Whitman's Quaker Spirit

I.
William Bartram's "On the Dignity of Animal Nature"

In the summer of 1999 I picked up a book by Thomas P. Slaughter entitled *The Natures of John and William Bartram*, attracted by the idea of a biography that featured a father-son relationship, especially of two botanists whose historic trips to Florida had always intrigued me. It is a special grace when a child follows a parent's vocation or genius and then in many ways outstrips the forebear.

In teaching William Bartram's *Travels* (1791) I had always been struck by the unusual spiritual ecology in the Introduction and in many of the natural descriptions that fill the rest of the book. As he puts it, "This world, as a glorious apartment of the boundless palace of the sovereign Creator, is furnished with an infinite variety of animated scenes, inexpressibly beautiful and pleasing, equally free to the inspection and enjoyment of all his creatures." He starts then right away to detail the excellence of the glories of the vegetable world with long catalogues of flowers and trees that remind me of Whitman. Then he argues that plants and animals have a greater affinity in God's system than we usually accord them. Especially in their vital principle, he finds no essential difference, for example, between the seeds of plants and the eggs of oviparous animals. He follows then with three extraordinary examples of such "animated scenes": the yellow pitcher plant interacts with the rain and eats insects, the bear cub at Mosquito lagoon weeps over his murdered mother, and amid the butterflies at Turtle Mound the leaping spider captures a bumble bee in a long struggle. Bartram's is the first spirit to inform the animated scenes of Wekiva I have gathered here. His understanding of ecology is regularly both scientifically precise and personally spiritual. His concept of vitalism was soon to be cast into the graveyard of metaphysical concepts, but it enjoys a revival today in the phrase "intelligent design."

I had never had any exposure to Quaker life or people, so the part of Slaughter's book that eventually interested me most was the Quaker teaching that God was primarily on the inside, a Seed of growth, a Light that guides us. To the Bartrams, revelation in the Bible and in Nature were correlative. God in scripture was outside, but considered secondary to "that of God" in each of us. For Bartram, that means plants and animals, rivers and forests, too. So, if a passage of scripture or a flight of an egret happens to enlighten us, it comes from this power of God within. For the Bartrams, then, pursuit of an understanding of nature and its underlying laws of ecology embodied an act of faith, but one to be conducted with accuracy.

Gradually it dawned on me that the peculiar mode of non-theological Christian deism that Quakers and the Bartrams subscribed to is very much closer to my own experience of God, especially in the last few decades. All summer long Slaughter's book had a profound effect on me.

When I returned to Florida in August, I looked up the local Quaker meeting and started to attend their silent services and study their basic tenets.[1] I wanted to know more about the Quaker ecology in Bartram; so I researched first the correlation between Quakerism and empirical science.[2] While other Christians were also curious and followed the discoveries of science, they often found scruples between their literal understanding of the Bible and their experience. Since Quakers prefer works to words and internal leadings from God to authoritative prescriptions and interpretations of church figures, it was no problem for a Quaker scientist to discover any new fact about God's creation. For Quakers, the laws of nature can fully replace the laws of the Bible or the church (or else simply advance and articulate them) because their eyes and minds were God's. They were using their intelligence to understand God's work and design in creation.

One day in the middle of my excitement about Bartram's Quaker spirit, it crossed my mind that the identity I felt with Whitman twenty-four years prior was largely what I found agreeable in Quaker tradition. I started to comb through Whitman biographies and criticism to see what others had uncovered about Whitman's Quaker roots and connections (details in the next section).

Suddenly I had a new sense of integration in my life. The love of nature expressed in Wekiva came into focus with the lifelong identity I had felt with all the movements of peace inside my own soul, my family, the college, and the larger national and global concerns. It was an enduring joy to pull all of these endeavors together, but the most astounding part was learning to listen for God from the inside. Since I had always done that without thinking that God was already there, I had ironically missed the truth that all along my faith in a provident God was revealed by my own free, intellectual, natural, and soulful pursuits. Furthermore, the horror I had come to feel of all public ceremony, preaching, and protestation was erased by the silent meetings for worship and my involvement in education and the protection of the river rang true as what Gary Snyder calls the "real work."

