

WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP, AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

LETTER 138

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19 Exeter Place, Rotorua 3015, New Zealand.

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Dear Friends,

Just recently I have been feeling a bit overwhelmed by the increase of complexity in modern-day living.

A trip to the supermarket for a tin of baked beans ended in a hunt among nine "value added" variants. The required original was eventually found, relegated to the corner of a bottom shelf. Then two different attempts at on-line compliance with official regulations resulted firstly in unsatisfactory printouts and then a request for my non-existent smartphone number. These are tiny examples of the hard-to-avoid complexity that seems to be encouraged by today's expectations.

Rising frustration has made me look more deeply into the Quaker testimony of Simplicity. The attitudes of Friends who recognised the importance of simplicity during the last 500 years have changed with time, but the struggle with complexity continues. Many have found relief by turning to the Spirit for guidance.

At our recent Yearly Meeting Gathering, Friends agreed that direct assistance from the Spirit is an essential feature of Quakerism. It is always there if we choose to use it. We are urged to seek "that of God" in ourselves, in each other, and in our environment. Elizabeth Duke and Murray Short have already facilitated exploration of ways in which we can make Spirit-led decisions. Their workshop will be repeated for northern North Island Friends in November (11-13th) and for South Island Friends at a later date.

In company with many of the authors quoted below, Quakers trust that attention to the leadings of the Spirit will continue to support the search for ways to promote justice and care for our planet.

Yours in Friendship,

Ruth Gadgil.

Quaker attitudes to simplicity

Here are some thoughts taken from entries in Britain Yearly Meeting *Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995 (BQF&P). I have also drawn on passages in Richard Foster's *Freedom of Simplicity* (1981); John Punshon's *Portrait in Grey* (1984); Geoffrey Hubbard's *Quaker by Convincement* (1985); Catherine Whitmire's *Plain Living* (2001); and *Quaker Faith and Practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand* 2003 (QF&PANZ).

It is our tender and Christian advice that Friends take care to keep to truth and plainness, in language, habit, deportment and behaviour; that the simplicity of truth in these things may not wear out nor be lost in our days, nor in posterity's; and to avoid pride and immodesty in apparel, and all vain and superfluous fashions of the world.

Yearly Meeting in London, 1691 (BQF&P 20/28)

From the beginning of Quakerism, Margaret Fell (later Margaret Fox) saw the dangers of carrying this attitude to extremes. She noted that :

"... poor Friends is mangled in their minds, that they know not what to do, for one Friend says one way, and another another, but Christ Jesus saith, that we must take no thought what we shall eat, or what we shall drink, or what we shall put on ... But contrary to this ... we must all be in one dress and one colour; this is a silly poor Gospel. It is more fit for us, to be covered with God's Eternal Spirit, and clothed with his Eternal Light, which leads us and guides us unto righteousness."

Margaret Fox, 1700 (BQF&P 20/31)

A period of strictest observance of plainness during eighteenth century gave Quakers a reputation for puritanism, which has not entirely disappeared. Margaret Fox's wisdom was gradually recognised, and made a substantial contribution to the development of a more open Society.

The effects of the Industrial Revolution made it harder to keep a balance between plainness and extravagance. In a carefully-kept journal, John Woolman (1720-1772) expressed sorrow that many people had slowly given way to the temptation of living in luxury, first engaging in unnecessary trade and then beginning to use its products themselves. His hope for Friends was that they should return quietly to the clearness and simplicity of obedience: *"that Friends may dig deep, may carefully cast forth the loose matter and get down to the rock, the sure foundation, and there hearken to that divine voice which gives a clear and certain sound."*

Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845) belonged to a prominent Quaker family of bankers. Although her brothers and sisters, like many others who became known as "gay Friends", were willing to flout the plainness rules, Elizabeth herself always wore the plain Quaker dress. She found that it distinguished her as a benefactor and engendered respect from the prisoners and others among whom she worked.

Although life seems to become ever more complex, Quakerism itself retains a basic simplicity. It is not limited by the restrictions which fetter other societies, political or religious. It accepts all comers who seek admission, irrespective of race or caste or sex. It has no sacred days or seasons, no special sanctuaries, because every time and every place alike are holy. It interposes no system of persons by whose intervention God is reconciled and men forgiven. Each individual member holds personal communion with the divine head.

