

## **Signposts of the Quiet Way: A Personal Journey Begun**

The quiet way is in essence a life project for spiritual venturers, for those who inhabit the questions and are willing to risk the journey. It speaks to us as seekers in the precarious and adventurous terrain of God, making us co-venturers with the divine. The quiet way calls us to fathom who we are and how we fit the shape of our depths, of our deepest calling in the project of our own life and spiritual experience. In its essence, the quiet way encourages us to begin an experiment with the sacred, with soul. As such, it relates radically to the life we live now and to the way we co-create the conditions for our own transformation. Transformation, if anything, is a work, sometimes an extended work, of the soul. The task of poets and mystics of the soul has generally been to attempt to give language and meaning to the Mystery, to the call to co-venture with the divine. I do know that the quiet way has always been, at some instinctive level, indivisible from the topography of my own inner landscape.

I was born in North Wales, in a stone cottage built by my paternal great-grandfather in a small settlement of seven houses. Five of these houses were built by my great-grandfather for himself and members of his family. They stood at various heights on hilly fields of wild gorse and fern banks, a setting of endless creative adventuring for myself and my cousins. On the lower slopes of this vale stood the larger, more distinctive family home named Olive House, where three generations of the family lived during my father's childhood and after. When I was growing up, four of the houses were still occupied by my father's family, and the family home still contained three generations. The settlement itself was called Ffos-y-go, meaning a moat, possibly the site of an ancient fort of some kind. When I think of geographical home, this family home is still, in my heart, home. My aunt and uncle there, my godparents, were in every sense like second parents to me, perhaps because they lost their first child, stillborn around the time I was born. When my young brother died tragically, when I was sixteen, and my mother was overwhelmed by bitterness and blame, it was these godparents who came to the village where we were then living and took me with them, gathering me into the safety, shelter, and love of this family home. This emotional and psychologically secure "holding" of me undoubtedly was my salvation in the weeks following the aftermath of my brother's death.

I remember vividly two experiences during this time that shaped and made sense of my later explorations of the quiet way, and which resonated with me, so many eons later, in the circle of silence in my original Quaker meeting in Devon, England. I was with family members who had gathered in Olive House to express their condolences after my brother's death. As each drew up a chair and sat down, we inadvertently formed a circle. The atmosphere, already quiet and subdued, gradually became silent. I remember an uncle sadly shaking his bowed head, an aunt quietly dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief, another getting up and holding my head close against her and gently stroking my hair while I wept. Then we just sat together in the quiet. I remember mostly the experience of comforting silence, my godparents sitting next to me, and that I was not alone. I was, in the deepest sense, accompanied.

The second experience occurred later during a conversation with my godmother, a stalwart of the local Anglican church. We were standing gazing out of the window, deep

in one of those reflective discussions on "life, the universe, and everything," when she grew quietly thoughtful, asking herself more than me, it seemed, what life was all about. She didn't have answers any more; she sometimes wondered about God, who God is, whether God, indeed, is. Faith itself had become a mystery to her. This incident made a profound impression on me. I realized that faith could be explored, questioned, reflected upon; that faith was not a static, bound-in-concrete certainty, but a flowing, malleable concept, an ongoing questing dialogue with oneself and with God. This was spiritual journeying, as Annie Dillard expressed it, "not held aloft on a cloud in the air but stumbling pitted, scarred and broken through a frayed and beautiful land."<sup>40</sup>

My mother's mother lived just a quarter of a mile away in another hamlet of a few scattered houses. My grandfather had died young, in the Spanish flu that swept the world after the first world war, and she never remarried. There were few men of her generation left after the brutal scything of them during this war. She kept chickens for eggs, two cows for milk in a field nearby, damson trees for jam, her faith, and her own quiet counsel. She taught me more than anyone about the quiet, steady, unobtrusive comfort of presence, the inner nourishment of faith, the art of collecting eggs, and how to milk a cow. Undoubtedly, I absorbed from her, and from my father's ability to be quietly present to himself, how to be a presence to myself, an ability that has sustained me throughout my life. I learned how to be a hospitable presence to myself in times of solitude, to nurture and embrace the rich depths of my own inner resources, to quietly ponder the ways of God. In hindsight, my grandmother was a wise elder, extraordinarily accomplished in the hospitality and cosmography of the soul, though her life had been anything but easy ... perhaps because her life had been anything but easy.

