

Children and Solitude

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When William Penn, that extraordinary composite of polished courtier, daring statesman, disciplined seeker and devout Quaker saint, found himself in one of a number of periods of enforced retirement through being out of favor with the reigning monarch in the turbulent late sixteenth-hundreds, he “kissed that Gentle Hand which led him into it,” for he found his solitude a great treasure. His little book, *Some Fruits of Solitude*, is the treasure shared. It never fails to lift the spirits of those who are “persuaded to

stop, and step a little aside, out of the noisy Crowd and Incumbering Hurry of the World, and Calmly take a Prospect of Things.”

Steeped for the past twenty years in the Quaker reverence for solitude and silence (though in the midst of a busy life), I have come to feel it is the most natural thing in the world that children, like adults, should need and cherish times of solitude. The desire to supplement my personal experience and religious convictions about the matter with current thinking from the fields of sociology and psychology, however, led to some revealing hours spent browsing through social science literature on child development.

I found that the discovery of the importance of the socialization process in the development of the individual, which gave such a tremendous impetus to the growth of all the social sciences, seems to have completely obliterated awareness of the kind of growth that takes place in the individual when he is *not* interacting with others. The only attention given to aloneness is as a pathological phenomenon, under such headings as introversion, withdrawal, alienation, isolation, or just loneliness. The positive aspects of aloneness and solitude are ignored. A glance at the card catalogue of the university library under the heading of solitude reveals that this is a subject attended to chiefly by poets and German metaphysicians. (Alexander Pope at the age of 12 wrote an *Ode to Solitude* which takes its place among his best writing.)

The one word that does appear in the sociological literature is privacy, and there is very often an edge of desperation to

the word as it is used. Privacy is something defensively longed for, rarely achieved. It has been suggested that the only legitimate place left for privacy in our culture is behind the wheel, and that this is why men and women prefer driving long distances to using public transportation.

We have a real compulsion to groupism. We alternately drive ourselves into groups because we feel it is selfish to stay apart, and bury ourselves in groups because we fear to be alone. A few voices in the wilderness cry out against this. In *Individualism Reconsidered*, Riesman begs us to develop our private selves, for on this all advances in science and morality depend. Whyte in *Organization Man* and Barrington in *The Crystal Palace* each paints a pitiless picture of men umbilically tied to The Group, The Team, The Organization.

All this is by way of pointing out that in examining the positive functions of aloneness in the development of the individual, child or man, we are moving against the main stream of thought of our time. The commitment of behavioral scientists is, in their complex language, to view individuals as vastly complicated receiving and transmitting stations in a finely-veined network of such stations embedded in a complex super-network society, which is further interwoven into the geophysical structure of the globe to comprise the biosphere. It must be acknowledged that the concept of stimulus-response opened a great door to psychologists in their effort to understand how men came to comprehend, relate themselves to, and interact with this biosphere. The precision with which physiological psychologists and

neurologists have been able to measure what the brain takes in through its sensory receptors of the thousand-faceted stimuli which at any instant of time present themselves from the environment to the individual is nothing short of remarkable. Add to this the knowledge about the part which various kinds of interpersonal relationships play in the development of the individual gained from painstaking analysis of interactions in the family, the small group, and in the larger institutions of society, and we are faced with an impressive body of knowledge about what makes a child what he is, and a man what he is. These are not achievements to belittle, they are achievements to be proud of.

But preoccupation with the processes of socialization and adaptation leaves unexplained the Divine Plus in man, which renders him incapable, in the long run, of simple adaptation to the environment in which he finds himself. While it has been productive scientifically to view man as a socialized animal, this leads to a dead end spiritually if we do not give equal weight to that which goes on inside a man. I will go further and say that man *will come to a spiritual dead end* if he does not allow time apart and in solitude for things to happen inside him. It is possible to drown children and adults in a constant flow of stimuli, forcing them to spend so much energy responding to the outside world that inward life and the creative imagination which flowers from it becomes stunted or atrophied. James Nayler, the seventeenth-century Quaker who has described his own spiritual journey so movingly in the famous passage beginning “There is a spirit which I feel . . .,” goes

on to say, “I found it alone, being forsaken.” All the saints, God-lovers, creative spirits through the ages, will testify – there are some things which can only be found alone.

