CHAPTER VII

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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This section on historical perspective is included as background to present day efforts. We do not advocate a total return to "the way things were". However, the past may influence our thinking, offer some concrete ideas, and ease our minds regarding the importance of First Day School in the larger context of nurturing the spiritual growth of everyone in the meeting family.

In the burst of religious enthusiasm and life-altering religious experience which accompanied the birth of the Society of Friends, there was no organized structure charged with the religious education of children. It was assumed that this important task would be a natural part of family life, reinforced and supported by the meeting. For early Friends, religion was a way of life which suffused everything they did. Children unconsciously absorbed their parents' attitudes and actions. The principles and activities of Quakerism were not specifically child-centered. Children were expected to enter as fully as possible into the religion of their elders. There was one religion, and therefore one religious education--for children and adults. There was no concept of a graded course of study, or of age level groups to "learn" about religion. It was less something to learn about than something to be lived.

The Quaker concept of the Inner Light and its relation to children provides one of the greatest contributions Friends have made to the religion of childhood. Because the Inward Christ is present in everyone, including young people, children did not need to have their self wills "broken", as the Puritans taught. Instead, children were like "tender plants", in whom the Spirit had to be gently nurtured. Children could experience God's presence, and parents were admonished to hold regular periods of family worship, in addition to twice-weekly group worship, so that children would be encouraged and taught how to wait in stillness before God. From babyhood, children participated in meetings for worship (usually more than an hour and more than once a week in those days). Children belonged to the Society as fully as adults, and were expected to participate according to their capacities of interest, judgment, reason, and experience. Many of the early "Publishers of Truth" were teenagers or in their 20's. Their youth undoubtedly made a lasting impression upon children, providing living proof that the Spirit moved without regard to age.

George Fox advised parents to be sure to hold frequent family worship, read the Bible, and have their children and servants attend meetings for worship with them. Here is the quaint language of Fox's Epistle 389, written in 1683:

> It's desired, that all Friends, that have children, families, and servants, may train them up in the pure and unspotted religion, and in the nurture and fear of God, and that frequently they may read the holy Scriptures, which is much better than to be gadding abroad. And exhort and admonish

them that every family apart may serve and worship the Lord, as well as in public. And that when they go to Meetings they may take their families and servants that they may not go wandering up and down in the fields, or to alehouses, as many have done, to the dishonour of God, and to the dishonour of their masters' and mistresses' families, and to their own ruin and destruction.

During the first four decades, when Quakers suffered under waves of persecution, children observed that religion was neither easy nor meaningless. They saw that it was worth ridicule, fines, beatings, imprisonment, and even death. They felt a part of the faith community which experienced the joy of God's presence, the love of a supportive group, the courage of joint action. It is not surprising that even when all the adults were imprisoned, children continued to hold meetings for worship, as in the famous incident at Bristol.

But the early fires of enthusiastic religious experience were replaced with the embers of quietism. Friends hesitated to attempt teaching their children anything about religion; children were expected to experience it through the Light Within. (There are parents today who do not discuss religion with their children or bring them with them to meeting, under the impression that they are letting their children make up their own minds about religion.) If individual parents did not maintain a living religion, children were not exposed to the Bible nor to the concepts which early Friends taught. During the first half of the eighteenth century there was a drifting away by many from the direct relationship with God which had formed the basis for Quaker testimonies. A reform movement within Philadelphia Yearly Meeting rippled out to all of Quakerdom. Over a period of years, Friends grappled with the meaning of membership in the Society of Friends. Gradually consensus grew that Friends do not buy, sell, or own slaves; that Friends do not participate in or pay taxes which directly support wars; that Friends have distinct ways of doing things which include marriage procedures, temperance, plainness of speech and dress, honesty, and so on. Meetings chose to proclaim disunity with Friends who did not uphold Quaker testimonies, so that the world would know Friends' values. In the ancient dichotomy between inclusiveness and purity, Quakers chose purity.

But the reform movement did not address the issue of religious education for children per se. The next generations, who had not gone through the soul searching of the reformers, followed the rules while losing the Spirit. Some responded to the felt emptiness by participating in the evangelical fervor sweeping American protestantism. Others clung more tightly to what they perceived was the unique Quaker "doctrine" of the Inner Light. There was an acrimonious and painful separation in 1827-28.

The old advices were repeated down through the years, echoing Fox's original admonition, but somehow emphasizing outward behavior rather than the inward relationship with God from which such behavior should spring. An example is this 1808 advice reprinted in 1859:

> Friends are desired, by all means in their power, to keep our youth duly to meetings, to dissuade all under their care from the indecent practice of straggling abroad on the first day of the week; and at all times to prevent them from mixing with crowds of rude and noisy people, which are not only interruptive of the public peace, but often productive of mischief to individuals.
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> Ye parents, be solicitous to discharge your important and awful duty with scrupulous attention. It is often too late to warn the youthful mind of danger, when your own negligence hath suffered your offspring to deviate from that path of simplicity in which you have thought yourselves bound to walk, and in which you have found peace. If you fail to suppress the early beginnings of undue liberty, how can you expect a blessing on your endeavors, when further deviations at length arouse your attention? and how, having failed to rule your own houses well, can you expect duly to take care of the Church of God?

It seemed that with the great concern for outward conformity, the inner springs which should have been motivating such behavior dried up.

The "hedge" of peculiar language and customs, designed to keep Quakers pure and separated from the rest of the "world's people", was porous. Protestants were discovering the concept of Sunday School, and some Quakers joined them. In 1790 the "First Day or Sunday School Society" was founded in Philadelphia, with Episcopal Bishop William White as President. The membership included Universalist Benjamin Rush, liberal Catholic Matthew Carey, and Quakers Joseph Sharpless and Thomas P. Cope. But like the British model they copied, Sunday School was conceived as a benevolent charity for poor youths. Teachers were hired, rooms rented, and a five hour curriculum developed which included ordinary school subjects plus moral, religious, and biblical lessons, and two periods of worship. For years the thrust of Sunday Schools was outside of the organized church although run by religiously-inspired laypeople, and directed mainly towards the poor.

During the nineteenth century the "traditional" Sunday Day Schools developed. They included such things as voluntary teachers inspired by evangelical zeal, the reward ticket with Bible motto to stimulate pupil endeavour, expansion to included adult and preschool classes, and published graded lesson material with an ecumenical, evangelical, protestant content.

Shortly after the Civil War Friends began to organize First Day Schools for their own children. The curriculum included reading from the Bible, Book of Discipline, and other inspirational literature. There were recitations of the Lord's Prayer, a temperance pledge, and memorization of appropriate verses.

The 20th century has seen a growing sensitivity to the developmental needs and abilities of children at different ages. Friends have generally done more or less what other mainstream protestant churches have been

doing. This is made more concrete now with the participation by Friends General Conference and Friends United Meeting in the Joint Educational Development of biblical materials. However the continuing emphasis on the Inner Light does make Friends unique.

What are the "lessons" of history for the harried volunteer who must produce something for First Day School, and it is less than a day away? The Society of Friends is not in existence today solely because of the efforts of First Day School teachers. For two thirds of our existence, there was no organized religious education. And we survived. The crucial ingredients for spiritual growth of children are God's loving grace, the child's innate response, and the examples of adults around them who are actively engaged in their own spiritual journeys, who respond to God's unconditional love of them by loving those with whom they come in contact, and who demonstrate by the way they spend their time that the meeting is important. Our words are less important than who we are. But that doesn't mean we should not continually try to articulate the Quaker message, to explain it to our children and to seekers as we, ourselves, continue to grow in the Light.

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