

HEARING WHERE THE WORDS COME FROM



## Hearing Where The Words Come From

Alfred Roberts, Tom Cerecini,  
Sally Rickerman, Mickey Edgerton

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Publications  
Quaker Universalist Fellowship  
Route 1, Box 28-3  
Millboro, VA 24460  
email: [friends@universalistfriends.org](mailto:friends@universalistfriends.org)

<http://www.universalistfriends.org/>



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**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.

particularly treasure his humanness – the struggles depicted in the Gospels of his carrying out his complete commitment to God’s mission for him. If I’d been born into a different culture, I might well have learned different symbols for the Divine, and had different models for Living the committed life.

But I was born into this Judeo-Christian culture, and much of what I know about God I have learned from the Scriptures, and from Jesus’ teaching therein. I am content to call myself a Christian; I find power in that designation, and being a part of a community of faith enables me to follow more faithfully my commitment to a vocational life. Say what you will about Christendom and the Church: its excesses, its venality, its propensity for oppression. All these things must be acknowledged and repented.

Yet it is Christendom that has kept the Gospel alive, and it is the means by which we still know the name and teachings of Jesus, and the transforming power he has manifested down through the ages. Being a Quaker offers me a means to live out my response to God’s love for me, and identifying with Christendom at large also seems to be a part of that faithfulness. Knowing others deeply, and being deeply known, is essential to my life of faith. A shared commitment to Christ’s teachings provides a context wherein we can encourage one another, hold one another accountable, manifest God’s love to one another. It is another means to learn more and more about God through experiencing one another.

## PREFACE

This pamphlet contains four papers presented by panel members at a conference held on January 11th 1992, at Woodstown Meeting in southern New Jersey. It was sponsored jointly by the Quaker Universalist Fellowship and the Adult Education Committee of the Religious Education Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. These talks are presented in the same order they were given that day.

*“Hearing Where the Words Come from,” The Source of Our Spiritual Strength*, was the theme. The quoted words come from John Woolman. In his journal he gives his reason for visiting neighboring Indians with the following words:

That I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of Truth amongst them.

On that journey, when Woolman spoke without interpretation, an Indian who didn’t understand English said, “I love to hear where the words come from.”

Those who planned the conference hoped to provide a setting where Friends with diverse religious experiences could comfortably share their beliefs and could be listened to wholly. One hundred Friends gathered in worship out of which panelists and attenders were led to share. This was followed by large and small group discussions where we explored the blocks that keep us from listening to one another. Throughout the day, there was a deepening sense of trust and openness – a place for us to truly listen to *where words come from*.

As we parted, many felt that we had had a minor miracle. A wide variety of beliefs had been expressed; each had been honored. We had found a unity as Friends that overarched our differences.

Carolyn N. Terrell, QUF clerk  
 Carol A. Bernard, clerk Adult Education,  
 Religious Education Committee, PhYM

am God's beloved child, always have been, always will be. Those words that had come out of me for Mary were for *me* to hear as well. The Holy Spirit had led me to say the words that I needed so desperately to hear!

As I reflect on this life-changing occurrence, I am reminded of the frequent childhood fantasy that one is adopted, "These aren't really my parents, they just won't admit it." I wonder now, seriously, if there isn't an inborn conviction from our very first consciousness that we do indeed belong to God, that these earthly parents are just stand-ins for the real thing. I wonder...

In any case, deep and joyful sobs were my physical response to this new understanding. At first, my thought was, "Of course, I'm OK, I'm God's beloved child." Then soon, it was "Being OK is no longer a relevant concept, I no longer have to pay rent with good works on the space I take up here on earth. As a beloved child of God, I have an inherent right to be here. I don't have to *be* OK, I only have to *be!*"

A few weeks after this epiphany, I realized that I wanted to – well, yes, I wanted to, but it was stronger than that – I knew I *had* to make some sort of "official" response to this amazing experience. Grace may be free, it *is* free, but even if it doesn't have to be paid for, it jolly well warrants acknowledgment and gratitude. What could possibly be an adequate response to this incredible awakening to the fact of being totally loved, totally known, totally accepted? The only thing I could think of which even came close was deliberately and intentionally to turn my life over to that Source of Love, to promise God, in the presence of a witness, that from now on, to know God's will and to do it was my reason for being. I intended my every act to be an expression of God's love. In short, I wanted to live my life vocationally.