Lest it be thought that such sentiments are chiefly a quirk of the religious-minded, it may be useful to point out that our latest information about the interior operations of the nervous system, combined with our knowledge about the conditions of creativity, must lead the hardest agnostic to insist upon the importance of solitary meditation in the development of the human mind. It used to be thought that all our perceptions of the world around us were images cast upon the blank screen of the retina, and that closed eyes confronted only the blank screen, except for occasional weird flashes of inexplicable color. We know now, however, that there is a continuous ideo-retinal light, sometimes referred to as “luminous dust,” which generates a continuous succession of vague shapes and colors “before our eyes,” so to speak, although the process takes place inside the retina and inside the brain, whether the eyes are open or closed, whether the person is asleep or awake. There are similar auditory phenomena and quite possibly other continuous sensory stimuli that have not yet been isolated. These are internally generated by normal body processes. The vividness and variety of these inward images and sounds vary enormously from person to person, but the basic phenomenon is universal, like breathing. Normally, our inward images and sounds interact with stimuli from the outside world and we are conscious only of the fused result. One reason why the world never looks exactly the same to different individuals is that this world is

always filtered through the physiological light-pattern unique to each individual.

Now what do we make of this? It would be possible to discuss all the visions of the saints as “luminous dust,” (was this perhaps what the Lord made Adam out of?) and equally possible to go to the other extreme and close our eyes and ears to the outside world, claiming that these interior experiences are the only true, God-given ones. But this duality – dust of the earth and image of God – is a duality which the very fact of our creation challenges us to encompass. It is interesting to note that participants in sensory deprivation experiments, such as those conducted at McGill University, in which subjects are placed in a darkened cushioned compartment arranged in such a way that they can see, hear or feel nothing outside themselves, cannot endure this condition for more than two or three days. The experiencing of what might be called continuous hallucination becomes too overwhelming when not counterbalanced by experience of the outside world. Such continuous hallucination unchecked by other realities moves rapidly into psychosis.

But continuous hallucination is not the danger faced by most of the children in our care. Rather do they face the danger of what we might call imagery-deprivation. They do not have enough periods of withdrawal from outside stimulation, and must therefore rely on developing a series of stereotyped reactions to that environment to protect themselves from having to cope with more perceptions than they can handle. The absurdly stereotyped lingo of adolescence, the mask of apathy that is often worn,

represent defenses against a world that presses too constantly, too insistently, without allowing opportunities for meaningful reflection, a world without niches and in-between spaces where a teen-ager can get a foothold while he finds out where he fits in. The younger child has not yet been pressured into developing these defenses. You still see him, wide-eyed and open-eared, taking in what the world has to show him, and then going off quietly into a corner to mull it over. But watch out! We worry about the child who goes into corners to mull things over. We feel we must fill the young child's life with meaningful activities and opportunities for creative interaction. We must prepare him for the group life he must lead as an adult!

Our wants for our children are very inconsistent. While we are anxious on the one hand that they fit as smoothly as possible into the social grooves society has prepared, we also want them to be "creative." We in our time set great store by creativity, because we recognize that it is creativity which sets man free from his grooves and enables him to realize all the God-given potentialities within him. We know that it was the tremendous exercise of creativity in the Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment which produced the explosive and exciting developments of twentieth-century society. We also dimly realize that only a tremendous exercise of the creative imagination is going to help us find our way out of the deadly nuclear dilemmas we face in the world community.

Year after year the research piles up on the conditions of creativity, steps in creative problem-solving, the theory of innovation, and so on. And what does all this research tell

us? First, that creativity is a fundamental characteristic of the human mind, and that there is no sharp dividing line between the creative thinker and artist and the “ordinary” human being. Unlike the ant, we are incapable of completely stereotyped, instinctive behavior and everything we do, no matter how trivial, is in some sense an innovation, simply because we never do anything twice in exactly the same way.

Second, the essence of creativity is a recombination of elements, a putting together of things in a slightly different way from the way they have been put together before. This is as true of a three-year-old’s drawing of a tree as it is of Einstein’s theory of relativity. Fragments of knowledge and experience have been recombined to create a new synthesis.

Third (and here I vastly oversimplify a large body of data), there has to be *time*. There have to be large chunks of uninterrupted time available for creative activity. We are accustomed to the demand for solitude as a foible of the creative artist or an ascetic craving of the saint, but we have not realized what an indispensable condition it is for all mental and spiritual development. It is in these chunks of time that the great interior machinery of the brain has the opportunity to work (both at the conscious and unconscious levels) with all the impressions from the outside world. It sorts them out, rearranges them, makes new patterns; in short, creates. This is not to say that creative activity can go on only in periods of undisturbed concentration. Such periods may alternate with sometimes quite long periods when the conscious mind turns to other things while the

unconscious stays busily at work on the sorting and rearranging process. But the workings of the unconscious are of little use to man if he does not spend sufficient time organizing these labors with his conscious mind.

