

Spirit And Trauma

A Universalist World View
As An Instrument Of Healing

Gene Knudsen-Hoffman



THE QUAKER UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP

...is composed of seekers, mainly, but not exclusively members of the Religious Society of Friends. QUF seeks to promote open dialogue on its issues of interest. It writes in its statement of purpose:

While being convinced of the validity of our own religious paths, we not only accept but rejoice that others find validity in their spiritual traditions, whatever they may be. Each of us must find his or her own path, and each of us can benefit for the search of others.

In the selection of both its speakers and manuscripts, QUF tries to implement those ideas.

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PREFACE

The relationship between religion and psychological health is an issue the pre-Freudian world never had to face. But in the twentieth century the person who avoids facing it is escaping from reality. The ability to have faith, to hope and to love are qualities of personality analyzable and made accessible by the insights of modern psychology.

Many people are attracted to the Quaker Universalist Fellowship because it provides a forum for unconventional approaches to the analysis of the religious impulse in humankind. So we are pleased to welcome under the QUF umbrella ways of looking at religion rooted in twentieth century understandings of the human condition.

When we hear from a person who thinks about religion and psychological health out of personal experience with psychological illness, and who has found faith, hope and the ability to love in the insights and techniques of Quaker Christianity, Hasidic Judaism, Zen Buddhism and modern psychology, we see universalism affirmed as both theoretically sound and practically useful.

Gene Knudsen-Hoffman is the mother of seven children, a Californian whose journey to emotional health included a master's degree in pastoral counseling under the mentorship of Dr. Benjamin Weininger, a psychiatrist who found common ground between his profession and the teachings of Christianity, Hasidism, and Zen. She is a teacher of poetry and a peace activist. For the Fellowship of Reconciliation she worked from 1983 to 1992 on US/USSR relations and then on Middle Eastern issues. She is the author of four books, one a collection of poetry. She is now preparing her collected articles and essays for publication.

Gene Knudsen-Hoffman credits psychology with “teaching us how to examine our lives for the healing of our wounds.” She credits the Twelve Step Movement with identifying her errors and giving her disciplines for correcting them. But her main message to Quaker and other universalists is her focused description of the world views of the three religions that helped her, in her words, “to a wholeness which, like revelation, is ongoing.” In her writing and her life, their commonalties are revealed.

Kingdon Swayne

SPIRIT AND TRAUMA

A Universalist World View as an Instrument of Healing

The way we respond to suffering determines the future of the world. Unhealed trauma is, I believe, the cause of many of our psychological ills, such as fear, greed, anger and violence.

I do not believe God creates trauma. It is we ignorant humans who do so. We are ignorant because our infatuation with temptations – pleasure, security, riches, power, success – deflects us from our natural journey, a journey which I believe moves us toward compassion.

My first stirrings of spiritual awakening came at the age of nine, most vividly at my first Mass. The place was Mary Queen of Angels Chapel in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Moved by I knew not what, I determined to dedicate my life to goodness and truth. I had also confronted evil on that trip to Europe, in the bloody Tower of London, where Ann Boleyn and Lady Jane Grey were beheaded, and instruments of torture were on display. I also met, at Flanders Fields, a wounded veteran with a gaping hole where his nose had once been. His shattered visage haunted my dreams. He is responsible, I believe, for my conversion to pacifism.

In 1969, in my fiftieth year, I fell victim to the trauma in my life, and I committed myself to a mental hospital. I was nurtured on my journey back to health by three great world religions. I am pleased to share with my fellow Quaker universalists and others their meaning for me.

QUAKERISM

I joined the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in 1951. I am a Quaker universalist. Jesus is a great teacher and not God to me. My Meeting is a silent one. Our worship is akin to Catholic contemplation. I have no minister, no priest, no church, and no scriptures more sacred than the truths revealed to me in silence. At the heart of Quakerism is the faith that “there is that of God in every person.” All life is sacred, and we think of our worship as experiential. We sometimes feel the presence of God in ourselves and in our Meeting. This presence is experienced differently by each of us.

