

How do our journeys and experiences in academia inform us as Friendly scholars, teachers and students? How do we move beyond the Quaint Quaker and into cyberspace as Friends, with “the grace of great things”? The essays in this issue, which grew out of the June 2014 conference of the [Friends Association for Higher Education](#) at [Haverford College](#), address these matters forthrightly.

Janet Gray, who teaches in the Women’s and Gender Studies program at The College of New Jersey, shares with us her process and trepidation in approaching online education, finding that the work of Rose Braidotti on *The Posthuman* (2013) helped her “become” open to the possibilities of such teaching.

Julie Meadows, who runs *The Generous Reader*, a midwifery service for academic writers, also shares her journey of living the Quaker values of peace and integrity by practicing plain speech, honesty and intellectual hospitality in the academic settings so infused with doubt and critique, of creating “cracks” in others’ work.

Due Quach, an MBA and founder of Calm Clarity, provides us with an insider’s view of the experience of first-generation students who have made it to college against all odds, including through harrowing experiences—and then find themselves unable to realize

their potential. Her work and mission is to develop a mindfulness process for such students, using the tools of neuroscience and meditation practices.

Diane Reynolds, Ohio University Eastern, digs into the evolution of the term and practice of plain-ness for Friends, beginning with its geographical references and unearthing the development of the pastoral romance and anti-modern posture that attached to Quakers.

Finally, we are pleased to include two poems by the late Joan Joffe Hall, of Storrs Friends Meeting in Connecticut. Dr. Hall was the first woman hired for a tenure-track position in the English Dept. of the University of Connecticut, in 1963. She helped found the women’s studies program at UConn, as well as the creative writing and film study programs. A tireless advocate of women’s rights and gender equity, she was also a gifted poet.

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FAHE ANNUAL CONFERENCE
June 18-21, 2015



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Posthuman Right Relationships: Can There Be a Quaker Cyber-Pedagogy?

*Janet Gray
The College of New Jersey*

One of my summer 2014 projects was to design my very first online course. I had mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, I felt that I'd be contributing to the downfall of higher education. On the other, it was a chance to avoid becoming a fossil by stepping up to the challenge of educating in ways that are "worthy of the present." I was skeptical of both responses; resistance smacked of nostalgia, but I knew how readily we slip into collaboration with destructive trends, especially when there's a stipend involved, as there was in my case.

I teach at The College of New Jersey, which unabashedly prides itself on its *US News and World Report* rating as the best public institution of its type in the northeastern United States. Despite misgivings many faculty share about the quality of online instruction, the college had begun allocating resources to the development of online courses. We as an institution have to keep up with the trend, and we need to make money, but the courses have to be good in ways that carry the TCNJ brand of intensive courses, smaller class sizes, and closer student-teacher relationships.

It was a puzzle that intrigued me. I'd had good experiences with online assignments, including alternate class sessions to substitute for classes cancelled for bad weather, but I assumed that the online assignments worked because of the effort the students and I put into building community face to face in my classes—one manifestation of my

commitment to Quaker (or Quakerish) educational practices. What if we never meet in person? What if we didn't have a chance to share an inward/outward, same-and-different, embodied experience, gathered together around the warmth and wonder of what Parker Palmer calls "the great thing"?

In proposing a conversation about this topic for the FAHE conference, I wanted advice from a gathering of Quaker educators about how to do online courses. What can Quakerism contribute to the construction of "right relationships" in online pedagogy? In cyberspace, what does it look like to greet "that of god in every man," or as we prefer today, "that of god in every person"? Is it time for a further revision: that of god in every cyborg? But as I prepared, I got excited about exploring a mysterious theoretical question that lurked behind the questions I initially posed: Can Quakerism be posthuman? And what does that even mean?

My comments below draw on one of many possible sources on posthumanism: Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman*, published in 2013. Braidotti is appealing to me because of her adeptness with the relevant theory, and because her insistence on an affirmative ethic for intervening in the inhumane aspects of the posthuman condition lends itself to the framing of right relationships in online pedagogy.

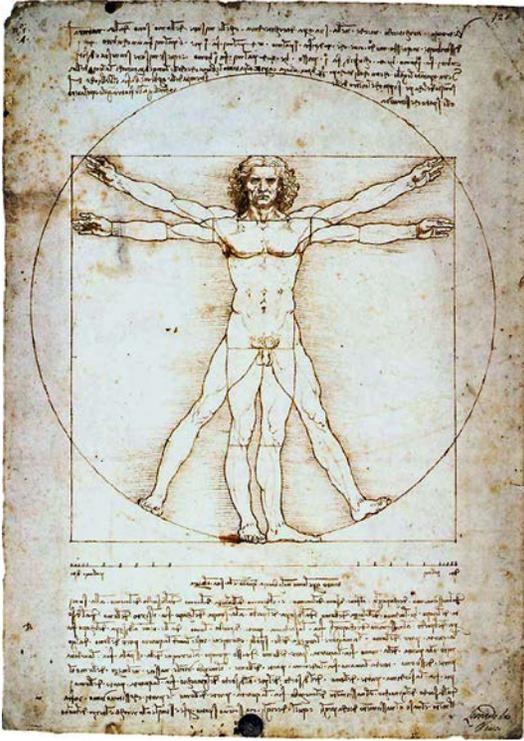


Fig. 1 Vitruvian Man: The “human” that we’re post

What is the human that we’re post? It’s Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, the subject of Enlightenment humanism: man as the measure of all things—the notion that mankind has an almost unbounded capacity for individual and collective self-perfection through the use of secular, scientific rationality, accompanied by faith in the intrinsically moral powers of human reason. The problem is that this notion masquerades as a universal, when it’s actually a historically constructed convention that functions as a regulatory standard. As a norm, it treats differences as a problem, but it also requires differences in order to affirm its superiority. So it functions through a dialectic of self (the human) and other (the less-human, the nonhuman)—and thus is complicit in a whole range of exclusionary practices, such as gender and race oppression,

defensive nationalism, colonialism and imperialism, genocide, and the destructive exploitation of nature. This notion of the human ultimately leads to the collapse of humanism by bringing on what Braidotti calls the “anthropocene” biogenic age, our current age, when “the Human has become a geological force capable of affecting all life on this planet” (p. 5).

We can’t avoid the posthuman condition, Braidotti says. We’re in it. She describes it as a bipolar experience that breaks down dualisms of nature and culture. On the down side is a negative unity with all of life through our common vulnerability to cataclysm—which can generate solidarity, but also produces xenophobia and technological violence. On the up side is a sense of euphoria about the possibilities of the extension of human capabilities through technology. Technology, Braidotti insists, is in itself morally neutral, but is widely exploited for inhumane purposes—what Braidotti calls “necrotechnology.” As profit-making enterprises know, technology is loaded with creative potential, and Braidotti wants to promote ethical appropriations of that creative potential.