Woe to him who disturbs conscious creation! Brahms recounts that he nearly killed a zealous young man who climbed a ladder outside his study window in order to watch him at work in the hope of finding the secret of his inspiration. Great was Brahms' anger and frustration at the intrusion on his solitude, which broke a complex train of mental processes and rendered him incapable of ever finishing the piece. He tells us that he never tried to go back and finish compositions thus interrupted, because the complex silent kaleidoscope of sound, once shattered, could not be recaptured.

“Solitude.” Is it not a beautiful word? If we snatch it rudely from our children, what use can they make of their inner riches and outward experiences? What use have we made of ours? H. G. Wells began his *Experiment in Autobiography* at the age of 66 with the despairing cry, “I need freedom of mind. I want peace for work. I am distressed by immediate circumstances. My thoughts and work are encumbered by claims and vexations and I cannot see any hope of release from them; any hope of a period of serene and beneficent activity, before I am overtaken altogether by infirmity and death.” Since childhood he had dreamed of a Great Good Place that he would build and work in, and at the end of his life he said sadly, “Perhaps there is no *there* anywhere to get to We never do the work that we imagine to be in us, we never realize the

secret splendor of our intentions.” Wells himself succeeded far better than most in alternating his attention between the inner and the outer world, and while he never permanently resided in a Great Good Place, he got inside often enough to produce one of the most significant intellectual syntheses of the modern era, *The Outline of History*.

What secret splendor of intentions resides in the heart of every child? In most cases, we will never know, but from time to time poets and writers reveal glimpses of the inner world of their own childhood, or parents or friends record their observations of the childhood of men and women who make outstanding contributions to the world in adulthood. Walter De la Mare has collected such records in a book entitled *Early One Morning*, which every parent, teacher, and worker with children ought to dip into from time to time. These children admittedly made unusual use of unusual gifts. But the point has already been made that these gifts are present to some extent in every child. The children described all made special use of solitude. They therefore had opportunity to develop their gifts. They were not being vigorously socialized from morning to night.

The word that De la Mare uses most frequently to describe the children is “watchers.” These youngsters stood slightly aside from the mainstream of life and observed and pondered. He speaks of them as “recording experience in the silence of the mind.” Isaac Newton was “neglectful of play,” a sober, silent, thinking lad, one who was “continually knocking and hammering in his room” making the mechanical models that led his mind to the frontier of the knowledge of his day. Joan of Arc, whose mind was

never fed with the written word, began to hear voices as she worked in the fields. Somehow in her solitude she gained the strength to rise above the conventional expectations of behavior of her time and “dared to live a life apart in the reality of her own mind” – but a reality which encompassed practical political action beyond what the boldest of her fellow-countrymen contemplated. Herbert Spencer, the first great English sociologist, was noticed by his father sitting silently by the fire when a very little child. Suddenly he broke into twittering. “On saying, Herbert what are you laughing at, he said ‘I was thinking how it would have been if there had been nothing beside myself.’” This little philosopher grew up to carry wads of cotton wool in his waistcoat pocket for use when involuntarily exposed to dull conversation! Lord Herbert of Cherbury, poet, philosopher, soldier, declares his parents thought him stupid because he could not learn to speak, but that actually he refrained from speaking because he felt there was nothing important to say. Imagine the astonishment of his governess when this silent sage one day opened his little mouth and asked, “How came I into this world?”

The Quaker psychologists Victor and Mildred Goertzel, in *Cradles of Eminence*, a study of the childhood of famous persons who have lived into the twentieth century, point out how important a childhood period of “time out” was for the maturing of the creative powers of these men and women. The “time out” might have come as a result of illness, of family crisis, of a move to an isolated place; but whatever the cause, anything which brought about a drastic break in the usual routine and left the child with a lengthy period of

time in which he was thrown on his own devices was remembered in later years as a time of special importance for his inward development.

The Goertzels cite Einstein, who when he was fifteen found school so intolerable that a school doctor finally gave him a “certificate saying he had a nervous breakdown and must spend at least six months with his parents in Italy He wandered through churches and hiked through the Apennines. It was at this time that he began to ponder what would happen if a ray of light were to be imprisoned” At the age of sixty-seven, Einstein himself wrote, “this delicate little plant [the holy curiosity of inquiry] aside from stimulation, stands mostly in the need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail.”