How does all this relate to belief in Jesus as Christ? I am still working this out. I certainly acknowledge Jesus' power as a teacher, a healer, a model of total discipleship. I

I was finally released from the necessity of being OK, knowing that I'm OK, being recognized as OK by others. This was no longer what my life needed to be about.

I was in my first term at Earlham School of Religion, in a course called "Spiritual Preparation for Ministry". Be assured, dear Friends, that becoming a student at ESR, or any other seminary, does not imply a state of firmly established faith. The makeup of that small seminar class, about ten of us, was sufficiently motley to dispel any notion that only pious folk go to seminary. Although this class had an official syllabus of spiritual issues to address during the course, basically it was a means for us to share our spiritual journeys and begin to know one another well enough to be able to bear one another's burdens. We were able to give encouragement and to hold one another accountable. We were there to learn Christian discipleship.

On this particular morning, we were listening to one of our members who was feeling specially alienated from God, feeling that somehow, she had done something to displease God, that she wasn't good enough somehow to hold God's interest. I found myself saying, "But Mary, don't you know that God loves you?" She answered that yes, sometimes she did know that, but she couldn't stay in that place where it was real to her.

Shortly after that, we took a 15-minute break, and I walked out into a little garden outside the classroom. Ordinarily, I hung around with the other students, laughing and talking, but today I was alone. Suddenly, I found myself sobbing deeply, but the feeling was not pain, not sorrow; instead there was an overwhelming, incredible, powerful, all encompassing sense of God's love for *me* – a complete, all knowing, all accepting, non-conditional permanent, eternal love, pouring over me and coursing through me. A certain deep, pervasive knowledge encompassed me that I

## Hearing – Where Words Come From

Alfred Roberts

This week when I was walking through the corridor of one of the psychiatric units where I currently am working, I heard one of the patients say, "There goes that good doctor, he really listens to you." Of course I was pleased that she thought I was a good doctor but I was especially glad that she had explicitly expressed what I believe is most important in the practice of psychiatry and, for that matter, in all medical practice – "listening" to our patients. As I recall, one of the older doctors who taught us in medical school used to call it "listening with the third ear." I doubt if any of us knew what he really meant at the time and it is only more recently that I have come to think that I know his full meaning.

Certainly the most fulfilling gift of our lives is the joy and satisfaction that comes from what I would call true communion one with another. This occurs in many ways and forms and with many degrees of feeling, but when we experience it best we are truly listening each to the other, not just to the words but beyond the words. It is more than empathy. It is matching passion with compassion. It is as though music were played and experienced mutually, such that actual words and facts become secondary or irrelevant. This is the way we know one another in a total sense, or what I would call holistically and it is from this experience that we come to truly care and love. Without it we become lonely and depressed, and I believe that it is the failure to have this validation of ourselves in the company of others that is the basis of most if not all, of the human suffering accompanying what we refer to as mental illness.

My patients are truly alienated. In this regard it is interesting to note that in the past, doctors who treated the

insane or the *alienated* were called alienists, and I believe that it is the countering of this alienation which is the essential feature of any effective treatment. And I believe that it is within these experiences with my patients, as well as with my friends and family, that I become aware of what as Friends we call *The Inner Light* or *that of God within us*.

Although I have been – and remain – a rationalist ever since my older brother told me when I was age five that there was really no Santa Claus, I have gradually come to understand that the truly important truth in life is primary to rationality, and can be known only by intuitive experience. Thus it is not the specific meaning of the words but “where the words come from” which really counts. And so the Indian chief heard the best of John Woolman even though he didn’t speak his language.