Quite a few personal revelations followed for me out of the experience of Quaker meetings for worship that I will only summarize, because my story is not the story I am telling, only in so much as it is yours as well, when you step into your own Wekiva, into the mysteries of the wild flower or the animated scenes of your own neighborhood. One peculiar discovery for me was the strong sense that God was my mother in me. Even

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[1] A simple, personal religion, which avoids creeds and systematic theology, Quakers find the same spirit in us that tradition held for the bible. They generally refuse set forms of worship, have no trained ministers, refuse to take oaths on the grounds that the truth is always to be spoken, and put an emphasis on practice rather than preaching. Individual freedom in this regard is cherished, but some form of humanitarian work is assumed to flow from a conscience keen on justice in the community. By and large, Quakers have been pacifists, opposed to slavery, supportive of native rights, concerned for the welfare of prisoners, and opposed to capital punishment. George Fox began the movement in England in 1647; and American Quakers arrived in 1650, many settling in Pennsylvania and New York. They have suffered from two major schisms created by Elias Hicks in 1827 and John Wilbur in 1845.

[2] Arthur Raistrick has compiled the most comprehensive list in *Quakers in Science and Industry*. John Dalton, Joseph Lister, William Allen, James Logan, Thomas Lawson, Arthur Eddington, and Kathleen Lonsdale are among the most prominent including of course the Bartrams of Philadelphia and their cohorts in the Royal Society, Peter Collinson and John Fothergill.

though she died in 1968, she has always remained present to me as a guiding force. A second was the feeling that all the events of my life had to be reconsidered, especially the sudden dark despair that I fell into at twenty-four that nearly was the death of me and took a year and a half to recover from. But the strangest epiphany of all came with the realization that if you could be following the God from within without knowing it, then there is no telling who is a Quaker.

The day I got this sense, I was driving down a crowded highway in Orlando and it was a sudden exhilaration to realize that we don't have any idea how many or which other people might be kindred spirits of this kind. I later learned that George Fox, the founder of the Religious Society of Friends, had a similar experience at the original Pendle Hill and it guided him the rest of his life. Since the day in 1976 when I was first gathered in the light of Whitman's poetry, I began to feel the "intelligent design" of the earth and my own life as one, a personal order outside the boundary of myself or of our species. Life happens, species evolve through arbitrary changes, we make decisions without a particular plan, but at some points we have the blessing of hindsight that reveals nature's destiny, the divine intelligence of our small part in the wild and scenic river of our home place.

My final step was to reverse Bartram's travels and visit Philadelphia, partly to follow out the last leg of the unusual journey that these four Whitman interludes chronicle. I wanted to sift through the best Quaker libraries and archives in America to answer the question: did Bartram get his ecology from his Quaker upbringing and research? If so, then likely Whitman had as well. After some preliminary days of building a bibliography at Swarthmore's extensive collection of the Religious Society of Friends, I came across an article by Kerry S. Walters, a comparison of Bartram and the Peaceable Kingdom of Edward Hicks. It talked about an unpublished manuscript of William's—a 4400 word essay in the Bartram papers downtown at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania—that seemed to be about the relationship between God, humans, and animals. In the catalogue it was described as "on morality."

I find this a most unusual document of American history because it represents the answer to my question, as though Bartram himself had decided to simplify my research. In the essay he defines his own and his father's deistic Quakerism and its sense of ecology in one grandly overarching tour of Bartram's own experience. Like me, he was looking back over his life and patching together the pattern that would make sense of it. Although I cannot be sure of the date of the essay at this time, it seems to represent a much more advanced version of the spiritual ecology that I have described in the introduction of the *Travels*.

I have entitled the essay *On the Dignity of Animal Nature* and present it in the appendix below as the first great document for the restoration of America, the protection of wildlife, and the equality of native Americans of all species and nations. To read this essay is to read the heart of *Leaves of Grass*, but written, I suppose some ten or twenty years before Whitman was born. In it botany, zoology, anthropology, ecology, democracy, and theology are woven into one fabric of enlightenment idealism.

In Whitman's voluminous textual legacy I find no reference to John or William Bartram, but I have no difficulty now imagining the connection between the two men and my own writing. William Bartram was an artist and a botanist, fully understood the connection between habitat and organism, and between life forms and organisms. He had a spirituality that grasped all of this in one stroke, like Whitman, but he was an introvert like me and it seems never grew into the communitarian work that Whitman espoused—aside from his great contribution to literature and botany. Different gifts, one spirit.

