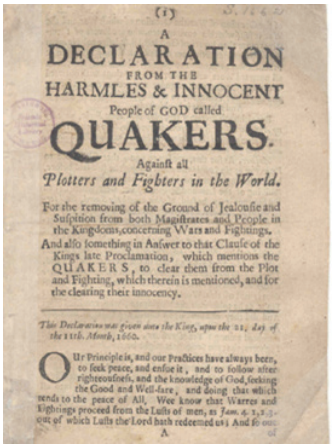
Towards a Testimony of Nonviolence

An opportunity for transformation?

BY JANIE BANFIELD

***'Do you view the Quaker movement in decline, or engineering a transformation?'*, those of us attending this year's Summer Gathering were asked. The consensus was that if the Quaker Movement was to flourish and grow in the decades ahead, there would need to be some radical reinvention. As I see it, 'repurposing' the Peace Testimony into a 'Testimony of Nonviolence' may be what is needed.**

'Not from the letter for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life,' Elders reminded Brethren in 1656. The Quaker movement was to be a Spirit-led organisation, free from written beliefs and creeds, yet has our Quaker Peace Testimony today become an Anti-war Creed? What follows is an exploration of whether the Spirit is now calling us to shift from the current focus on 'peace' to the wider connectedness implicit within the principle of 'nonviolence' (with no hyphen).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A
DECLARATION
FROM THE
HARMLES & INNOCENT
People of GOD called
QUAKERS.
Against all
Plotters and Fighters in the World.
For the removing of the Ground of Jealousie and Suspition from both Magistrates and People in the Kingdom, concerning Wars and Fightings.
And also something in Answer to that Clause of the Kings late Proclamation, which mentions the QUAKERS, to clear them from the Plot and Fighting, which therein is mentioned, and for the clearing their innocency.
This Declaration was given unto the King, upon the 21. day of the 11th. Month, 1660.
OUr Principle is, and our Practices have always been, to seek peace, and ensue it, and to follow after righteousness, and the knowledge of God, seeking the Good and Well-fare, and doing that which tends to the peace of All. Wee know that Warres and Fightings proceed from the Lusts of men, as *Jam.* 4. 1, 2. out of which Lusts the Lord hath redeemed us; And so our
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I wasn't surprised by the responses to my informal survey amongst friends and family as to what the word 'peace' conjured up for them. They suggested concepts such as 'suppression of conflict', 'absence of noise' and 'harmony', all of which closely reflect current dictionary definitions: 'freedom from disturbance', 'tranquillity', and 'a state or period in which there is no war, or a war has ended.' Yet in our present challenged world, is this conceptual framework extensive enough?

Three considerations are timely:

- the expedient basis to the original 1661 Peace Testimony
- the growth of the Nonviolence Movement since Fox's time
- how a life in the 21st century committed to nonviolence seems to demonstrate the same choice to live outside of social norms that fuelled the lives of early Quakers.

I believe a refocus from 'peace' to 'nonviolence' will enhance the wellbeing of each Friend and those with whom they interact and, by enhancing the visibility of Quaker witness, will draw in others.

The outward focus of the Peace testimony

The pragmatic anti-war stance of the original Quaker Peace Testimony was a safety measure. In 1661 George Fox and fellow Quakers' statement, 'We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fighting with outward weapons for any end or under any pretence whatever; this is our testimony to the whole world,' was issued to protect the burgeoning Quaker Movement. After the Restoration of the Monarchy in England, Quakers had been suspected of plotting against King Charles II. To refute this false accusation, Quakers published:

> A Declaration from the harmless and innocent people of God, called Quakers, against all plotters and fighters in the world, for the removing the ground of jealousy and suspicion from both magistrates and people in the kingdom, concerning wars and fightings. And also, something in answer to that clause of the King's late proclamation which mentions the Quakers, to clear them from the plot and fighting which therein is mentioned, and for the clearing their innocence.

Our New Zealand Statement on Peace issued in 1987 by Yearly Meeting has a similar anti-war focus. Kiwi Quakers affirmed their 'refusal to fight with weapons', asserting how, while 'there is no guarantee that our resistance will be any more successful or any less risky than military tactics, at least our means will be suited to our end.'

Anti-war work by Quakers in Aotearoa New Zealand undoubtedly has a powerful impact: public protests, government lobbies and numerous other initiatives impact the weapons industry, heighten public awareness, reduce suffering, and open pathways for war-torn regions for peace. Yet could it be that Quakers determined prioritisation of their anti-war stance, the legacy of an action taken in a particular set of circumstances 400 years ago, comes close to a self-limiting Creed that masks other calls from the Spirit for changes to our inward lives?

The need for an inward focus

George Fox understood that the refusal to take up arms outlined in the 1661 Testimony was in today's terms, the 'ambulance at the bottom of the cliff'. It was our 'carriage and life', he asserted, our demeanour and our

attitude which held the power to bring about a peaceable society. Fox explained that he lived 'in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars' for he had 'come into the covenant of peace which was before wars and strifes were' and so had felt justified to refuse the King's army recruitment drive.

