

**LIVING  
IN  
DARK TIMES**

**REX AMBLER**

— PENDLE HILL PAMPHLET 447 —

## About the Author

Rex Ambler is known for his search to experience and understand the Light and the workshops he developed and materials he wrote to share what he discovered. He taught theology for over thirty years at Birmingham University in England and has more recently traveled extensively to teach Quaker meditation, or “Experiment with Light,” helping those interested to set up “light groups” to practice it. See [www.experiment-with-light.org.uk](http://www.experiment-with-light.org.uk). His many publications include *Light to Live By: An Exploration in Quaker Spirituality*; *Seeing, Hearing, Knowing—Reflections on Experiment with Light*; *The Quaker Way: A Rediscovery*; *Truth of the Heart* (an anthology of the writings of George Fox); and *The Light Within: Then and Now* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet 425). He has run for Parliament in Britain as a Green Party candidate.

This pamphlet is an edited version of the plenary talk given to Friends General Conference Gathering in Minnesota in July 2016. The theme of the gathering was *be humble, Be Faithful, BE BOLD*. Rex Ambler gave the talk extemporaneously. A video of the talk is available at the FGC website. This revision is based on the transcript of that recording.

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## Living in Dark Times

Friends today face a new challenge in the world.<sup>1</sup> For a long time, perhaps for a century, we could rely on widespread support for our concerns in the world at large, in particular among the progressives and liberals who were similarly working for freedom and justice. And this has been an important part of our identity, part of what it means to be Quaker. Now things are changing, the world is changing, and that confidence that we can make a new world, that things are going our way, that “we will overcome” is beginning to wane. In fact, we are becoming aware that there are very big forces in the world, which are getting bigger and stronger, making the world less free, less equal, and less peaceful. And they seem to have their own momentum. Conflict in Europe and the Middle East, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and developing climate change are beginning to impress with their size, strength, and apparently unstoppable force. We are beginning to wonder what we or anyone can do about them.

Part of the problem is that we do not feel we are being heard. No one is listening. Politicians have given up on

honest debate as they set their minds on gaining or retaining power. What to do? In such a time there seem to be only two options: either to retreat from the world or to rebel against it. Reason doesn't seem to work any more—here or anywhere. The mutual respect and trust that we rely on to hold civilized conversations are fading.

“Dark times” is a good description of this situation.<sup>2</sup> It indicates not only hardship, frustration, and anxiety but also deep puzzlement as to what is going on. Times are dark because we cannot see who is doing what, and why. And we suspect that those in power cannot see either, though they may feel that they have to present themselves as people who know, people in charge. If we also come to think that leaders of our institutions are not telling the truth, perhaps deliberately avoiding it, our unease will deepen. Our own mood will darken.

We are therefore becoming anxious about our world, even depressed at our inability to make a real difference or see hope for the future. We have had dark times before, but not in our memory, or at least not for a generation or two.

I'll tell you of a situation that has troubled me. We had a referendum in Britain on whether to leave the European Union. It was the most important decision we had to make as a country in a whole generation. Everybody knew that. We expected an open and honest and serious debate. But the public discussion that led to the Referendum could not rise to the occasion. It became a crude slanging match between opposing parties, the ins versus the outs. The real issues before us were hardly touched on at all. The EU had been set up in the wake of World War II in order to prevent such a thing happening again. It was a peace project. And it worked. The nations

of Europe found peace by trading freely with one another and cooperating to secure more justice and overcome poverty. Once it had (apparently) achieved those goals, however, the interest shifted to trading simply for more wealth. It became a capitalist project. Everything was done to achieve economic growth: generous (and risky) loans, free trade, free movement of people. More growth was achieved, certainly, but the cost was crippling debt for some poorer countries and overwhelming migration to the richer countries. So we are now sharply divided in Britain—and possibly in Europe—between those who want wealth and those who want security. And the “wanting” is intense in our society. It overrides everything else, so that no cost is considered too high to achieve what is wanted. In that sense we could call it a religious commitment, and wealth and security are the idols our society worships.