II.
The House of God

7/29/01

How many ways can we take the measure of this phrase? As a child I remember voices of parents, nuns, and priests using it to teach respect for or the proper conduct inside the church or before the tabernacled presence. To be sure, among Catholics the differences between churches is enormous—God living as it were in everything from castle to cattle-loft. Among the various other denominations of Christians, the belief in the Divine Presence, in the Eucharist, or among members of the Church in worship or song covers another whole spectrum of the phrase. All of these are just preludes, however, to the Father's House which is, by definition, in heaven.

Even though most believers will say that God is omnipresent or everywhere (part I suppose of knowing everything), almost all have a sense that at certain times and places, the Presence is more than commonly tangible or assured. If I walk into St. Margaret Mary's Catholic Church on Park Avenue today, that Presence or sense of the House of God will be overpowering even though each parishioner has a different degree of faith or contribution to that reality. Many would say that even if not one soul in that church believed or held up the bargain of the House, it would still be "of God."

Most of my life now has been attending a different House of God, the hallowed halls of creation. From the cosmic fire-works to the Wekiva eelgrasses, to the exquisite wasp at our seventh-floor window, nothing moves me to respect more than the House Made of Dawn, as Scott Momaday and his Kaiowa people refer to it. I add to creation, in my own delight, the whole of the human population, its cultures and creations, cities and slums, vessels and machines, telescopes and mountains of garbage. I admire the works of humans, but my appreciation of the poetry, music, dance, painting, and architecture is an extension of my rapture in the House Made of Dawn. I often feel a much greater presence of God in the pure habitats of Wekiva than in the subway or the mall, but usually wherever I see people, the place becomes charged whether it is a church rimmed in gold or under the simple cloth of subsistence. But this House of God is not the most important one.

In my Catholic upbringing we were taught that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, as though we ourselves were a tabernacle. I never fully believed this, even

though by taking communion with faith, I was clean and simply moving God from one golden chalice to another. But now, thanks to Walt Whitman, I see God is always within me as the embodiment of all of creation in its evolutions from the Big Bang to this point. This transcendental concept in its scientific scope joined to a Quaker faith that God's Spirit is open to each human heart makes me stand on or rather in very firm ground, "tenon'd and mortis'd in granite," as Whitman puts it ("Song of Myself" 20:419). The greatest respect accrues to the body when it holds firmly and without question to the whole of the House Made of Dawn.

Finally, inside the healthy body-house operates the mind. I will not separate the actions of God in body from those in mind, but the question of whether or not creation of the Godly self is also a House Made of Dawn is perhaps worth asking. As we make our selves and include a spiritual dimension to our story—what these interludes partly are doing—we are constructing our own temples out of our daily activities on behalf of our multidimensional community.

As a college professor I have evolved as a teacher from lecture to discussion, from questions to multiple answers to deep complexity. My idea as a teacher has been to take off whatever collar of orthodoxy I might currently have and let each student, asking the enduring questions, seek her own or his own truth. That truth starts out in discussion with words about values, but it tests itself in action every day. This is a form of practical, ethical reasoning, which is the foundation of a liberal education, based on the most up-to-date scientific research, the latest theories to explain the data, and the varieties of philosophical critiques or paradigms. However, this happens for all of us, not so much in a classroom as in the practical experience of laboratories, field work, studios, offices, families, churches, and theaters. It starts especially in each journaling mind. Seek truth and goodness for yourself, I urge my students daily.

Here's the exciting discovery of this roundabout presentation and the four interludes. When I look back at a lifetime of haphazard intellectual pursuit, very little of my searching has not had a divine significance or intelligent design to it, apparent if at all, only in hindsight. So, if you could watch it all growing in time-lapse photography, the result would be a fine cathedral, as Whitman said of the organic structure of his thirty-seven years of revisions and expansions of *Leaves of Grass*, through eleven editions and many more reissues.

Journaling is the essence of the transcendental quest for the House of God within. The Quaker and Whitman insistence on the suppression of creed is a democratic way to pass the communion to each individual, inside or outside the Church rosters. Skepticism, even temporary atheism, agnosticism, and the scientific refusal to step across the boundary of values are all a part of seeking such a personal truth, of openness to the light of dawn. No house that I so build is better than any other house that you so build and that makes it all a global Force in each tribe, nation, sect, or religion.

