

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO EXPERIMENT WITH LIGHT

Books cited:

John Nickall (ed): *Journal of George Fox* (Religious Society of Friends 1975) GFJ
Rex Ambler: *Light to Live By* (Quaker Books, 2002) LLB
Rex Ambler: *Truth of the Heart* (Quaker Books, 2007) TotH
John Lampen (ed): *Seeing Hearing Knowing* (Sessions, 2008) SHK

In 1994 Rex Ambler was pondering what was the spiritual experience which gave the early Quakers such joy and peace of mind and the courage to share it with others even when beaten and imprisoned for doing so. He began to suspect that hidden in their words (often so obscure to us) was a particular spiritual practice. The 17th century was not an age of “how to do it” manuals, and Rex had to search in many writings; but a clear pattern emerged, which he sets out in his book *Light to Live By* (LLB, pp.16-21).

Two of George Fox’s key terms were “the Light” and “the Truth”. “The Light” denotes a capacity within us which shows us ourselves as we really are and the nature of right and wrong (not the conscience, Friends have always insisted, but “the Light that shines in your consciences”.) Early Quakers liked to quote John’s gospel, 1^o, which says that Christ “was the true light that lighteth every man...” “The truth” is what the Light reveals: the reality of what is happening inside ourselves and in the world, and the path we must take out of confusion, conflict and wrongdoing. “The Truth shall make you free” (John 8³²). (TotH contains many passages illuminating Fox’s use of these terms.)

Rex identified four stages of a spiritual practice which early Friends used and described. **1. Mind the Light.** This means stopping to consider what the Light within you shows you about what is happening in your life. Is anything causing you unease? Is there anything you need to attend to? **2. Open your heart to the Truth.** Be honest and open with yourself and with God. Let the Truth emerge of its own accord. Don’t try to evade or excuse anything that you are shown. But don’t let yourself become confused or guilty. **3. Wait in the Light.** Instead of worrying over what the Light shows you, or trying to come up with solutions, be calm and patient. The Light itself, as it shows you the Truth, is a sign of something of God which is in you. Its power can show you what you need to understand (or to do!) in order to achieve peace of mind—providing you don’t lose yourself in troubled emotions. “Be cool” said Fox in his longest account of the process (GFJ, p.346). **4. Submit to the Truth.** Fox wrote in a letter, “When you have seen what’s going on in your mind, and the temptations there, do not think but submit... You will then receive power. So, stand still in the Light, submit to it, and all the rest will quieten down or disappear”. (This is a modern paraphrase from TotH, 1:90). At times, the Light impels you to a necessary course of action, and then submitting means obeying it.

While Rex was exploring the experiences of early Friends he was introduced to the work of the American psychologist Eugene Gendlin which is called “Focusing”. This therapeutic process offers in modern secular terms a set of very similar steps to the above (SKH pp. 37-41). It helped Rex to conceptualise what he was discovering in a way he could share with modern Friends. And so Experiment with Light was born.

The process, as given on this CD consists of a stilling process, followed by five short prompts with five minutes between each one. The point of the prompts is to keep you moving through the process in a meditative way, not getting stuck when problems or painful thoughts arise. The process takes nearly forty minutes. Afterwards it is helpful to take about twenty minutes to reflect on the experience, possibly by writing in a journal. Then, if one is practicing with a group of others (what is called a Light Group, see SHK pp. 34-6), the group members usually share whatever they wish in confidence. They are careful not to analyse, advise, or try to fix each other’s problems— that is the role of the Light. Others practise the Experiment on their own.

The first set of prompts which Rex introduced to Friends were strongly influenced by Gendlin’s “focusing” (LLB p. 46-7). They were also quite long, so a shorter version was produced. Both of these are available on the second disc in the set of *Experiment with Light* CDs on sale in the Quaker Bookshop, Friends House, London. Later some people asked for versions less psychological in tone and closer to Fox’s words (CDs 4 and 5 in the set). The prompts on this most recent CD are short and closely based on the four steps described above. They start with a stilling practice (track 1).

Light to Live By is Rex’s account of his discovery; it contains the original version of the practice and adaptations of it for specific purposes. Among other materials available from the Bookshop, *Truth of the Heart* is an anthology of George Fox’s writings, with modern English paraphrases, which Rex Ambler compiled to show the basis of his work. *Seeing Hearing Knowing* contains a number of essays reflecting on questions and difficulties which have arisen, and connections with worship, prayer, discernment and political action, with personal stories of spiritual discovery. There is also a website www.experiment-with-light.org with updates on resources and news of coming events such as introductory weekends.