Well before the time when a child can consciously make use of time alone, however, comes that critically important moment in his life which represents the dawning of the sense of self-consciousness. All later intellectual and spiritual development depends on this emerging sense of identity. “I stood one afternoon, a very young child, at the house door, when all at once that inward consciousness, *I am a Me*, came like a flash of lightning from Heaven, and has remained ever since.” This was Jean Paul Richter’s experience. This may not happen in early childhood. It may not come until adolescence. But many of us if we look back introspectively can recall some special moment of realization. In spite of its momentary character, the memory of it stays on. Gerald Bullett makes the indelibility of this experience very vivid: “I came upon a four-year-old child standing alone in a sunlit country lane . . . the summer sky

arching over him The moment . . . has nothing at all of drama or poignancy . . . nor could I hope to express in words . . . the meaning it holds for me. But if I shut my eyes, and hold myself very still I no longer see that child: I *am* that child. The chalky road is hard under my feet and brilliant to my eyes; I feel the sun on my hands and face, and the warm air on my shins Except for this aloneness, this sense of *me*, it is perhaps a purely animal or sensual experience, and it occupies, as I conjecture, the merest point in time, a fraction of a second.”

Why is such a moment so important? And why is aloneness an essential part of it? I am not sure that I know the answer, but I feel that it has something to do with the fact that this may be the first conscious integration which the young mind undertakes of the world outside with the interior world of his mind. In the act of conscious integration, which is a heaven’s breadth away from simple unquestioning acceptance of the world of sight and sound, a sudden mastery is gained over the interior machinery which sifts, sorts, combines what comes in with what is already there. It is the first great step in spiritual development, because it involves recognition of Creator and created. The subduing of the will, the proper discipline of the mind and the spiritual understanding of the *me*’s true place in the universe all come much later. Aloneness is essential because this is an experience of separating out from the world in order to integrate with it. This cannot happen if the mind is distracted by constant social stimulation.

Along with this release of the sense of identity, which is of course growing gradually all the time and is not necessarily

marked by a sudden expansion of the understanding as described above, there is also a continually expanding awareness of spiritual reality. I believe this awareness is present in all children from a very young age, but it takes different forms depending on the kind of environment and teaching a child receives. Obviously some children are better at articulating it than others. Because awareness of spiritual reality depends on the experiencing of the invisible as real and present, it is likely to flower most in the children who have times alone.

Gote Klingberg of Sweden has done a study of the religious experiences of children between the ages of 9 and 14, and the most meaningful experiences which these children record are not very often in a church setting, but times when they were alone in the house, or alone in the woods and fields. It is not surprising that sometimes a child is dealing with fear of aloneness when he comes to a religious experience. One boy described an October evening when he was left at home alone to look after a sleeping little brother. He tried to bolster his courage by thinking about God. Suddenly, he felt that God was there, around him, in him, as he sat by his brother's bed. A twelve-year-old girl described a long walk home from a friend's house in the later afternoon. It was growing dark, and the path lay through a gloomy wood. "I imagined that God walked by my side and that I said: Dear God, take care of me on the way. And I imagined that God answered: 'See I am with you.' Then I felt very calm as I went along."

Fear of being alone, when met by a child who has had a sensitive upbringing by understanding parents, often

becomes the means of developing an awareness of spiritual reality. Helen Thomas Flexner writes of her childish fear of Satan, who lurked in dark and empty rooms and closets in their commodious home: “At nighttime Satan grew very bold. The whole house was haunted by his presence. Every empty room, even my mother’s, was full of him, so that when I was forced to go upstairs after dark on some errand I begged my mother to send her voice with me. While the magic refrain, ‘I am here! I am here!’ sounded in my ears, however faint and distant up the long stairway, I was not afraid.” To rely on the reassuring voice in the threatening darkness was as big a step for that child as for the anguished adult to rely on the still inward voice in the emotional darks of maturer years.

There are many kinds of aloneness, and they are by no means all desirable. Feelings of isolation and abandonment do not necessarily lead to experiences of God’s presence. The children here described came from homes and church communities in which a loving and careful nurture had already given the child a store of experience upon which he could draw in time of need. The more I study the religious life of children, the more impressed I am with the importance of providing the child’s mind with materials with which to work. The role of parent, teacher, minister, are crucial indeed. So are the books the child reads – and how quickly we recognize the imprint of the Scriptures on the expressions of the child who has been wisely steeped in them!

Unfortunately our generation of parents has developed a very negative attitude toward steeping the mind of the child

in Scripture and the language of religious experience. We have seen too much of the unfortunate results in previous generations of children who have emerged from such upbringing mouthing meaningless stereotypes and expressing a false emotionalism. A child left alone with a Bible in our time is more apt to evoke horror than admiration. A child all alone is bad enough, but put that black book in his hand and you are really asking for trouble!

