

## Quakers and Healing A Silent History

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### Introduction

I was fortunate to be welcomed into a liberal Quaker community, also known as the Religious Society of Friends, during a time of exploration about what healing means and the role of those with healing ministries. Both of those words—*healing* and *ministry*—seemed unclear for Friends, and together, they appear to speak to a timely issue: What is the role of Quakers who have healing ministries? Healing is complex because it seems to be connected to two things about which Friends are uncertain and not in consensus: a history of healing “miracles,” and Jesus Christ. The whole concept of ministry is sensitive because of the egalitarian nature of “unprogrammed” Friends—unprogrammed meaning that there is not a minister or pastor. Believing that there is “that of God” within each of us means that a minister or pastor is unnecessary, and many meetings (the Quaker equivalent of “church” or “congregation”) want to be as nonhierarchical as possible. Still, Friends are involved in talking about these issues.

George Fox was the founder of Quakerism in the 1650s in England. His *Book of Miracles* is an account of over 170 “miracles” performed, including raising people from the dead. Upon his death, the *Book* was not published with his journals and other papers. In fact, it was only in the 1930s that the accounts resurfaced and the text was reconstructed. I found that many Friends had not heard of or read it. Is it simply that there is no knowledge of the healing history, or is there something more to it? The majority of the Friends I spoke with did not want to be identified. This isn’t because Quakerism is a secretive environment where people cannot express their opinions; rather, I think this stems in part from the Quaker belief in unity and consensus: Friends are responsible for what they say and do outside of Meeting. It is very “Quakerly” to want to be in unity and to find common ground.

As I became more and more involved with Friends—especially those with healing ministries—

I came to understand and hypothesize three things:

1. *Healing is not curing.* The Quakers I spoke with were unanimous in this. The healing history of Quakers and, arguably, of Christians is associated with curing—the miraculous removal of a physical ailment and the restoration of health. The Friends I spoke to rejected the idea of healing being the same as curing. Therefore, healing today may not be miraculous; the Quaker history of George Fox is not necessarily parallel to current beliefs about “Quaker healing.” Moreover, the healing miracles that Fox performed were attributed to and in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.
2. Although historically Christian, today, liberal Friends do not have an exclusively Christian theology.
3. Within the Quaker community, healing ministries appear to be secondary to the Quaker commitment to social justice work.

In my research, I focused on Liberal Friends within New England Yearly Meeting. I was not in contact with the Evangelical Friends—a group that is more explicitly Christian, conservative, and often pastored—meaning they have a minister. I used a structured interview at first but found that many informants preferred a narrative style. Toward the end of the fieldwork, I had all but abandoned the structured interview. Additionally, as I was invited to, I participated in prayer circles, weekly meeting for worship, and a retreat in healing for New England Friends.

My informants were articulate, intelligent, and thoughtful. They were Friends whose professions, jobs, or interests were in healing—as traditionally or medically defined (physicians, massage therapists, acupuncturists, and Reiki practitioners)—and those working in the public and mental health fields, a chaplain, poets, intercessory prayer practitioners, and retreat leaders.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, as I thought about the stacks of data that I was accumulating and

feeling like things weren't lining up, one of my informants said something that made everything click: "Quakerism seems so individualistic but it's just the opposite. Indeed, at first glance, Quakers—particular liberal Quakers—seem so individualistic: they have no creed, they are not in agreement about Christianity, there are Buddhist and Pagan and Christian Quakers. I, too, was of the mindset that Quakers were quite individualistic. However, as I began to analyze my data, I realized that, by and large, it's just the opposite. Friends may follow their own leadings and their own path, but it seems that they are acutely aware that they do it all within and are responsible to their Quaker community.

### Healing and Healing Ministers

What is "healing" for Friends? Healing is connected with community and with being relational. Over and over, Friends referenced the idea of community as healing. For example, one Friend who is a massage therapist told me: "[It's] about the quiet and being relational—making a connection." Another said: "Well I also think that healing comes through the community. And I don't know that I have it very well verbalized or anything like that but, you know, in that sense of 'holding people in the light.' . . . I often experience meeting for worship as feeling that it is creating a kind of healing energy and the possibility of healing in community." ("Holding people in the light" is roughly similar to saying, "I'm praying for you.")

