

THE TWENTY-FIFTH JAMES BACKHOUSE

LECTURE

1989

**A NEW-BORN SENSE OF
DIGNITY AND FREEDOM**

Erica Fisher

The James Backhouse Lectures

This is one of a series of lectures instituted by Australia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends on the occasion of the establishment of that Yearly Meeting in 1964.

This lecture was delivered in Melbourne on 7 January 1989 during the Yearly Meeting.

James Backhouse was an English Friend who visited Australia from 1832 to 1838. Backhouse was a botanist who published full accounts of what he saw, besides encouraging Friends and following up his deep concern for the convicts and Aborigines. He and his companion, George Washington Walker, travelled widely but spent most of their time in Tasmania. It was through this visit that Quaker Meetings were first established in Australia.

Australian Friends hope that this series of lectures will bring fresh insights into truth, often with reference to the needs and aspirations of Australian Quakerism.

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Presiding Clerk
Australian Yearly Meeting

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ISBN 0 909885 30 3

Typeset by Household Word
Printed by Highland Press

ABOUT THIS LECTURE

The practices of the Religious Society of Friends have always been rooted in the belief that all members, women and men, have equal responsibilities in the corporate spiritual life. This lecture explores some of the challenges to Quakers presented by the status of women today in the wider society of everyday life.

It draws on statistical and other material collected for the UN End of the Decade for Women in 1985, and on similar data relating to (white) Australian society. The responses of two great Quaker women, Margaret Fell and Lucretia Mott, to the challenges of their times are also considered.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erica Fisher was born and grew up in England. She was educated at institutions which were founded on what are now described as affirmative action principles: Sheffield High School for Girls, one of the Girls Public Day School Trust schools; University College London, the first university establishment to have no entry bars on grounds of race, creed or colour, and the first to admit women; and Birkbeck College London, an evening college for those in paid employment.

She worked in market research and social survey research until the birth of her first child when, as was expected at the time, she left paid employment. After coming with her husband and three children to Australia in 1972, she worked at the Survey Research Centre at the Australian National University for a number of years. She is now a 'femocrat' - a female bureaucrat - working on issues relating to the status of women.

Erica's parents were Quakers but, themselves Friends by conviction, they felt their children should make their own decisions about membership, rather than join by right of birth; she did not formally join the Society until she was thirty.

Erica is a member of Canberra Regional meeting; she has served as Regional Meeting Clerk, on the Oversight Committee and as the Canberra member of the Board of Friends' School, Hobart. She attended the UN Conference for the End of the Decade for Women, held in Nairobi in 1985, as a member of the FWCC Delegation.

A NEW-BORN SENSE OF DIGNITY AND FREEDOM

A Beginning -

The practices of the Religious Society of Friends are based on the great truth expressed by Paul as 'there are no more distinctions between male and female, all are one in Jesus Christ'.

All Quakers, men and women, have equal rights and responsibilities in our corporate spiritual life.

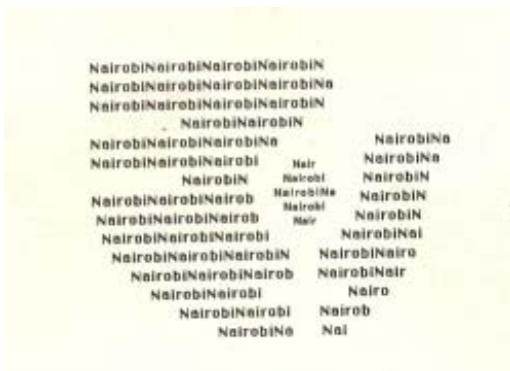
The 'woman' question therefore has no relevance to Quakers, and we need give no further consideration to it.

Finis . . .

Another Beginning -

The practices of the Religious Society of Friends are based on personal experience of the light within; there can be no distinction in spiritual value between male and female. However, the deep underlying concepts of the Christian heritage, which Quakerism shares with other churches, oppress women. If women wish to find their own spiritual truth, we have no alternative but to leave any group which maintains this framework.

Exodus . . .



THE BEGINNING -

The practices of the Religious Society of Friends are based on the vision that all may know God directly without need of an intermediary – Such as a 'hireling priest' - and that all, female and male, may be led by the spirit into ministry. The history of the early Friends shows quite clearly that it was expected that women would take part in the vital work of proclaiming the truth if they heard the call.

However as David Hodgkin pointed out, Quakerism is not a 'Sunday religion'; our faith should have an impact on the whole of our lives. Section four of our Advices begins: 'Bring the whole of your daily life under the ordering of the Spirit of Christ'.¹ Our daily life, though, is continually changing in small and large ways; modes of thought and action which we adopted ten or twenty years ago may simply no longer be appropriate.

We generally recognise when we need to change the practicalities of our daily lives. It is less easy to come to terms with new spiritual, challenges. Often we are tempted to retreat into the comfortable thought rituals which we maintain perhaps from our first commitment to the Society of Friends.

The challenges of feminism, of the 'woman question', of the status of women, have been renewed yet again in the past twenty years. Members of the Society of Friends have responded in the light of their firm conviction that all are one in Jesus Christ. On a practical level, many positions of responsibility within the Society are held by women because they are the right person to do so. Australia Yearly Meeting has revised the Advices and Queries so that the language used does not exclude any part of the membership.

And yet there remains the uneasy feeling that perhaps the rejoinder 'but the Society of Friends has always given women equality with men' is one of these comfortable beliefs which shelter us from new challenges.

