help me along my spiritual way. No matter what they bring or ask, whether easy or hard, or whether they seem friendly or not, all are God's messengers and to be treated with equal respect and loving-kindness.

To trust in God's presence and goodness is simply to trust life itself.

It is easier for me to understand Jesus' use of the word love with respect to my neighbor, because I have previously written about his concept of love in my pamphlet, *On Love*. The word that seems to fit his teachings best is "serve." This is well illustrated in the gospel of John when he says, "love one another as I have loved you" and then later adds, "I have given you an example." The example is the washing of feet; that is, serving the needs of others. I can modify the word serve in many ways that incorporates the qualities of love—serve with compassion, serve with humility, serve without expecting anything in return, serve anyone in need, serve without worrying about the results or the consequences for yourself. In fact, all of these qualities are aspects of love mentioned somewhere in his teachings.

In Wagner's opera, *Parsifal*, the character Kundry has a large role in the second act. She is under the spell of an evil master who has charged her to seduce Parsifal so that he will lose the purity he must have to complete his task. She tries very hard and sings a lot! By rejecting her advances Parsifal essentially frees her from the spell. In the final act, she speaks only one word: Serve. It is the essence of the opera, and, I believe, an essential characteristic of Jesus' life, condensed to a single word.

Of all the thousands of words I've read on the thousands of pages in those couple of hundred books, these two—trust and serve—stand out for me as the ones that best exemplify what it means to lead a spiritual life. They are easy to say, but very hard to put into practice. However, many people have been able to do so, which challenges me to continue to strive to do the same.

* * * * *

REFLECTIONS FROM A SOLITARY MEETING FOR WORSHIP

June 1, 2020

(When I sat down for my solitary meeting for worship on Sunday, my mind and heart were on the marches and protests that had occurred in Philadelphia on

Saturday. It seemed inappropriate to think of anything else, but that's not where I was led.)

Last week during my solitary meeting for worship my eyes were drawn to the bookcase on the left opposite where I sit, so it is not surprising that this week my attention was drawn to the one on the right. In contrast to the first, which contains books about only one spiritual tradition, the bookcase on the right contains books about so many different spiritual paths it is almost impossible for me to describe what's there. Everything from Buddhism, Islam and Quakers, to *A Course in Miracles*, Gurdjieff, Edgar Cayce, Native American wisdom, Swedenborg—well, you name it and I've probably got at least one book about it.

There is no doubt I've gained a lot from reading all of them; they have definitely enriched my spiritual knowledge and reinforced many of the ideas I've obtained from the books in the other bookcase. At the same time, they've created a lot of confusion in my mind and for my spiritual journey. When I became a Quaker I spent about the first ten years trying to learn about the history, spiritual beliefs and practices of Quakers. That was an inspiring experience and made me feel I'd made the right decision in becoming a member. However, in recent years I have been drawn to the wide variety of other ideas represented by my second bookcase. I liken my approach to trying to get to the top of a high hill or small mountain. I started out on one path and got fairly far along. But then I decided to explore another path. I went a short way along it, enough to get a feel for it, then tried another and another and another. Now I'm still only part way up the mountain and unsure which path to take and feeling confused and somewhat lost. It feels as if I'm afraid to commit myself to one because I wonder if there might not be a better one around the corner or that by picking one I'll pick the *wrong* one. Too many paths, too many choices.

As I was staring at these books today I realized that many of the original founders of these spiritual traditions followed a similar path. Buddha sat under a tree in the forest for forty-nine years, or so the story goes. Jesus went into the desert for forty days; even Muhammad spent many nights week after week in his cave in the hills before anything happened. Native Americans talk about going into the woods on a vision quest. George Fox describes himself wandering alone in the fields at night for what seems like years before he had a transforming opening. Each of them went off alone into a natural environment away from the world of other people. Why did they do this and what did they do while they were there?

