

Whenever I choose to identify as a Quaker, I feel a need to hedge. “I’m sort of Quaker,” or I say, “I identify as Quaker—depending on the day.” Most often, it’s something like, “Well, I’m a Quaker in my heart.” What I really mean when I do this is that I wanted to be a Quaker—quite a lot at one point—and some days I still do, but I’m not convinced.

During my first semester of seminary, I wrote and presented a paper that I titled “Hallway Discipleship.” I referred to the preface to *Mere Christianity* where C. S. Lewis describes the subject as a hallway that opens up to several rooms. He says that his aim in writing the book was to get people into the hallway. “But,” he adds, “it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals.” I took this metaphor and made it my own. For me, the hallway was not his version of the essentials of Christianity but that sacred space between belief and non-belief, and the rooms that lined this metaphoric hallway included other religions and frameworks.

The idea that sooner or later I would have to choose a room, a community united around a common narrative or framework, nagged me for years. I wanted to sit down, eat, and rest, but I just couldn’t get myself to walk into—or remain in—any of the rooms I passed. Then one day in my early 20s, I woke up suddenly, before my alarm clock, and thought, “There can be fires and chairs and meals in the hallway too!” I realized I didn’t have to agree with the idea that time in the hallway should be seen as “waiting,” rather than “camping.” That is not to say it is never a time of transition, for sometimes we do “return to God after God.” Sometimes agnosticism and atheism can serve as a necessary purification before discovering a new framework (or rediscovering an old one) and thus, finding a new home. But there is no reason why community cannot be built in the hallway, too.

The thing that continues to draw me to Quakerism is the way it feels to me both like a room and a hallway. It is a room in the sense that it is its own proudly unique thing, with its own culture, history, and organization. Yet from what I can tell as an inside-outsider, or as a hallway-dweller, it seems to make room for the unconvinced. At one point during my recent unit of clinical pastoral education, my supervisor said something like, “I’m trying to figure out if you like Quakers, or if you just like that they let you do whatever you want.” Doing whatever I want in this case entails listening to my inner voice, reading and exploring ideas freely, and being honest and authentic with others about where I am spiritually or otherwise. And I remember thinking, *Of course that’s why I like Quakers; isn’t that why most people are drawn to Quakerism?*

Perhaps I don’t know why most people are drawn to Quakerism, but surely it isn’t only the quirky sayings and the occasional, inevitable cliquishness. Instead, it is the testimonies, the clear commitment to the things we know in our bones are important; the emphasis on universal ministry; and the acknowledgement of how each and every person has something to say and to offer. At least, those are some of the things I get excited about. Upon my initial perusal seven or eight years ago, I was attracted especially to Quakerism’s in-theory non-creedal stance—for many reasons, though right now I am reminded of Simone Weil’s assertion that “Christianity speaks too much about holy things.” And the thing is, Quakers generally don’t. There is an orientation toward waiting, listening, and silence that allows me to honor what I discovered as a

child and what I have been reminded of periodically since: that everything Real is outside of our structures.

There are a few things that keep me from committing still after all these years of watching and considering. One is that I have conviction issues. I am wary of it just as I am wary of all my past conversions and “violently mystical” experiences. Some of these events were powerful, but I found that the meaning I made of them could be gone in an instant. So I am not looking to be convinced of Christianity or of Quakerism. The only kind of conviction I could trust at this point is that described by Father Zosima in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*: Early in the story, a woman comes to Zosima wanting to know how she can be sure of her salvation, and he tells her that her task is to love her neighbor “actively and indefatigably.” For if she is able to remain oriented to that goal, to act on it over and over each day, then there will come a time when she is sure. “This has been tested,” he says. “This is certain.”

What I am interested in is a community where values and actions are lifted up above beliefs, or where beliefs are only useful if they reinforce and encourage the values that are demonstrably important. I judge religious communities primarily based on their care for others and the earth, and on their commitment to justice, equity, and inclusiveness. I am looking for other things as well, but most of all, I am looking for something a weighty Friend named for me not long ago: spaciousness. I thought for a long time that Quaker meeting was the place I had been envisioning: a community of seekers who are working together and separately through what I will forever term, thanks to Jacques Lacan, “trauma of the Real”; a group of people who respect the process without demanding particular outcomes or theological structures. This was my hope, my assumption, and I have yet to figure out whether or not this assumption holds. I am waiting at the door—for what, I don’t know exactly.

There are other ways in which I am a hallway person. When I was five, my mother and I spent a day visiting the kindergarten classroom and then the first grade classroom at my new school in Seoul, South Korea. I was nearly too old for the former and nearly too young for the latter, so I was to experience both and then choose. The kindergarten classroom was “fun” and active; the teacher coddled me and sat by me, leaned over and tried to help me do my worksheet. I walked into the first grade classroom with my mother, and that teacher coolly looked up from the book she was reading and motioned for us to sit outside of the circle she had gathered. I can remember it perfectly: how soothed and safe I felt, how precious it was to be invited to be present in my preferred role.

I think what I want in addition to spaciousness is freedom—freedom to go in and out, to hang out just outside the open door if I need to. And perhaps that is what makes Quakerism unique: I think I’m allowed to do that. As with any other group, Friends are diverse, and so this permission really depends on who you ask. But I’ve asked around in my circles, and the consensus is that to some degree, “Quakers do whatever they want.” That sense of empowerment my mother gifted me when she let me choose classrooms based on my comfort and my needs is what I am asking for, and that is what I want to have found.

I quoted Emily Dickinson in my head as I was seeking to wrap this up, and I think it fits, however strangely:

So We must meet apart—
You there—I—here—
With just the Door ajar

They are apart, yet meeting; separated, yet the door is open—expansively open, as she explains in the next line, “That Oceans are.” My love affair with Quakerism is not nearly as complicated (or dramatic) as the connection Dickinson describes in the poem, but similarly, “I cannot live with you,” at least not yet.