

Musings (Part 2)

A Quaker reflects on spirituality

BY MURRAY SHORT

This is the second part of an article *A Quaker reflects on spirituality*. The first part appeared in the November 2023 issue of ANZ Friends Newsletter. These brief reflections on spirituality have emerged from evolving ideas, some of which are recorded in the article (*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).

Kingdoms

It was difficult for a republican like me to avoid the media coverage of the recent coronation of King Charles. What I did see reinforced my republicanism because the things that immediately stood out were the inherited wealth and privilege which sit atop an entrenched social class system, and the militarism which has always been needed to protect and build on that privilege.

It reminds me of the warnings recorded in Samuel when the leaders of Israel, seeking continued stability, asked the ailing Samuel to appoint a King before he died. Samuel prayed to God for guidance on the matter who duly warned against it. Samuel is said to have then told the leaders:

This is how your king will treat you... He will make soldiers of your sons... Your sons will have to plough his fields, harvest his crops, and make his weapons and the equipment for his chariots. Your daughters will have to make perfumes for him and work as his cooks and his bakers... He will take a tenth of your flocks. And you yourselves will become his slaves. (1 Samuel 8:11-17)

As is so often the case in the Bible, this anti-monarchical theme is matched by one that is pro-monarchical and the just rule of several kings is recorded, although for most their misbehaviour is also recorded. Indeed, God is often described as king and from that came the notion of the kingdom of heaven. For me, kingdom and heaven don't mix. Whatever heaven means to us, it would surely have to be more like what David Boulton, the non-theist writer describes as a democratic republic, and an egalitarian one at that.

What canst thou say?

We received a request in the mail recently from Amnesty International, asking us to make a special donation as 2023 was the 75th anniversary of their beginning. This reminded me that Quakers were instrumental in the formation of the organisation, as they were of Oxfam, Greenpeace and several other organisations involved in the antislavery, penal reform and social justice movements. What a wonderful gift of service to the world!

It is widely acknowledged that over the years Quakers have had an influence well beyond their small numbers. There seems to be a number of reasons for this, not least the fact that many early Quakers had direct experience of prisons and persecution during the period of religious oppression in 1600s Britain. They were also influenced by scripture of course, such as the piece in James:

Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in saying to them, 'God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!' – if you don't give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith: if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead.

Scripture, though, has never been the most important influence for Quakers. Rather, it is the direct experience of God that is regarded as the final authority. Early Quakers believed that the salvation experience, when the divine spirit of Christ was accepted into one's life, was transformational and, forever after, one was compelled to follow the promptings of the divine within. This, more than anything else, is what drove their action in the world.

We may now have some difficulty with the expression of this belief, but I believe we must recognise that faith is critical, for without faith, action can be dangerous and destructive.

That wise Quaker phrase therefore comes to mind, "What canst thou say?" What action do I take in the world and just as important, what do I do to sustain the faith that is the wellspring of that action?

Meaning

One of the big questions that has exercised us humans is 'What is the meaning of life?' Some say there is no meaning but, for me, a sense of meaning is what motivates me. It gives every day a sense of purpose.

In October 2022 a human experiment proved that our knowledge and technology now make it possible for us to alter the orbit of asteroids so that they do not threaten massive destruction to planet earth. With justification, many of us have developed a very negative view of the human contribution to life on earth, but the experiment proved that humans and our evolving knowledge and technology can have a positive, indeed vital, role to play. This thought is, for me, what gives human life meaning.

Our knowledge has reached the point where we know how to be, as James Naylor, an early Quaker, would say 'at unity with all creation' and, in a very real and practical sense, carry out 'God's wisdom and love' by helping to sustain creation. The challenge, of course, is in making the right use of our knowledge and our technology. If, as I believe, protecting and sustaining life is our meaning and purpose, then this is what must inform the right use of all our knowledge, technology and even the smallest of our actions in the world, both in the human community and in the wider environment.

My hope is that humans will make a more positive contribution than we have done to date.

Karakia

We once had to fell a large pōhutukawa tree in our garden. The cutting of the tree was a very sad process. The tree was a beautiful one that was covered every early summer with the bright red flowers of its kind. It is the Christmas tree of Aotearoa. Its quiet presence was a constant in the memories of many family years and as our children grew up, the tree grew ever larger.

The tree had to be cut as it was impinging on the property and lives of three neighbours – a case of the wrong tree for the place chosen. This did not make the process any less sad, and I could only console myself somewhat with the thought that we were using the wood for the fire and the ashes and mulch to nourish other trees and plants in the garden.

Niwa, my wife, said karakia each day as the tree was brought down. This daily expression of reverence and thankfulness for the life of the tree seemed so appropriate. It said to me that sometimes trees do have to be felled and karakia is a way to recognise their preciousness. It reminds us to replace what we fell so that we always have trees which become part of our lives as the pōhutukawa did for our family. Otherwise, we destroy the web of life on which we depend. For me, prayers are about taking time in a busy day to quietly reflect on and be thankful for the many gifts we enjoy: the gift of life, the gift of relationship with others and the gifts of bountiful nature. As we reflect on the gifts we enjoy in this way, we become aware of those less fortunate, and part of prayer for me is to acknowledge and hold them in the Light.

Kindness

Walking along the Wellington waterfront on the way to Meeting for Worship, I passed a coffee cart which had the words "Make kindness your superpower". It caught my eye because it was a surprising place to see such a sign. As I continued walking, I reflected on the meaning of the words.

Apart from superheroes of comics and movies, we have associated superpowers with something 'out there,' a divine, transcendent force that creates and controls the universes. I have long questioned this belief and in my view, we humans are the ones who must, in the words of the sign, show kindness to nature and to each other in order to mend this broken world. So, I say, let's make kindness and love our superpower.

May Spirit be with you

When I was confined to the house for several months due to illness, I would often sit at our large lounge windows looking out over Parumoana harbour. I enjoyed this especially as the sun set between the two peaks on the horizon, Rangitūhi and Whītireia. One evening I noticed hundreds of seagulls flying past and this happened each following evening. I realised this must have been a daily event as the gulls flew from the Porirua stream estuary to their roosting site on the cliffs of Whītireia, and yet I had only just noticed it after over 30 years in our house. On another evening the gulls, instead of flying past in a procession were circling upward in a giant spiral some halfway to their roosting site. It seemed to me they were simply enjoying themselves soaring on high and as I watched, I shared their sense of joy and felt better for it.

There is a growing body of research evidence that is demonstrating the health benefits of connecting with and appreciating nature in this way. Such connection is different in quality to when nature is seen simply as a backdrop or something to exploit. Similarly, there is increasing research evidence of the health benefits of connecting with others. Even brief contact is beneficial, so long as it goes beyond the purely transactional and involves acknowledging the other by, for example a simple smile or greeting.

I have been wondering what it is about these relationships with other people and with nature that is so important to our wellbeing. Buber suggests that it is in I/Thou relationships that we encounter God. In addition to our physical, mental and emotional capacities then, we have a capacity that I would describe as our spiritual capacity. This capacity enables us to make meaningful connections, and, through these, we encounter God and are supported and strengthened. This, for me, is the source of the health benefits observed from our relationships with each other and with nature.

Notes:

- *I and Thou* by Martin Buber, United States, 1 February 1971
- Both parts of the article A Quaker reflects on spirituality can be found on the Aotearoa Quaker website at <https://quakers.nz/newsletter/selected-articles> .