It is from within that our ultimate truth comes. We are urged to follow this truth even if, after careful exploration with our Meeting we learn the majority of Meeting are against it. We believe revelation is ongoing. We can meet anywhere. In the 17th century, when our meeting houses were destroyed, we would meet sitting in the street. If, during the silence, a member feels moved by the spirit to speak, he or she stands and speaks, preferably briefly, from the heart and from experience. The speaker sits down and the words are absorbed into the silence. There may be more than one speaker, and sometimes we are gathered into an epiphany where the spoken words coalesce into a truth none of us could have imagined. We seek to be “spoken through,” and we are spoken through as much by silence as by speech.

Ours is a faith of social action (which sometimes derails our spiritual intentions). We seek to alleviate suffering. Many of us would rather be killed than kill. And many of us believe we must cherish the oppressor as well as the oppressed, for both suffer, and each is a bearer of truth.

Perhaps we are best known for our peace testimony. Because we believe all life is sacred, most of us abjure killing. As we become sensitized, we are more aware of the violence

within and around us. We seek to be a compassionate people. We fall short, but we are on a path which sometimes leads us into harmonious places.

It is by looking at life as a holy adventure, upon Quakerism as a holy experiment, that I find strength to continue life and go through the pain of it. I know there are hidden gifts of understanding and spiritual growth in pain, and these enable me to live and grow in compassion.

In illustration, I give you the story of Emil Fuchs¹, a German Quaker who passed through great suffering. He speaks to me with authenticity. He wrote:

I was dismissed from my professorship and imprisoned because I would not be a Nazi. My youngest son hid himself because the students at his university threatened to lynch him for being a leader of anti-Nazis. My eldest son and daughter were in great danger.

One night I became nearly mad. I saw my children cruelly killed and lying before me. In this hour of utter despair heard a voice saying, "What do you want? Shall thy save their lives by losing their conscience?" I knew it was Christ in my cell, and peace came to me. From that moment I could bear the hardships my children had to go through.

That I saw Christ, that I heard his voice, might have been imagination. What cannot be imagination is the new life, the strength and the insight which his presence gave. No imagination... can give a father the strength to face danger to his children and remain certain and full of peace because they go the way of their conscience.

HASIDISM

Hasidism was the popular communal mysticism that transformed the face of East European Jewry in the 18th and 19th centuries. It arose in Poland and spread until it included almost half the Jews there. Martin Buber² has expressed and interpreted Hasidism eloquently for us today. As he portrays it, it is a mysticism which hallows community and everyday life rather than withdrawing from it. Buber seeks to “draw God into the world – to make shine the hidden divine life in all persons, all things, all experience.”

Here are some of my touchstones from Buber’s Hasidism. They are his interpretations of ancient Hasidic tales.

The Zaddik was asked, “Can you show me one general way to the service of God? ” The Zaddik replied, “It is impossible to tell people what way they should take. One way to serve God is through learning, another through fasting, another through prayer. Everyone should carefully observe what way his heart draws him and then choose his way with all his heart.”

There is something that can only be found in one place. It ... may be called fulfillment of existence. The place where this can be found is the place on which one stands. The environment which is my natural one, the situation which has been assigned to me... the things which claim me day after day; these contain my essential task... For it is where we stand that we should try to make shine the hidden divine life.

A person who frets himself with repentance, who tortures himself with the idea that his acts of penance are not sufficient, withholds his best energies from the work of the new beginning... Rake the muck this way, rake the muck that way; it will always be muck. In the time I am brooding, I could be stringing pearls for the delight of heaven.

Evil is the lowest rung of the good.

When a woman is pregnant and the child begins to come in the eighth month, the doctor does everything he can to prevent it. When the child begins to come after the ninth month, the doctor does everything to help the mother through any pain and suffering to enable the child to be born. My friends, the world is in the ninth month!

One of the tenets of Hasidism is that life has meaning, and it is our task to discern it. Out of the horrors they experienced, the Hasids devised a spiritual meaning for themselves. This enabled them not only to survive, but to live.

Victor Frankl³ was a survivor of Auschwitz, not a victim. I do not know whether he was a Hasid, but the story of his concentration camp experience surely has the flavor of Hasidism. In his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he described horrors beyond our imagination and demonstrates that it is possible to remain human while suffering them. He does not tell us how to do it; he suggests it can be chosen and the choice comes from something I would call Grace. These words are drawn from Frankl's postscript to his book, which he called *The Case for Tragic Optimism*..