It would be well if we all could do the same with one another, both within and outside of our meetings. The specific beliefs that we state in words are secondary and trivial to the significance of their energizing source. The essential nature of that source is a mystery, and in terms of rational thought, will probably forever remain so. From my experience I would maintain that the most egregiously deluded person and the most erudite and validly-thinking person are energized by the same mystical source, and may be heard, if truly listened to, with equal profit.

going without a qualm.

I moved to Philadelphia as a young woman, and became a social activist Quaker. I was relieved that I did not have to witness to any particular religious beliefs to be accepted into fellowship and membership. My newfound urban sophistication had no allowance for belief in a personal God, and it was a relief not having to experience the guilt of continuous backsliding. I rarely even heard any “God-talk” any more, even in Quaker circles. I could amuse my new friends with tales of my quaint family and Midwestern lore. I told about those pious folk who actually still believed in the Bible, attended church regularly and even believed that God was telling them what to do! “And those people call themselves *Quakers!*” they would say with expressions of amused disbelief, and we would all chuckle tolerantly.

That was pretty much my situation in terms of religious faith, (non-faith?, ex-faith?) for most of my adult life. And then in a series of events which I see now in retrospect, the Holy Spirit, whose name I had certainly heard, but did not know, began to work powerfully in my life, influencing me to make some life-changing decisions.

For many years I denied and ignored evidence contrary to my perception that my intelligence was all I really needed to rely on. My personal autonomy was the highest goal I needed to have achieved. After many years of therapy and counseling, I asked the same unanswerable question, “Am I OK?” I gained the occasional temporary reassurances that, “Yes, I’m OK enough to deserve to take up space on this planet...” I noticed that once again, the bottom had fallen out of that reassurance and that I was once more anxiously asking in one form or another through all the things I did and said, “Am, I OK?”

Finally, after years of this, I had an experience so powerful, so definitive as to put that question to rest forever.

## The Source of My Spiritual Strength

Mickey Edgerton

I want to tell you my story, how the Holy Spirit acted in my life long before I knew to name it and claim it, and how it empowers my life as I discover more and more about *who* I am and *Whose* I am. My experience with the Spirit is wondrously varied; sometimes it beckons and whispers, sometimes it nudges and urges, sometimes it grabs me by the back of the neck and pushes and pulls.

I was raised in a Christian home, a rural midwestern Quaker pastor's family, the oldest of five siblings. I was a teenager before I knew that any other sort of Quaker existed besides pastoral Friends, and if anyone had ever posed the question of whether we were *Christian* Quakers, none of us would have known what that person was talking about. As far as we knew, they were one and the same.

As long as I lived at home, I entered fully into our church centered life; attending daily vacation Bible School in the summers, where I memorized all the names of the books of the Bible, the 23rd *Psalms*, the 13th chapter of *Corinthians*, the *Ten Commandments* and the *Beatitudes*. I had 17 years of near-perfect attendance at Sunday School, and went to the altar and got saved every summer at the annual revival meetings held in our church.

When, as an adolescent, I began to question the literal truth of the Bible, I was strongly admonished that it had to be true since it was in the Bible. Since there were some things which I just could not believe were factually true (Jonah's three day stay in the belly of the whale, for one!), I sadly concluded that I must not believe *any* of it, and thus lost the whole Bible, and a good part of my childhood, at one fell swoop. Going away to school released me from the family obligation of regular church attendance, and I stopped

## The Reality In Which I Live

Tom Ceresini

It is an honor and a privilege to speak to you today – but I want to be clear that the honor and privilege belong to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who died for me, who lives within me, and for whom I live. I'm glad for this opportunity to speak to you in the language that expresses most exactly the reality in which I live. Please understand that while I'll be focusing on my own experience, I do so in order to give glory to God – to demonstrate as best I can God's power in my life. I'm also glad to use this language to speak boldly about the source of my spiritual strength: the person of Jesus Christ, and my relationship with Him.

Throughout my life, I had a desire to know God, and sought God in many ways. In time, I was drawn to the Religious Society of Friends. With you I learned, through the meeting for worship, what stillness, silence, waiting, and listening can do to bring me to an awareness of God's presence. I learned a respect for experience, truth, reality, and “starting where one is,” in both myself and others. In this way, I understood and valued Friends' view of a common creed as a limitation of Truth.