Neal Donald Walsch tells a lovely story that helps explain the "why." A father noticed his young son went off by himself into the woods every day. When he asked his son why he did that, the reply was "to be with God." But, the father said, God is

everywhere; God is no different in the woods than here. “Yes, I know that,” said the son; “But in the woods *I* am different.”

One of the copies I have of the Tao Te Ching translates a line as, “Let nature renew what men undo.” Clearly for the young son and for these others getting away from the man-made world was an important way to get in touch with the essence and wonder of creation and its creator. Anyone who has spent time in a natural setting is aware of the different quality of peace and calm that comes from that experience. That most certainly has been true for me. In such environments, I feel more open and more connected to the divine reality behind creation and I believe that’s how Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Fox and others felt as well. Did they expect to find God there more than any place else? No. As T.E. Lawrence put it, in that “solitude they heard more clearly the living word they brought with them.”

As to what they did while there I cannot say for certain. However, their teachings suggest that they turned inward to connect with that living word they brought with them. While they may not have used these words, they were, it seems to me, all doing what Fox advised early Friends to do: “Turn to the Inner Light and it will tell you all you need to know.”

For early Quakers the idea of turning to the Inner Light seems to have been both a primary belief and a primary practice. Indeed, it almost seems that it was the only thing early Friends believed in. They were certainly not concerned with codifying a set of rules, ideas or “testimonies” to follow. Direct experience of the Inner Light seems to have taken precedence even over the Bible. Yet turning to the Inner Light has not been a feature of my own spiritual practice, nor was it for two groups of Quakers in two different meetings I asked about this. Rather than turning to the Inner Light as a central practice, there seems to be a reliance on other people’s experiences that have been organized into a list of testimonies and a book of guidelines without having had the actual experiences ourselves. We know what these others said, but as Fox challenged us, “what canst thou say” of your own direct experience.

Much to my surprise, I have found that sitting silently alone these past few weeks has provided more spiritual inspiration (the source of these reflections) than I’ve found in several months of sitting in a meeting room filled with people. Has this been turning to the Inner Light? I’m not sure, but it seems like a practice worth continuing.

* * * * *

REFLECTIONS FROM A SOLITARY MEETING FOR WORSHIP

June 7, 2020

Today I decided to hold a meeting for worship outside on the roof deck of my apartment building. No one else was there so I was able to sit quietly, undisturbed. When I am seated my eyes are level with the top of the parapet wall that surrounds the deck. Facing west all I can see over the roof of the Art Museum is a thin line of the trees in Fairmount Park to the right and mix of parts of low buildings interspersed among more trees to my left. Above all that, stretching endlessly it seems, is the vast, open, cloudless blue sky. None of the tall buildings of Center City or West Philadelphia interrupt my view of infinite space.

My hour passed quickly, my mind coming back now and again to the protest march on the Parkway yesterday, and wondering what the future holds. Just as the buzzer on my phone was sounding the end of my meeting, a small blue and gray bird landed on the rail on top of the parapet. I rarely see birds up here on the 14th floor so it was a bit of surprise. Normally, when birds are chirping, singing or speaking, whichever is the right word, I think they have only one sound. But this bird had many, so many that it seemed it was speaking an entire sentence in bird language. Then I realized it must have been designated to close meeting for worship and was saying, "Good morning, John. Peace be with you today." With that, having delivered its message, it flew away.

The bird reminded me of my favorite Leonard Cohen song. It begins with the words, "The birds they sing at break of day / begin again I hear them say." I hear birds singing each morning when I wake up and the sound is a reminder that no matter how well or poorly I thought I did living my spiritual life yesterday, today is a new day, a new beginning, a new opportunity for me to do a little better and inch one step closer to the person God calls me to be.

Much as I like this line it is the one that follows that is the reason I like this song—*Anthem*— so much. "There is a crack in everything / that's how the Light gets in." I doubt if Cohen capitalized "light" when he wrote this song down, but I have no doubt that is what he meant—the Light of God's presence. What is distinctive about the phrase is that normally a crack is something that would be considered an imperfection, a defect, a reason for getting rid of the cup or plate or whatever had the crack in it. But Cohen makes it the symbol of something sublimely positive.

