

Musings

A Quaker reflects on spirituality

BY MURRAY SHORT

These brief reflections on spirituality have emerged from evolving ideas, some of which are recorded in the article in ANZ Friends Newsletter Vol 104 No 5 November 2022, and the booklet *Care for the Planet Toward a Quaker Story* (Supplement to Volume 103 No 3 July 2021) <https://quakers.nz/anznews/news/care-planet>.

I have been influenced by the ideas of Martin Buber, especially those in his book *I and Thou*. The heart of Buber's idea is that God is encountered in the "I-Thou" connections person to person and person to nature. One of Buber's central concerns was that the course of human history had seen an ever-increasing dominance of the "I-It" world of utilisation and exploitation rather than the relational "I-Thou". Even in the 1920s and 30s when he was writing, he predicted that the very survival of people on this earth was under threat if that trend continued. From this I developed the idea of a relational Spirit and a life-sustaining faith.

Silent worship

The silence in Quaker worship for me is not the absence of noise but the absence of self-centredness which is what causes distraction. There are always noises and other potential sources of distraction, whether a sneeze, a squeaky chair, the neighbour's lawnmower or latecomers joining the worship.

One of the deepest experiences of worship I have enjoyed was during a Quaker peace vigil with the noise of traffic, aeroplanes and pedestrians all around us. These were not experienced as distractions because the group was centred on the purpose of the vigil and on those gathered in silent vigil.

Shared meal

Shared meals are a common practice in communities, including amongst Quakers. There is something about sharing food that takes us beyond the transactional to deeper connection with each other. There are many stories of shared meals in the Bible where it is described as "breaking the bread", as in Luke 24:35: "They began to relate their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread."

Buber would call this the I-Thou connection wherein God is made manifest. He says it is in our relationships with each other and nature that we encounter Spirit.

Shared meals work because of the contributions people bring. In our Meeting from time to time, the contributions exceed what people can consume and at other times, when people like me forget to bring our contribution, they can seem a little sparse. I say "seem" because in fact, the shared meal still feels fulfilling and I am always reminded of the story of the five loaves and fishes. The miracle in this story, to me, is not that Jesus magically produced numerous baskets of food out of nothing. The miracle is that he so moved the hearts and minds of those gathered, that they not only shared what they had, but also felt that whatever they shared was enough. At shared meals, there is always enough, no matter who has forgotten their contribution.

A life-sustaining faith

One of the important ideas in the New Testament is that faith without action is meaningless. "So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead." (James 2:17). Reflecting on this, I thought it was equally true that action without faith can be meaningless and even destructive.

Human action that is destructive of nature or the human community is ultimately self-destructive, as the many wars over the years and now the climate crisis attest. It seems to me that a fundamental purpose of life must be to thrive, not to self-destruct. Action must therefore be life-sustaining. What then can be said about the nature of a faith that provides the wellspring of life-sustaining action?

Martin Buber's idea that God is between, rather than separately within the I and Thou, appeals to me especially because the Thou includes people and nature. It is another way of saying that without the web of life we would not exist, we cannot live as individuals with God alone. The nature of my faith therefore centres on a Spirit, a life-force or power, that we encounter only in relationships. My faith in such a Spirit is the wellspring of my action to help sustain a thriving human community and natural environment.

Awesome God

I warm to Martin Buber's idea that spirit, light or God exists and can be sensed in the connection between people and nature, in the relationship itself, rather than separately as part of each person or as a separate being or force. When discussing this with others, some have commented that for them this idea of God lacked the sense of awe and wonder for God the creator and controller of everything.

I had reason to reflect on this comment when one Christmas the family camped near Ohinetonga Reserve, an expanse of bush in the central North Island. As we wandered amongst the massive tōtara, rimu, tawa, mataī and kahikatea in the reserve, I was filled with a sense of awe and wonder. They have been standing for upwards of 800 years, have seen the comings and goings of many human generations, and amongst everything else they are and do, they have breathed out the oxygen on which those generations depended for their very existence.

It was clear to me that my sense of awe emanated from my experience of the trees, and I had no sense of awe and wonder for the image we have created to try and explain their origin. Indeed, I couldn't help reflecting that as we have worshipped the image, the trees have been cut down at an alarming rate.

Sacramental life

Quakers from the beginning have minimised the use of ritual, images and symbols. George Fox described this as returning to "basic" or "primitive" Christianity which he suggested was like the times when Jesus gathered with the disciples, well before the development of the superstructure of the church with all its rituals and sacraments involving icons, images, music, choreography and of course the magnificent "sacred" churches themselves. The intention of such superstructure and sacraments, was to create the means through which God could be experienced. This became unnecessary for Quakers when God was seen to speak directly to the human soul.

Indeed, it seems to me that there is a risk that the means can become ends in themselves. When we respond with awe to the beautiful church architecture, the icons and the images, they can become the objects of our worship. They are not ends in themselves to be worshipped in this way. They are not invested with the sacred any more than anything else, as God is in everything. The emphasis on church ritual and imagery is that we may fail to recognise that we can equally encounter Spirit in our everyday relationships with each other and with nature.

This, for me, is the meaning of the Quaker belief that all of life is sacramental. We know that we can encounter Spirit not just through church sacraments but through all our relationships.

Prayer

Niwa, my wife, describes how some students participating in noho marae as part of their degree requirements, would object to karakia on the basis that state education should be secular. Karakia are an intrinsic and important part of marae life and Niwa would explain that before colonisation and the accompanying conversion to Christianity, karakia were not religious in that sense. Prior to colonisation, karakia Māori were about helping people become fully "present", aware of place, self, others, and task. Thanks are offered for the presence of all participants, and they are encouraged to work together in an atmosphere of peace and good will. If the task involves the taking of other life, whether animal, vegetable or mineral, thanks are offered for that life and the life-giving sustenance provided.

In rejecting karakia, it seems to me that these students are missing an important opportunity to become more fully present where, and with whom they gather.

This made me think about my understanding of prayer. I have always been uncomfortable with one of the common understandings of prayer as a supplication for God's intervention, on my or another's behalf. This is problematic for me in many ways, not least because it implies there is a power out there that will answer the entreaty and actively intervene. "We beg for deliverance and submit that no healing is too hard for the Lord if it is His will" is an extract from one example of many such prayers of supplication. Presumably if we are not healed it was "His will" that we suffer, which implies a God that is far from my understanding.

The Māori idea of karakia seems to me a better understanding of the nature and purpose of my prayers.

Creativity and Spirituality

In a recent *New Zealand Listener*, Richard Dawkins, the "fact fundamentalist" and author of *The God Delusion* is quoted as acknowledging that he "didn't understand" why he enjoyed some pieces of music and not others. Perhaps if he could apply the same degree of insight to spirituality as he does to creativity, he might have a different view of religion. Creativity and spirituality after all do have an important thing in common; neither is discernible using our rational capacity alone.

To create or appreciate a piece of music or other art, we need much more than just our capacity for rational thought. Both in the act of creation and appreciation, our imaginative, emotional and often, as in the case of music, our physical capacities are all engaged. And so it is with spirituality, with which our rational capacity alone does not get us very far.

Creativity and spirituality are not exercises in objectivity that require separation of thinker and object as with rational analysis. Indeed, quite the opposite, creativity involves a deep relationship between artist and media, between appreciator and work of art. And so it is with spirituality, which involves a deep relationship person to person and person to nature, in the midst of which spirit is encountered and thus made manifest.

Note: To be continued in the next issue of ANZ Friends Newsletter in March 2024.