In framing an ethical response to the ups and downs of the posthuman condition, Braidotti rejects a nostalgic return to humanistic universals. She also wants to counter the negativity of common victimhood with affirmative bonds. She proposes a model of critical posthuman subjectivity that I find promisingly compatible with Quaker thought; it’s basically an expansive framework for thinking through right relationships. She conceives of nature and culture not as oppositions but as a mediated continuum, and takes what she calls a

“matter-realist” approach to call for non-anthropocentric human alliances with the “dynamic self-organizing structure of life,” which she calls “Zoe.” We are in it and it is beyond us; our becoming is codetermined with the becoming of others in intersecting environmental, social, and psychic ecologies. Braidotti describes her approach as “post-secular,” meaning that it aims to release the historic oppositional tensions between religious faith and humanistic reason. I don’t find it a stretch to see congruences between holding “Zoe” as a central value and Quaker understandings of seeking the Spirit, or of the pagan and Buddhist-based spiritual practices (such as mindfulness meditation) that are attractive to many Quakers. Valuing life, understood as dynamic interconnectedness, is certainly consistent with Friends’ testimonies.

As for the implications of Braidotti’s ethical posthumanism for online education: she would see it as a challenge to be worthy of our times, to pursue inquiry in ways that respect “the complexities of the real-life world we are living in.” One aspect of posthuman becoming is that we are becoming-machine. Our bodies are a part of the nature-culture continuum, and technological devices alter and extend our bodies not only in ways that serve the for-profit values of efficiency and productivity, but also in ways that express Zoe by processing our energies and facilitating interrelations and assemblages—new potential spaces for building right relationships. In other words, there is that of Zoe in every cyborg.

Braidotti’s framework for an affirmative ethics of posthumanism is based on a

process-oriented concept of the subject geared toward creating possible futures. The criteria for her framework are that ethical posthuman practices (1) are nonprofit, (2) emphasize collectivity, (3) accept relationality across differences, (4) experiment with and actualize possible alternative futures, and (5) create new links between theory and practice. All of these criteria seem to me quite doable in online pedagogy.

A more expansive framework for online pedagogy can be drawn from Braidotti’s criteria for posthuman critical thinking. All of these criteria, but especially the last two, seem to me to open promising spaces for the practice of right relationships.

1. Accurate mapping and ethical accountability: Map power relations and our own location in them to account for the situated, partial, and limited nature of our claims to knowledge.
2. Alternative ways to figure the subject: Highlight the in-between processes of becoming, pursuing affirmative alternatives to the dominant vision of a static, singular subject.
3. Transdisciplinarity: The knowledge we need in order to create accurate maps of power is scattered and multi-centered, implying a release of the authority of separate disciplines of knowledge.
4. Nonlinearity: Pursue critical practices (in the sciences as well as the humanities) that trace *becoming* rather than *progress* and link the topic of study to “its many ‘outsides’.”
5. Memory and imagination: Multiply the possibilities of connections by using

memory and imagination to actively reinvent a self that is “joyfully discontinuous” rather than unitary and in opposition to the not-self, the other.

6. Defamiliarization: Disengage the knowing subject from the normative vision of the self to become relational in ways that connect to multiple others (pp. 163-9).

Exploring posthuman theory helped me to process some skepticism I had about how the answer to my question about whether there can be a Quaker cyber-pedagogy would turn out. Quaker thought historically coincides with the history of “the human” and, together with some key moments of resistance, has contributed to the notion of a singular unitary self. I suspected that Quaker educators often collaborate with the unitary notion of the “human” represented by da Vinci’s Vetruvian man in a way that would translate roughly as the Quaker subject as the measure of all things.

In the spirit of creating new connections between theory and practice, however, I do now think there can be a Quaker cyber-pedagogy. A faculty study group on Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge at TCNJ embraced the insight that technology needs to be integrated into courses in purposeful ways, driven by pedagogy and content rather than by the beeps and whistles of particular new media. I think Quaker educators could expand this insight: the learning community and its relationship to what we are studying—what Parker Palmer calls “the great thing”—come first; choices and uses of technological media need to serve the purposes of constructing and extending this

experience. I think that posthumanism challenges Quaker educational practice by compelling us to attend to our assumptions about the human, the subject, and therefore about ourselves as teachers and learners, how we construe and pedagogically construct our relationship to our fields of knowledge. For meeting this challenge, I find Palmer’s meditation on “the grace of great things” in *The Courage to Teach* endlessly useful and, returning to it, strikingly posthuman in its recognition of the virtues learning communities must practice in working through the partial, situated nature of knowledge:

We invite *diversity*...because diverse viewpoints are demanded by the manifold mysteries of great things.

We embrace *ambiguity*...because we understand the inadequacy of our concepts to embrace the vastness of great things.

We welcome *creative conflict*...because conflict is required to correct our biases and prejudices about the nature of great things.

We practice *honesty*...because to lie about what we have seen would be to betray the truth of great things.

We experience *humility*...because humility is the only lens through which great things can be seen—and once we have seen them, humility is the only posture possible.

We become *free*...because tyranny in any form can be overcome only by invoking the grace of great things. (pp. 107-8)

Whatever we teach, to treat it as a “great thing” is to recognize it as a lens on Zoe.

But right relationships in online pedagogy are not just theoretical. I will close with a few material problems that I think need to be mapped into creative envisionings of alternate possible futures for online education.

1. Unequal access. Access to the internet is increasing for lower income people globally, but is still related to financial means. A study of massive open online courses (MOOCs) offered by San Jose State University showed that even free courses did not reach underserved students.¹

2. Exploited labor. Over 60% of college instructors today are contingent faculty, an increase of 40% since 1970. Online education can contribute to the widespread trend of rendering academic work flexible and temporary--“on demand”—through the exploitation of intellectual labor at low wages.²

3. Pollution. We use less paper in online education, but the servers that support the internet pump carbon into the atmosphere, generally in locations remote to us. The industry is making progress with energy efficiency, but its carbon footprint is still large. IT services account for 2% of global carbon emissions, according to Greenpeace.³

4. Electronic wastes. The continual development of new softwares compels institutions and individuals to upgrade their hardware regularly. Computers become obsolete, incapable of handling a current platform, in just a few years. The disposal of e-wastes tends to follow a pattern of environmental racism, as toxic piles mount in disempowered communities globally.

An affirmative posthuman ethic, and Friends’ testimonies, would urge institutions promoting online pedagogy to address these material concerns.

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¹<http://remakelearning.org/tag/mooc/>

²<http://www.aaup.org/article/what-do-we-know-about-teaching-online#.VPNs-EuVtCQ>

³<http://time.com/46777/your-data-is-dirty-the-carbon-price-of-cloud-computing/>

Quaker Testimonies and Scholarly Practices: Plain Speech and Hospitality

*Julie Meadows
The Generous Reader*

My teaching identity has always been interwoven with my Quaker identity. I began my teaching career at a Quaker Middle School. I was handed Parker Palmer's *To Know as We Are Known* before I even started teaching, and the principle advice passed on to me regarding my new craft was to "Love the kids and be patient." My scholarly identity, until recently, was mostly separate, even though my area – social ethics – would seem to make for an easy integration of the two. In this essay, I describe a path of integration I have been walking down, and some questions it has raised for me, concerning the practice of plain speech, honesty and hospitality.