Even with regard to the spiritual ministry of the Society, there is the evidence of the minute of a Morning Meeting at the beginning of 1701, rebuking women Friends:

'This meeting finding that it is a hurt to Truth for women Friends to take up too much time, as some do, in our public meetings, when several public and serviceable men Friends are present and are by them prevented in their

serving, it's therefore advised that the women Friends should be tenderly cautioned against taking up too much time in our mixed public meetings.'²

We must also consider how the experiences and constraints we encounter in our daily life affect our life in the Society of Friends. A letter to the English *'Friend'* in 1987 put it forthrightly: 'Equality of women with men in our Society is a pious intention and not yet an achieved fact. We have a lot of work to do before we are free of the sexism which we bring with us to the Society from the world.'³

Margaret Hope Bacon, the American Quaker writer who has opened to our view the great well of female experience in the Society of Friends in America, develops this position: 'The Society does not exist in a vacuum. Its own testimony for equality has always been shaped and tempered by the attitudes of the larger society. It has been inevitable that unconscious forms of sexism have crept into Quakerism itself.'⁴

The Society of Friends is not the only body to be questioned in this way. Other Churches and religious teachings are being scrutinised by some of their members, usually women, and their findings show it is beyond argument that roles, and responsibilities allotted to women within churches and systems of religious belief have always been profoundly affected by the social framework around them. And since in nearly all societies the position of women in that framework has been and is such that they suffer from systematic injustice because of their sex, it is not surprising that in religious life also 'the insights and activities of one gender are valued above the other'.⁵

At some times in the early Christian church, as reflected in the writings of the Fathers, it would not be too strong to say a woman was 'a thing despised and rejected by men'. Three hundred years ago George Fox recorded in his Journal that 'I met with a sort of people that held women have no souls adding in a light manner, no more than a goose.'⁶ Many of the arguments presently used against the ordination of women in the Anglican church are equally demeaning.

What, then, can and should the Society of Friends say today, in response to this continuing injustice? They could rest comfortably in their conviction that the Society is not sexist. They could admit that such injustice exists, but argue that the removal of this is far less important than fighting the threat of nuclear war or the horrors of institutional racism. Individuals have only so much energy available to fuel their concerns, and for many the long-standing peace testimony of the Society needs all their energy.

I want to explore a third option - that we should inform ourselves about the arguments and evidence relating to the position of women in society today; that we consider past responses within the Society, notably in the lives of two outstanding Quakers, Margaret Fell and Lucretia Mott; and that we then consider ways of responding to the concerns about women while maintaining our peace and other testimonies.

At the outset I should say that my approach is focussed on the experience of women. I have no intention of being 'balanced'. One of the great joys of exploring 'the woman question' in its present renaissance is the rediscovery of women's experiences in the past. Another liberation is the change of viewpoint in the discussion of politics, health, education in short in consideration of all aspects of our daily life as members of the human race not just mankind. Women exist, have experiences, opinions, thoughts and emotions which perforce are often different to those of men. For so long omitted, even suppressed, from the record these different perspectives are slowly being accepted as valid windows on the world, giving new views that illuminate the human condition for the benefit of all.

However, as Janet Radcliffe Richards has written, there is still a difficulty to be faced:

'The phenomenon of sexual injustice, of taking it for granted that different kinds of treatment are suitable for men and women as such, is so pervasive, so deeply entrenched and so generally taken for granted that to recognise it for what it is is to have a view of the world which is radically different from that of most people. The feminist sees what is generally invisible, finds significance in what is unremarkable, and questions what is presupposed by other enquiries.'⁷

Along with many others I have that radical view of the world. We have faith that the Society of Friends, our Society, can accept that this view is seeing the truth clearly and that the overall Quaker witness is increased by its power. It is important for the life of the Society that it should do so. For many seekers, the egalitarian Quaker ideal, the value of individual experience, is one of the testimonies that brings them to Friends. We have to make sure that we still respond to this need as it appears amongst us today, not as manifested three centuries ago, when the Society of Friends began.

HOW WOMEN HOLD UP HALF THE SKY

As a social statistician, my way of looking at the status of women is through the collection of items of information about individuals, then categorising, classifying and combining the separate snippets until we build up overall pictures of the general situation. It gave me great joy when I realised recently that there were good Quaker precedents for this: for example, James II was greeted on his accession to the throne by a Petition regarding the 'suffering condition of the peaceable people called Quakers' showing the number of Quakers currently held prisoner, with details of the statutes invoked, the numbers of prisoners at different locations, and including some economic analysis of the effects on employment resulting from the imprisonment of certain Quakers in manufacturing businesses.⁸

This power of statistics to summarise and then to illuminate a situation was notably demonstrated during the United Nations Decade for Women.

Let us start with the world economic profile of women developed by the International Labour Organisation in preparation for the Mid-Decade Conference held in 1980, and cited in the World Plan of Action:

While women represent fifty per cent of the world population, and one third of the official labour force, they perform nearly two-thirds of all working hours, receive only one tenth of world income and own less than one percent of world property.

The findings of the research undertaken by the United Nations in preparation for the End of Decade World Conference in 1985 reveal further:

that women do almost all the world's domestic work which, together with their additional work outside the home, means most women work a double day; that women grow around half of the world's food, but own hardly any land, find it difficult to get loans and are overlooked by agricultural advisors and projects;

that women are one third of the world's official labour force, but are concentrated in the lowest-paid occupations and are more vulnerable to unemployment than men;

that, although the wage gap is closing slightly, women still earn less than three quarters of the wage of men doing similar work;

that women, because of their poorer education, their lack of confidence, their greater work load, are still dramatically under-represented in the decision-making bodies of their countries.⁹

If we now turn to Australia, at least the Australia of the culture which was established just 200 years ago, we see that many of these findings are paralleled here.