I have come to believe that at the moment of our conception, much like the Native American and oriental rug makers who deliberately put a flaw in everything to show that only God is perfect, God also puts in each of us something that we, from our human perspective, would call an imperfection or a difficulty to overcome. But like

the unique skills, talents, and interests God gives us to help us on our spiritual journey, this imperfection or difficulty is also a gift and all gifts from God are inherently good. In this case, the gift is intended to challenge each of us to love that aspect of ourself we might most like to be rid of, and through that learn to love unconditionally. It reminds me of a Tibetan Buddhist prayer that says, "Grant that I may be given appropriate difficulties and sufferings on this journey so that my heart may be truly awakened and my practice of universal compassion may be truly fulfilled."

For me, I felt the imperfection God had given me was being gay. For the first forty years of my life I was ashamed of this and worked hard to hide it from others. If a genie in a bottle had come along and offered me one wish, my wish would have been to be "normal" as I would have put it. But there was also something else I kept hidden: I had a deep longing for a spiritual life and for a spiritual community that would accept me. When I came out to my friends, family and colleagues, when I embraced my imperfection, the Light came through the crack and my spiritual longing burst forth at the same time. In what I can only describe as an act of God, both came together for the first time when I attended my first Quaker meeting. Since then both have grown, hand in hand it seems, leading me to a fuller and happier life.

Many people have something they would call an imperfection or a difficulty in life that they would prefer not to have or not to have experienced. And many may believe, like I once did, that if that aspect of themselves could be changed their lives would be much happier. My experience is that the opposite is true: our imperfection, our difficulties, our crack, is our individual path to wholeness, to the ability to love unconditionally, and to unity with God if we are prepared to embrace and follow it.

If we can learn to love ourselves unconditionally, then we may come to love one another with an unconditional love that is equivalent to God's unconditional love for each of us.

* * * * *

REFLECTIONS FROM A SOLITARY MEETING FOR WORSHIP

June 21, 2020

For the past two Sundays, my solitary meetings for worship have been anything but peaceful. My mind has been like a corral full of wild horses unwilling to be tamed. It is a reflection, at least in part I think, of the chaos and confusion that exists in the world around me. I try to calm my mind each morning with a routine of walking, meditation, prayer, and a simple form of

Tai Chi, all performed on the roof deck of my apartment building. There are usually no other people there, and so I am free to carry out my activities in the quiet early morning sunlight.

The Tai Chi exercise I do is called Tree Energy Tai Chi and is intended to be undertaken with a tree as a partner as a way of reminding myself of the spiritual lessons a tree has to teach me. These days, rather than take the time to search out a tree in the park, I focus on a stand of pine trees on the opposite side of the Parkway, and on one particular tree on the edge that is slightly taller than the others. Each movement of the exercise has a spiritual meaning. The first reminds me that the tree is firmly rooted in the ground; its roots are deep and its trunk is solid and strong, capable of withstanding all kinds of conditions. This reminds me that my spiritual life must be rooted too, well grounded in my convictions and practices with confidence in God's presence. The second movement reminds me that the branches of the tree are flexible and can adjust to changing circumstances—wind and rain and snow, different seasons and temperatures. If the tree was only as stiff as the trunk, it might easily break in a strong wind; if it were only as flexible as the branches that same wind would blow it over. It is this combination of strength and flexibility, this ability of the tree to accept and adjust to circumstances without losing its integrity, that serves as a model and a goal for my spiritual life.

The other movements represent exchanges of energy and love between the tree and me. We each give and we each receive just as in reality we mutually exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide. The last two movements are the most important. The first requires me to bend my right leg and balance on my left foot while holding my arms folded horizontally in front of my face so that my hands block my view of the tree and everything else. It reminds me that for both me and the tree, the future is uncertain and unknown. The last movement maintains the same position, but lifts my arms upward until they and my body form the letter "Y". This symbolizes that no matter what the future brings, I, like the tree, stand ready to receive it with the strength of my faith in God's goodness, and my willingness to accept all that comes to me as a gift. It is a very powerful posture—and challenging belief—that I hold for sixty seconds before I bow to the tree and finish.

