



# TOWARDS WHOLENESS

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## THOUGHTS FOR THE MONTH

I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you.

*2 Timothy 1:6*

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Sunlight's a thing that needs a window before it enters a dark room.  
Windows don't happen.

*R.S. Thomas*

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It is the glory of religion not to be set apart from life, but to permeate  
it powerfully.

*H.C. King*

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Try to see people's lamps - not their shades.

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## EARLY FRIENDS AND SPIRITUAL HEALING

by Cecil W. Sharman

From reading in John Nickalls' version of Fox's *Journal* such well-known stories as that about his recovering the use of his arm after the beating up at Ulverston in 1652 (N. p.127-8), and perhaps from hearing about something called his *Book of Miracles*, we may get the impression that Fox and his companions had very much the same approach to spiritual healing as readers of *Towards Wholeness*. But it is misleading to confuse the outlooks of two very different periods.

The first Friends believed that they were recovering the true early Christian faith of the Gospels, where they read about healings and other astonishing events. These healings were recorded not as actions arising from simple compassion, in the outflowing of the divine love, but as "signs" or proofs of the true identity of Jesus; they were part of the evidence offered to persuade people to accept him, as is said plainly, for example, in John IV, V.54. In Fox's time two arguments were current. According to one view, true followers of Jesus should expect the same wonderful happenings amongst themselves. (Naylor and one or two others even attempted to restore someone dead to life). Other people held that the miracles of the Gospels were a sufficient witness to Jesus, and that no more were needed or should be expected. After inclining to the first view Friends moved towards the second. In his *Apology* Barclay dealt with the problem.

"Some unwise and unwary Protestants do sometimes object to us, *that if we have such an immediate call as we lay claim to, we ought to confirm it by miracles.*"

He continued by saying that it was enough to give the same answer as that given by the primitive Protestants to the Papists.

"*We need not miracles, because we preach no new gospel, but that which is already confirmed by Christ and his apostles . . .*" (*Apology* X Sect XII.)

The only common ground in the controversy was that healings and other miracles were principally demonstrations of divine power or favour, or of divine anger. Few of us today are likely to think of them in this direct interventionist way.

Another feature of the time was the mixture of credulity and scepticism. Fox's own reports of healings were ridiculed as incredible less because of their miraculous element than because he had delayed so long in reporting them in his *Journal*, and often apparently could not remember details, such as names or places, which would have enabled his story to be crosschecked. The confusion of outlook amongst early opponents is well shown in this extract from a pamphlet of 1656.

"These things being objected against by me, as being done far off, and most of them in corners, and therefore far unlike the miracles done by Christ and the Apostles, I desired to hear of some done nearer hand, the truth of which I might find out; whereupon I was informed of one in this town ... I demanded by what means he was cured? It was replied, that Richard Hubberthorne did but go to his door and speak to him,

and presently he recovered; but afterwards enquiring of the man himself, he told me that Hubberthorne had said nothing, but bade him look to the light in him. He did not rebuke his distemper, nor command him in the name of Christ to arise and walk; and since that time the man hath continued in a languishing condition." (quoted in *Book of Miracles* ed. H.J. Cadbury, C.U.P. 1948, Introduction p.23).

We must also remember that some of the remarkable happenings mentioned in the *Journal* were reported as judgements, the deaths or misfortunes of those who opposed Quakers. The list of 'judgements' (*Journal* p.504) (in which some of the misfortunes were in fact wrongly attributed), or the vivid and detailed account of the opponent gored by a bull (Nickalls p.363), should be enough to remind us of the dark side to 17th Century attitudes, in which Quakers to some extent shared.

As the years passed Friends' own attitude to healings and 'miracles' changed, and this is shown by the treatment of the stories in Fox's writings. When Ellwood prepared the manuscripts of the *Journal* for publication after Fox's death in 1691 he toned down and sometimes left out healings and judgements. Fox himself had accumulated a collection of such events, which was known as the book of miracles. This is mentioned on p.516 of Nickalls, but Ellwood left out this reference. The book was indexed along with Fox's remaining MSS after the three main collections of his writing had been published. (See Nickalls p.754-5). Fifty years ago Henry Cadbury went through the index, which gives only the opening and closing phrases of each incident, and attempted a reconstruction of the work. He arrived at a total of about 150 separate entries, mainly healings. The index is all that survives, for the manuscript was soon afterwards lost or destroyed. We can only guess whether it was thought to be unhelpful or discreditable. It may be relevant to note as further indications of changing views that Ellwood's edition of the *Journal* in 1694 has an index entry for 'Miracles', whereas Nickalls in 1952 has no entry under 'Healing', much less under 'Miracles', but did list some healings under 'Incidents and Topics' as 'cures'.