In Australia employed women are still found predominantly in a restricted group of occupations. Over two thirds of them work in clerical, sales and unskilled jobs such as cleaning. In addition, a much lower proportion of working women, compared with men, are found in managerial or administrative positions.

Women are also restricted in the range of industries where they work. Over a quarter work in community services such as health and education; nearly a quarter work in the wholesale and retail trades.

When they are in paid employment, overall, women receive lower wages than men even under the same conditions of full-time working over a full year. Recent figures show that on average women receive only 82 per cent of men's wages. Even women graduates are disadvantaged compared with their male counterparts. A study of recent graduates showed that despite holding similar degrees and moving into similar areas of work, the women were paid less than the men.

Until 1969, minimum rates of pay for women were fixed at lower levels than for men. Under various award decisions the relativity varied; in general from 1950 on the female rate was set at 75 per cent of the male's. Between 1969 and 1975 equal pay decisions were adopted. Nevertheless, because many women work part-time, and because they are clustered in lower status and lower paying occupations, they will still generally experience lower lifetime incomes.

Until relatively recently, marriage effectively cut off any further advance in employment for women. In 1978 a decision of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission finally established the general principle that a woman worker could not be dismissed on marriage. This right to work is now laid down in the federal Sex Discrimination Act, and in comparable State legislation.

Education and training can open up many doors to the future. Up to very recent times, girls were less likely to complete the full period of secondary schooling and less likely to go on to tertiary training. If they did, young women

tended to concentrate on certain subject areas, and this situation continues. It is still the case that young women may not have the prerequisite subjects for certain fields of study, and have been badly advised on their career options. It also takes an exceptional person to chart a passage through unexplored territory, without known predecessors as models or companions for comfort, with the risk of mockery, abuse or active harassment; young women entering trades areas or other traditional male occupations, including some professions, have had to put up with all this.

If women do not themselves work in paid employment, and do not have the support of a male partner, they are likely to be very poor. About sixty per cent of those directly dependent on income support from Social Security pensions and benefits are women, that is, about one and a half million women. This generally means that they, and their children, are living near the poverty line. This situation is summed up in the well-known statement quoted by Gloria Steinem: 'most women in this country (USA) are only one man away from welfare'.¹⁰

Women's individual life experiences have changed over the past 40 years, for various reasons. These changes have not yet been assimilated completely into the general social structure, nor, possibly, into our expectations and images of members of our society.

If we take the section of the life line between menarche and menopause, that is, a woman's reproductive years, we are presently witnessing an unravelling and reweaving of the web, because of one simple fact.

Women now have the means to control how many children they bear with almost complete certainty. Moreover, in principle, that control depends only on their decision. If they take the decision to use an oral contraceptive (or to undergo surgical sterilisation) the results affect only them directly.

Of course, that is a simplistic statement. There are many ethical, moral and social factors which surround the control of fertility. Some of us are profoundly concerned with the consequences of these factors, not least those relating to the new reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilisation. Another matter of great concern is the social control of certain groups of women through the administration of contraceptives without their informed consent.

However, in the present context I shall consider only the simple fact that most women, if they want to and have the information and means to do so, can control the number of children they conceive. Pre-dating this development

somewhat, improvements in public health and medicine greatly reduced child and maternal mortality. A woman no longer need spend a large span of her life bearing and caring for children unless she chooses to do so; survival of the preferred number of children is assured. She herself is very unlikely to have her life cut short by the hazards of giving birth.

Australian women are now tending to marry at a later age, and to start their family later than their sisters did in the 1950s and 1960s. At first marriage, at least half of the brides are aged 25 years or older; fifteen years ago half were aged under 21 years. Similarly, at the birth of the first child of their current marriage, at least fifty per cent of mothers are aged 26 years or more, an increase of about three years since 1970.

Women are also having smaller families. In 1961 a family size of more than three could be expected. By 1986 the number of children according to current fertility rates would be less than two.

All these changes affect the range of options and experiences now open to individual women. Young women can have the experience of paid employment, with the associated economic independence, for a number of years before the demands of caring for children. They can plan to take tertiary education or training lasting several years without interruption. And increasingly they expect to return to the paid labour force after a relatively short period of full-time caring for children.

Yet another life change is currently the subject of considerable discussion, the demographic pattern known as the 'greying' of the population. Women and men alike have benefited from the vast improvements in public health that come with the provision of clean water, good sewerage and sanitation, better housing and adequate food. Many more people are living into the so-called retirement years. However, women on average live longer than men. Life expectancy at birth for a female is now about 79 years, compared with nearly 73 years for men. Combined with another social factor, that men tend to marry women younger than themselves, this means that many older women are widowed. Not only do they lose their companion, they may lose a major part of the family's retirement income. The present generation of older women may also lose mobility, because they have had little experience in driving the family car. They may have problems in dealing with financial arrangements and maintenance jobs around the house, responsibilities usually taken by their husband. This will almost certainly change with successive groups, because of their different experiences, but studies show that currently these are the situations that can cause stress.

To Know Nothing About Oneself is the Plight of Subjugated People.¹¹

Why bombard you with all these facts and figures? To make sure we establish a view of society which includes the experience of women. These are the overall constraints which can affect work, recreation and even worship. It is much more difficult to walk cheerfully over the earth on a pension, or with the three-fold responsibilities of paid work, house work and child care, or when dependent on a partner for income. It makes me very angry when men, and women, generally on the basis of a small highly selective sample of themselves and a few friends, discount the obvious effects of the social structure on women's experience and options, obvious, that is, when the focus for analysis is changed.