It is true that many children labored under a heavy burden of doleful religious imagery and admonitions, and we feel a pang of sympathy for the little Quaker girl reflected in Jane Pearson's Journal written at the turn of the nineteenth century: "It pleased the Lord by his good Spirit, to work in my heart in my young years: which brought goodly worry over me, and fear lest I should be taken away in my childish follies. When the bell used to toll for those of other persuasions, oh! the awe and inward fear attendant on these occasions! I would say in my heart, these are now called off the stage of this world, and fixed as for ever they must be." We also long to comfort young William Dewsbury, who "delighted in lightness and vanity . . . [and lived] without fear of God," and then suddenly heard the word of the Lord at the age of 8, "I created thee for my glory; and account thou must give me for all thy words and actions done in the body." William spent the years until he was 13 tending his sheep and seeking an acquaintance with the God of his life, a rather long stretch of solitary anguish for a preadolescent.

This, however, is not the whole story by any means. In the close warm communities of these early Friends Meetings

(where, writes Clarkson in his *Portraiture of Quakerism*, domestic bliss was the chief recreation and source of enjoyment,) children knew life, love and fun as well as the somber truth of the Time of Reckoning. In the long stretches of solitude open to the young of that less cluttered age, they worked out their own solutions to the conflicting inward and outward pulls they felt. Living in “colonies of heaven” in a sea of revolution and violence, they made their own observations and developed their own ideas about what the Lord required of men. The more outgoing they were, the more they responded to the outside world. This made their inner conflict more intense, and the resolution more colorful. These resolutions did not come in ready-made scriptural formulas, or through the application of external admonitions, although the latter were certainly not wanting. Scripture and admonitions were but among the many seeds sown in the heart, and each child brought forth his own individual fruit. Ruth Follows, an 18th century Friend, writes of the loving upbringing by precept and example which she had, and the struggle which ensued after the death of her mother in early adolescence: “I left her counsel behind me, trod her testimony under my feet and took a large swing into vanity, frequenting such company as had like to have proved my utter ruin. But blessed be the Lord! he closely followed me with his Sharp reproofs, and . . . stopped me in the midst of my career, and took off my chariot wheels, so that I could not overthrow nor yet keep the pure Seed in bondage.”

Benjamin Bangs, of the very first generation of English Quakers, writes lovingly of the seeds of wise religious

instruction sowed by his widowed mother, and of the pulls which his fun-loving nature exerted on his more sober intentions. “When I was between 11 and 12 years of age, I was much given to divert myself in running, wrestling and foot-ball playing, which was much practiced in the part of the country where I lived, and my company was very much desired by such Being one day by myself, not far from the place of our habitation, I met with such a visitation, as I had been altogether ignorant of before, in which a sweet calmness spread over my mind; and it rose in my heart, that if I could but keep to this, what might I grow up to in time? It much affected me, and rested with me for some time.”

John Woolman records his first conscious memory of his lifelong work of integrating images of spiritual and physical reality at an early age: “As I went from school one seventh-day, I remember, while my companions went to play by the way, I went forward out of sight and setting down, I read the 22nd chapter of the Revelations: ‘He showed me a pure River of Water of Life, clear as Crystal, proceeding out of the Throne of God and of the Lamb, etc;’ and in the reading of it, my mind was drawn to seek after that Pure Habitation, which I then believed God had prepared for his servants. The place where I sat, and the sweetness that attended my mind, remain fresh in my memory.”

Sarah Stephenson, of that first generation of children to come under the influence of the inspired early Publishers of Truth, writes of the time before she met the two Quaker ladies who were to change her life, that she was torn between a “natural disposition” to vanity (her father being a

rich merchant) and what was surely an equally “natural” inclination to love the Lord, and to seek to be alone with him while still a child. The seemingly trivial words of the worthy Quaker servant of the Lord, Elizabeth Ashbridge, “addressed to me in the language of unspeakable love, ‘what a pity that child should have a ribbon on her head!’” were enough to set her permanently on the Lord’s path, ribbonless.

What is the significance of these records, chosen out of hundreds of passages on childhood recollections of Quaker journal-keepers of past centuries? These Quaker journals are an enduring demonstration that the child’s spirit is the most fertile ground in the world, and that seeds planted unnoticed bring forth unanticipated flowers. Ruth Follows, Benjamin Bangs, and John Woolman each had the teachings of a deeply spiritual mother and the storehouse of the Bible to feed their young minds, and the experience of the “world” served only to stimulate the growth of that which was early prepared inside them. Sarah Stephenson had only stray crumbs of spiritual instruction, yet was able to build deep meaning out of what she had. As one reads these journals, one finds again and again the same incredible richness and variety of human experience in the encounter with the Creator which we also find recorded in the Bible. Is there any better summing up of the complexities of the adolescent encounter with God than “the Lord took off my chariot wheels”? Knowledge of Scriptures has never cramped a child’s spirit; the cramping comes only through the lifeless rendition of Scriptures by uncomprehending adults.

