

Authentic leadings: the making of a Quaker author

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In reflecting on this subject – my experience as a Quaker author, someone whose writing can be seen as a form of ministry – I realised how inherently corporate I have found the enterprise of writing-as-ministry to be.

First of all, I present to you the evidence. You know the old saying: ‘If you were accused of being a Quaker, would there be enough evidence to convict you?’ The evidence I can present as a minister of the written word is really quite meagre: the Swarthmore lecture in book form *A Faith to Call Our Own: Quaker tradition in the light of contemporary movements of the Spirit*, published in 1999; an article in *Friends Quarterly* published in January 2002, ‘A Great People to be Gathered?’; an issue of *The Woodbrooke Journal*, also from January 2002 – and subsequently distributed in the *Hearts and Minds Prepared* study pack). All these are published but other evidence includes – in manuscript, the draft of a book I’m co-authoring with Jo Farrow provisionally entitled *Faith in Transition: living a new story* and a booklet – also being co-authored, this time with Timothy Peat-Ashworth, the bible studies tutor at Woodbrooke - with the working title *Gathered Together: engaging with our spiritual diversity in BYM*.

I want to share the stories of these pieces of writing as examples of ‘writing as ministry’ in the light of what I’ve come to recognise as three aspects of written ministry. In preparing for this talk I’ve been reflecting on what distinguishes writing *as ministry*. Vanessa Julye spoke last night of ‘leaving a permanent record’ for those who follow us – and clearly this is one difference between the written and the spoken word. And one that can make writing an intimidating thing to do, especially knowing that some Friend is bound to refer to something you wrote years before and quite likely expect you to hold the same views today!

I feel that writing that is ministry needs to satisfy three basic criteria (perhaps in discussion afterwards we can think of more). It needs, I believe, to be inspired, tested and ‘answering’ to others (and to be answered by them in the reading).

Inspired: Writing as ministry seeks to come from beyond the egoic mind, what Buddhists call ‘the mind-made sense of self’. The inspired writer is a channel, a conduit for something that needs to be said, recorded and heard. There are passages in the written version of the Swarthmore lecture which still surprise me when I read them. And this requires, in my experience, a certain vulnerability on the part of the author. (I’ll return to this later).

Tested: We were reminded yesterday of Thomas Merton’s caution about ‘not rushing into print’ and my sense is that written ministry has been honed and crafted by more than the writer’s individual skill and precision; it has been tested in the light of whether it is faithfully addressing – and is likely to elicit a response from – ‘that of God’ within the reader. For the writer this can be a difficult and even fraught process; there is a necessary quality of obedience, of submitting oneself to the scrutiny of others – during the creative process of writing. This testing is about discerning whether our written words will ‘speak to the condition’ of our readers.

Such tested writing may well be challenging to the reader yet *has* to be taken on board, the message cannot be sidestepped. The well-known phrase that something ‘speaks to one’s condition’ seems to have changed in meaning over the generations – at least amongst British Quakers. Early Friends (who thought much more in terms of sinfulness than is fashionable among liberal Friends today) used this phrase to mean ministry that revealed our lack of wholeness, that reflected our true condition, that broke through our denial, our complacency, our habitual defences. (George Fox seems to have possessed an uncanny, almost ‘supernatural’ talent for looking into the very heart of a person and sensing their ‘condition’.) This process was itself an inherently inspired and collective one; those transformed by the Inward light both recognised this process at work in one another and

were then able to see others in this penetrating way. But this was as a result of a transformative experience they themselves had known.

In my experience of writing as ministry these elements are present not only in the process of producing the writing but also describe aspects of a process happening to the writer, him or herself. For example, there is a testing process in being asked to give the annual Swarthmore lecture. My understanding is that the committee meet to discern, that they consider both a list of themes likely to be of interest/importance for the Yearly Meeting and a list of names of Friends who have been noticed as having at least a latent or budding sense of ministry. It is an unusual, privileged platform in BYM, an opportunity to lay before the Yearly Meeting – not as a formal part of Yearly Meeting in session but whilst Friends are so gathered - a prepared ministry. It is a chance to address, in one place and at the same time, around 1000 members of the Society (roughly 5% of the Quakers in Britain).

The length of time one has to prepare varies but I had been approached three years before I gave the lecture and was asked to write about my spiritual journey both before and since coming amongst Friends. Already there are at least two contexts of discernment here: as well as the Swarthmore lecture committee's discernment there was also the fact that when I was asked I was in my third term at Woodbrooke, the Quaker Study centre, initially because I had been offered an Edward Cadbury bursary through Quaker Life (a department of Britain Yearly Meeting previously known as Quaker Home Service). Such funding is aimed at encouraging study/ministry amongst Friends in the Yearly Meeting and someone had decided I might be a worthy recipient. I stayed on for a further two terms (thanks to bursary support from Woodbrooke) and had the wonderful opportunity to study with Janey O' Shea, then Quaker Studies tutor and author of the 1993 Backhouse lecture *Living the way, Quaker spirituality and community*.