We must now consider other segments of the social structure, aspects of living which are not quantifiable but which mould our expectations, build up our self-image and control social interaction.

One of the strongest influences on our view of the world is the language available to express that view. The English language is deficient in that there is no neutral personal pronoun or possessive adjective for use when the subject may be of either sex. The solution adopted - the use of he, his and man as the indefinite terms as well as the male terms - clearly distorts the expression of the view. The female perspective is subsumed into a collective view which is also labelled as the male perspective. As the guidelines on non-sexist language put out by the Australian Council of Trade Unions express it:

"The use of words like "he", "him" and "himself" when writing about people of both sexes, implies that women are absent or somehow inferior.'¹²

Protests against the use of these non-inclusive terms elicit two main responses. First, the problem is seen as trivial, and the protesters as wasting valuable time and energy, for others as well as themselves. If the problem is indeed so trivial, then no harm would be done if the requested change was made without further ado. One group would be pleased, the other would surely not be affected by anything so trivial. There is another version of this argument - the problem is so trivial, and we have so many important things, like banning the bomb or saving the forests, to be concerned about. It is perfectly possible to concentrate on saving the world, and be non-discriminatory while doing so.

The other major argument presented is based on historical precedent and custom. It is claimed that these are the correct grammatical constructions as defined by eminent grammarians. Those putting forward this view respect the rules which they were taught and have absorbed into their own practice; as they see it, they are being asked to ignore proper usage. I was taught that the great glories of the English language include the variety and flexibility of expression possible when using it. In my life time the English language has developed the means to communicate about nuclear fission, electronic computers, putting humans on the moon and creating human embryos outside the womb. Surely we can adapt to communicating in non-discriminatory language.

Why labour the point? Because language is a symbol of underlying attitudes, social and individual; if we review the symbols we have to come to terms with the underlying attitudes as well. Early Friends understood the significance of language; by dropping titles and the double standard of 'thee' and 'you' they showed clearly their rejection of worldly hierarchies. Radcliffe Richards writes that 'towards the end of writing this book . . . I had to go through the whole manuscript removing supposedly neutral uses of 'he' and 'man' from the text. I used to think that feminists were making a fuss about nothing but they are not. It seems to be clearly demonstrable that (a) (a philosophical point) the use of 'man', 'he' and the like are not sexually neutral at all; and (b) (a psychological point) the common use of these male words does influence people's unconscious attitudes to women.'¹³

By using male terms as the general indefinite terms, we reinforce the underlying attitude that the male experience is the norm except in very specific situations. For example, a group with more than 50 per cent women in it is seen as unbalanced. I have read comments implying this relating to topics as varied as the main characters in a group of children's books being reviewed and the Australian Chamber Orchestra.

In a page of problems from a high school algebra text, six out of twenty problems are structured around human actions, buying, spending, overtime rates - everyone of these refers to males. Another batch of six refers to the relative ages of fathers and sons. No women - perhaps they don't undertake such complex tasks, or, more likely, the context of maths is male.

There is a darker, deeper-lying web of attitudes in our society which was opened to English Friends in the Swarthmore Lecture of 1986, and to Australian church members through the presentation from the Commission on the Status of Women of the Australian Council of Churches. The revelation that domestic

violence occurs much more often, and amongst all groups and classes, than we have been willing to accept, often has produced a response of angry disbelief. Yet we permit our law-makers and law-enforcers to treat as private problems these assaults of a severity and frequency that would be criminal in any other context.

Women are the objects of physical assault even in situations which are part of everyday life. A woman was attacked, in daylight hours, while riding on the cycle path which runs near the house of a colleague of mine. The neighbourhood children play around that path, many people use it for riding or walking. Young women in a Melbourne suburb have been attacked as they walked from their local tram stop in the evening. Some have been coming home from work, others from social activities.

Perhaps this is nothing new, perhaps such attacks have always occurred at the current level. If so, why have we maintained the social framework which accepts assault of women by men as a norm of human behaviour?

One English commentator saw it as resulting from the way women were defined in society, which has a powerful effect on how we live. In pornography, she said, women are presented as objects for men; advertising 'portrays them as halfwits, taking their identity from men, existing only for the service of men. Disrespectful attitudes to women at work, in the family, in religion, do the same.'¹⁴ After losing his position in the government in 1988, John Brown abused journalists as 'a team of girls'. The Foreign Minister of South Africa told a journalist asking questions after a major speech that he 'didn't want to quarrel with beautiful ladies. I do better things with them.'¹⁵

There's No Law Against Flying on a Broomstick

So far I have presented to you depressing evidence that women still face considerable injustice in everyday life. There have been some changes, including the landmark of the passing of the Sex Discrimination Act, but in most areas we still have much to do.

Nevertheless, over the past twenty five years there have been exciting times as women have discovered their potential, often strengthened by the discovery of their past. Detonated by the insights of the brave and original women generally denigrated as 'Women's Libbers', we have realised that different perspectives, different structures, different relationships are possible, where women can have the opportunity for growth and self-respect that men have enjoyed for so long. As Sarah Grimke, the Quaker abolitionist and then activist for women's rights, wrote

in 1837: 'I ask no favours for my sex . . . All I ask of our brethren is, that they will take their feet from off our necks and permit us to stand upright on that ground which God designed us to occupy.'¹⁶

Once we have hauled ourselves to our feet, what next? We may discover we can do new things, things which are impossible when crawling on the ground. Some women, for example, now undertake the education they missed earlier there are increasing numbers of women 'mature-age' students in all sectors of tertiary education.