Healing is also about intention—holding an intention for the greatest good to come to that person, as opposed to holding the expectation that a miracle or cure will take place. The idea seems to be that we can't know or be attached to the outcome. To illustrate this point, one Friend said healing can occur, "Simply being present and being open to what happens." Connected to this was the idea that God can use us to heal, but God—Quakers also used the word "Spirit"—alone is responsible for the healing. I would like to focus on this point as it relates to the idea of curing: "Healing is not curing." My informants were certain of that.

For the Friends I interviewed, curing seemed to be connected to physical or medical healing and miracles—the sort that George Fox did and, arguably, that which Jesus of Nazareth is credited with in the New Testament of the Christian Bible. Quakers, even during the time of George Fox, were criticized and persecuted for their claims of miracles. Indeed, his book is titled "Book of *Miracles*," not "Book of *Healing*." Holding up this book as an example of

"Quaker healing" may be tenuous ground for Friends who want to make their case for healing, on the one hand, while perhaps not wanting to align themselves with miracles and Christianity, or an exclusively Christian theology, as several Friends alluded to, on the other.

Only three of sixteen informants identified themselves as Christian in the historical and traditional sense. I posed the question to my informants in this way: Given that, historically, Quakers were Christian, do you consider yourself a Christocentric Friend or Christian? While one Friend told me that, "If Quakers are Christian, then I'm not Quaker," more often I was told that while personally appreciative of Christianity, they were also appreciative of Buddhism, Taoism, and other religions. As John Calvi, a Released Friend—meaning that his Meeting formally recognizes and supports his healing ministry of massage therapy and energy work primarily with survivors of sexual abuse, torture, and persons living with AIDS—told me:

The first thing that occurs to me is that I had a visitation from Jesus while I was working on a Salvadoran woman who had been tortured by the military down there. And when Jesus came into the room there was no doubt about who he was and what his light meant and the amount of compassion that he had. So on one hand, I think that that makes me a Christocentric Friend. Now, when I was working on the Cambodians who had been tortured by the military in their country, I had a visitation from Buddha while I was doing the work. And in some ways, I think that that makes me a Buddhist because I could feel who he was—he's very different from Jesus. In some ways, I'm waiting for Muhammad. There might be some Friends who would define that differently but I certainly understand myself as someone who knows Jesus and sees the work in the world.

I then asked, "Would you then consider yourself to be Christian?" And John responded, "Yes. And Buddhist. Because I know the essences of both from those visitations. . . ."

When asked about his beliefs, another Friend replied, "That's a good question, and I often ask myself that question." He went on to say that he feels a connection to Jesus but he's uncertain what that means. He continued: "I wonder . . . what is it, really, to be a Christian? To believe that Jesus Christ was God? I don't believe that. Do I believe that he was really here? I do believe that. I believe that he was really here."

"I wonder, what it is really, to be a Christian." This summarizes a common sentiment I heard from many—but certainly not all—Friends. As it relates to healing, perhaps one part of what it would mean

to be Christian would be to believe in miraculous healing—that is, curing. As a non-Christian Friend told me: “Healing is just part of my belief in our access to Spirit. If God is a loving God, then Spirit is available, but I don’t think God heals. I don’t think we heal, ourselves, either. I know everyone says that healing moves through us, but if that is God, then that gets into God intervening in history. So if a baby lives or dies, God decides? No, I don’t want to get into that.”

Perhaps to get “into that” would be to get into the “miracles” that George Fox performed in the name of Jesus Christ. As a Christian Friend told me, “I think one of the challenges with liberal Friends is that there was a large influx of new membership during the [19]60s, particularly around antiwar status.” He goes on to say that, while this is a positive thing, “I think the repercussion and why there is this tension between Christian language and Universalist language is that many people came to Friends because of social action.” As a result, there are some Friends who do not recognize the Christian history of Quakerism, but rather, see Quakerism, “as primarily a gathering of spiritually minded people around specific social issues.”