This is what has happened, as I see it, and that is why an honest and open discussion of the issue has not been possible. We have walked blindly into a disaster. I don't want to say more about *why* this has occurred. I don't think I can say much more. In fact I don't think any of us can really and fully say *why*. That is the issue. We are in the dark. Is this not also true to some extent of the political situation in the States? Is it not true of many other situations in the world today? How do we live in a world we no longer understand?

We Quakers are also prone to this mood, are we not? How can we as Quakers make sense of what is happening? Even if we could make sense of it and make a stand, who is listening? Our traditional liberal responses seem to be inadequate. What can we do?

This has been a problem for me personally, and I have spent much time and effort in the last twenty years or so trying to find a way through. I was born and bred in dark times, at the center of World War II. Only with the end of the war and the beginning of reconstruction in Europe did I feel there was any hope for my family or for the world. But that glimmer grew to be a bright light in the 1960s and early 1970s as we felt the world was at last ready for the change it needed, and we (and I) were going to be part of it. And we were. I was. There were real, important changes toward a more free, just, and cooperative world. But then in the 1980s things stalled, and, little by little, they have been undone.

This global crisis echoed crises in my personal life, and out of this came a quest to look more deeply into the spiritual roots of these problems. I worked with the Green Party in politics. I went to India, studied Gandhi, and talked and wrote about him for many years. I undertook psychotherapy. These were all worthwhile. But the breakthrough came when I studied Early Friends. This may seem surprising to you, since Early Friends are not easy to read or understand. They lived, after all, in the seventeenth century so they thought and spoke in a quite different way from us. This is true, and I had to struggle hard to make sense of them. But I was well motivated. I recognized that those Friends were themselves living in dark times, that they, too, struggled with the deep uncertainties and agonies of their time, but they eventually found a way through. I recognized that, as others have, too, but it took me a very long time, some twenty years, to understand how that all happened. I hope something of that understanding will come through here and enable

you to make a new connection with those founders of our faith and the great discovery they made.

## Advice from William Penn

George Fox is the one who opened my eyes to the experience that could change our lives, that could help us understand ourselves and, indeed, become who we truly are. It is William Penn, however, who enabled me to see the world in a new way and see how we might mend it. You will be familiar with William Penn, of course: he achieved some remarkable things in America as well as in England, in religion as well as in politics. What is less well known is what he wrote about these things, what he really thought about them. And this is where I feel he can help us today.

Let me give you three quotations that had a revelatory effect on me when I first read them. In the preface to his collection of advices, *Some Fruits of Solitude*, he urges us to step aside from the world and take an honest look at it. If we don't do that we will be swept away by the illusions and distractions of the world. (Note, he includes himself among those who need this advice.)

We understand little of the works of God, either in nature or grace. We pursue false knowledge, and mistake education extremely. We are violent in our affections, confused and unmethodical in our whole life, making that a burden which was given for a blessing, and so of little comfort to ourselves or others, misapprehending the true notion of happiness and so missing of the right use of life and way of

happy living. And until we are persuaded to stop, and step a little aside out of the noisy crowd and encumbering hurry of the world, and calmly take a prospect of things, it will be impossible we should be able to make a right judgment of ourselves, or know our own misery. But after we have made the just reckonings which retirement will help us to, we shall begin to think the world in great measure mad, and that we have been in a sort of *Bedlam* all this while.<sup>3</sup>

The world was obviously a very dark place for William Penn. *Bedlam* was the so-called lunatic asylum in London, which was open from time to time for the public to view, and many thousands went to view it.<sup>4</sup> It became a byword for madness, for everything the people most feared for themselves and the world. But for Penn it was a sharp metaphor for the way the world actually was—already. People in general were not in their right minds, they were not thinking clearly or feeling appropriately. The fundamental problem with the world was not what was happening on the surface, but what was happening deep in people's minds. They were so disturbed and troubled they no longer knew how to be happy, or how to make others happy.