Fox reminded followers how it was not enough to remain embedded in social norms and habits of behaviour and speech. Instead, Quakers needed to become 'patterns and examples' because this first step would give Friends the courage to walk 'over the world' (i.e. to live outside the conventional social behaviours of their time).

So, for us 21st Century Quakers, what does it mean to show up daily with this 'carriage' which is capable of taking away 'the occasion for war'? I sense recent sociological research, and three later visionaries, Mahatma Gandhi, Marshall Rosenberg and Joanna Macy may hold some answers.

Gandhi chose to translate the ancient Indian philosophy, 'Ahimsa,' around which the Indian Independence campaign was centred, with the English word, 'nonviolence.' It was a worldview he described as 'avoiding injury to anything on earth in thought, word or deed' We are all one so there is no place for violence of any kind towards life. This same understanding underpinned the approach of Tohu Kakahi and Te Whiti o Rongomai of Parihaka many decades earlier, and years later was central to Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' vision.

If you sense that this paradigm of nonviolence instinctively fits your own yearning for life in this world, it is not surprising! For more than 300,000 years as hunter gatherers, we evolved with collaborative instincts. Indeed, it was the ability of Homo Sapiens to work together that gave them the edge while other Neanderthal species died out. The origin of moralistic right/wrong judgements on the other hand is much more recent, a mere 8000 years ago as pastoralisation began. This way of labelling others as right or wrong, good or evil, is not instinctive, it is simply a habit that society habituates individuals into in childhood that overrides our instinct to be kind.

Now research shows collaboration as instinctive, and diminished by societal norms within recent human history, George Fox's understanding appears perspicacious. Could his reference to a 'covenant of peace that was before all wars and strifes were' allude to the cooperative period of humanity prior to the introduction of right/wrong evaluations, a social state we instinctively yearn for: in the words of Charles Eisenstein, 'the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible'?

The lives of early Quakers were shaped by Fox's insight into how blind adherence to social norms of his day disengaged a person's ability to live with integrity in line with their own spirituality. Whilst today we are no longer expected to doff our hats, or use 'you' when speaking to our superiors, we too experience social pressures to conform. Rather than speak up about what is important to us, we choose to say nothing to avoid upsetting others, we group with others to classify another as an 'enemy', labelling them as 'wrong' or 'evil' rather than seeking to empathise with what drives their behaviour, and we castigate ourselves and others into conforming to particular behaviours through our use of the word 'should.'

A more recent understanding of the way social conformity compromises our integrity comes from clinical psychologist and visionary Dr Marshall Rosenberg (1934-2015). Rosenberg's analysis into how the actions of peacemakers down the ages differed from expected conventions led him to distil a practical model for empathic behaviour open to all. Through adoption of Rosenberg's simple framework, an individual shrugs off four socially accepted ways to interact that were learnt in childhood, moving away from society's 'who's right and who's wrong' lens. In consequence they find deep connection with themselves and with others, even with those with very different views.

Rosenberg's Model of Peaceable Behaviour		
Observation	*Replaces*	Evaluation
Awareness of Feelings	*Replaces*	Thinking
Awareness of Needs	*Replaces*	Strategies
Request	*Replaces*	Demands

Although Rosenberg chose to use Gandhi's word 'nonviolence' and branded the model as 'Nonviolent Communication', it was a name he later regretted. While it was a catchy term that drew people to his initial workshops, confusion around the name has diluted understanding and held back wider uptake. For it is not aimed at reforming violent people (though it can do that too) nor is it just a way to communicate better (though it also does that). Rather it is a complete philosophy for life, a spiritual consciousness, a lens into the worldview brought to light by Gandhi, Tohu Kakahu, Maya Angelou and others society reveres for their inclusivity. But I digress.

It is hard not to be aware of the parallel between George Fox's call to 'answer that of God in every one' and the Nonviolent Communication approach (now partially rebranded as 'NVC'). In NVC, deep connection with others, whatever their view, comes naturally through the focus on the underlying feelings and needs of an individual because the same core feelings and needs are common to all human beings. What 'the Other' feels is something we too have felt in our own life, and the same needs and longings that drive their actions are ones we can identify with ourselves. Every choice and each action anyone makes – you, me, or even a serial killer – is understood as 'the best way they find at that time to meet their need.' Whilst not agreeing with the strategy someone choses, we can identify with the need or longing that drove their choice of action: we connect with the common humanity between us that Fox termed 'that of God'.

I'm part of an international group entitled 'Paths of Peace', Quakers who choose to integrate NVC into our lives. NVC has enabled us to replace decades-old habits which unwittingly separated us from others and even led to conflict, with ways of interaction that connect us to others. We find greater connection with ourselves too. The self-empathy comes with the shift from inner judgements and 'shoulds' and for some, lifting decades of depression. It's not easy going against the norm, and regular meet-ups to practice and to revisit and role play challenging interactions prove invaluable. Four hundred years after early Quakers heeded the call of the Spirit to shift from practices at the time considered normal, I sense adopting the NVC lens enables me to do the same. What Fox termed my 'carriage' differs radically from current social norms of interaction and it's becoming easier as time goes on to be the change I want to see in the world.