It has somewhat surprised me that, confined as I mostly am to the inside of my apartment, these reflections have been so inspired by thoughts about nature: streams to float in, rivers to float on, hills to climb, birds that sing, and now

trees that serve as spiritual teachers. Perhaps it is the general absence of those things that has made them more precious, more a source of spiritual inspiration than usual. And there is even one more: wind.

When I sit, usually shirtless, on the roof deck in meditation after completing my Tai Chi, I feel the wind that comes to me there fourteen floors above the street. It comes as a soft and gentle breeze as if the hands of God were caressing my body with the same soft and gentle touch a mother would use washing her child's body with warm water. It is a final reminder of God's constant presence and loving-kindness that I try to carry with me throughout the day.

* * * * *

REFLECTIONS FROM A SOLITY MEETING FOR WORSHIP

June 28, 2020

A wonderful feature of Zoom technology is that you can attend a meeting for worship almost anywhere. Today I spent part of my time in a Conservative Friends meeting for worship from Cleveland Ohio at the invitation of a Conservative Friend I met several years ago. The rest of my time I spent in my usual solitary meeting. The host of the Conservative Friends meeting posted an image on the screen of the painting, "The Presence in the Midst" by James Doyle Penrose. I found this a welcome change from the usual focus on the faces of participants.

The painting is based on words in the gospel of Matthew (18:20): "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them." Penrose's interpretation of the phrase is clearly influenced by George Fox's statement, "Christ has come to teach his people." This is indicated by the hovering transparent figure of Jesus superimposed over a 17th or early 18th century meeting for worship in what is thought to be Jordans Meeting House in England. Women in bonnets and plain dress and men in dark suits and hats sit with heads bowed in silent expectant worship. The image, and my interpretation of the phrase, reminded me of the difference between meeting for worship alone and with others.

All my life I have been aware that I feel very different when I am in the presence of another person. I feel more alert, more alive, more energized

whether I'm with just one person or many. And it doesn't seem to matter whether we are in the same room or in separate ones or whether we are doing something together or not. The mere presence of another person nearby is enough to change my attitude and the way I feel. I have a theory of why this is so.

I believe that all living things are sending out vibrations of energy. When I am with someone else the vibrations of energy that we are each sending out interact with one another in a way that enhances and magnifies our own individual energies, but also creates a new and third field of energy that both combines our individual energies and encompasses them as well. It is like saying there is me, and there is you, but then there is also "us," which is a third entity in its own right that results from the merger of the two of us and in some strange way is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

There is some basis in scientific fact for this theory. Scientists tell us that at the atomic level everything is in motion; everything is vibrating and sending off waves of energy whether we detect it or not. This is true of even what we might call "dead" matter – rocks and other inanimate objects. The only difference is that living creatures, and human beings especially, send off waves of energy at higher frequency levels. Some scientists suggest that there must be an intelligent force that sets these atomic movements in motion. For me, that force is what I mean when I use the word God.

When I apply these ideas to meeting for worship, it is the words "come together *in my name*" that have special significance. I don't take those words as literally referring to Jesus as Penrose did. To me they mean coming together with the specific *intent* to try to connect with "that of God" within, with the Inner Light or what some call the "Christ consciousness" that Jesus personified so fully and that is potential in all of us. And in the best of moments, that effort brings forth an encompassing field of energy—a presence—that unites each of us with one another and with the Divine energy of creation itself.

When I am in meeting for worship with others—even just two or three—the potential for this sense of a larger field of energy is greater than when I am alone. And I believe that it is this sense of connection to something larger that enables me or another to tap into the presence within and bring forth a message that may provide one or more of us present with inspiration for our

spiritual journey. This potential, and the feeling that I am vibrating in unity with the oneness of all creation that seems only possible in the actual physical presence of others, is what I miss in the current situation and long to recapture.