

## MEMBERSHIP: SOME QUESTIONS ANSWERED

by Antonia Saxon

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As many of you know, I applied for membership in the Ithaca Meeting not too long ago, and celebrated joining just recently. I was surprised at the number of questions I got from people about this, and thought—on the theory that not all the people who wondered about membership had asked me about it—that I should write something down for wider consumption. These observations reflect my personal experience. They're not official statements in any sense.

One of the things I've loved most all the time I've attended Quaker meeting is that no one has ever nagged me about anything. No one has ever asked me to contribute money, or asked why I haven't attended a certain series of meetings. I think this reluctance to interfere has its source in Fox's teaching regarding the Inner Light, which envisions inward search and fulfillment—a search nurtured by corporate worship, but founded ultimately on the ability to hear God's voice within.

(Once, in a lather of anxiety, I confessed to an elderly Friend at a workshop that I was having a kind of crisis of faith, and that I wasn't sure I was really a Quaker. She greeted this piece of news serenely. "Just keep coming to Meeting," was all she said. She did not feel that resolving the crisis quickly would give evidence of deeper faith.)

Almost all attenders who make the decision to join the meeting come to the decision by themselves, and are not solicited to do so by another member of the Meeting. As it happens, I was asked to consider membership by someone on the Ministry and Oversight Committee. This isn't usually done, but the person who asked had heard me say that I'd been meaning to start the process. She knew I was merely needing a nudge. During the conversation, she quoted a remark someone else had made recently along the lines of, "Attending for years and years without joining the Meeting is sort of like living with someone for a long time and not getting married." As someone who had in her youth inwardly judged a couple of live-in partners who appeared to fear commitment, I felt called upon to act.

Also, I knew there were committees on which only members of the meeting could sit, and I could see that the pool of potential committee members for these groups had stayed the same for a couple of years. I figured I could give a small gift to our Meeting by offering to increase that pool by one.

When you decide you want to become a member, you write a letter to Ministry and Oversight saying that you'd like to be considered for membership. (Although it's not always called Ministry and Oversight, most meetings have a committee which handles some of the duties of pastoral care). Ministry and Oversight then proposes a clearness committee to meet with you—just once, usually—to talk about membership.

A clearness committee! That has a vaguely Orwellian sound to it, people said. What is a

clearness committee? It's just three or four people who either light up at the mention of your name and ask if they can be on your committee, or who are asked to be on the committee because Ministry and Oversight regards them as having a gift for talking about their own lives as Quakers. I knew all the people on my clearness committee already, and I liked them all.

Many attenders joked with me about the meeting with the clearness committee. They asked if people were often rejected, or if they had asked me to do anything painful. They asked lightly, but it was clear there was some concern. What really goes on at these meetings? How do they know you are ready to become a member? Is it like joining a sorority? Did you have to sign something? Did they quiz you on Quaker knowledge?

They did not. They asked if I was comfortable with the main tenets of Quaker belief, and I said I was, and said why. They asked if I had any questions, and I did. (I asked about martyrdom. I was serious. Typically, answers ranged from "I've never thought that before..." to "Well, if it came to that, you'd find the strength to bear it.") They asked if I had any expectations. They asked if I had any worries. They were at all times warm and welcoming—too welcoming, I found myself thinking. Didn't they know what a bad person I was? Their opinion of me as a prospective member was a little too high, I thought. We ended with good cheer, with everyone agreeing that I had already made a substantial contribution to the meeting, and wondering why I hadn't asked to become a member sooner. The quietest person on the committee said, "I love it when we get new members."

Discovering that a celebratory brunch for new members was part of the process was a spiritual obstacle in my path. I try to avoid any social situation which requires me to stand and talk and eat all at the same time. But then I decided that the thing to do was to view it as a party I was throwing for the meeting, and to bring a lot of the food myself. That made it easier, and I enjoyed myself fully. People I had always felt shy about talking to came over and greeted me without reserve.

Now, with everything behind me, people have asked me if I feel different. And I have to say, I do feel different. The assumption is usually that you don't join a group or make a promise or a commitment until you feel fully ready to do so, fully competent to carry out your promise. It's an argument against hypocrisy, and it's a good one. But it works the other way around, too. In this case, for me, making the promise is what, in some sense, makes it possible for me to carry it out. Saying it is so, making the declaration, makes it so. If I were really a good Quaker, part of me thinks, I would not need to eat a lot of gingersnaps to complete writing this short essay. I am not a good Quaker yet. I have finished the essay, but not without eating a lot of gingersnaps.