For the early Quakers, the prescription for religious nurture was simple: provide the living human example of the God-directed life in the family and the Meeting; provide ample opportunity for religious experience in occasions of worship within the family circle and in the Meeting; provide time for the reading of the Bible and personal reflection in solitude. Today we would be very concerned to provide extra enrichment of the “religious learning” process: more intellectual synthesis, more aesthetic experience, and more social concern. But we easily overlook that critical ingredient of solitude, without which the identity of the seeking soul remains forever undifferentiated from the smorgasbord of experience on which it feeds.

If the crisis of identity is the crisis of the twentieth century, then we must look well to this aspect of the nurture of the twentieth century child. We are standing on the threshold of the cosmos, and we do not know who we are. Either we discover our identity and move into a new dimension of spiritual existence along with our technical conquests of time and space, or we shrink back into sub-existence as a race of well-trained clerical assistants, timidly feeding data into gigantic computers to find out what to do next. Who is taking “time out” to probe for new dimensions which will open up a way of life not now imagined? Who is dreaming dreams? Who is seeing visions? Where are the solitary ones?

They are all about, but they are too few, and we make it very hard for them. Are icy mountain peaks their only natural habitat? No, for solitude can be full of joy, it can

vibrate with life and warmth. Rather than bereft and isolated, in times of solitude we may be more deeply in tune with creation than human contact alone could ever permit. He who has felt that sense of glad at-homeness in the universe knows solitude's deepest joy. The child in times of aloneness is no stranger to such happiness. A ten-year-old boy in Dr. Klingberg's group writes, "Another time I was up on the hill near my house. I went there and was looking at the flowers, and then I thought, 'So beautiful. Has God really done this?' And I felt so happy."

Have we not each of us inadvertently stumbled on a child's solitary joy? Our oldest son used to come home very late from his weekly guitar lessons, and it was not until several years later that I learned that he used to sit down in a wooded field on the way home and play to its invisible inhabitants. Then I understood in retrospect the look of serenity on his face when he returned home after these trips. His younger brother, aged 11, brought me these lines after I explained to him what I was trying to write about: "It happened when we were playing in the little woods. For some reason I lay down while everyone else ran off and played. As I lay down on my stomach with my hands holding my cheeks, I watched the wind blow gently through the trees. Oh the silence of nature was beautiful even though the wind was blowing and the birds singing and the leaves crackling. Even though there were these noises, they were still soft, and quiet."

The way high grass was so yellow and the leaves so green and the sky so blue with its swift clouds. It seemed as if I was with God in Mother Nature's palace.

Each of us has our own recollections of solitary childhood joy, hidden away deep in our minds for safekeeping. When I look back, I can find a small girl all alone in a rowboat in the middle of a quiet mountain lake at high noon. Scarcely big enough to handle the oars, she sits alone feeling the warmth of the sun, the cool blueness of the water lapping softly at the boat, and the immensity of the fir-covered hills all around. She is bursting with warmth and bigness and silence. This is home. It is belonging. It is joy.

These, then, are the fruits of solitude for children: A sense of who and what they are, whence they came, their place in God's world. And out of this positive and secure relationship with the universe comes the freedom to "play" with creation in the best sense of the word. The things which they see and hear can tumble around inside their finely-tuned minds, interweaving with their inward store of knowledge to produce further creation. The products need not be mathematical formulas, complex social insights, or symphonies or paintings or poems. The beautifully ordered life, sensitively lived, the daily tasks performed for the love of God, represent one of the highest forms of integration any man can achieve, and if it were not so we would not still sit at the feet of Brother Lawrence, the humble and illiterate monastery dish washer. His insight that "our sanctification consists not in changing our works but in doing that for God's sake which formerly we did for our own" represents as creative an interior integration of knowledge about the world as Newton's insights on gravity.

How do we adults help to make creative solitude available to our children? First, surely, by finding meaning in it for ourselves. Solitude has many faces: reflection, creation, prayer, contemplation, mystical union with the All-One. “Delight to step home, within yourselves,” said William Penn. Forbidden fruit for busy parents and harassed organizers of the modern social scene? Rather the bread of life. And adults who seek it do not need to explain it to children. Children have an instinctive understanding of a withdrawal by adults into solitude, as memoirs often testify. Helen Thomas Flexner was mentioned earlier. In *Quaker Childhood* she recounts that as a child she was told that grandfather spent an hour every morning and evening listening to God. “So when I came suddenly upon my grandfather one day seated motionless in his armchair with closed eyes I knew he was not asleep. He was talking with God. I stopped short where I was and stood very still. Perhaps if I listened intently enough I might hear God’s voice speaking to my grandfather. But the room remained quiet, not even the faintest whisper reached my ears. After a long time my grandfather opened his eyes, saw me, and smiled at me gently. These moments of intense listening for God’s voice in the room with my grandfather are among the most vivid memories of my early childhood.”