A third visionary who can help us reenvisage Fox's vision in the 21st Century is respected eco-philosopher, Joanna Macy, for the philosophy of Nonviolence extends to the natural world too. She calls us to become part of the emerging 'planetary nonviolence' movement which has the capacity to overturn customary assumptions and norms of behaviour that threaten the continuity of life on earth. Macy's vision enhances Gandhi's 'we are all one' understanding in her reference to how it frees us to see the world as one larger living body' something I sense William Penn reminded Quakers of way back in 1692:

> It would go a great way to caution and direct people in their use of the world, that they were better studied and known in the creation of it. For how man could find the confidence to abuse it, while they should see the great creator stare them in the face, in all in every part thereof?

Despite our longing to care for the natural world, Quakers today can still find themselves embedded in antithetical behaviours. To look after our own health and that of loved ones, we purchase blueberries in a plastic box, and despite awareness of the environmental impact of single-use packaging, we absolve ourselves because 'everyone else does it'. We store increasing numbers of photos on the Cloud and remain complicit in growing a vast infrastructure of energy-hungry servers and data centres because 'it's free, it's normal.'

Social norms are very enticing: they give us a sense of security, a feeling of belonging. 'Kiwis have always enjoyed their cheese and butter,' we tell ourselves, selectively blind to issues of river pollution, winter mud farming, and the cruel removal from their mothers and slaughter of two million calves each year by the NZ dairy industry. Canned tuna has to be labelled with whether 'Fish Aggregation Devices' (FADs) were used (which draw in a sacrificial by-catch of other marine creatures), yet we may overlook ethical checking of the can label, popping it into our supermarket trolley because, yes, everyone else does it!'

Some social behaviours are so effectively marketed to us by corporations whose ethics are very different to those we espouse that we have come to view them as 'normal'. Kiwi children between 11 and 13 are exposed to an average of 638 advertisements each day, we adults surely even more. It leads us for example to unconsciously buy-in to behaviours that promote plastic packaging: each branded plastic container of yogurt or butter we lay out at meals with friends and family signals 'this plastic packaging is acceptable.'

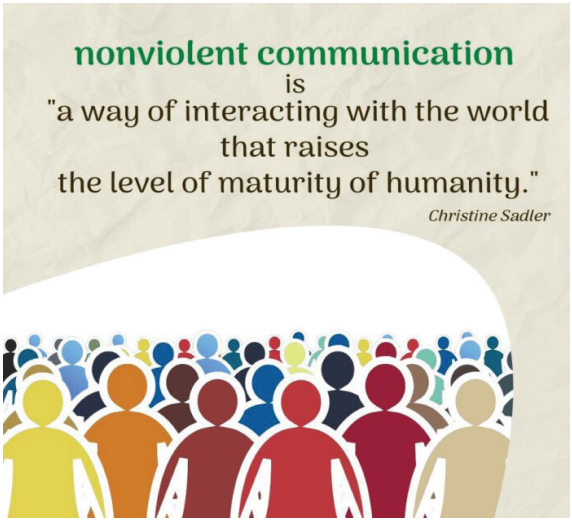
So, while Friends do indeed 'go against the tide' in a myriad of ways, I'm curious whether at a supermarket checkout or overheard discussing the actions of absent others, our behaviour sets us visibly apart as did that of the Early Quakers or do we today simply reflect the norm?

Conclusion

Let's become 21st Century 'patterns and examples', as Fox enjoined his own followers, by pulling all the myriad actions of Quakers together under the single bold overarching banner of Nonviolence. Consider the public impact once a Friend's 'carriage' of NVC supports not only the healing of interactions and relationships within Meeting but also amongst their family and friends, their communities and work organisations. Imagine how noticeable Friends' lifestyles will become when each Meeting highlights nonviolence to human and non-human life alike as their catch cry, and by supporting each other, Friends find the capacity to resist marketed social norms.

Once Quakers are seen to behave and interact differently to the norm in every thought word and deed, seen at the supermarket and in other public forums to live in 'thought, word and deed' to avoid injury to 'any thing on earth', this will surely stimulate curiosity in others.

At Summer Gathering it was suggested that Friends need to 'engineer a transformation'. At this critical stage in the world's history, nonviolence is a contemporary way to reflect the evolved instinctive connectedness with which humanity evolved - the 'covenant of peace before all wars and strifes were.' The philosophy of Nonviolence brings together the threads of environmental, social and spiritual action Friends engage in across the Globe, heightening visibility. A revitalised Quaker movement flourishing with even more visibly countercultural nonviolent lifestyles will be like a Fish Aggregation Device: others will be drawn in.



Postscript

Once nonviolence becomes the catch cry, it will behove each Friend to check, 'Do I practice non-hyphen-violence or nonviolence?' It's an important difference, as Kazu Haga identifies,

'In Kingian Nonviolence, a philosophy developed out of the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr., there is a distinction made between nonviolence spelled with a hyphen, and nonviolence spelled without a hyphen. 'Non-violence' is essentially two words: 'without' 'violence.' When spelled this way, it only describes the absence of violence. As long as I am 'not being violent,' I am practicing non-violence. And that is the biggest misunderstanding of nonviolence that exists.'