I speak of tragic optimism, that is, an optimism in the face of tragedy and a view of human potential which... always allows for turning suffering into human accomplishment.

Frankl conceives of conscience as a prompter which can indicate the direction in which we have to move in a given life situation.

There are three main avenues on which one arrives at meaning in life. The first is by creating a work or by doing a deed. The second is by experiencing something or someone with love. Most important is the third avenue: even a helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may grow beyond himself and change himself. He may turn a personal tragedy into a triumph. We have the freedom to choose our attitude, and that may be the ultimate freedom we have.

From Frankl's experience of horror, he was able to write thirty years later:

Everything is irrevocably stored and treasured... Do not overlook the full granaries of the past: the deeds done, the loves loved, and last, the sufferings gone through with courage and dignity.

Frankl was able to live out the commandment from Irving Halprin's book, *Messages from the Dead*,⁴ where those who experienced the Holocaust were admonished not to "look too long into the fire."

To dwell too exclusively on the pain and loss of the Holocaust is to invite the risk of deadening one's capacity to perceive what is life-giving in the present.

I hold Viktor Frankl's example as assurance that God is. For me it exemplifies the greatness of a spirit which can hold the dark and light in balance.

BUDDHISM

There is no deity in Buddhism. Instead, there is what is called *the Buddha Nature, our true nature*. I interpret this as the Informing Presence, the Spirit of God in me. "To contact this Spirit or Nature, we need time and space, so that, free from all interruptions and distractions, we can, at least once a day, collect all our psychic energy and concentratedly bring it into direct contact with our inner, most powerful resources. Then all our psychic energy, which has been scattered as a result of our pursuits and internal conflicts, is collected into a unity again."⁵

One of my teachers is Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese poet, teacher, peacemaker and Zen master. From him I learned the value and process of reconciliation. A paragraph from his book, *Being Peace*⁶ has deep meaning for me. I have sought to let it permeate my life and work.

In South Africa, the black people suffer enormously, but the white people also suffer. If we take one side, we cannot fulfill our task of reconciliation and bring about peace. Are there people who can be in touch with both sides, understanding the suffering of each, and telling each side about the other? Can you be people who understand deeply the suffering of both sides? Can you bring the message of reconciliation?

Zen meditation practice and Buddhist teachings increase my awareness of differing realities by giving me glimpses of life as it really is, a process which is never

completed. A practice I find essential is the Breathing through Meditation, as described by Joanna Macy.⁷

With Saint Shanti Deva say, Let all sorrows ripen in me. We help ripen them by passing them through our hearts, making good rich compost of all that grief...By breathing through the bad news, we can let it strengthen our sense of belonging in the larger web of being...It reminds us of the collective nature of both our problems and our power. When we take in the world's pain and our own, accepting it as the price of our caring, we can let it inform our acts without needing to inflict it as punishment on others...

Another meditation helpful to me is *The Great Ball of Merit*. Of it Joanna Macy writes:

Compassion, which is grief in the grief of others...is also joy in the joy of others ...This is very important...because we face a time of great challenge, and more commitment, endurance and courage than we can ever dredge up out of our individual supply.

In this meditation, we open ourselves to our fellow beings ... In each of these innumerable beings' lives, some act of merit was performed. No matter how stunted and deprived the life, there was a gesture of generosity, a gift of love, an act of valor...From each of these beings ... arose actions of courage, kindness, of teaching and healing...No act of goodness is ever lost. It remains forever a present resource for the transformation of life.

CONCLUSION

Quakerism teaches that there is that of God in each of us. Hasidism teaches gratitude to God for all things, both light and dark. Buddhism teaches compassion and harmlessness to all living things, and ways to achieve them.

I find these resources necessary to my efforts to live a sane life in our tragic world, and I think they lead to a better one. I am confident creation continues.

END NOTE

Adapted from the manuscript of a talk presented at the International Traumatic Stress Society Conference in 1993 at San Antonio, Texas.

FOOTNOTES and BIBLIOGRAPHY

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