Quakers place a high priority on listening with the heart. Their quest for Truth is practical. It requires a certain setting aside of the frivolous or egotistical pursuit and reaching out with compassion to the problems of others, to the hunger and thirst for justice, the sorrows of those in mourning, the problems of victors and victims, and so

forth. Doesn't that sound like a description of "Song of Myself"? So the Light of God has both an intellectual and an emotional force. Both require a sitting in silence—no outside authority and no internal control problems. Such a state of composure is not constant, but the embrace of the simple, out-going life is the best beginning for such a quest and leads to a consistency between faith and practice in the river community.

III.
Whitman's Quaker Spirit

1/24/04

Whitman's mother had a profound influence on the poet all his life, but it is impossible to tell how much of her family's Quaker roots affected his poetry and his life. We don't know how many meetings for worship or first day school sessions he attended as a boy. As an adult, he never became a member of a Quaker meeting and explicitly said he would not. Biographers generally agree, however, that a major influence on Whitman's whole career was the fiery Long Island Quaker, Elias Hicks, a friend of his mother and father. Hicks was so outspoken in his defense of the truth of the inner Light, as opposed to scripture, that he caused a schism in American Quaker meeting houses in 1827. Whitman admired Hicks all his life and even wrote a tribute to Hicks in his later years, recounting an extraordinary experience of seeing the man in action as a boy of ten. Many have surmised that the prophetic voice of the poem owes something to this experience.

As our study of his journaling mind in the last interlude reveals, the poet was born anew and the political journalist transcended in the early 1850's. Whitman underwent a change of calling, if you will, from one kind of writing to another. He went below the issues of justice that he was fighting in the press and, following his Quaker heritage, suddenly stood up, as it were, to address a national meeting for worship. In the face of the daily rollercoaster of the political news, he found a center in himself of the entire universe and he imagined a complete spiritual enactment of the sense of equality guaranteed by the revolution. His voice changed to another person and grew rapidly to achieve a clarity of form and matter that created, and indeed still creates, the next phase of democracy. He became an American constitutional fundamentalist, calling us to read the declaration of independence literally and to apply it equally to the ecological as well as the social community.

When Whitman's opens his song with the phrase "creeds and schools in abeyance," he is harkening to the Quaker truth that real religion is an attitude of mind that all folk share and is not to be found, either exclusively or automatically, in the orthodox principles and practices, rituals or forms of sacrament, words or interpretations of the learned clergy. Religion is at the heart a leading of the light or truth, a growth from a seed idea or experience of God's goodness, of the fruits or gifts of creation. It is fully democratic and protected under the first amendment. Whitman understood all his life

that his inner, indwelling divine spirit was growing with the cosmos, the earth, the islands of Paumanok and Manhattan, and the leaves of grass. His song is ecological, growing fully out of his place and it creatures. He melded the sense of humility of the Quakers with the sense of optimism of the transcendentalists.

The ground of literature is once and for all entirely shifted by the voice of this poem because it aligns all interpretation with the autonomy of the reader, the absolute authority of each reader to hear this leading voice from within. Each of us is the child of the same universe (or God) come to this same development, to the great hymn of worship and camaraderie, the democratic freedom from aristocracy and hypocrisy. The ecstasy of "Song of Myself" is spread to all its readers. America's (and Wekiva's) faith is in the heart of God within the reader, the song of that choir in the house of self.

One key ingredient of this new voice was very much not a Quaker concept: Whitman's equalizing of the body and the soul. Whitman's voice owes just as much to its sensual bodily existence as it does to its spiritual. He understood the necessity for a celebration of the body and a restoration of the spell of the sensuous in all its forms. The body electric and erotic was for him a perfect counterpart of the soul or spirit. Sexuality was a religious text of the creation which the majority of his Victorian culture wanted to erase, and this in the face of the most astounding scientific discoveries to show that the body is a dynamic flow-through thing made of atoms from the beginning of time. Not being the scientist that William Bartram was, Whitman did not get his understanding of the dignity of animal nature from the broad study of animal behavior. All the more surprising then that he insisted on the body as equal to the soul in its effluence of beauty, truth, and goodness. This departure from Quaker and Puritan values is a unique part of his song's appeal.

Aside from his poetry, it seems, Whitman did not fully or directly embrace the Quaker causes of his day. Whitman was outspoken as a political journalist, to be sure, but as Jerome Loving has spelled out quite carefully, his career does not follow the strong anti-slavery position that Lucretia Mott preached in Quaker and other meetings across the northeast. Whitman saw the problem of secession as greater than the likelihood that African slaves would soon be given full citizenship and acceptance. In practice he preferred the peace initiative and the free-soil compromises it required to the likelihood of a war and secession.