In the fall of 2012, I was invited by a friend to fill in for her on a panel at the national meeting of the American Academy of Religion. The book to which I was to respond, Richard Kearney's *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, invited me to reflect on the question, "Where do you speak from?" Taking that invitation seriously, I decided to see whether I could formulate a response speaking from my identity as a Quaker. That meant "trying out" plain speech at a national academic conference.

This was scary. Even though the Kearney people were not the people I would usually hang out with, inter-religious dialogue not (yet) being one of my central interests, I was standing in for a Boston University theologian, and I

did not want to let her down. And, *because* the Kearney people were not the people I would usually hang out with, I did not want to appear to be dense to them. Would they recognize that my simple speech was a conscious choice? Or would they just think I was not very smart?

Worse, my commitment to plain speech began to impact the content of my talk. Claiming the location I was speaking from meant that I also began to engage the book as something that impacted me. This meant that I was no longer analyzing an academic text for its admirable academic qualities – though one could certainly do that with this text, and one of the other speakers did that with aplomb. I found myself, instead, taking the book quite personally, and writing a conference paper about how it related to my life. If you have been to the AAR, you know that this is *not* how things are done.

This did not mean my paper was all about me. I did find my way to some questions and suggestions for the author, the result of me, in my location, seeing things differently from him, in his. I said some things about discernment, and got to mention Quakers running naked through the streets. The choice to welcome strangers was a central theme of the book, and I said that I thought that this was not just a decision we make, but that being welcomed by others helps us learn how to be welcoming ourselves.

While the ooohs and ahhs went to the intellectual tour-de-force of a paper on the panel (a paper that may well have set a record for the number of major philosophers and theologians referenced in the space of one twenty-minute talk), I was relieved to find that no one seemed embarrassed by me and my plain speech. Kearney responded graciously, and asked me for a copy. I found myself inhabiting a whole new way of being a scholar in public, one that risked taking books personally, and one in which my identity and commitments as both a Quaker and a scholar were explicit, even as I was discovering how to weave them together.

Once I allowed myself to explore how one Quaker testimony related to my identity as a scholar, I started to be nudged by other conflicts or intersections. The next one came into focus as I was editing the introduction of a friend's book. My friend Kate is incredibly smart, and also exceptionally gracious. She is the kind of person who never complains about anything, who takes care of people around her, and who reflects deeply on the ethics of her scholarship. But, in this introduction, she completely demolished another scholar. All that remained was dust.

I did the same thing, in one section of my dissertation: I tore down the work of one of the scholars I most admire, and did it well. I stomped her into the ground.

It troubled me then; now I began to reflect on it more specifically in light of Friends' peace testimony.

What conditions lead otherwise gentle scholars to tear down other people's

work? Do the conventions of academia actually encourage us to do this? And, attacks aside, what about the overall critical stance of academic scholarship? Aren't we trained to advance our own work by ferreting out flaws and omissions in other people's work? Is it possible to envision a more constructive approach to scholarship that would be more consonant with the peace testimony? What would that look like?

After helping Kate find a tone more consistent with her own generous spirit, I asked her about the mean paragraph. Where had it come from? One of the members of her dissertation committee had thrust the article upon her on the eve of her defense; she had resented having to incorporate it. The same thing was true in my case – the exhausted final chapter of my dissertation lapsed into overly pointy and gouging criticisms of other scholars, even while the rest of it called us to be more attentive and humane. Other people I have talked to have similar stories, although not everyone sees it as a problem. All's fair in love and war and academic jockeying for position.

The scholarship of attack seems to me to be a cheap form of power, one to which we might have recourse when we are exhausted, or worried, or under pressure to come up with something. But since academia sometimes seems to be designed to make sure that we are exhausted, worried, and under pressure, how do we resist, especially if the larger academic culture appears to celebrate its own special kinds of brutality?

One answer is that there is some value just in naming the problem. One of my mentors, Pamela Hall, is a master of

naming, and her ability to call things what they are, and name them directly as unfair and unjust, has been very powerful for me. Naming the problem makes the stakes more evident; the standard which I hope to uphold is made explicit. We might, then, help each other by working to name this kind of conflict between scholarly norms and Quaker testimonies. Surely this is also plain speech, in a different, and perhaps even more important, context.

But we can go further, and scrutinize the underlying conditions that tempt us to make easy but destructive uses of power. This is where my humane mentor has been so powerful, in directly challenging the value systems in which we are entangled. Scholarship becomes moralized in such a way that at times our worth as human beings seems to depend on our success in writing and publishing. Certainly, our value as scholars does. Succinctly and clearly, Pam Hall detaches one from the other, reminding me that academia cannot claim to be the whole or only world, much as it may try. “You are not a bad person if you don’t write,” she told me, “and you are not a good person if you do.” I cannot overstate how crucial it has been for me to be offered such a clear-eyed view of the academic world. If we can do this for each other, for our colleagues, and for our students, it will be no small thing.

Beyond the ways that we may feel ourselves to be under siege by the pressures of academia, what about the larger critical stance of scholarship? We are trained to look for weaknesses and flaws in arguments; these form the cracks into which we can anchor our own work. But this forms us morally: it

shapes us as people. We learn to approach work with doubt rather than with hospitality; we learn to keep ourselves at a distance. I tell my students, once we awaken from our dreaming innocence, there is no return to it. One example: I teach a book by Carol Adams called *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. Once the book with its many vivid images makes the connection between woman as meat and meat as woman, they go out and see it everywhere – whether they want to or not.¹ We cannot unsee what we have seen, and we cannot easily uninhabit the critical stance.

This impacts our lives, and our students’ lives as well. In a recent opinion column in the New York Times titled “Young Minds in Critical Condition,” Michael S. Roth observes that our emphasis on teaching students to think critically risks teaching them to be cynical and detached.

In campus cultures where being smart means being a critical unmasker, students may become too good at showing how things can’t possibly make sense. They may close themselves off from their potential to find or create meaning and direction from the books, music, and experiments they encounter in the classroom....²

Roth writes that, by learning to ‘debunk’ anything and everything, these students are learning *not* to commit to anything, not to take risks, not to feel awe, not to create. Roth writes that critical inquiry

¹ For the curious, Adams has a detailed website, <http://www.caroljadams.com/spom.html>.

² Michael S. Roth, “[Young Minds in Critical Condition](#),” *The New York Times*, Opinion: The Stone. May 10, 2014. Accessed May, 2014.

needs to be balanced by “exuberant performance in pursuit of excellence.”

champions of “messy participation and reverent beholding.”⁴

Creative work, in whatever field, depends upon commitment, the energy of participation and the ability to become absorbed in works of literature, art, and science.