From our upright position we can also take a fresh look at the past. Often this means discarding the received version, and then trying to weave in our new insights, so that we can draw on the strengths which still speak to our condition as it is today.

PATTERNS AND EXAMPLES

That simple Quaker grey dress and face-framing bonnet have a lot to answer for. The popular image of a sweet old-fashioned lady doing good or praying with a saintly look in meeting, obliterates the reality that many early women Friends were strong, radical and independent.

Some of the achievements of these women are part of our collective Quaker history - Elizabeth Hooton's vision of buying land for a refuge for Quakers in the hostile New England of the Puritans; Mary Fisher's journeys to America and to Turkey; there are many others who committed themselves with equal vigour to the new message.

They also could express themselves quite forceably, as Anne Blaykling did, who was committed because she 'affronted the Minister in the Pulpit, calling him Priest, hirelinge and deceiver, greadie dume dogge, with many more words of the same nature'.¹⁷ Margaret Fell called the local Justice of the Peace 'a Catterpillar, which shall be swept out of the way'.¹⁸ Brailsford, writing just before the first world war, compares the Quaker women obliquely with the suffragettes of her own time;

'One cannot but feel a reluctant sympathy with the unhappy "priest" of the period, whose meetings, like those of Cabinet Ministers of later date, were subject to interruption without warning, and his most eloquent discourses

broken at any moment by the sudden shouting of home truths from a member of his congregation.'¹⁹

George Fox recorded this incident in his Journal: 'Several other Friends were committed to prison... Many of them being poor men that had nothing to maintain their families by but their labour which now they were taken off from, several of their wives went to the justices who had committed their husbands, and told them if they kept their husbands in jail for nothing but the truth of Christ, and for good conscience sake, they would bring their children to the justices for them to maintain them.'²⁰

My own response to learning about the activities of these women was a sudden insight into the experience of Paul. Poor Paul, he must have been faced with small, widely dispersed congregations where women were eagerly participating and drawing on the strength of his vision - there is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus - and going out joyfully to share the good news with all, free, as they thought, to heed the promptings of their hearts and minds. No wonder Paul reacted with such rigid guidelines for behaviour - social anarchy threatened the respectability of his cause, and probably the men in the congregations were lobbying as well, for help in keeping their women in their accustomed place.

Fortunately for the Society of Friends, George Fox could accept the consequences of his vision, and encourage women and men to walk cheerfully side by side in their mission.

His own experiences must have supported him in this radical stance. In the beginning he had a number of women associates, and in 1652 Margaret Fell was convinced of the truth at her first meeting with Fox.

Nursing Mother of Quakerism

Margaret Fell's personal history has been often told.²¹ She was the daughter of a land-owning family in Furness, in the North-West corner of England. She inherited money from her father and received property as a marriage portion. She was married at the age of 17 to Thomas Fell, a neighbouring land owner, who was a lawyer, later becoming a Judge. He was sixteen years older than her. They had nine children, only one of whom died in infancy, which was very unusual for this period. Seven of the eight living children were girls, the son being the fourth in order of age.

Most writers on Margaret Fell comment on the advantage she would receive from this social position. In particular she could make contacts in government and court circles and make representations against the imprisonment and other sufferings experienced by Friends because of their religious beliefs. She also had the benefits of wealth and the control of property which she most unusually retained after her second marriage, to George Fox in 1669. The Fell family was in fact part of the upper gentry, which formed a very small proportion of the population of the time and which could be considered part of the local aristocracy.

We should remember that this social position also demanded considerable management and financial skills. In the absence of her husband on his legal duties, and after his death, Margaret Fell managed an extensive estate, with a household of servants and outside workers. Several of her daughters, notably Sarah, also took this responsibility at various times.

The estate provided most of the vegetables and fruit, and much of the meat for the household. Produce was also sold in nearby markets. Flax and wool "were spun and woven, and made up into clothing and furnishings. When Sarah, the fifth child, was in charge, she kept careful and detailed accounts; these show that she rented extra fields as required, arranged for" the maintenance and repair of plant (such as carts) and buildings. The family owned an iron smelting forge, and the financial interests of the various parties were carefully recorded. Sarah also acted as a business agent for a relative, and settled his affairs after his death on behalf of his incapacitated wife. Some of the sisters invested in shipping ventures between Dalton and Liverpool, Bristol and Cornwall. It is not surprising, therefore, that when it was required, Margaret Fell and her daughters could provide organisational skills and experience in financial management to the new movement to assist in developing structures unlike any other group of the time.

The Fund for the Service of Truth, which was originally based in Kendal, was overseen in the beginning by Margaret Fell. The establishment of the Fund recognised the need for financial support to be available for all who wished to travel in the ministry, both men and women, and also the need to assist those Friends in prison.

Margaret Fell provided lodging for travelling Friends and maintained correspondence with most of the leaders of the new movement. She also wrote material for publication, in particular, an important tract defending women preaching. In it she uses biblical example and logical extension of argument to

confound opponents, a style of argument which recurs in the feminist 'Women's Bible' of 1895 and indeed can still be found today.