Only those dozen or so entries also in one of the MSS of the *Journal* are known in full. The rest are like this:

"And there was a distracted woman . . . it was in Essex".

"And another young woman was small pox . . . of God made well".

"Another time there was a woman . . . dumb . . . was a great miracle".

Further difficulties about interpreting these early healing stories are caused by the indefiniteness of many of the reports and the primitive understanding of disease. (For example, the woman mentioned above who survived smallpox may well have been one of the people lucky enough to have some immunity). At least one of Fox's healings, that of John Jay in New Jersey in 1672, (Nickalls p.631-2) is rather a daring, desperate and lucky exercise in osteopathy than anything more miraculous. Another problem of the time is that medical treatments were often so irrelevant and injurious that many sufferers stood a better chance when they kept clear of orthodox doctors.

Fox himself was not at all opposed to some medicine, for he regularly encouraged the use of herbal remedies. In fact, at first he considered

"whether I should practise physic for the good of mankind, seeing the

nature and virtue of the creatures (- natural world and substances) were so opened to me by the Lord." (Nickalls p.27)

Thomas Lawson, his lifelong friend, a botanist and student of herbal medicine, who once received fees for instructing Thomas Lower, a doctor married to one of Margaret Fell/Fox's daughters, in the use of herbs, whilst they were staying at Swarthmoor. Fox wanted to see herb gardens set up and the use of herbs in medicine explored. At the end of his life, for example, he left to Friends in Philadelphia a piece of land for a meeting house, with a school and "a garden, . . . to be planted with all sorts of physical plants, for lads and lasses to learn simples there, and the uses to convert them to - distilled waters, oils, ointments, etc." (M. Webb, *The Fells of Swarthmoor Hall*, 1895, p.367)

Unfortunately none of these wishes were ever carried out.

The largest single group of Fox's healings were of people disturbed in mind. One in ten of the *Book of Miracles* entries call the patient by such words as 'moping' or 'distracted', and probably some of the many others just called 'sick' would also come under this heading. A long story from 1649 shows the irrelevance of the doctors' efforts and the eventual recovery of a woman 'possessed' and of another 'distracted' after Fox had spoken to them and Friends had waited in prayer. (Nickalls p.42-44) In America in 1673 Fox was taken to a house where there was a woman

"who had been many years in trouble and would sometimes sit moping two months together and hardly speak, nor mind any thing."

Fox said he

"was moved to go to her and tell her that salvation was come to her house, and did speak other words to her and for her, and that hour she mended and passed up and down with us to meetings and is well, blessed be the Lord". (Nickalls p.652)

This is probably one of the clearest accounts, even if tantalizingly brief, of Fox at work with someone evidently suffering from a severe depression.

One of the few stories which deals with a physical infirmity in a way that could perhaps be echoed today is that of James Claypole, who "was mighty sick of the stone that he could neither lie nor stand. He was in such extremity of stone that he cried out like a woman in travail; and I went to him and spoke to him and was moved to lay my hand upon him and desired the Lord to rebuke his infirmity and as I laid my hands upon him the Lord's power went through him, and his wife had faith and was sensible of the thing, and he presently fell of a sleep and presently after his stone came from him like dirt and so then he was presently well. ('presently' = 'at once') Formerly he used to lie a month or two weeks of the stone, as he said, but the Lord's power in his time soon gave him ease, and he came the next day 25 miles in a coach with me." (*Itinerary Journal* p.78, in *The Short Journal and Itinerary Journals of George Fox*, ed. N. Penney C.U.P. 1925)

We can be clear that for early Friends, especially Fox, spiritual healing was a real experience. Nevertheless we have to bear in mind that their outlook was in many ways strangely different from that of today, and that the information they have left for us is often ambiguous or without detail. Their reports have therefore to be examined with caution.