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Our students need these to be whole, and so do we. Roth says that the liberal arts have become unbalanced, with “debunking” becoming increasingly dominant. Roth calls us to be and to teach, alongside “the sophisticated (and often ironic) spectator...the messy participant in continuing experiments or even the reverent beholder of great cultural achievements.”³

Roth’s piece offers us useful categories for recognizing scholarly work that we know and love, work that is consistent with the peace testimony. Creativity or reverence, and sometimes both, have transformed criticism into something far more powerful in the academic books I most love, the ones I read over and over again for what they have to say about how I might live life better. We ourselves need to be whole, to balance our well-cultivated critical faculties with a hospitality that overcomes our tendency toward doubt, and with a commitment that overcomes our self-distancing, even when this runs contrary to academia’s prevailing winds. In teaching and in writing, may we be

³ *ibid.* We may also want to teach them to attend with care, and invite them to fall in love. See Meadows, “Seduction and the Liberal Arts” in *Quaker Perspectives in Higher Education*, ed. Donn Weinholtz, Jeffery Dudiak, and Donald Smith, June 2014. Also available online in the November 2012 issue of *Quaker Higher Education*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Could Neuroscience Hold the Key to Closing the Education Divide?

*Due Quach
Calm Clarity*

As a Vietnamese refugee growing up in inner city Philadelphia, getting into Harvard was an unlikely dream come true. When I arrived at Harvard's campus in the fall of 1996, I had no idea that my life was about to implode because of post-traumatic stress disorder. In the end, my journey towards healing gave me a deep personal understanding of how poverty and trauma impact the brain and of the capacity of the brain to recover. I hope that sharing these insights will shed light on the challenges that first-generation college students face and how to help them succeed.

Carrying Trauma to College

I was completely unprepared for the catapult from the bottom of the world's pyramid to its most elite ivory tower. I had no idea how to make sense of this new environment. Academically, I made the dean's list in my freshman year. Culturally, I was disoriented. Surrounded by overachievers, I put up a front to hide my insecurity and alienation.

By my sophomore year, I was worn out. Not only was my family unable to support me through this challenging transition, they resented the way I had changed at Harvard and accused me of being ashamed of them. Meanwhile, the intense stress was bringing the traumas I had suppressed to the surface, and I began to experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. I had

nightmares full of flashbacks and increasingly found myself dissociating. I was overwhelmed by uncontrollable crying fits and bouts of rage. I dealt with this by further withdrawing and isolating myself, locking myself in a negative spiral. Soon, I could not function enough to complete problem sets and write papers. Luckily, I found a refuge in the art department and discovered I could mask my new cognitive disability as an art major.

The PTSD continued to worsen. I had panic attacks about graduation because I had no idea what would happen afterwards. The depression and anxiety became so debilitating that I could not get out of bed to go to classes. I was overcome by anhedonia and simple choices like what to eat or what to wear took forever. My self-talk was a broken record of negativity, telling me I didn't belong anywhere and was completely alone in the world. Eventually, the voice in my head became so dark that I decided to get help.

When I finally sat down with a psychiatrist, he asked me to walk through my life story:

I was born in Saigon after the Vietnam War. When I was about 6 months old, my family escaped by boat and nearly starved at sea when we finally reached land. We then spent about a year in refugee camps in horrible living conditions, where I suffered

malnutrition and a series of near fatal diseases. My family then settled in inner city Philadelphia, which was like a war zone. Relatives and friends were attacked, robbed, and shot. My parents ran a takeout restaurant in a dangerous neighborhood in Philadelphia, which was also our home. My recurring nightmares are about a customer getting shot at our front door.

It did not take long for the psychiatrist to conclude that the early childhood traumas impacted the development of my brain.¹ It was a bittersweet realization to learn that childhood adversity could be a life sentence. Despite breaking through so many barriers, my brain turned against me! I wanted to know: how can I recover? He recommended trying medications that targeted neurochemistry, though there was no guarantee that these would work. I began taking Zoloft.

I found this situation unacceptable and became determined to beat it. To the psychiatrist and counselors who treated me, I felt I was just a patient, a case. It was up to me to take ownership of my recovery. I did not have health insurance for most of my life and anticipated that I would not necessarily have insurance after graduation. I had a ticking clock to wean myself off medication.

I started by reading about the brain and holistic approaches to healing. I began eating healthier, exercising regularly,

¹ Eventually, the condition I had would be called complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) or complex trauma which describes exposure as children to multiple traumatic events and chronic stress. It is likely this term would apply to many people growing up in the inner city.

and building a stronger social support network. I learned to drop negative rumination before becoming drained. Steadily, I began to see improvements. Eventually, when I graduated, I got off medication and never relapsed.

Making sense of my journey to help others

After graduating, I learned that the difficulties I experienced are common among first-generation college students. The shame of poverty and the stigma of mental illness drove many of us to hide our struggles. Many compensate by putting up a front but when the challenges become overwhelming, then we do not have a social support network to help us. I knew I wanted to do something about this issue, but I had no idea how. It would eventually take more than twelve years for me to create a program with the potential to make a difference.

In the meantime, I built a career in management consulting and earned an MBA from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. Then I worked in private equity in Vietnam and reconnected with my ancestral roots. Finally, after paying off my student loans, I began to think about my earlier aspirations to help young people facing similar challenges. After reading fascinating articles on how meditation relieves stress, changes the brain, and is making an impact in inner city schools, I traveled to Dharamsala, India, to study meditation directly at the source.

What I experienced during the meditation retreats aligned with findings I had read from neuroscience, behavioral economics, positive psychology, and

psychoneuroimmunology. I realized that the body is actually a sophisticated bio-feedback system. Research has shown that mind, brain and body are interconnected and that our thoughts impact our health. Thoughts correspond to neuro-circuits and trigger a cascade of neurotransmitters, chemical agents, hormones, and other messengers that feed into the immune system. While meditating, I felt how thoughts and feelings were intertwined and embodied. There were clear differences when I focused on a positive thought or cherished memory versus a negative thought or painful memory. At the end of these retreats, I saw the world through a different lens and was much more peaceful and calm.

Developing the Calm Clarity Program

In 2013, I returned to Philadelphia and began to develop a neuroscience-based leadership curriculum aimed at helping people build resilience to toxic stress and enhance performance by rewiring the brain. My vision is to build a self-sustaining social enterprise that provides world-class leadership training to professionals and invests the profits to close the education divide. The focus of the programs are to:

- 1) increase the college graduation rates and well-being of low-income college students (nearly half drop-out in the first year).
- 2) train educators in inner city schools to address toxic stress and reduce burn-out. I believe that these endeavors will contribute to ending the trans-generational transmission of toxic stress in low-income communities.

The development of Calm Clarity benefited from the input of corporate and non-profit leaders who serve on the board of advisors. I also received guidance from experts, including Dr. Martin Seligman at the Penn Positive Psychology Center and Geri Summerville, who teaches program evaluation at the Penn School of Social Policy & Practice.

