

Profession and Practice: Quaker Perspectives on Healing as Ministry by Maureen Flannery

Reviewed by Bill Ames

Maureen Flannery's Pendle Hill Pamphlet (#363) entitled Profession and Practice: Quaker Perspectives on Healing as Ministry is an interesting exploration of the dilemmas of being a traditional Quaker healer and a modern health care professional. Early Quakers considered healing and preaching to be extensions of the same faith, healing being lived faith intentionally practiced toward others. The emphasis was on not just recognizing, but also answering to that of God in every person, and this would lead naturally to a life of service.

Quaker healing work could include all aspects of the person. It would provide for their physical needs, as a nurse or midwife might do. It might mean providing emotional support or spiritual guidance, as a friend or parent might do, as well as might a psychologist or psychiatrist. It might involve social support or political advocacy, as a social worker or lawyer might do. In short, the Quaker healer was truly a generalist working within the Quaker meeting, which has traditionally been a place of healing.

Flannery points out that Quakerism faces several dilemmas in relation to contemporary notions of professionalism. For example, the 'white coated,' impersonal, doctor and hospital-centered model, is a powerful current in modern health care. The service is centralized and specialized. In this model, doctors are experts, but not necessarily experts on the patient. If they are cardiologists, they are experts on the heart. If they are nephrologists, they are experts on kidneys. Unfortunately, experts are expensive, and while it may be very good for those who can afford it, is often out of reach for people who are disenfranchised, countercultural, poor or marginal.

Maureen Flannery points to three other possible models of professionalism. I will not go into them all in this summary; however, the one she finds most congenial to her concept of Quakerism is that of the midwife. The authority of professional midwives is based on their experience and demonstrated trustworthiness within the service community. Diplomas from famous universities are less important. Also, they are also committed to understanding their patients as whole people, and of serving them where they are socially, economically, geographically or culturally. The goal of the healer in this model is to help the patient acquire the knowledge, support, care and personal power they need to complete the healing process.

Professionalism, by almost any definition, means the healer is committed to service, continuous study and a strict code of ethics. However, the economic and cultural structures of the contemporary health care system often push the provider to offer particular kinds of service, often depending on the patient's ability to pay. Therefore, in asking ourselves what it means to be a "Quaker healer," we are called upon to question the current model and how it rewards specific knowledge over general knowledge, detachment over empathy and wealth over poverty. How does social, economic and political power affect quality of care? How do we Quakers deal with the powers that be? How can we live out our testimonies within today's economic and legal conditions?

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