So there was discernment all the way: Friends in Quaker Life who decided to award me the bursary, the Swarthmore lecture committee considering names and possible lecturers, Friends at Woodbrooke cultivating me as someone with 'something to say'. I have the sense, looking back, that for at least three years I was being prepared in my own process of reading and writing, prayerfully reflecting, opening myself to (hopefully) being inspired. And then it came to the writing there was a rigorous process of testing with two members of the Swarthmore committee – Val Ferguson and Jo Farrow – both seasoned, 'weighty' Friends who nurtured, challenged, and encouraged me to stick to the brief, to write from my personal experience (when my own tendency was to want to hide behind quoted passages from much more worthy spiritual sources).

They were there *eldering* me in the fullest sense – firmly 'sitting on me' at times but always nurturing, drawing forth the talent that might be there – not for my aggrandisement but for the benefit of the community as a whole. They read the early drafts, met with me frequently and upheld me in prayer throughout. By keeping in contact, and preventing me getting lost in the isolation required by the discipline of writing, they provided solid bedrock for me, grounding me in my doubts, countering my fears, my sense of being inadequate to the task.

Other members of the committee read later drafts, the whole process constantly refining, commented upon, becoming a more tested ministry which hopefully would fulfil the Swarthmore lectureship's twofold purpose: 'to interpret to the Society of Friends their message and mission' and 'to bring before the public the spirit, the aims and the fundamental principles of Friends'. Yet there is a delicate balance here: the actual words, the inspiration of the lecture and the book, came through me but they were disciplined, tested, honed as they were being formed into a ministry of the written word by the loving consideration of many other people. The image I have is of the banks of a river, the firm but also yielding sides of a fast-flowing stream. And of course there's the discipline of a tight deadline. The book has to be out on the night the lecture is delivered.

So I had a sense of this both being *my* writing and it being so much more than my own creation, its genesis being something far greater, something so much more than any ambition or aspiration on my part as the author.

I remember the day I was to give the lecture in the evening, being too anxious and excited during the day to sit in the main sessions but sitting through the worship in the main meeting room at the beginning of the afternoon session. I looked out at the Friends assembled there and I didn't see individual faces, I just saw a tide of colour (of their clothes) and felt a wave of love and goodwill coming from them and returned to them from me. My heart literally felt opened and at that moment I knew it would be alright, that whatever I was led to say that evening would be 'in the life'. (Most lecturers read directly from a script. I had prepared one but it felt wooden so I prepared crib-cards and spoke to themes instead. One of the things people commented on afterwards was the memorable way I paused during the lecture, waiting in the silence to sense exactly how I was led to proceed. The process of giving the lecture illustrates the kind of vulnerability I spoke of earlier). Looking back at this experience I resonate with those words of John Woolman's we have been reminded of at this gathering: 'Love was the first motion'.

A different process of testing happened with the *Woodbrooke Journal – Tradition & Transition: open to the sacred yesterday and today*. This is really the written-up version of a (by then) much repeated vocal ministry, basically my presentation in the 'Rooted in Christianity, Open to New Light' project which Timothy Peat-Ashworth and I developed and took around meetings between 2001 and 2004. I have never written anything so quickly or with so little reworking of the material. Having been a student in Tim's classes, we entered into a dialogue which has continued for the last eight years. We started to offer work together with a sense of addressing wounds Friends and attenders might be carrying from their religious (Christian) past. We felt we were under concern in the traditional Quaker sense and our idea of working together underwent a process of eighteen months of testing in clearness meetings with colleagues, discerning the right way forward. We applied for funding from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust to travel in the ministry and were asked to gain the support/oversight of a Quaker body such as Woodbrooke for our project (which we did). Being rejected for this initial funding in a clear and well-reasoned way was part of the testing of the concern. We ended up travelling to one General Meeting, fourteen Monthly Meetings and running nine residential events at Woodbrooke over a three-year period. Interest was still growing in the project when we felt it was right to lay it down.

We travelled together as minister/elder, each of us presenting material and the other prayerfully upholding the presenter. After each event we reviewed, encouraged and reworked the material together. The challenge was to keep the material fresh, to continue our 'dialogue in difference' in a way that was authentic and had life in it. In 2002 there was a slot in the Woodbrooke journal programme and I was asked to write up my part in the project. I sensed my job was not to be too clever or precious about the actual words. I was reminded of the words of Louis Pasteur: 'Chance favours a prepared mind'. With writing as ministry maybe grace favours a prepared heart? For whatever reason, the words just flowed.