The heart of Calm Clarity is a simplified framework I developed to synthesize key findings from neuroscience in a way that teenagers can easily grasp and apply to real life. The framework explains that people have three emotional states that correspond to brain structure:

Brain 1.0: Our fight or flight system, rooted in “reptilian” brain structures which govern self-preservation. When Brain 1.0 is activated, we tend to feel angry, sad, hopeless, anxious, or afraid.

Brain 2.0: Our pleasure and acquisition system, rooted in “mammalian” brain structures which give rise to our social instincts, conditioned habits and addictions. When Brain 2.0 is activated, we feel compelled towards a specific reward. It drives us to chase carrots we believe are going to make us happy. However, the pleasure is short-lived and once it evaporates, we start a new chase. The term “hedonic treadmill” captures this phenomenon.

Brain 3.0: Our system for self-mastery and well-being, rooted in our neocortex, which gives rise to our capacity for learning, planning, creativity, and self-control. It also houses our values, ideals, and

aspirations. When Brain 3.0 is activated, we feel positive and centered in a sense of meaning and purpose. The Greek term “eudaimonia” describes this state, which I refer to as “calm clarity.”

All of us are subject to environmental priming or triggers that cause us to shift between these three states. Brain 2.0 converges into Brain 1.0 if we do not get what we want. When we are hijacked by Brain 1.0 or 2.0, our behaviors may undermine our long-term goals and well-being. Shifting into Brain 3.0 enables us to think straight, create, and collaborate. Triggers usually lie below conscious awareness and the neuro-circuits people use the most serve as the default autopilot setting of their brain. When we start to pay attention to how and when we shift between these states, we can start to pre-empt the triggers. As we change our patterns, we rewire our brains.

Albert Einstein said, “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” I believe most of the world’s problems are created when human beings are hijacked by Brain 1.0 or 2.0 and that people can only see the bigger picture and come up with solutions when Brain 3.0 is in the driver’s seat. In retrospect, I realized my recovery from PTSD involved shifting my autopilot from Brain 1.0 into Brain 3.0.

The Calm Clarity Program trains people how to exercise and develop Brain 3.0 until their autopilot runs in Brain 3.0. The program consists of ten interactive two-hour modules, which are focused on a specific set of social-emotional skills that support people to succeed and

flourish. A key part of the modules are contemplative practices (similar to those occurring during a Quaker meeting for worship) that strengthen Brain 3.0 circuits.

Preliminary Proof-of-Concept and Next Steps

Throughout 2014, I tested the Calm Clarity Program with groups across a wide range of backgrounds and ages, all of whom responded positively. I ran programs for high school students from neighborhood schools in West Philadelphia and from academic magnet schools like Masterman. With the support of Professor Elizabeth Mackenzie and students at the University of Pennsylvania, I ran a pilot workshop there in spring 2014. As an adjunct professor at Cabrini College, I taught Calm Clarity as a credit course in fall semester 2014. I have also run workshops for adults through the Cabrini Mission Corps, the Wharton Alumni Club, and Leadership Philadelphia. Each program provided an invaluable opportunity to gather feedback, refine the program, and design the program evaluation process.

The Cabrini College credit course provided the first opportunity to run the pre- and post- surveys developed to evaluate the program. The findings suggest that Calm Clarity had a positive impact on the students. The course was delivered as a mid-semester retreat over two consecutive weekends on November 8, 9, 15 and 16, 2014. The fifteen enrolled students (11 being first-generation college students) took the pre-survey prior to the course and the post-survey in early December around finals period. The validated assessment

instruments consisted of the Brief Resilience Scale, the General Self-Efficacy Scale, and the PERMA-Profilier (a multi-dimensional measure of well-being developed by the Penn Positive Psychology Center) and a new multi-dimensional stress assessment instrument I developed to measure peak stress levels and the frequency of toxic stress.

In this preliminary pilot, statistically significant changes were seen in the mean scores for resilience (up 13%), self-efficacy (up 10%), positive emotions (up 15%), meaning and purpose (up 11%), negative emotions (down 20%), and loneliness (down 24%). There were also significant reductions in peak stress levels (down 14%) and frequency of toxic stress (down 24%). These figures were strongly reinforced by testimonials from the students, such as this:

“Since my mother had passed away right before I started college, I felt like giving up on life. But I knew that she wouldn’t want me to do that...Honestly, this class not only encouraged

me to stay in school but to also focus on thinking positive and being a positive impact on others.”

~Freshman first-generation college student

Calm Clarity’s progress thus far has been achieved in lean start-up fashion, bootstrapped and run by a one-person-team. Over the next year, our priority will be to achieve financial stability by offering Calm Clarity as a professional leadership development program. To realize the social justice mission, it is necessary to raise funds, build a team, and develop collaborations with educational institutions. Our next steps include building training capacity and running a larger longitudinal study to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of the program.

To learn more about Calm Clarity, please visit www.calmclarity.org.

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An Evolving Rhetoric of Plainness: From “The high places must be thrown down within” to the Quaint Quaker

*Diane Reynolds
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This paper traces changes over time in the use of “plain” in Quaker contexts. It has changed from a word with rich multiple meanings and radical connotations to a term that increasingly describes quaintness and antiquarianism. In the 17th century, plainness (and simplicity¹) often meant an interior spiritual state. Later, the word plain shifted to signify outward forms, especially a style of dress and a rural ethos. This shift towards complacency and nostalgia in a term so integral to Quaker identity, should, this paper argues, disturb Friends.

This study emerges from the context of emotional geographic scholarship. This theoretic posits a multivalent “affective atmosphere” which, through a variety of discourses, creates an emotional perception around a group. While this paper focuses solely on written discourse, the approach helps underscore that Quaker identity has not developed in a vacuum but at least in part in the “in between” space between Quakers and the dominant culture, with the Quakers over time internalizing the non-threatening face they first projected

¹ Because of space constraints, this paper concentrates on the term plain. Plain and simple were often used interchangeably from early on. Simplicity, however, was from the start a more abstract term connoting a singleness or unity of vision and also, especially in England, could carry the negative connotation of being a simpleton.

to outsiders and which outsiders then reflected back to them.

Plain and Simple: How the words themselves were used

At Quakerism’s beginning in the mid-17th century, rich layers of connotation made the term “plain” an apt descriptor of the early Friends. According to the *OED*, as it does today, plain meant open, obvious and manifest, and as today, it also meant honest, unadorned, straightforward, frank and direct.

In addition, early Quakers explicitly tied their use of “plain” to the geographic feature describing flat, unencumbered ground. This became a potent metaphor to represented internal spiritual renewal.

In 1657, in “Ground of High Places and the End of High Places,” Fox wrote:

“Mark, the high places in the wilderness; the sword here must reach to the soul ... they must know the dry wind through the high places in the wilderness, and the sword ... is not this that which the sword comes against? is not this that which forgets the Lord? and must not this weep before there is peace, and the heart be prepared for the Lord, and the high places thrown down within ...”

