

## GRASPING THE NETTLE: CONFLICT AND THE QUAKER CONDITION

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### ABSTRACT

Conflict among Quakers is unexpected: the espoused image of the Quaker community is peaceful and tranquil. In the community narrative, commitment to 'mend the world' is undoubted but conflict within the community is handled with aversion, not articulated, and harmony is privileged above justice. The 'theory in use' is 'don't ask, don't tell, don't even think about it'. Quaker identity is cherished and challenges to it provide the rationale for intractable conflict sagas. The hesitation of the 'absolute perhaps' is visible in unwillingness to appear authoritative about tackling conflict. A different account is reported from Ireland Yearly Meeting where Friends appear to be able to grasp the nettle of conflict and remain friends.

### KEYWORDS

Quaker conflict, community narrative, theories of action, sociality

### INTRODUCTION

'Conflict' was the flavour of the year among British Quakers in 2000. Perhaps the advent of the millennium prompted a resolve to tackle this difficult subject anew, with sessions on the topic at Yearly Meeting, in Quaker Life Representative Council, at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre and with the publication of a new book of guidance *Conflict in Meetings*.<sup>1</sup> It was at this time that I started my research into conflict-handling among Quakers, the story of which was told in 2005 (Robson 2005: 214-27; Gabriel 2000). However, conflict is not a discrete entity, either in time or human space. It is always expressed and engaged in by people; they are embedded in their own particular social contexts, and positioned by the discourses in those contexts and communities (Winslade 2003). Therefore my study of conflict among Quakers was also a study of the organizational culture, of the community narratives, and of the tension between the collective and the individual in Quaker life. Conflict is but one thread in a loosely woven cloth of many threads, where the links and the

tensions between the threads are fluid and changeable. With that assertion, I first outline my findings about conflict among Quakers and then explore the links with other elements in the Quaker condition, Dandelion's 'absolute perhaps' (2008) and Scully's Quaker virtue ethics outline (2008).

Conflict among Quakers is unexpected; the espoused image of the Quaker community is peaceful and tranquil. In the community narrative, commitment to 'mend the world' is undoubted but conflict within the community is handled with aversion, not articulated, and harmony is privileged above justice. The 'theory in use' is 'don't ask, don't tell, don't even think about it'. Quaker identity is cherished and challenges to it provide the rationale for intractable conflict sagas. The hesitation of the 'absolute perhaps' (Dandelion 2008) is visible in unwillingness to appear authoritative about tackling conflict (Robson 2005: 124). A different account is reported from Ireland Yearly Meeting where Friends appear to be able to grasp the nettle of conflict and remain friends.

#### POSITIONED AS RESEARCHER

Other writers (Dandelion 1996; Nesbitt 2002; Collins 2002) have explored the position of the Quaker insider researcher. The most meaningful description of my own position came from organizational studies with Torbert's 'observing participation' (1991), which features a continuing relationship with the organization studied, with interaction and influence between the research process and the participatory role within the organization. In my case there were several roles, as I was carrying a great deal of Quaker responsibility, or even power.<sup>2</sup> I was positioned by at least two discourses (Harré 1999), the research discourse and the Quaker discourse. Sometimes these seemed to be separated by invisible but ethically significant boundaries, sometimes the doors were open between the two. However, this was only one aspect of data gathering. I also undertook 39 semi-structured interviews<sup>3</sup> and a workshop and follow-up with 20 self-selected Quakers. These people gave me my primary sources of data. Responses to presentations of my work continue to add data and develop my learning.

#### THE INTRIGUING QUESTION: AN UNEASY JUXTAPOSITION

The question at the heart of my research was one which both disturbed and disquieted me. It was expressed most neatly in a Fat Cat cartoon in *The Friend*.<sup>4</sup> Here Fat Cat, as the Clerk of the Preparative Meeting, sitting under the clock, says, 'If we cannot agree to alterations to the Meeting House shall we turn to ideas for peace in Kosovo?' This uneasy juxtaposition of enthusiastic grandiosity in the public sphere with inadequacy in dealing with more personal distress nearer home recurred in my own experience. I was embarrassed by what seemed like inappropriate smugness among Friends and wanted to know how it came about. I must also admit to a desire to change it.

