

QUAKER MONEY, OLD MONEY, White & Privilege

by Elizabeth Cazden

“As a birthright Friend, she really knew her antiques.” This comment opened a testimony to the life of a beloved 104-year-old Friend. I wondered, “What does antique furniture have to do with Quakerism?”

What the speaker alluded to is that although the Religious Society of Friends includes people of diverse backgrounds, a large number of Quakers in North America come from “old money” families. Those of us who do often take for granted inherited money and its benefits: nice homes (and second homes), private college and often secondary school, travel abroad, comfortable retirement communities.

Like other “old money” folks, Friends tend to frown (usually silently) on signs of newly gotten wealth or ostentatious display. In the old phrase, Quaker clothing, furniture, and living should be “of the best sort, but plain.” In earlier generations, fine silk was “plain” if it was the right color of gray; homespun dyed with local brown or green dyes was not. Today, well-



worn wool tweeds are suitably Quaker; pastel polyesters are not, at least among liberal unprogrammed Friends. (It's different in the Midwest, where basketball and golf are more common than National Public Radio.) Well-used wool Oriental rugs are acceptable; synthetics from the local Wal-Mart are not. Finely crafted furniture, especially handed down within the family, is good (unless too ornate); mass-produced from the local big-box store is not.

I have seen Friends judge new attendees for their cars (foreign and, recently, hybrids, good; American, SUVs, or pickups, bad), clothing (suits and ties odd, but may be OK if dark-colored; nylons and high heels, questionable; blue jeans and T-shirts with left-wing slogans, one of us). With these criteria, newcomers from other old-money families “fit in,” while others can feel uncomfortable or out of place.

Education is both a marker of family wealth and, frequently, a way to pass it on to the next generation. Since at least 1930, unprogrammed meetings in most parts of North America have had an astonishing percentage of men and women with doctorates and professional

degrees, even when less than half of the population finished high school. I commonly overhear after-meeting conversations about which elite and/or Quaker colleges our children attend. (By contrast, most of my children's public school classmates applied only to in-state public colleges.) Our books, magazines, and newsletters assume a high level of literacy.

We recognize that some Friends may not be able to afford all of this, and so subsidize “deserving” Quaker participation in colleges, retirement communities, Pendle Hill conferences, FGC Gatherings, and even yearly meeting. Many “poor” Friends are highly educated individuals who have chosen to live below taxable income or to work at low-paying social service jobs. They have a choice, in other words, unlike our neighbors who are stuck in minimum-wage jobs or dependent on Social Security.

The Quaker tradition of offering and depending on gracious home hospitality for traveling Friends also assumes a certain level of affluence. Old journals, trying not to complain, describe spartan living in frontier areas. But the norm is a well-furnished home with at least one guest bedroom, a large dining room with a well-filled table, and husband and wife both free to entertain company thanks, until recently, to the unnamed cadre of servants behind the scenes. An early FGC Gathering photograph shows well-dressed (white) Friends outside their rustic tents and, lined up in the background, their (black) servants.

That picture identifies another oft-silent question: how did Friends come to do so well? The standard story is a variant on the Puritan one: Quakers became wealthy by working diligently; extending their experimental approach to religion to invent new industrial technologies; trading honestly (thereby attracting customers); making productive use of

NO



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transatlantic kinship networks; and living frugally, without money-drains like drinking or gambling, thereby freeing up money for savings, investment, and philanthropic giving to Quaker-run institutions.

All of that may be true, but is at best partial. The unspoken “rest of the story” has two pieces: land and slaves.

Both show up clearly in my family, among the first Rhode Island Quakers. Richard Borden, son of a Kent wool merchant, arrived in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, from Boston in 1636, with the banished Anne Hutchinson and William and Mary Dyer. Over the next 35 years he developed land in Rhode Island and New Jersey, land that was acquired (with or without compensation) from indigenous peoples. When he died in 1671, his estate included “30 swine, 11 pigs, negro man and woman, £50; 3 negro children, £25; turkeys, geese, [and] fowls.” I do not know what work the slaves did. Having unpaid laborers to plow the fields, mend

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the roof, and do the laundry undoubtedly helped him supervise his distant land holdings and attend to Quaker business.

I can trace the family wealth fairly directly from Richard Borden through his non-Quaker descendants’ land investments in Indiana and Chicago. The family money that enabled me and my children to attend college without student loans, to buy a house, and to give up my law practice to pursue my love of history and writing, however, has its roots in land taken from Native peoples and in slave labor. I suspect I am far from unique among Friends, and that many of us, if we choose to look, have similar stories of how the wealth really built up.

Is it important to look? My father, son of left-wing Jewish immigrants, believed that wealth is always ill-gotten gain, squeezed out of the blood and sweat of poorly paid and exploited workers, usually with a dose of corruption, theft, and links to powerful governmental officials. What I see instead is how difficult it can be to separate oneself from the economic structures in which one lives, even in the face of obvious moral compromises. For example, we know the petroleum economy endangers the people of Nigeria, irreparably harms the planet on which we rely for survival, and transfers money from poor working people to shareholders of enormous corporations. Yet most of us continue to use oil and gas to run our cars, heat our homes, and power our computers.

What will not serve us is refusing to acknowledge how much of what we consider “normal” among Friends is, in fact,

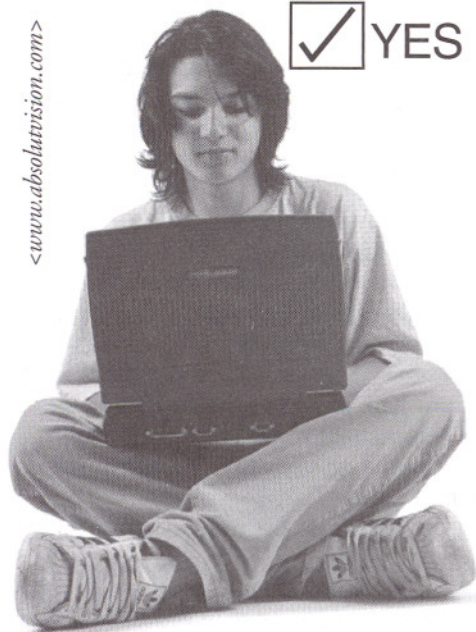
the privilege of a few. Randall Robinson’s powerful book *The Debt*, among others, sets out the contrast between this normative Quaker world and that of most African American workers. The racial wealth gap is more pronounced than the income gap. African American students are

far less likely to be able to get help from grandparents or parents to attend college. African American workers are less likely to receive pensions or even Social Security, due to coverage restrictions for jobs predominantly occupied by nonwhites. They are less likely to own a home, due to less chance to accumulate down payments, less help from relatives, and discriminatory lending practices. Retirement communities with six-figure down payments may as well be on another planet.

If Friends would like to racially integrate our lives, we need to acknowledge the realities of wealth and white privilege. We need to examine, for example, whether scholarships earmarked for Quakers function to keep benefits within the families of those already privileged. Those of us who like to travel, to go to expensive plays, or to enjoy vacation homes need to listen to our after-meeting chit-chat with the ears of those who cannot afford those luxuries. We need to make sure that our sense of which newcomers “fit in” to “the Quaker way of life” is not based on unspoken markers for race, social class, and wealth.

A Roman Catholic teacher told me that “church is where you are brought into fellowship with people you never dreamed you could be in fellowship with.” She held up the Gospel vision of an abundant banquet table with room for all, rich and poor, male and female, old and young, of a variety of ethnic backgrounds and languages. God calls us to that banquet, but only if we make room for all of God’s people. □

YES



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