Likewise, “by his Spirit,” wrote Margaret Fell in “True Testimony from

the Kingdom of God” in 1660, “he will remove the great Mountains of the Earth, and they shall become a plain ... for a new “Kingdom is arising.”

As George Lakoff argues in “Why it’s hard to replace the fiscal cliff metaphor,” conceptual metaphors with a spatial dimension are often more powerful than other kinds of metaphors. Lakoff speaks for example, of “the metaphor named ‘MoreIsUp,’ which he defines as “a neural circuit linking two distinct brain regions, one for verticality and one for quantity. It is a high-level general metaphor widespread throughout the world, and occurs in a vast number of sentences like “turn the radio up,” “the temperature fell,” and so on.”² In choosing “plain,” a term conjuring geographic lowness, Quakers fashioned a powerful and countercultural image.

Further, early Friends and their contemporaries understood a double-entendre in the now archaic meaning of “plain “ as “suffering,” “plaintive,” “lamenting,” or “complaint-ing.” The term called attention to their sufferings. They also understood the plain as “a scene of battle,” not a physical battle, but a contest for souls.³

² Lakoff, “Why it’s Hard to Replace the Fiscal Cliff Metaphor” *Reader Supported News*, Dec 4, 2012 (Accessed 5 Dec. 2012). <http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/14854-why-its-hard-to-replace-the-fiscal-cliff-metaphor>

³ From the *OED*: plain: “An expression of pain, grief or discontent; complaint, lamentation,” as in 1563’s: “Why didst thou keep back thy woeful plain?” or 1633’s “Thus with sweete sorrow did she sweetly plain her.” And “An open space as a scene of battle or contest.” According to Quaker Fran Taber, the use of plain to connote suffering was common through the 19th century.

Above all, plain described their role as levelers, not only of social distinctions and hence injustices, but as excavators of the true Christian faith from beneath a human mountain of ritual. To them, Christianity was low and “plain,” in all of “plains” multiplicity of meanings, not high or “airy.” They referred often to Isaiah 40 as they embraced the plain: “Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain (Isaiah, 40 3-4). And as at least one historian has noted, to the early Friends, these obstacles presented by human religious forms were “not just unnecessary but evil”⁴

Plainness, an interior spiritual state conceptualized as getting low and level and down off the false earthly mountain, so as to perceive without obstacle and from a humble perspective, opened one to Christ’s presence. It was a prerequisite to becoming a Quaker. One must get low to be lifted once again.

New Times

As the seventeenth century progressed, the physical dimensions of plain began to disappear.

Plain now shifted toward a person of humble origin or honest heart. As of yet, few references to plain dress existed, though even very early on, in 1669, George Fox writes in “Arraignment of Popery” that “no Ecclesiastical, person should wear any Coif, or wrought Night-Cap, but only plain Caps of black Silk, Satin or Velvet.” Frost cites an instance too, when, in 1655, Fox comments in the

⁴ Frost, 17.

Epistles that it is wasteful for the rich to put lace and ribbons on clothing and condemns colored ribbons, gold and powdered hair.⁵ But before 1680, these references were few.

By the 1680s, Friends, the apocalypse receding, began the process of becoming more acceptable to the outside world. Barclay's *Apology*, a work meant to help outsiders understand Friends sympathetically, discussed "plain" practices as outward forms, such as renouncing war and adopting plain dress and food. The *Apology* would, as well, provide a theological defense of plain style that was sensitive to class difference, explaining that renunciation could be calibrated to the level of privilege to which one was accustomed.⁶

Instances of "plain" used as interior spiritual metaphor dropped off markedly after 1680. During the 1680s meetings began codifying plain dress, a process that would last until the 19th century.

A 1717 poem shows a shift in metaphor away from venturing outward to seek the plain. "The Quakers Tea Table Overturned," a moral satire in verse, probably written by Yorkshire Quaker John Sutcliffe, uses metaphors of building hedges or walls to keep evil out.

As God had hedg'd his servant Job about.
Job and his to keep in and Satan out.
As the true church in holy record seen
Had under law and gospel been.
So common prudence wou'd dictate to men
A fence as necessary now as then.
Loose members to bind in society

⁵ Frost, 19.

⁶ Frost, 23

And therewithal keep out the enemy.⁷

Sutcliffe's poem describes a faith group that has shifted away from venturing out into the wilderness and encountering suffering. Now the suffering threatens to invade the Quaker community if people stray from outward conformity to plain living.

Pastoral and anti-pastoral

The early Quaker identification with the plain fits the framework of the anti-pastoral. William Empson, in *Some Versions of the Pastoral*, and following him, Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*, describe the pastoral as an art form that, during the 17th and 18th centuries, moved away from actual descriptions of peasant or rural life to what Williams called "an enameled world."⁸ The pastorals of the 16th to 18th centuries no longer "look[ed] ... at what the country was really like,"⁹ but became characterized by "the nature of [distant] observation, of the scientist or the tourist, rather than that of the working countryman."¹⁰ Likewise, for Empson, to whom Williams is indebted, the pastoral was "about" but not "by" or "for" the common person.¹¹

If urbanization, mercantilism, the rise of the middle class and the concentration of vast wealth in a few hands during the course of the 17th century divorced educated and well-to-do people from the plight of the

⁷ Oliver Pickering, "'The Quakers Tea Table O'verted': An Eighteenth-Century Moral Satire," *Quaker Studies*, 17/2 (2013), 244-64. Pickering names the author as Sutcliffe.

⁸ Williams, 18.

⁹ Williams, 18.

¹⁰ Williams, 20.

¹¹ Empson, 6.

countryside and the real life of the common person, Quakerism, especially in its embrace of plainness and simplicity, allowed people of relative privilege to cross class lines to embody what life was like for the poor person. Higher class Quakers, like Sarah Cheevers, Katherine Evans, and William Caton, actually suffered the violence, imprisonment, hunger and abuse more commonly endured by the “simple” person for whom justice was meted out unjustly.¹²

Both Quaker men and women, propelled by the explosion of spiritual energy that ignited the Friends’ movement, could break out of confining bonds of gender and class. Caton was not forced to stay, vaguely discontented, as the companion to a rich relation, nor was he forced to perform masculinity through entry into the army or mercantilism in order to escape domestic confines. Quaker women, without having to abandon an identity bound up in purity, could move from occupations such as housewife and schoolmarm to embrace a broader world. The discipline of plain or unencumbered obedience to the Light allowed all these individuals, at a price, to become less defined by a restrictive social structure

What were others saying about Quakers?

As Howard Weinbrot describes in *Literature, Religion and the Evolution*

¹² Fox, for example, as quoted by Moore, p. 120, railed against the way the legal system dealt more harshly with poor: “If a Lord or an Earl come into your courts, you will hardly fine him for not putting off his hat ... but it is the poor that suffer.”

of Culture 1660-1780, England after the Restoration experienced anxiety about the religious “other” as it sought both to expand its empire and establish an “English” identity. Memories of the English Civil War remained alive and frightening and elites especially feared the “radical” qualities of dissenting religious groups, including Quakers, as well as Jews and Catholics. In 1744, only a wild storm stopped a French invasion, and up until 1745, credible threats of papist invasion existed.

