

My Sudden Understanding of Early Quakers' Mysticism by Laurence Clarkberg

Quakerism is mystical. Sitting in silence is mystical. And yet you won't find any Quaker guide to mystical experience. We offer no gurus who will guide you on a path of advancement. We are all on our own together. There are good reasons for this. But I suspect that something is missing from contemporary Quakerism. Something that the early Quakers had in spades. Early Quakers were flagrant mystics.

Last October I had an intense mystical experience. It began when a spiritually charged person came up to me on the street and touched me. Their touch triggered in me what was the most powerful event I have ever experienced: for many seconds I felt intense blissful energy coursing through my body. I felt like my body was suddenly a volcano while at the same time I had just been struck by lightning. This event was followed by weeks of extreme emotions. I found myself skipping for joy one day and then sobbing uncontrollably the next day. And that in turn was followed by a weird urge to try to make myself a better person, which lasted for months.

I was baffled by what was happening to me. A Friend explained that I had had a "spiritual awakening," a sudden release of spiritual energy that coursed through my body. Was my experience similar to that of the early Quakers? Certainly they describe similar conversion events, which they called "convincement". By this they didn't mean being intellectually convinced of reasons to convert to Quakerism, they meant an inward experience that affected them deeply, like mine.

Here's another possible similarity. Since my awakening, my spiritual energy sometimes grows unbearably intense and makes my body contort and shake. It's possible that Quakers (and Shakers) got their very names because they were observed to quake from their spiritual energy.

My awakening was followed by months of self-examination and change similar to what George Fox called "regeneration". He said that during regeneration people "neither sin nor are able to sin." That speaks to my experience. I suddenly became unable to lie. I became a vegetarian. I was unable to watch violent TV shows. My righteousness really annoyed my family. The early Quakers had similar annoying righteous urges: the whole Thee and Thou thing, the refusal to doff their hats, the refusal to swear oaths, etc. Their actions seem random and bizarre today, but in the context of a spiritual awakening they make sense to me.

Awakening people report having paranormal experiences. I've experienced some myself. A few were frightening, but most were kind of cool. In his Journal George Fox reports that he had many premonitions, performed healings, and had mystical experiences. And John Woolman in his Journal describes an uncanny premonition of the Civil War. Contemporary Quakers downplay this history.

What happened to Quaker mysticism? The children of the early Quakers were not mystics. They attempted to replicate the outward appearance of their previous generation's mysticism with rules and regulations. As a result Quakerism entered into a decline that we still have not recovered from. Can a new exploration of mystical experience bring us back to our roots, and provide a way forward?

Read a longer version of this essay at <https://medium.com/@laurenceclarkberg>

I welcome people asking me more about my experience and sharing their experiences with me. You can contact me at laurence@clarkberg.org