My participation in the Quaker Studies Program a few years later was a pivotal experience in my life. I want to focus on a single element of my QSP experience this morning. During the term on Christian thought and history, we learned about the creeds of the early Church – and our instructor asked us to consider how we would state our own central beliefs. I was shocked to realize that I had taken Friends' avoidance of a common creed to mean that I didn't need to have a personal creed – that I did not have to know or declare what I believed.

As I considered this, I couldn't actually recall ever hearing the statement, "As a Friend, you don't have to know what you believe", although I had heard the statement, "As a Friend, you can believe whatever you want." What I realized then was that neither statement is true; the same respect for experience, truth, reality, and "starting where one is" that leads our religious society away from a common creed led me toward a personal creed, toward a clear and definite statement of my beliefs. I was being called, not to choose my beliefs, but to examine myself and begin to express my beliefs and allow them to develop. It was a process of observation more than one of decision or construction. I had to declare, for myself, what I believed; without doing this, I had no foundation, no root, and thus no power, no spiritual strength. So I felt challenged to explore my beliefs.

One example was that I had more or less decided that it didn't make a difference to me whether or not Jesus Christ had risen bodily after His passion and death. In time, I came to believe that He did rise from the dead, although I had no idea then how my life would begin to be transformed as a result.

Several months after my QSP experience, God gave me a way to lay down my will and take up God's will. In that experience, I became a new creation – I was born again; I had a new sense of the center of my life. My knowledge of God was real and immediate, and I came to understand who Jesus Christ is and how I can know Him. As a result, I came to accept Jesus as Lord. Since that time, Jesus is always with me; He guides me, leads me, and teaches me. I am His disciple, and He is my Lord and Savior. Before, when these were only concepts or words for me, they were difficult, but now they describe the reality in which I "... live and move and have [my] being." *Acts 17:28*. When I say, "He is my Lord", I mean that He is sovereign over my life – that I

Yet, even as I intellectually discern this apparent loss of separateness and uniqueness, I find in this loss that which is exhilarating, uplifting and quickening: my sense of universal unity with all. I find, in the experience, the knowledge that each drop of water is more than just a single isolated drop, for together with other drops, all necessary, they form magnificent oceans; that our vast land mass arises from the collection and unity of all grains of sand; and that even the huge and amazing ant hills of Africa depend on each and every ant for their size and efficient functioning.

"The raw material of thinking, imagery, dreams and fantasies must come from firsthand empirical experience of the external world." So states Ralph Hetherington in his 1975 Swarthmore Lecture. This reliance on the experimental is the basis of my Quakerism, my universalism and my Quaker universalism. With the gifts of genes, birth and environment, I was given the "I", the "experimentally" and the loving acceptance of a Quaker community. These in turn nurtured the gifts of an inquiring mind, an openness which has permitted me to hear the faint whispers of mysticism, and an opportunity to fan those whispers into a full blown, continual, beneficial breeze.

I cannot believe that these gifts and understandings were given to me, this universal unity with the *All*, so that I could, first, draw a boundary around myself and, then, put those who do not come packaged in a Judeo-Christian theology, beyond the pale. Neither of these things I can do. For in the very depths of my most inner being, I know that I am a part of the whole, of all times, all ages, all peoples and all expressions of the Divine.

says that God does not speak to any of us in words, that we are spoken to through grace, and the words that result, however deeply and truly they may be inspired, are still *our* words, human words from the human vocabulary of everyday life. And grace is what I strive to hear from others, rather than to be constricted by their words or by their particular theological understandings.

There are other special locations beyond the meeting-house, where I have this same sense of belonging to all others. These are where it is evident that those who have preceded me have themselves reached out to that which is universal and divine. These sites are those of the great cathedrals of Christianity, the Acropolis of the pagan Greeks, the olive tree under whose branches Socrates taught, the carefully curycombed Hindu ashram of Gandhi and the pre-Celt Stonehenge. I cannot believe since I feel such unity with those who created these places special to their faith, that their God and my God are not one and the same. We differ only in our interpretation and cultural understanding, not in *grace*.