In homes where silence is lived, the child finds it easy and comfortable to turn to it. In a large and noisy family (like my own) the period of hush that begins every meal sweeps like a healing wind over all the crosscurrents that have built up in the previous hours and leaves the household clean and sweet. Times apart of special family worship, hard to come

by in the daily routine, become hours to be remembered and valued for their very scarcity, and never fail to catch us up to another level of love and awareness. In these times we rediscover who and what we really are, as individuals and as a family, and can lay before God what we cannot easily lay before one another. It is an odd thing to say, but solitude can be shared. In a family where inward solitude is highly prized, individuals may slip easily into and out of each others' solitude. Some families must work harder than others to create the physical situation in which times of solitude become possible, but when silence is treasured, the quiet place is found.

The silence of the Quaker Meeting for Worship opens a unique door into solitude for the child who is fortunate enough to experience this corporate listening. Rufus Jones has written in his wonderful record of his Quaker boyhood, *Finding the Trail of Life*, "It does not seem necessary to explain Quaker silence to children . . . they feel what it means. They do not know how to use very long periods of hush, but there is something in short, living, throbbing times of silence which finds the child's submerged life and steers it to nobler living and holier aspiration. I doubt if there is any method of worship which works with a subtler power or which brings into operation in the interior life a more effective moral and spiritual culture. Sometimes a real spiritual wave would sweep over the Meeting in these silent hushes, which made me feel very solemn and which carried me – careless boy though I was – down into something which was deeper than my own thoughts."

I cannot resist including here a passage describing a presumably typical late nineteenth-century meeting for worship attended in childhood by William Fryer Harvey, recorded in *We Were Seven*. (These were two-hour meetings, by the way.) It is very revealing of the natural interplay between the sense of religious awe and the love of fun in the child's mind, and should set us at rest about the child's capacity to handle solemn experiences. Little William has been squirming through the first long hour of silence, and has just now listened incomprehendingly to a message delivered with deep conviction by an older Friend whose face is lined with suffering. "I feel that he is a good man, that what he has said has not been lightly spoken. For some minutes I am conscious of a feeling of awe. Then the ticking of the clock claims my attention. I become aware that the cracks in the plaster of the wall are extraordinarily like the map of Norway and Sweden. Charlie [his brother] gives a great sigh and drops his handkerchief. Then we all rise to our feet and Charlie climbs on to his footstool as grandmamma offers prayer. She is the only one in the Meeting who wears the old-fashioned Quaker dress and bonnet. She is like a beautiful dove. Her face shines with an inner radiance. When she has finished we sit very still. The hand of the clock moves very slowly. Suddenly a strange fancy seizes me: what would be the best way of arranging the Friends in meeting in a series of fights? How would they be most evenly matched? William Stout and Samuel J. Hay, M.A., were about the same height, and though Samuel J. Hay, M.A., was much the heavier, I thought and hoped that William Stout was the more active. The two elder Miss Thistlethwaites would be evenly matched, but who could

best take on the young and energetic Miss Thistlethwaite? Kate? Mrs. Turnball? or Mrs. Howgate, the caretaker's wife? The hand of the clock is moving very quickly now. Almost before I realize, it is ten minutes to twelve and grandmamma is shaking hands with John Henry Probyn. Meeting has broken up." A lot can happen in a boy's mind in two hours!

Whether they are awe-struck or mischievous, in our hearts that our children must have solitude in order to do the kind of inward growing which we cannot plan for them. Are we not then required to reflect on what is happening to our own lives and the lives of our children. Each year that passes cuts more deeply into the precious silent hours our souls require. What is happening to our children as a result of the fact that their time is so heavily scheduled both in and out of school, and even increasingly in the summer time – that once golden time of inner ripening for the child? The chancellor of one of our major universities recently made the alarming comment that the greatest danger of our time is "unoccupied minds," and that the best way to counteract it is to have students go to school all year around. Time is our greatest resource, says this educator, and no moment must be wasted. The year-round calendar leads to the fully-occupied mind which ensures our coming out on top in the bitter struggle for national survival. May it not rather be that unoccupied *time* is the only thing that can lead to the creatively occupied mind; I certainly share the concern for the right use of time, but suggest that an Inward Scheduler may be a better guide than an outward scheduler as to that right use. How can outward schedules allow for

the really important claims on the mind? Amy Lowell used to drop ideas for poems into the back of her mind, as into a letter box, and let them incubate. Then at the right moment (announced only by the Inward Scheduler) she would drop everything else to “attend to the arriving poem.” Any obstetrician’s secretary knows that births cannot be scheduled by any calendar on her desk!