And this relates to what I said about the vulnerability involved in writing as ministry. The author's job is one of emptying oneself of personal ambition, not being too attached to the outcome (once the ego's vanity has been appealed to by knowing that 'I'm going to be published again!'). In this case the material had been offered to several hundred Friends by the time it was written down; it had been tested by the rigorous process of presentation and discussion at many different kinds of meetings around the country. (With hindsight I see these meetings as threshing meetings – chances for theological discussion and even argument but where there were moments of great tenderness, of opening up and maybe convincement, moments when Something Else was apparent in the room.)

In the case of this fat manuscript an altogether different process of discernment has been at work. I was brought on board as co-author to help Jo Farrow finish a book she has been working on for the best part of ten years, a follow-up to her earlier book *The World in my Heart*. The discernment here was in a meeting with two trustees from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust where it was decided to offer funding to release me to write for six months. (The writing involved then took eighteen months!). This manuscript is now being

considered by Quaker Books (of Britain Yearly Meeting) and is at the editorial stage of pre-publication.

The current writing I am involved with is still only a draft which offers Friends and attenders in BYM a model of, and reflections by Tim and myself on, the spiritual diversity of our yearly meeting at the start of the C21st. This has arisen directly out of the ongoing conversation between the two of us but has been tested by students on the 'Equipping for Ministry' course at Woodbrooke on which we have taught together since the project ended. An earlier complete (we thought!) draft was tested by four readers, one of whom loved it, two of whom thought it was good but needed work and one of whom disliked it quite strongly. A complete reworking seemed called for and it is now very much a work in progress, currently going through the testing, honing and refining process I have been outlining.

In researching the topic 'writing as ministry' when I searched on the internet it was not surprising to be directed to the Earlham School of Religion in Richmond Indiana, that offers courses by that name. On their website I was drawn to an article by a former student on their course, Ingrid Fabianson. She writes:

"Writing is a ministry to the writer, the reader, to human history, and sometimes to the subjects. Working as a scribe or an inventor, writers may gather thoughts from a source of greater mystery than themselves. This is the miracle of writing: the transcendent does occur. Writers become pilgrims on a quest, searching for truth and clarity and sometimes, just sometimes, in the excitement of a carefully chosen phrase, an incarnation takes flight and the illuminated page becomes a holy grail. The tiny symbols perform an act of grace".

In her conclusion to this brief article she perfectly encapsulates my own hope as a writer:

"If I am able to share the awe I feel... or bring the beauty of our planet into focus, if I am able to give hope to one person who is grieving or set afire the courage of another, than I shall have ministered in words."

Her words remind me of something Jean Cocteau wrote: 'The poet does not ask for admiration; he wants to be believed'.

In conclusion I want to return to the theme of the vulnerability of the writer as minister (in my experience). I think of how earlier Friends used the words 'tender' in two distinct ways. On the one hand there was the tenderness of being kind, considerate, sensitive to one another. On the other they used it as a verb, 'to be tendered' – as in Margaret Fell's observation that 'the Light will rip you open'. It is, for some of us at least, the cost, the mark, of being faithful. Personally I struggle, almost constantly, with self-doubt. It is a cross I have to bear, linked with my perfectionism (the form my pride often takes).

I remember when I was at Woodbrooke, giving a presentation and worrying about it how it was received. Janey O'Shea, my tutor, said something wise about the giving of ministry that I shall never forget. Seeing my anxiety, my wanting to have 'got it right', my wanting to be liked and accepted by my audience, she said there is only one question that a minister had to ask themselves: 'Was I faithful?' I hear these words every time now that I prepare to give a talk, convincing myself that for all the times it has worked in the past, this time it will surely be a disaster. And I think this links with what I've suggested is one of the criteria of a true ministry of writing. Just as it is, hopefully, inspired and will have been subjected to testing, so too it must be 'answering' that of God in the reader. And this way of writing, I have found, necessarily speaks to the present condition of the writer. For me it is part of a process of surrendering, of not having my egoic self too invested in the writing itself, in the craft of writing – which can be a trap.

This is often not a comfortable process. I find the call to be a minister of the written word at times exhilarating and at others almost more challenging than I can bear. I question my discernment, I doubt my sincerity, my spiritual credentials ('Who do I think I am to hold

forth to others on things eternal'?) Yet all this *angsting* is worthwhile whenever I have the sense of having answered the sense of the Mystery in an other. The thing that confirms that I was faithful in my Swarthmore lecture is the number of people who have approached me since reading it to thank me for articulating something they couldn't put into words, for maybe challenging them but also confirming a precious experience of faith (particularly one that takes an unconventional form) that was hard, indeed almost impossible, to encapsulate.