Mark this, you that despise and oppose the message of the Lord God that he sends by women, what had become of the Redemption of the whole body of Mankind, if they had not believed the message that the Lord Jesus sent by these women, of and concerning his Resurrection? And if these women had not thus, out of their tenderness and bowels of love... if their hearts had not been so united and knit unto him in love, that they could not depart as the men did, but sat watching, and waiting, and weeping about the Sepulchre until the time of his Resurrection, and so were ready to carry his message, as is manifested, else how should his disciples have known, who were not there? ²²

In her recent study of the life of Margaret Fell, Kunze develops the view that Fell played a much greater role in the development of Quaker church organisation than is generally conceded. She also takes issue with the popular description of 'mother' or 'nursing mother of Quakerism'; she says 'the metaphor would be more precise if it conveyed the sense of a "mother superior", a powerful, dominant and somewhat distant authority.' Fell, she says, was 'a model for authoritative female public ministry... more enduring and effective than the model of the female prophetess who, as a "weaker vessel", was authoritative only while in a temporary and volatile state of religious enthusiasm.' ²³

The establishment of women's meetings is generally regarded as the most controversial innovation in church organisation undertaken by early Quakers. There seems to be little doubt that Margaret Fell and her daughters played a major role in their development. Although two women's meetings had been established in London around 1660, with responsibility for general welfare work, relief of poverty, and later the oversight of Friends held in the several London prisons, the first regular organisation of women's monthly and quarterly meetings was proposed by Fox in 1671. The first of these meetings were established in Swarthmoor and Kendal; later the Lancashire women's meeting, with Sarah Fell as clerk, sent out a long epistle detailing the functions and discipline to be observed by the women's meetings.

Elise Boulding has pointed out that although a number of women took up the challenge of ministry and the responsibility of the new women's meetings, others clung to their traditional roles and would not participate. This gave the active 'ministry sisterhood' the burdens of nurturing their own spiritual

development, at the same time struggling with unsupportive associates and with the tribulations of the larger world.²⁴

Margaret Fell clearly was willing to accept the challenge. What extra strength did she draw from her loving and supportive daughters, a women's meeting in themselves? It may be indicative of the loving family relationship that none of the Fell daughters had their marriages arranged for them. We have realised in recent times the spiritual and emotional value of sisterhood in the broadest sense - surely the Fell family added its power to the service of truth in their time.

A Moral Responsible Human Being

In June 1840, there were two anti-Slavery meetings in London. At the World's Anti-Slavery Convention, a recognised minister of the Society of Friends, an accredited delegate from her own Philadelphia Anti-Slavery society, was not permitted to take part because the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, and others, decided that women delegates should not be admitted.

At a special meeting several days later, held by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, a recognised minister of the Society of Friends, in company with the Duchess of Sutherland, was escorted amid applause to a prominent seat on the platform.

The ministers were Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Fry; Lucretia Mott commented on the inconsistency of the Anti-Slavery Society in assessing the proper sphere of women at the two meetings.

Elizabeth Fry is well-established in the Quaker company of saints; Lucretia Mott is not so well-known in the English and Australian traditions.

Lucretia Coffin Mott wrote a simple description of her roots; 'A native of the Island of Nantucket . . . Born in 1793. During childhood was made actively useful to my mother, who, in the absence of my father, on a long voyage, was engaged in mercantile business, often going to Boston and purchasing goods in exchange for oil and candles, the staple of the island. The exercise of women's talents in this line, as well as the general care which devolved upon them in the absence of their husbands, tended to develop their intellectual powers and strengthen them mentally and physically.'²⁵

Lucretia Coffin was sent to Nine Partners school, a Quaker co-educational boarding school. During this time, she learned about the plight of slaves, which awakened 'a strong feeling in their behalf'. She also had her first encounter with discrimination on the grounds of sex, when she found out that women teachers at her school were paid only half as much as the men, even though the charges were the same for boy and girl students. In her words 'the injustice of this was so apparent, that I early resolved to claim for my sex all that an impartial Creator had bestowed'.

After she had finished her schooling Lucretia was asked to join the teaching staff at Nine Partners, and her work entitled another sister to attend free of charge. At the age of eighteen Lucretia married James Mott, also a teacher at the school, to form a loving supportive union which continued until James Mott's death in 1868. Lucretia Mott also had the advantage of loving female companionship - she had a close relationship with her mother, two of her four sisters, and four daughters. She had only one brother, and one son who survived to adulthood.

Lucretia Mott is much closer to our own time than Margaret Fell, and we can respond more easily to her concerns, because they are so like ours. She recognised the importance of education for women, and strongly supported the establishment of Swarthmore College, the Philadelphia Female School of Design and the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania. She herself went back to teaching to help support the family when her husband's business failed. Her mother ran a store and then a boarding house when left a widow with many debts.

Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who was to be one of the most influential figures in the struggle for women's rights in the United States, first met in London at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840. Their experiences at that time aroused Elizabeth Stanton's interest in the 'woman question'; eight years later they met again, with Martha Wright, Lucretia's sister, at a friend's house in Waterloo, near the town of Seneca Falls. They then decided to call a Woman's Rights convention - 'to discuss the social, civil and religious conditions and rights of women'. On the day, the gathering of men and women crowded into the Wesleyan chapel heard the words of the Seneca Falls Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions, modelled on the Declaration of Independence, starting with the revolutionary statement: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal'. There follows then:

'The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of

an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.'

Following on a list of the legal restraints of the time, we hear a modern cry:

'He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honorable to himself.'