Dare we leave spaces of time free for the promptings of the Inward Scheduler? Dare we have faith in the workings of the spirit-illuminated intellect? Walter De la Mare says of the child’s mind, “There is a natural instinct to preen the wings and choose the food and water; as will a goldfinch in its solitary waste, converting into song and beauty and energy the seed of a thistle.” Can we believe this?

A Prayer for Parents

Father of us all,

We come before thee, parents and teachers of children, burdened with many concerns. We are caught in a fear that there will be no future for our children. We are beset with temptations to act in many directions at once. We would run here, run there, to prop up this corner, and then that, of our crumbling world.

Heavenly Father, what precious burden have we dropped to one side in the midst of all our frantic running? Shall we save the world and lose the soul of one untended child? Let thy light shine through our every waking moment, that we and our children may know by whom and for what we are

created. Spare us from the blasphemy of taking the weight of the world upon our shoulders. Help us to lead our little ones to the true source of all being, as we have ourselves been led. And help us never to mistake action for understanding, busyness for concern, and agitation for love, lest through action, busyness and agitation we stand between our children and the living water from which they must come to drink of themselves.

Grant us the singleness of purpose to step into solitary times with our children, that thou mayest do the work in us that we cannot do of ourselves. And grant that we may together experience the outpouring of thy love, that our children may know, as we do, the one source of true joy.

We ask this in the name of one who knew both love and joy, and gladly shared them with children. Amen.

Cape May, June, 1962

About the Author

Elise Boulding is the wife of the Quaker economist and poet Kenneth Boulding, the mother of five children, and a sociologist. She has written *My Part in the Quaker Adventure*, an exploration of Quaker history for use with young Friends, published both by the Friends General Conference and the Five Years Meeting of Friends. Her William Penn Lecture, *The Joy That Is Set Before Us*, has also been printed. Her translation of the Dutch award winning *De Toekomst is Verleden Tyd*, by Dr. Fred Polak, was published in 1961 as *The Image of the Future* (2 vol.

Oceana Press.) She has lectured at Pendle Hill and been a participant in many Friends conferences. For the past several years she has been working with the Center for Research on Conflict Resolution at the University of Michigan, where she is a Research Associate. This pamphlet was written in moments of time left between an active family life on the one hand, and a professional life plus activity in the peace movement on the other.

Pendle Hill

Located on 23 acres in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, Pendle Hill is a Quaker study, retreat, and conference center offering programs open to everyone. Pendle Hill's vision is to create peace with justice in the world by transforming lives. Since Pendle Hill opened in 1930, thousands of people have come from across the United States and throughout the world for Spirit-led learning, retreat, and community.

At the heart of Pendle Hill is a residential study program which encourages a step back from daily life for reflection and discernment in preparation for deeper engagement in the community and wider world. Because spiritual experience is essential to Quakerism, Pendle Hill's education is experiential, or experimental, at its core. Adult students of all ages come for a term or a year of education designed to strengthen the whole person – body, mind, and spirit. The Resident Program captures the earliest vision for Pendle Hill while responding to the call of the world in which we exist today. Program themes include:

Quaker faith and practice
Dismantling oppression
Spiritual deepening
Leadership skill development
Ecological literacy
Personal discernment
Arts and crafts
Gandhian constructive program
Building capacity for nonviolent social change.

Programs are offered in a variety of formats – including term-long courses, weekend workshops, and evening presentations. Those unable to come for a term or a year are encouraged to take part in a workshop or retreat. Information on all Pendle Hill programs is available at www.pendlehill.org. Pendle Hill’s mission of spiritual education is also furthered through conference services – hosting events for a variety of religious and educational nonprofit organizations, including many Quaker groups.

The Pendle Hill pamphlets have been an integral part of Pendle Hill’s educational vision since 1934. Like early Christian and Quaker tracts, the pamphlets articulate perspectives which grow out of the personal experience, insights, and/or special knowledge of the authors, concerning spiritual life, faith, and witness.

A typical pamphlet has characteristics which make it a good vehicle for experimental thought. It is the right length to be read at a single sitting (about 9000 words). It is concerned with a topic of contemporary importance. Like words spoken in a Quaker meeting for worship, it embodies

a concern, a sense of obligation to express caring or to act in response to a harmful situation.

To receive each Pendle Hill pamphlet as it is published, order an annual subscription. Please contact:

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