“A gathering of spiritually minded people around specific social issues” aptly describes Quakers and their commitment to social justice.

### **The Peace Testimony and Healing**

The Quaker Peace Testimony is central to Quakerism. In fact, in 1947 the Friends Service Council of London (FSC) and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) of Philadelphia were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for the relief work they did stemming from the Peace Testimony. The Peace Testimony is Quaker commitment to bear witness to nonviolence, not just in times of war, but at all times and in all aspects of life. This often comes across in Quaker commitment to social action and engagement. As one Friend told me: “That’s one thing that can always be said about Quakers: we’re practical in terms that we’re practicing. If you believe that there is “that of God” within you, then of course, you have to act. I mean, [that’s] the imperative to do it.”

When I began to ask Friends if social justice and healing were connected, one person said something striking: “It would be nice if they were.” She went on to say that it is her perception that the Quakers who focus on social justice “don’t seem to be the same people who are focused on the mystical—they don’t seem to be the same ones doing energy work.” She gave an example of the two groups she perceives.

Workshops are held at the yearly Quaker conference, and “the people at ‘Exploring the inner light through meditation’ are not the same as the ones at the workshop on ‘What are we going to do about Nicaragua?’” She teaches some workshops that are about healing and “the mystical,” as she described it, and “one of the social reform folks” told her that “he wouldn’t touch my workshop with a ten-foot pole.” However, she adds, there might be an overlap between healing and social justice in AIDS or hospice work; “but otherwise they’re not connected.” This speaks to one of my informants in particular: John Calvi.

The other informants seemed to hold up John Calvi and his work as an example of the important and effective healing work that is done “in a Quaker context.” As a Released Friend, his Quakerism and his healing work are directly connected. His healing work is primarily with AIDS patients and with survivors of sexual abuse or torture. This may be why, in part, John Calvi’s healing work appears to be so supported: it can be seen as social justice work.

The Peace Testimony is so central to Quakerism that it can overshadow Quaker healing ministries and history. One Friend expressed his frustration with his perception of a lack of support for Friends with healing and prayer ministries. “Quakers today don’t know our own history.” He went on to say: “A lot of Friends today believe what they want to believe about Quakerism and jump on board with peace, nonviolence, and social justice, but they won’t look past that to healing.” He later declared that Friends are “Gung-ho” about social justice and will support you if you go off to protest something and get arrested. Your family will be fed, they’ll pay your fine, but when it comes to healing, none of that applies. There is “Yankee reserve and it’s an uphill battle to get support that we think we need.”

### **End Note**

In a book titled *Quakers in Boston*, published almost thirty years ago, the author, a member of Friends Meeting at Cambridge, recounts the more than three hundred years of Quakerism in Boston. He concludes with this personal statement:

Quakerism at all times has included two elements. On one hand, there has been a sensitivity to inner guidance; yet on the other hand, Quakerism has also been an outward way of life, a witness, a form of behavior. There have always been distinctive Quaker attitudes, even a “Quaker lifestyle”. The relative importance of these two aspects has varied among Friends from time to time: at one time greater emphasis has been placed upon the inward or “mystical” aspect, at another on the outward conduct.

During some periods, therefore, Friends have seen the Quaker life-style as primarily derived from inner guidance, inwardly motivated; during others it has seemed right for Quaker conduct to be enforced by outward rules and social pressure. Historically, the emphasis varied.<sup>1</sup>

These elements continue to vary today and New England Friends are continuing to reflect on this tension. I am grateful that the Friends welcomed me into their community and trusted me with their insights and thoughts during this process and time of exploration. The Friends were very generous in

their hospitality. In turn, following true Quaker tradition, I hope that I have been faithful and clear in all that I have recounted of my experiences and insights of healing in the New England liberal Friends community.

**Note**

1. George A. Selleck, *Quakers in Boston: 1656–1964*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Friends Meeting at Cambridge, 1976), 270–71.