Yet what strikes me about Penn's writing is that he does not seem to be fazed by this crazy world. He can look at it calmly and accept it for what it is. And he can do this, because he has been able to "stop, and step . . . aside" and look at it from outside. He can detach himself from the mad talk and turbulent feelings that occupy people and see things as they are. This is where retirement and solitude come in. They are the conditions that help make this detachment possible. When people sit quietly and are

able to stop thinking and imagining, they will be open to a much deeper kind of attention that will give them the insight and wisdom they need. But Penn is not recommending that his readers abandon the world. He is urging them to retire from the world in order to detach themselves from the world's way of thinking. Once they have done that—they have to do that, of course, again and again—they will have the clarity and sanity to see what is going on in the world. Having stepped out of the madness they will be able to see it for what it is. And perhaps like good doctors they will have such an understanding of their patients in *Bedlam* that they will be able genuinely to help them. What Penn is doing in this book of advices is helping people to recover a sound state of mind and eventually to see themselves and the world more clearly.

He makes a similar recommendation to his children in *Fruits of a Father's Love*. He gives them advice on how they should spend the day, which begins and ends with retirement "into a pure silence, from all thoughts and ideas of worldly things"—all this before they get dressed and eat their breakfast, and again when they go to bed, "before you close your eyes." (You can imagine William Penn sitting bolt upright in his bed, beside his wife—both with their nightgowns and nightcaps on, being utterly still and silent until they were moved to get up.)

He then turns to the practical activities of the day and suggests that they "mind an inward sense upon doing anything." If they choose to read a book, even scripture, they should be aware of how their "spirits are most touched and affected" by what they read. In any case,

Rather meditate than read much. For the spirit of the man knows the things of a man, [a quotation from

Paul the Apostle] and with that spirit, by observation of the tempers and actions of men you see in the world, and looking into your own spirit, and meditating thereupon, you will have a deep and strong judgment of men and things. For from what may be, what should be, and what is most probable or likely to be, you can hardly miss in your judgment of human affairs; and you have a better spirit than your own, in reserve for a time of need, to pass the final judgment in important matters.<sup>5</sup>

I take that to be a special message to us: “You have a better spirit than your own, in reserve for a time of need.” What is happening in the world, even in our own personal lives, cannot really be understood by our normal conscious minds. We can understand many things that way, but the more important issues of life—what we really think and feel and need as human beings—elude us.

The reason, as Penn and others made clear, is that these important issues of life go deep inside us; they are not plain matters of fact. They are not *out there* where we can investigate them by measurement and calculation. They are *within*, at least in part. So to plumb those issues we need to know ourselves, first of all. As Penn says, “By observation of the tempers and actions of men you see in the world, *and looking into your own spirit*, and meditating thereupon, you will have a deep and strong judgment of men and things.” Both kinds of knowing are required: the objective observation of what people are doing, and the subjective observation of what is happening in me, in us. The two go together, and one depends on the other.

Let me give you one last quotation from William—the words that had the greatest impact on me when I first

read them. It is part of his account of the early Quakers’ testimonies, their choices around honesty and truth, which had caused such alarm to their contemporaries. Penn wants to assure his readers that Quakers were not troublemakers. They were not trying to provoke opposition or challenge the establishment. “But God, having given them a sight of themselves, they saw the whole world in the same glass of truth, and sensibly discerned the passions and affections of men, and the rise and tendency of things.”<sup>6</sup>

Their chosen way of life was simply a response to the reality of life as they had been given to see it. Penn is making a connection here between the Quakers’ understanding of the world and their original conviction. In their first experience of God’s Light they discovered, shockingly, that they were not what they thought they were. Their thinking had been distorted by the self, the ego, which always has to think it is right or justified. When they stopped this posturing, the Light of God within them showed them what was really going on. As Penn put it, so neatly: “Of Light came sight, of sight came sense and sorrow, of sense and sorrow came amendment of life.”<sup>7</sup> Simply by seeing themselves as they were and accepting what they saw, they were changed. Then, he says, something else happens. If the Light of God in them is like a mirror, a “glass of truth,” in which they see themselves, they can turn it slightly to see the world. And yes, they could see the world and see it as it really was, without the pretensions and deceptions that persuaded them to see it differently. “They . . . sensibly discerned the passions and affections of men,” what they really wanted for themselves, behind the rhetoric and appearance.