Some argue, however, that by about 1750, at least in the American colonies, a change in attitudes toward Quakerism becomes apparent. Sarah Crabtree notes the following:

Perhaps for the first time in their history [at around 1750], people praised Quakers publicly and touted their achievements. Society members’ work on peace, abolition, the milder treatment of Indians and the education of women and the poor inspired a new image of the Quaker in the public imagination. Rather than the ecstatic rabble rousers of the seventeenth century, this icon was a humanitarian, a quaint farmer and a rational Christian. In short, for some 18th and 19th century intellectuals, the Friends became emblematic of many values and behaviors they praised.¹³

Woolman probably best exemplifies the “humanitarian ... quaint farmer and...rational Christian” of the mid 18th century, although, with the depth and

¹³ Sarah Lelia Crabtree, *A Holy Nation: The Quaker Itinerant Ministry in an Age of Revolution, 1750-1820*. Unpublished dissertation. University of Minnesota, 2007.

fervor of his religious faith and experience he also provides a bridge back to the earlier Quakers. All the same, he represents a change: He aims his concerns about slavery, oppression and superfluity on the Society of Friends rather than the larger culture. He also exercises great care in how he approaches Friends; his is not the single-minded fixation on the Light, the “plainness” that walks the “plain” trusting God to remove all obstacles, but a more rational simplicity. While he is deeply Christian and bases his concern for simplicity in moral imperatives—“Look, my dear Friends, to divine Providence; and follow in Simplicity that Exercise of Body, that Plainness and Frugality, which true Wisdom leads to; so will you be preserved from those Dangers which attend such as are aiming at outward Ease and Greatness”¹⁴—there is a subtle but distinct shift in emphasis toward embracing simple living in its outward forms for rational reasons. The early Quakers, of course, had a fervent concern for the poor and oppressed, but advocated for plainness primarily as a way to achieve union with God. Woolman, on the other hand, writes the following:

I was concerned to speak with the Women Friends... of attending singly to the Guidance of the Holy Spirit, and therein to educate their Children in true Humility, and the Disuse of all Superfluities, reminding them of the Difficulties their Husbands and Sons were frequently exposed to at Sea; and that, the more plain and simple their Way of Living was, the less Need of running great Hazards to support them in it; encouraging the young Women in their neat decent Way of attending

¹⁴ John Woolman, *Journal*, 78.

themselves on the Affairs of the House; shewing, as the Way opened, that, where People were truly humble, used themselves to Business, and were content with a plain Way of Life, it had ever been attended with more true Peace and Calmness of Mind, than they have had who, aspiring to Greatness and outward Shew, have grasped.¹⁵

For John Churchman, writing in 1779 in his “Account of the Gospel Labors of John Churchman,” simplicity was even more markedly an outer way of life:

[I] desire that my grand children may be brought up in a plain simple way, accustomed to industry, and some useful business in the creation; not aiming at great estates, nor following others in that way; but give them useful learning, and rather chuse husbandry, and a plain calling for them in the country, than endeavour to promote them to ways of merchandize.

Thomas Clarkson’s *A Portraiture of Quakerism*, 1807, idealizes Quakers as a harmless, if peculiar, sect. Clarkson, who got to know Friends as part of his battle against slavery, hoped to legitimize abolition by legitimizing its proponents. He presents an idealized and exhaustive account of Quaker’s plain behavior, with only passing reference to interior spiritual states. In Clarkson’s account, Quakers are people who don’t play cards, gamble, read romances or novels, hunt, play instruments, dance or go to the theatre.

Charles Lamb writes to Coleridge, his close friend, of his experience at a Quaker meeting in February 1797:

¹⁵ Woolman, 120.

...Tell Lloyd I have had thoughts of turning Quaker... Unluckily I went to one of his meetings, tell him, in St. John Street, yesterday, and saw a man under all the agitations and workings of a fanatic, who believed himself under the influence of some "inevitable presence." This cured me of Quakerism. I love books of Penn and Woolman; but I detest the vanity of a man thinking he speaks by the Spirit, when what he says an ordinary man might say without all that quaking and trembling.

Notably, the lack of domestication, the manifestation of uncontrolled spirit, disturbs Lamb.

But 20 years later, in "A Quaker's Meeting," in *Essays of Elia*, Lamb looks back on this particular 1797 meeting experience with nostalgia, all rough edges smoothed way. Quakers are nothing less than pure, gentle people, their plainness almost supernatural: "The very garments of a Quaker seem incapable of receiving a soil; and cleanliness in them to be something more than the absence of its contrary.

Every Quakeress is a lily ...

By the late nineteenth century, nostalgia predominates in references to Quaker plainness. In *Clayton's Quaker Cookbook: Being a Practical Treatise on the Culinary Art adapted to the Taste and Want of All Classes*, 1883, Clayton puts a moral and democratic spin on his Quaker culinary enterprise:

While carefully catering to the varied tastes of the mass, everything of an unhealthful, deleterious or even doubtful character has been carefully

excluded; and all directions are given in the plainest style, so as to be readily understood, and fully comprehended, by all classes of citizens.

He extols the butter of his youth. For the best butter, an old style Quaker spring house is "essentially requisite" for "who that has ever visited one of these clean, cool and inviting appendages of a well-conducted farm and a well-ordered household, at some old farm of the olden time, does not recall it in the mind's eye as vividly as did the poet Woodworth when he penned that undying poem of ancient home life, "The Old Oaken Bucket that Hung in the Well."

As with Lamb, Clayton conflates Quaker plainness with physical cleanliness, such that Quakers, exemplars of the buttermaking art, could offer guidance in producing a superior product, for they, as he put it, finding cleanliness close to Godliness, kept all their utensils "scrupulously clean" and never added too much salt to their cream.

In 1903's "Unselfishness of God and How I Discovered it," Hannah Whitall Smith also uses "plain" nostalgically and externally. She quotes her great-grandmother bemoaning the fallen plight of Quakerism:

Oh, I think could my eyes run down with tears always at the abominations of the times ... Oh! The calico! We pretend to a plain dress and plain speech, but where is our plainness? Ain't we like all the rest, be they who they will? What fashion have not the Quakers got?¹⁶

¹⁶ Smith, 137.

She herself writes, “I grew up with a distinct feeling that the plain thing to do was to greet my friends with, ‘How art thou’ or ‘How does thee do’ and to part from them with the simple word ‘Farewell.’ Though why ‘Farewell’ was any more truthful than good-bye, even if good-bye did mean God be with you, I have never been able to understand.”¹⁷

By the 20th century, the word “plain” largely faded except as a descriptor of antiquarianism.

