REFLECTIONS ON FOUR DAYS SPENT WITH DOUGLAS & DOROTHY STEERE, QUAKER SAINTS

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Loree & I, having previously met but never spent real-spiritual time with D&DS, were grateful to Kirkridge for making such time possible, 4-8 this month. No particular order to the following impressions-reflections.

1. Seated on the floor, at age 87 he was having a bit of a time rising, & I helped him up. He: "Thank you, but you needn't have done that." I: "Thank you, but I was glad to do for you with my body what your writings have done for my soul." Esp. ON BEGINNING FROM WITHIN.

2. In a ½-hour conversation with him, mainly on more important things, I said, "I noticed that you make no use at all of inclusive language." He, looking puzzled (sincerely, not rhetorically): "What is inclusive language?" He really didn't know! When I explained, he said, " I see the point, but it seems to me of minor importance." Things, for the soul, are the size the soul makes them. He is, as his tribe says, a "weighty" Quaker, & inclusive language is not on his list of weighty matters....Reminds me of this in Flannery O'Connor (LETTERS: THE HABIT OF BEING,128f): Walter Ong's "position would be the same if Freud had never been alive," & it is "no part of his concern whether one sex is superior to another. He's off on an entirely different track, and whether the male or female is the superior sex ain't going to ruffle his orthodoxy any; or mine. You may be right that a man is an incomplete woman. It don't change anybody's external destination." This, in the same paragraph: "The moral basis of Poetry is the accurate naming of the things of God....For me the visible universe is a reflection of the invisible universe." (Note that in that 1956 letter, she was responding to a radical feminist.)

3. He's blessedly free of psychocant & sociobabble, incl. the absorption of deity into, respectively, the psyche & the group. God today, as an embarrassment to the secular mind, is soaked up into, & disappears in, the humanum--as the water over the dry beans I'm soaking while writing this is being sucked up into the beans. On CNN a few minutes ago, Sonya asked Nan Robertson (33 years so far with the NYTimes; now author of an insider's view of AA, GETTING BETTER: INSIDE AA), "What do you say to those who think of AA as a religious cult," the first of the 12 Steps being confession of dependence on a Higher Power? NR: "The other members who help you are your higher power." S: "What about those who feel too guilty to go to an AA meeting?" NR: "We define alcoholism as a disease & the guilt falls away." Note, too, NR's 4Cs for AlAnon: "I didn't cause it; I can't control it; I can't cure it; I can change myself." With this radical anthropocentricity, compare this of Chaim Stern (GATES OF PRAYER, 166): "Hold our hands in Yours, O Lord, that those who take our loving hands may find You there"--the radical theism that, ½ c. ago, was no embarrassment to the founders of AA, nor is it any to D&DSteere.

4. She, 6½ years younger than he, has constant osteoporetic pain, yet complaineth not (& I didn't get this info from her) but weareth a benign countenance. Doubtless equally as rich in good works as he, nevertheless she sweats not her lesser prominence from being less published than he, & leads "meeting" well.

5. My greatest shock, next to the "inclusive language" conversation, was to find both of them blissfully unconcerned over the structural rigidity & undemocracy (no group feedback) of their sessions. I put this down in detail, partly as a puzzle (Quakers being so hot for listening) but partly because I am, as so many of my fellow teachers are not, open to the virtues of monolog, the straight lecture with no opportunity for response (though I prefer group participation in almost every instance of my own leadership). Here's what happened:

I to him after his first lecture: "You didn't ask for audience response. Not that you should have, but I'd have preferred it." He: "I don't want audience response to me. I came with the manuscripts I want to read to the group, & that is all I want to say to the group. I am old, I know just what I want to say, & I don't want to have to respond to questions." (Both he & she set aside, each, six ½ hours for private conversations, for which individuals could sign up.) (With that style, no wonder he didn't know about inclusive language! Among the 74 of us there were grumblings about it, & it would have been good for everyone, I think, if he'd had to say to the group what he said privately to me, & then had to face the group's responses. To put it bluntly, what are saints for?)

She surprised me by requesting that during the first group session before the ½ hour of silence before lunch each of the four days there be no responding of anyone to anything anyone said in "meeting," the traditional Quaker silence-+-speeches--not even after a decent pause, which is the Quaker style I was familiar with. No one violated her rigid rule, each speech plopped into the silence, & each speaker made sure not to say anything that might be viewed as responsive to anything any other speaker had said. I've never been in any Christian worship, howsoever simple or complex, with more rigidity, exclusion of spontaneity. On the teetertotter of freedom/order, spirit/institution, how could there be less freedom for the spirit & the Spirit? What would Geo. Fox have thought of this ossification? It was an outrage, but a quiet, peaceable outrage, to be followed by (again absolutely rigid) the less outrageous rule that there be silence for the space of the half hour before lunch (not even the relief of suggesting that conversational partners might form & go off where their talk would not disturb those observing silence)....One pastor told me she couldn't take the oppression. After the first morning, she spent her mornings staring at a waterfall a 45" drive away.

Some common questions were bubbling up among us. Eg, just how is a modern person to come open to the divine love D&D were preaching? I got desperate to hear the questions + D&D's responses, but no luck. I said to her, "How about spending at least part of the last morning in conversation with us--you two, & plenum?" Said she, "I'll think about it." When I asked her again, next day, she put her hand on my arm, smiled, & said, "You loose. I checked your idea out with several people, & they were against it." Said I, "How about taking the sense of the meeting on it?" She, broader smile: "Now, that would be Quaker, wouldn't it?" But D&D never did the Quaker thing there, never did take the sense of the meeting. My guess is that she checked it out with him & he quashed the idea....How unQuaker can you get?

IRONY: These two Quaker saints were thus giving a bad name to Quakerism, demonstrating not the freedom of the Spirit or of the meeting but rather rigidity & tyranny. But, their behavior aside, they were a blessing just to be with, & his manuscripts were inwardly nourishing to hear him read to us. Loree & I agreed it wasn't less a blessing than we'd hoped for....By contrast, Kirkridge had designed the 4 ½ days with wisdom: excellent balance of order/freedom, plenum/groups, leisure/work.... A GENEROUS THOUGHT: It's possible the wife was protecting the husband from overexertion. Will Loree be doing that for me 17 years from now? Further, the occasion gave the company an opportunity to practice a virtue now rare, viz respect for elders, "honor to whom honor is due." D&D are longtime doers for God, not just meditaters & speakers....A (I THINK) WISE WORD: Style is not as importance as substance, which is less important than spirit. D&D are deep-flowing spirits, thank God; I've panned their style & said nothing about their substance, the content they presented publicly & privately. In criticism, the operator will give priority to style; the intellectual, to substance; & the spiritually hungry, to spirit....I should add that his substance, the content of his lectures, was grand, rich.