The third class of location is the one which occurs in the midst of the indifferent vehemence of “natural” forces, when it seems as if I am no more than a mindless leaf tossing about in a violent storm. Here, I have felt at one with the universal *Uniter*, the Spirit able to lift us, up and beyond our limited selves, to the heights which we do not know that we can attain. For here, in these violences of “nature”, I am whittled down to size, appearing to be as infinitesimal and insignificant as any trivial unit can possibly be. It is as if I were merely a single drop of water absorbed without trace in all the oceans of the world, one grain of sand merged, indistinguishable, with others on all the beaches on this earth, or the lone ant working in isolation in its towering hill.

have given my life over to Him. I know Him as my shepherd, and I know that He sees the “big picture” and is better able to lead me than I am to lead myself.

When I say, “He is my Savior”, I mean that He saved me from my sins. What does this mean? First, let me define “sin” as “acts which separate me from God”. Left to my own devices – following my own will – I will generally act in ways that separate me from God; I know this “experimentally”. The Letter to the Romans puts it this way: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...” *Romans 3:23*. What was the effect of sin in my life? Again, from *Romans*: “For the wages of sin is death...” *Romans 6:23*. This is a spiritual death – to be separated from God. While my body lived, I drifted apart from God, from God’s power and truth and love and presence. To physically die in such a spiritual state would mean to be separated from God’s power and truth and love and presence forever.

How could I possibly learn to know and do God’s will in my life while separated from God? In other words, how could I be redeemed? Long before I committed even a single sin, God provided a way; again, from *Romans*: “But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” *Romans 5:8*. Jesus Christ took upon Himself my sin and died in my place. There was, however, one thing left for me to do: to accept Jesus Christ into my life, to accept what He had done for me, to accept the new and abundant life He offered me. Even before I read this next step as given in the Letter to the Romans, God had given me a way to do what was required: to believe that Jesus rose bodily, and to accept Him as Lord of my life. Reading from *Romans*:

If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your

heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”  
*Romans 10:9-10.*

This is what I mean when I say I am born again: because of what Jesus Christ did for me, I have been justified before God, saved from the power of sin, and redeemed – that is, returned to God’s power and truth and love and presence.

Now I know that I can do anything Jesus asks of me, with His strength and righteousness. There are certainly many times that I get sidetracked from complete obedience to Him, but I also see the evidence in my life that ‘... he who began a good work in [me] will carry it on to completion...’  
*Philippians 1:6.*

Jesus Christ asks me to listen to others who have a respect for experience, truth, reality, and “starting where one is” regarding their beliefs, and to share mine with them. I am grateful to Him and to you for this opportunity to listen carefully to one another.

## Where Words Come From

Sally Rickerman

To be able to hear where words come from entails the ability of me, as a listener, both to be likable and to be liked by myself. Without that capacity, I am blocked by my emotions from hearing with love. For it would be easy to become a combative duelist hindered by my own immaturity, so that I heard only through the haze of feeling, threatened and diminished.

This I know experimentally. These words are the essence of my very being. More than fifty years ago, I latched onto a quotation from an art appreciation course: “Art is not born of thought patterns, but of experiences.” For me today, this could be extended to the art of living, the art of the relationship to the Divine, the Divine in others and in myself. The two important words are “I” and “experimentally”, for my only understanding, illumination and enlightenment comes through myself and my experiences, as I trust them both to teach and inform me. This is the path that I know how to tread. It is the only path of which I have as full knowledge as is possible. I, alone, can feel that which helps me see, hear and understand, that which has touched the depths of my soul and that which resonates to the beat of my heart.

Also I have learned experimentally that if and when I give myself space and quiet, I can tap into unity with all creatures and all aspects of our earth and cosmos. The easiest place for me to do this is in meeting for worship, for it is in this location that I can most clearly hear from whence the words of others come, rather than permitting their spoken words to interfere with my unity with them.

I was thrilled recently to have these feelings validated when I read Geoffrey Hoyland’s *Use of Silence*, where he