To be a writer-minister, I have found, means being an avid (even compulsive?) reader, constantly noticing new material, absorbing, assimilating and (let's be honest) regurgitating the words of others that seem to us to be 'in the life'. As writers we are necessarily called to a ministry of listening – to others we meet in person and to those we 'meet' through the written word. I was at a talk given by a friend of mine recently and he said we have been used to going to talks such as the one he was giving and we have expected to hear inspired speakers. Part of what our world is crying out for today, he said, is *inspired listeners*.

Thinking of Patricia Loring's wonderful description of the Quaker way as 'a listening spirituality', I immediately saw this as one of our most precious gifts for the world today, part of our essential vocation as Friends in all our ministries and witness – to be inspired listeners in every situation. I have a particular sense of this myself in that I feel we're called to an unfamiliar, prophetic, kind of listening in this time. Some years ago, in Yearly Meeting in session, we were reminded of the sobering words of the Zen monk and poet Thich Nhat Hanh: 'Now is the time to hear within us the sound of the Earth crying'. That is a challenging listening ministry called for in this time.

I was struck in reading some of the proposed pieces for the new collection of the writings of young Friends by comments made by Kody Gabriel Hersh in his article 'Obstacles to Faithful Ministry'. He offers sound advice to all of us would-be ministers when he says, 'nothing will cripple a ministry more effectively than waiting until you are the perfect person to deliver it'. (This Friend knows my failings all too well). 'In order to serve God best,' he continues, 'I need to evaluate the gifts that I have now, not compare them to the gifts that I think I might have in future'. (Or, I might add, to the gifts *I* believe that *other people* already have!) The real question, he suggests is not, "Are my gifts ready?" but instead, "What work is best suited to what my gifts are right now?"

And of course, to state the blindingly obvious, the work of any kind of ministry is not an occasional, take-it-or-leave-it pastime; we're talking vocation here. You write because it is, in a sense, in your very nature, it is something you *have* to do. And for all the trials and tribulations I have describing here, it brings you joy in the execution and in the process of faithfulness and response, the answering and being answered. Thinking of vocation I am reminded of what Parker Palmer says in his deceptively little book *Let Your Life Speak: listening for the voice of vocation*: "The deepest vocational question is not "What ought I to do with my life?" It is the more elemental and demanding "Who am I? What is my nature?" This question, he suggests, leads to another. The Quaker teacher Douglas Steere 'was fond of pointing out that the ancient human question "Who am I?" leads inevitably to the equally important questions "Whose am I?" – for there is no selfhood outside relationship'. Only as we answer this question, Palmer suggests, can we 'discover the community of our lives'.

The challenge we face – as writers, as ministers, or simply as faithful human beings, is to "grow into our own authentic selfhood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we *ought* to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks – we will also find our path of authentic service in the world." He then links this with one of my favourite insights, from the theologian and novelist Frederick Beuchner who writes of vocation: 'The place God calls us to is the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet'.

I know that in considering my formation as a Quaker writer-minister the support and discernment of others has been crucial. And this is an ongoing process. I meet at least twice a year with my Faithfulness Group, three seasoned Friends who help me weigh up the options and sense the rightness of my leadings. I am encouraged (given heart) by them, to

help me get beyond what Kody Gabriel Hersh describes as the second obstacle to his ministry, which he describes as ‘getting stuck in my “head space”, the rationally-driven part of me that believes nothing without proof, and so is constantly confounded in any understanding of God’.

He certainly speaks to my own condition when he writes: ‘My faith, my ministry – indeed, everything about my life – falls apart when examined under the lens of rational “objectivity”’. This nineteen year-old Friend from Miami names perfectly for me the tyranny of this intellectual scepticism for a post-Enlightenment Quaker like myself:

“These occasional episodes of doubt and confusion are disruptive enough that even when they have passed, they make me doubt my fitness to minister. How can I be a faithful gospel minister without a constant certainty of God’s existence?”

But he offers me hope when he goes on to write that ‘ministry is less about belief and more about witness’. (Of course, I can doubt my faithfulness here as well!) He challenges and encourages me in equal measure when he says: “One does not need to intellectually accept any set beliefs or doctrine in order to minister ... The work of a Quaker minister is to be spiritually receptive and to manifest the goodness of God, not to expound it as doctrine.” Amen to that.

Being ‘spiritually receptive’ for me is also about the kind of vulnerability I have been describing; being open, being accessible to the inspiration of the Spirit in our lives. Of course all Friends are called to live that way. But those of us called to be ministers of the written word need to live by a particular sensibility (and sensitivity) in the fullest sense of the words. So please be tender with us in our fallibility. We don’t need to be treated as *prima donnas* but I ask you to bear in mind the image I had this weekend of us as ministers and you – as our editors and publishers – as our elders. I hope I have been able to convey something of the writer’s side of this joint enterprise, this common calling to faithfulness.