Was Whitman then a pacifist? Jerome Loving argues that the poet was not fit or eligible to fight at forty-three years of age, but this is not the key issue. His brothers brought up in the same household had his same mixture of religious cultures, it would seem: a father who believed in the war of revolution and a mother who as a Quaker might have opposed violence to achieve power. Each of the Whitman children made different decisions when faced with the fact of the Civil War.

Whitman went to the war scene at first to help his wounded brother, but when he saw the reality of the battlefield, he intuitively settled in the tents rather than joining ranks with the unionists. At this point, like many a Quaker leader before him, he turned his life upside down for this heartfelt cause. The suffering and death he witnessed and

celebrated in *Drum Taps* confirmed his notion that the hero of feudal aristocratic literature was a mask for the common and average soldier of whatever rank on either side. He never as far as I know renounced the war itself—a war perhaps he sensed was necessary to keep democracy intact—but he celebrated the fervor and the spirit which guided his comrades through the pain and suffering of it, helped each wounded soldier he met keep contact with his family and his home place. His autobiographical writings do not reveal that he had a special leading or calling to all of this, but in fact he did. At first it seemed at odds with his poetic mission, but eventually was swallowed up into it.

It means a great deal to me that the poet interrupted his poetic career for mercy's and mourning's sake. In the stench of the hospital tents his optimism and his manifest destiny were only somewhat muted. A telling revelation about Whitman's authentic Quaker spirit, as Loving reports, is that he didn't tell the soldiers about his poetry or read them his poems. Indeed, before and after the war when he would hang out with the working men of any kind, he remained to them an unlettered comrade.

The key question in all of this is not so much whether the poem has Quaker trappings (for example, the use of the ordinal as reference for months), but whether, as William Sloane Kennedy has pointed out, Walt was a Quaker in his own life and spirit. In other words, to what extent was the poet authentic in that voice? Was he a democratic charlatan or a pharisee? Many of the critics of Whitman have referred to his entourage of promoters and friends at the end of his life as his disciples, imagining he is preaching some sort of false religion.

Kennedy, who knew the poet in his later years, would say yes, he lived like a Quaker. In a brief essay entitled "Whitman's Quaker Traits," Kennedy outlines Whitman's passion for freedom, guidance of the soul by the inner Light, self-respect, respect for every other human being, sincerity and plainness, placidity, silence (do you believe that?), and unconventionalism. Kennedy allows that this list is more true of Walt in his later years than in his passionate youth, a kind of reversal toward his mother's teachings. In his mid-life, the poet spent a great deal of energy in self-promotion, which is to say that he was trying to spread the spirit that would build the land anew.

When Mary Austin wrote her great study of ecology and culture in *The Land of Journey's Ending*, she prophesied that the Southwest would someday produce America's finest culture because the spirit of the land was working through all who took root there. I remember thinking when I first read her book that after seventy-five years it had not yet come true and frankly that a land could not have a spirit. However, in the past twenty years I have watched one growing in central Florida and now I am thinking that unless we become kindred spirits, share a basic spiritual ecology with each other and with the land community, Wekiva is lost.

Last year at the opening of a county commission meeting, I stood with fellow residents to recite the pledge of allegiance. As I stumbled in my mind over the phrase "under God," it seemed very clear to me then, as now, that we all stand together in Wekiva, in the ecological community as our common body. Even a pure materialist who believes in no God can say that phrase in good faith, if what is at the heart of our common task is to preserve life and community in the way that we were born to it.

Whitman's insistence on the body as equal to the soul and Bartram's tracing of divine intelligence and morality in the deep ecology of animal instinctual and developmental behaviors is the best hope for our unity. The best way to work out the issues of the Wekiva is to recognize that each member of the community has at least this much reason to work together to preserve and restore the natural world that begets and sustains us.

Democracy of all forms requires adherents and a message, a newsletter, web site, foundations and funds, networking, enthusiasm, and aplomb. The cause requires many talents, so we can all pick and choose in our small and local setting. Some like Whitman are led to make a much larger statement. The I and Myself of his song is meant to belong as much to you and me as to Whitman. It is the voice of God calling inside us to do what we can to make a world of equality work, to see beneath the surface of the material world the grand progress of earthkind inherent in each of its creatures.

The Great Golden Digger Wasp
Shell Island