While simplicity provides an answer to the modern dilemma, it does not provide an easy answer. We must never confuse simplicity with simplism. Simplicity lives in harmony with the ordered complexity of life. It repudiates easy, dogmatic answers to tough, intricate problems.

I wish I might emphasise how a life becomes simplified when dominated by faithfulness to a few concerns. Too many of us have too many irons in the fire. We get distracted by the intellectual claim to our interest in a thousand and one good things, and before we know it we are pulled and hauled breathlessly along by an overburdened programme of good committees and good undertakings. ... The concern-orientated life is ordered and organised from within. And we must learn to say No as well as Yes by attending to the guidance of inner responsibility.

Thomas Kelly, 1941 (BQF&P 20/36)

Is our concern for simplicity relevant to our concern for the national economic situation? If we think of simplicity in terms of doing without certain things, of voluntarily reducing our standard of living, I believe this is almost irrelevant at the economic level in view of the scale of the world's need.

If we think of simplicity as a spiritual quality which incidentally simplifies our life styles then I believe it has relevance. This kind of simplicity goes straight to the heart of things and puts first things first, is needed to rectify our distorted values, to help us accept changes in our pattern of living. As this simplicity grows in our hearts and bears fruit in our lives, we may learn and help others to learn that the really abundant life is not to be found in the clutter of material complexity but in simplicity.

L. Hugh Doncaster, 1976 (BQF&P 20/35)

The testimony of outward simplicity began as a protest against the extravagance and snobbery which marked English society in the 1600s. In whatever forms this protest is today, it must still be seen as a testimony against involvement with things which tend to dilute our energies and scatter our thoughts, reducing us to lives of triviality and mediocrity.

North Carolina Yearly Meeting, 1983 (BQF&P 20/27)

Still another step toward simplicity is to refuse to live beyond our means emotionally. In a culture where whirl is king, we must understand our emotional limits. Ulcers, migraines, nervous tensions, and a dozen other symptoms mark our psychic overload. We are concerned not to live beyond our means financially; why do it emotionally?

*Can you recognise the simplicity in things that are beautiful?
Can you recognise the beauty in things that are simple?
Simplicity begins with awareness.*

Elizabeth Duke, 1995 (QF&PANZ 4.25)

It's no surprise that Quakers have come to love an old Shaker dancing song written by Joseph Brackett in 1848:

*'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.*

**Weekends at the Quaker Settlement,
76 Virginia Road, Whanganui 4500:**

9-11 September -

Transactional analysis 101

Designed to help people to understand and have options about their communication patterns.

Facilitator: Marion Wade.

Contact: Peter Watson

earlyyearstoys@gmail.com

**7-9 October – Treaty of Waitangi
Discussion Weekend**

Assistance with understanding about Te Tiriti, its status and possible developments in the future.

Facilitators: Treaty Relations Group.

Contact: Piet de Vegt

piet.devegt@gmail.com

28-30 October – “That of God”

For all who wish to have conversations about “God”.

Facilitators: Linley Gregory, Lesley Young.

Contact: Anne Hall

ahall@inspire.net.nz

**The next
SUMMER GATHERING**

**will be held at the Vertical Horizon Christian
Camp, Everett Road, Inglewood, Taranaki.
Thursday 29th December 2016 to
Wednesday 4th January 2017.**

Theme: “Mai i te maunga ki te moana:
From the mountain to the sea”.

Summer Gathering enhances the spiritual and social life of Quakers in Aotearoa. We welcome Friends and families, young and old, seasoned summer gatherers and first timers.

If you are interested, please phone **Liz Bridgman:**
06 758 0216 or email
summer.gathering.nz@gmail.com

The Wider Quaker Fellowship is an association of persons of diverse backgrounds who wish to have ties with the Religious Society of Friends without necessarily being in its membership, or who, through isolation, illness or some other circumstance are unable to attend a Monthly Meeting.

Any person who finds the fundamental Quaker testimonies and the Quaker way of life, with its emphasis on sincerity and simplicity, compatible with his or her philosophy of life is welcome to join the Fellowship. A request to the Clerk will ensure enrolment as a member.