Who can tell how such experiences mold themselves into the shape of our later psyches, how things remembered and not remembered determine who we are? Life is dynamic and we are constantly shedding skins, and the contours of memory are not always distinct, though the experience of the memory may well be. The thing about the work of transformation is not to let former "skins" continue to define us, nor to let others define us by "old skins," nor indeed to attire us with remnants of their own unshed skins. Nevertheless, memories often inform us about how we came to be at each way-station on the journey, how we acquired the strength to live with courage and integrity.

All my life, the people who have most influenced me—who "speak to my condition" as Quakers say—have been those who, at some level, have nurtured close companionship with the depths of the quiet way. I see these depths exemplified in profound human presence and spirit—in a presence and spiritual integrity that shines through service, books, poetry, art, music, or in just "being" in spirit in some extraordinary way. I have learned to recognize these profound presences (of many faiths and journeys) as pilgrims of the spirit and—though sometimes struggling like myself—as soul companions on the human journey. These companion pilgrims know that, despite our frailties and defects, we are called to wrestle with the profound mystery of human existence, to explore the deeper intuitions of the soul. I have met along the way my godfather and godmother, my grandmothers (I never knew either of my grandfathers), my father, and my mother, in differing human guises. I am molded for better or worse by the psychical paradox of their proximity in my life and journeying. But I am also "becoming" as an indivisible individual, constantly being born into the complexity and dynamic of the universal

human and spiritual community. My life story is attached to my psyche, but I am not my life story.

### Conclusion

In the Welsh language the word for journey, *taith*, means more than simply getting from one point to another. It is related to the verb *teithio*, to travel, to progress. It indicates what happens along the way, the developmental progress of the journey. We have another word, *hiraeth*, a word not easily translatable into English. Its sense is one of longing for home, for spiritual home and belonging, for the homeland. *Hiraeth* also encompasses ancestral longing, a calling of the soul to origins and identity. The only time I have felt anywhere near to hearing its outward expression occurred many years ago while living and working with Maori people in New Zealand. I experienced the rare privilege of being invited to a Maori elder's *tangi*—a traditional funeral, lasting three days—at a *marae* (a sacred meeting place, a "home" of traditional and cultural belonging) in a rural community in Gisborne. As our group prepared to be led onto the *marae*, a sense of deep quietness descended. Then, as we started to process slowly onto this sacred ground, a Maori woman leading us began what I thought at the time was a sonorous ritual lament for the dead. I later learned that it was a ceremonial call, a *karanga*. The powerful, soulful sounding of the call seemed to fill the mountainous space, rebounding with a resonance that sank deep into my soul. I have never forgotten that primal sound, filled with spirit and ancestral longing and home. It was indeed a call of the soul to origins and exemplifies for me the quiet way, the *hiraeth*, the longing of the soul for return to its true origins and spiritual home. "Delight to step home," says William Penn "(within yourselves, I mean)."

Waldo Williams (1907-1971), one of our finest poets in the Welsh language, who was also a Quaker, used the word *Awen*—a word of great spiritual significance in the Welsh language and its Celtic culture—to exemplify this sense of return to our true spiritual source and to transformation. *Awen* is pure, flowing, always present spirit, similar to the Christian concept of the Holy Spirit. It comprises the primal creative force and energy which rises from the hidden depths, reflecting Tillich's "depth in which we are quiet," to sustain and inspire both the individual and the collective. When we connect with *Awen* we are transformed. For Williams, this happens in the silence, in worship. Quaker meeting, he felt, should take us toward the silence of listening to God and to wonder, mystery, and connectedness. For him, it is what arises from the quiet, hidden depths of the soul (the *Awen*) that transforms the world, that brings us home again.<sup>41</sup>

40. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (Norwich, England: Canterbury Press, 2011), p. 230.

41. Translated into English by Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. His 2012 lecture on Waldo Williams, "Peacemaking and Poetry" (which also addresses Quakerism), is available on video at the website of the Waldo Williams Society at [www.waldowilliams.com](http://www.waldowilliams.com). (Select Events, then Rowan Williams Lecture; scroll to end of written summary for video.)