In Howard Brinton’s *Friends for 350 years*, simplicity too lost its early ecstatic religious meaning of a single eye focused on God and came to connote rationalism and an aesthetics rooted in an 18th and 19th century Quakerism of domestication. The radical challenges to a corrupt social order embodied in earlier expressions of simplicity were eradicated:

Simplicity, the fourth aspect of the Quaker code of behavior, finds primary expression in the meeting for worship in the simple manner of waiting upon the Lord in surroundings unadorned in respect of furnishing and architecture. In the 18th century, simplicity was insisted upon. The meetinghouses of that period exhibit not only plainness but fitness, beauty and proportion. In the 19th century this good norm was departed from, but recent structures show a return to functional simplicity. While the concern for simplicity was fresh and living, its expression showed good taste, but when it became largely traditional, Quaker meeting houses as

well as Quaker homes degenerated in form and style.¹⁸

If, as Jessamyn West writes, much in 17th century Quakerism hinged “upon the conviction that to have missed in life a right relationship with God was to have missed what was most important in life,”¹⁹ and that the early Quakers believed that “the only pertinent differences between individuals were spiritual ones,”²⁰ by the 20th century, Quakerism, at least rhetorically, had moved from anti-pastoral to the “enameled world” of pastoral, nostalgic for an imagined and explicitly rural Quaker past. Quaker identifiers had migrated from Spirit and “quaking” to dress and speech. “Plain” had lost its powerful and sometimes frightening connotations of God’s geographic flattening of mountains; it had, in fact, lost all its geographic resonances and hence much of its potency. Simplicity displaced it as the term connoting a life grounded in God—and simplicity itself sometimes became conflated with external behavior.

If, as argued, an affective atmosphere of nostalgia and homey antiquarianism has come to dominate the Quaker concept of “plainness,” and if this is understood to be a limiting atmospheric, the challenge becomes how reclaim the earlier richer and more radical notion of plain. Antiquarianism poses the

¹⁸ Brinton, 163. Here I would note that Thomas Kelly’s *Testament of Devotion* bucks the rationalizing trend in its discussion of simplicity—but one of Kelly’s lifelong concerns was a reanimation of the spiritual life of Quakerism, which he understood as moribund.

¹⁹ Jessamyn West, “Introduction,” *The Quaker Reader*, 2.

²⁰ West, 6.

¹⁷ Smith, 126.

problem of a superficial appeal: how can looking pure, clean and non-threatening be harmful? Yet if such representations restrict Quaker ability to speak truth to power, it is perhaps time start fashioning a richer and more disturbing discourse.

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* * * * *

The Aperture

Joan Joffe Hall

1. Double Circle

At Quaker Meeting we sit in a double circle,

Horseshoes really, through whose aperture the children
leave after all the silence they can bear. I listen

to smaller children squealing downstairs until they
leave too, on a field trip perhaps—it's a warm fall day,

this year's grand extended autumn, warm past leaf fall
and close to Thanksgiving with only one hard frost, kale

and parsley luxuriating—and my mind skitters back
to hundreds of starlings filling bare maples and oaks
in the backyard, as if, my husband said, the leaves rose
black

from the ground to the lacy treetops: starlings
twittering for hours yesterday, the air dark with their
swarming

from tree to tree, the bleak sky alive with their flight,
flocking in from the north and leaving by night

in eager, uncertain loops over the house, calling each
other,
the world at large, calling out the fall, dragging in winter:

and as the children left the circle I thought how they
were fewer than starlings, and of our own children away

in France and Morocco and San Francisco, gone
through gaps of our own design.

2. The Education of Children

After the children left through the break
in the circle, I stared at graying backs
of heads, rounded tweedy shoulders, one neck

so deeply incised around the spinal column
it reminded me of Frankenstein, I mean

the nameless monster who peered
through a hole in a wall
to learn to speak and read—his private TV screen;

also learned from his bad father, that wannabe mom
who fled the ugly infant in a post-
partum fit—and what infant
isn't in its own way gross?—
anyway learned from Dr. F to curse
and wish things dead.

Mary Shelley tells us how
the giant baby climbed up to the Doctor's room,
parted the bed curtains,
“muttered some inarticulate sound.”
Ma, he says, *Ma*, and waits.

The intake of breath before speech I hear
at Quaker Meeting when someone is about to speak.
That breath before creation: *Ma*, my son
called each morning from his crib: *Mamamamama*.

Mary's mother Mary wrote
“Thoughts on the Education of Daughters”
and died giving birth
to this runaway daughter,

who barely past her teens, dead
babies of her own,
wrote on man's usurping pride
and fall and on education: a misfit child
picks out what she can, through chinks in a wall.

Obligatory movie scene:
the pallet of creation raised on pulleys
to the sky, to light, to God.
The Brits say "goad," almost, which
seems right somehow, electric prod
that stirs the monster up. The children squeal
and play in a nearby field. "I sing the body
electric," wrote Walt in bliss;
"the filthy workshop of creation," said Mary S.

3. Omega

I've been calling it the aperture, that gap,
the break where chairs stop

to let the children out; the word in horse-talk
is the "heal" but more than a horseshoe it's like

the Greek Omega--Ω--made on my key-
board by "option" and "Z,"

the last letter in each alphabet. Bracket
and arch, Alpha to Omega, God—words we create.

And there, the crescent moon—can one say crescent
in the last quarter? Waning moon then.

Ah, but I wanted to think of growth, of hope,
new life, all those sentimental traps:

children are easy, aren't they—safe tears
or lifting of the heart? My friend Ann fears

I paint even my mother only in her benign
face, as if now she's dead she did no wrong.

Start again: the moon last night as we came home
made us linger awhile in the door frame.

Nail up a horseshoe for luck as we loiter

so long that the moon shifts—new to full to sliver.

Silence thumps in the meetinghouse room; we sit
a quarter-hour while children fidget

and then we give them birth, release them.
How they tear through our completion!

Not Named for Joan of Arc for Nothing

Joan Joffe Hall

I hear voices. I really do
hear voices. Sometimes as I fall asleep
they pursue me. Dream images, I know, but
haunting. Like crossed phone wires.
I can almost make out words. Like
listening to Nita's radio through our childhood walls,
her baseball games and quiz shows. Take
household appliances: I swear they talk, pick
up signals from the air. Last night the fridge
said "500 million economic package"—a man,
and then a woman—"Florida Republicans."
I, or my subconscious, wouldn't make this up.

If only they would tell me what to do,
as St. Joan's did. My mother saw Shaw's play
one cold night just before my birth. I was
the only baby born in Brooklyn Jewish Hospital
named for a saint. What was it Mother foresaw?
Did she want me to wear pants, pursue a cause,
be Joan or Shaw? To flame?

Too heavy a burden. Enough public service,
I said when I retired, my motto now Do No Good.
Enough superego. Enough living like an ant
who strives from child to work to home, and fills
her resume with needless scribbling, with
laundry, cleaning, cooking, watching clocks,
waiting for a doctor or a baby or a clear phone line
to the White House to oppose war with Iraq.

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