The resolution offered by Lucretia Mott at the last session of the Seneca Falls Convention has echoes of both Margaret Fell and our own modern feminists. 'Resolved: That the speedy success of our cause depends upon the zealous and untiring efforts of both men and women, for the overthrow of the monopoly of the pulpit, and for the securing to women an equal participation with men in the various trades, professions and commerce.'²⁶

Lucretia Mott was a supporter of Elias Hicks, the outspoken opponent of the growing evangelicalism amongst some American and English Friends Meetings and a long standing worker for the abolition of slavery. Lucretia herself was regarded in some Quaker circles as a dangerous agitator because of her activities in the anti-slavery and women's rights movements. It proved impossible to petrify her into a Quaker saint. As the reminiscences of her friend Elizabeth Stanton show, her reactions were often forthright. In 1869, the Women's Rights Convention was held in Washington and, as Elizabeth Stanton records, 'Chaplain Gray, of the Senate, was invited to open the Convention with prayer. Mrs Mott and I were sitting close together, with our heads bowed and eyes closed, listening to the invocation. As the chaplain proceeded, he touched the garden scene in Paradise, and spoke of woman as a secondary creation, called into being for the especial benefit of man, an afterthought with the Creator. Straightening up, Mrs Mott whispered to me "I cannot bow my head to such absurdities."²⁷ After the Seneca Falls Convention, the New York Herald called her a modern Lucretia Borgia, full of 'old maidish crochets and socialist violations of Christian dignity'.

Lucretia Mott herself had no intention of 'submitting tamely to injustice inflicted either on me or on the slave. I will oppose it with all the moral power with which I am endowed. I am no advocate of passivity. Quakerism as I understand it does not mean quietism. The early Friends were agitators, disturbers of the peace, and were more obnoxious in their day to charges which are now so freely made than we are.'²⁸

Saint or not, the woman who inspired Elizabeth Stanton to write as she did of their first meetings, must have been one who truly lived in the light.

'When I first heard from the lips of Lucretia Mott that I had the same right to think for myself that Luther, Calvin, and John Knox had, and the same right to be guided by my own convictions, and would no doubt live a higher, happier life than if guided by theirs, I felt at once a new-born sense of dignity and freedom; it was like suddenly coming into the rays of the noon-day sun, after wandering with a rushlight in the caves of the earth.'²⁹

Lucretia Mott saw clearly that her concerns were interlinked, arising from her Quaker faith. 'My convictions led me to adhere to the sufficiency of the light within us, resting on truth as authority, rather than "taking authority for truth". The popular doctrine of human depravity never commended itself to my reason or conscience... The highest evidence of a sound faith being the practical life of the Christian, I have felt a far greater interest in the moral movements of our age than in any theological discussion.'³⁰

DEAR FRIENDS AND SISTERS, ALL UP AND BE DOING

Over one hundred years after the death of Lucretia Mott, at 3.30 in the morning of 26 July 1985, the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, meeting in Nairobi, adopted by consensus the document 'The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women'.

I was present at that remarkable occasion, as a representative of the Friends' World Committee for Consultation. I spent two and a half weeks immersed in the two great meetings of the world's women, the Non-Government Forum and then the formal UN Conference, considering what had happened since International Women's Year, celebrated in 1975.

The Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women had been adopted at the Conference held in Mexico during International Women's Year in 1975. Governments were given a blue print for action during the Decade for Women, based on the goals of equality, development and peace. In 1979 the United Nations adopted a Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination

against Women (which was signed in 1980 and ratified in 1983 by the Commonwealth Government of Australia).

In 1980 a Conference to mark the mid-point of the Decade was held in Denmark - it reviewed progress since 1975 and developed a programme of action for the second half of the Decade. In particular three sub-themes were identified: employment, education and health.

In the Forward-Looking Strategies, the final response of the governments of the world to the Decade, the interdependence between equality, development and peace is emphasised yet again. 'Peace includes not only the absence of war, violence and hostilities at the national and international levels but also the enjoyment of economic and social justice, equality and the entire range of human rights and fundamental freedoms within society.'³¹ Lucretia Mott had said a century ago '... there is not true peace that is not founded in justice and right'.

Attending those meetings was truly inspiring - to realise that women were up and doing, and that governments were at last recognising the contributions and needs of women in their societies. The 'Forward-Looking Strategies' is a testament to the challenge of the tasks that still remain. Nevertheless, our journey is now clearly mapped out, we can measure our successes, and press forward encouraged by our achievements, even if sometimes we feel it is only inch by inch.

We must also be on our guard against forces which are looking to reverse the forward progress. The Decade for Women also saw the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment proposed for the Constitution of the United States of America. It is difficult to see why the simple words: 'Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex' should have aroused such opposition. We might also ask why such an amendment was not proposed during the recent considerations of the Australian Constitution.

Lucretia Mott once again may give us the solution: 'Any great change must expect opposition, because it shakes the very foundation of privilege.'

The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) could be seen as a symbol of the steady loss of men's privileges - such as those listed in the Seneca Falls Declaration: the elective franchise, profitable employment, rights in property, education. Women are no longer 'in the eye of the law, civilly dead' if married. Women are studying and teaching medicine and law.

It is also interpreted as threatening the privileges of women, the position of home-maker and mother within a family which is seen as complementary to the male's role as head and provider. Rosemary Thompson, an activist in the STOP ERA movement puts this view clearly:

'How often the Bible warns, "be not deceived". The plain fact is that women are being promised "liberation" from the plan God established for the family. The price of Liberty may be as costly as the one paid by our "foremother" in the Garden of Eden.'³²

A recent book, 'The Handmaid's Tale' by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood gives a chilling picture of a possible future based on this vision. Like George Orwell in '1984', Margaret Atwood has developed an ideology into a complete social structure. In the society of Gilead, which is the United States taken over by 'The Sons of Jacob', women are defined by their reproductive capacity; the 'handmaids' are those women with reproductive systems known to be viable, who are allocated to married males of high social standing who have no children. As in the biblical narrative of Rachel and Bilhah, the servant girl is to bear the child of the husband, so that the wife 'may also have children by her'. Other women are 'Marthas', the household servants, 'Econowives', married women of the lower classes, the women in 'Jezebel's', an upper-class brothel club, 'Aunts', the female control agents.

Through the device of an academic commentary as an appendix, Margaret Atwood explains: 'In the case of Gilead there were many women willing to serve as Aunts, either because of a genuine belief in what they called "traditional values", or for the benefits they might thereby acquire. When power is scarce, a little of it is tempting. There was, too, a negative inducement: childless or infertile or older women who were not married could take service in the Aunts and thereby escape redundancy, and consequent shipment to the infamous colonies, which were composed of portable populations used mainly as expendable toxic cleaning squads, though if lucky you could be assigned to less hazardous tasks, such as cotton picking and fruit harvesting.'³³

It is symbolic that amongst the earliest actions of the regime, women lost their jobs and lost control of their money and property.

LET THE CREATION HAVE ITS LIBERTY

Where do we, the Society of Friends and friends, go now? First, it is my hope that as individuals we all recognise the Society's commitment to the equality of women and men not just in the life of the Society but in the whole of our being, and that we accept and act on that commitment with all its consequences. In particular, as we work under concern for our traditional testimonies of peace and justice, we must recognise that peace and justice are grounded in equality. This means that we must reject any form of action or structure which maintains discrimination against women. Our response may be as simple as regularly requiring the use of non-sexist language in any group we work with. Or we may decide that we no longer support the traditional hierarchical decision-making structure (which almost always gives the major roles to men) in an organisation to which we are otherwise strongly committed, and seek to change it. Such actions in no way diminish the power of our major concern; it gives extra strength through recognising and freeing the potential contribution of all.

Reference to 'natural' capacity or ability has often been used as a tool for oppression of women. Now that we have developed a longer perspective of women's experience, we can see that at different times completely opposite 'natural' capacities have been cited in support of the same proposal for the regulation of women in society. Women were either sexually dangerous and threatening, as some of the early Church fathers saw them, or they were pure and weak needing protection, as in the romantic myth of the Victorian period. In both cases the result was that women were to be segregated away from the world of men.

Sometimes the same 'natural' attribute produced very different regulations. The hormonal cycles experienced by women were held to make them unstable emotionally and therefore unfit for administrative or political responsibilities. However, the same hormonal cycles, translated as natural maternal capacity, made women fit to take responsibility for the day-long care of twenty kindergarten children, the future of the country.

At other times it has appeared necessary to reinforce the 'natural' inclinations of women by legal action to achieve the same ends. What was hindering the invincible forces of nature?

We are told in Genesis that God created male and female, in the image of God. Male and female we remain, physically. In principle, the female body is designed to provide a support system for the human embryo through the gestation

period, and then to expel the mature foetus into a separate existence and then to provide food for the new-born infant. The female hormonal patterns set up the system and develop one of the essential gametes, the ovum; male hormones provide the complementary gamete, the sperm. When the gametes are joined together the process is activated. In individual instances, however, the process is far from inevitable. All kinds of things can halt or divert the process. For long periods of an individual's life, the process may not be activated at all.

Yet, of all the 'natural' forces this potential demand on the female body has been more constantly used to define a woman's position in the social structure, than any other.

The woman's experience of childbirth is without doubt incomparable in many ways - sharing and then giving separate life to another. What of the women who are unable to conceive?, or who give birth to a dead child, or who lose their own life as a result, or who have to have surgical intervention to give birth? Or the woman who does not want to have a child, or who does not have the opportunity?

Some women have argued that this experience, or the potential for it, makes the female nature more peaceful, co-operative and nurturing and that only women are capable of developing the strategies to ensure that humanity survives. If we adopt this line of argument, we then have no reason to reject other propositions based on the supposed nature of women. And, as we have already seen, many of these perpetuate systematic discrimination against women.

We are also accepting an implicit proposition about men - that they are naturally aggressive and dominant. How can women stop men acting this way, when this is their nature? How can men feel that spirit James Naylor knew, that hopes to outlive all wrath and contention?

Instead I would argue that no 'natural' differences of any importance have been identified. We are social creatures; the pressures and constraints of our social structure, as defined at any particular time, far outweigh the effects of the differing physical capacities of females and males. Hitherto our social structures have provided very different opportunities to women and men; it is not surprising that our general capacities and mode of response appear to differ also.

As a statistician, I am aware of the need to measure variation within groups as well as the variation between groups. For most measurable human attributes,

the differences between members of the same sex group may be wider than any between the averages of the two groups.

The evidence of human diversity and variety is inspiring. We must add to this diversity the amazing human potential. Humans can communicate, can share dreams, visions, and experiences. They can remember the past and use the memories to assist their present activities. They can imagine what does not exist, and can work out how to make it exist. Emily Greene Balch, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946, wrote some fifteen years later:

‘I am bringing my days to a close in a world still hag-ridden by the thought of war, and it is not given to us in this atomic world to know how things will turn out. But when I reflect on the enormous changes that I have seen myself and the amazing resiliency and resourcefulness of [hu]mankind, how can I fail to be of good courage?’³⁴

The essence of our Quaker experience recognises both the diversity and the limitless potential of human beings. Each individual may experience the working of God within. We cannot support any form of structure, social, or religious, which would devalue or restrict the individual's response to that experience. We must nurture that sense of dignity and freedom which permits all of us to take heed of 'the promptings of love and truth in our hearts, which are the leadings of God'.

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Thanks to Hugh Fisher for the 'Nairobi Bird'.