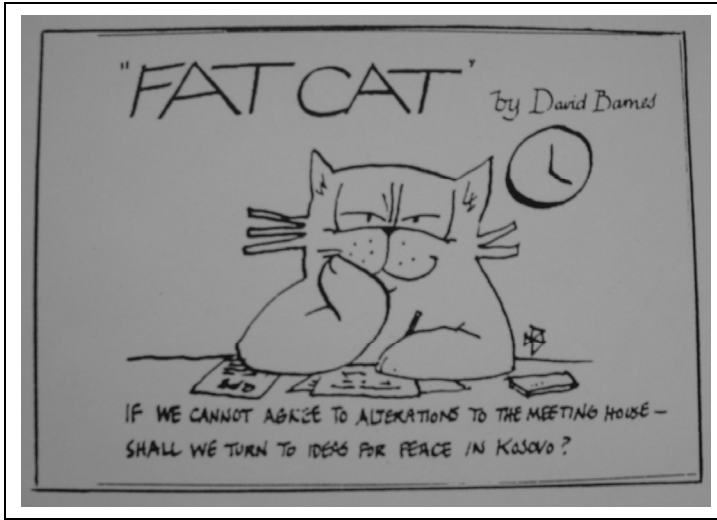


Figure 1. Fat Cat

An example of the imbalance of attention given to the wider world and domestic responsibilities occurred at Yorkshire General Meeting in October 2002. Several of the contributors to the research had already told me of the Yorkshire Conciliation Committee which existed to resolve disputes among Friends, blissfully unaware that it had been disbanded for lack of business some ten years previously. At this General Meeting there was an item on the agenda concerning the replacement arrangements for the Conciliation Committee. The Clerks felt ill-equipped to implement these. In a five-minute item, an offer from the Finance and Trusts Committee to take on this role was accepted.<sup>5</sup> The Meeting then devoted its two main sessions to speakers on conflict-handling in the wider world. The first talk was about the Quaker-originated Oxford Research Group, and the second from the armed forces about their increasing responsibility as peacekeepers. This imbalance between the attention given to the wider world and the attention given to the workings of the Quaker community struck me most forcibly.

#### THE QUAKER CONSTRUCTION OF CONFLICT

An English teacher friend said ‘Quaker Conflict, that’s an oxymoron’, ‘a pointed conjunction of seeming contradictories’. A colleague, embedded in another denomination, asked of my research ‘what do you have to do, go round stirring up all those peaceful Quaker Meetings?’ It is not generally expected that Quakers fight even without outward weapons, and Quakers themselves share this expectation. Many Quakers experience the Meeting as a haven: ‘a balm...a healing place, a privatised place’ (Robson 2005: 95)<sup>6</sup> in which they will not be challenged. Thus, ‘it was a big shock when conflict finally burst among us’ (Wrench 2006), as it has in most

Meetings. Though the 1994 *Advices and Queries*<sup>7</sup> enjoin Quakers to ‘bring into God’s light the emotions, attitudes, and prejudices which lie at the root of destructive conflict’ (*Advices and Queries* 1995: Para. 32) this is connected with public, community and international conflict. Within the Meeting caution and self-control is advised to ‘avoid hurtful criticism and provocative language’: ‘think it possible you may be mistaken’ (*Advices and Queries* 1995: Para. 17). I would be glad to be directed to Quaker extracts which encourage one to be brave, strong, or courageous.

The expectation regarding Quaker response to conflict in the wider world is much more easily observed. A participant in a conference spoke of the overload of exhortation to work for social justice which is apparent on any Quaker Meeting House notice board, with flyers for demonstrations, requests for volunteers and money, and news of projects across the world. Nevertheless the contributors and many other Quaker individuals and groups are very clear that it is an important Quaker task to ‘mend the world’. This phrase comes from a well-known extract from William Penn (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 23.02,<sup>8</sup> written in 1682). The phrase is now the title of a book explaining the current work and thinking by British Quakers for social justice in the world (Phillips and Lampen 2006). The short quotation also contains the notion that true godliness enables men to live better within the world. Penn was concerned to assist this process and set out a template of guidance about how to handle conflict within the Quaker community (Hartshorne 1993; Robson 2006). Interestingly, this has almost faded from contemporary knowledge. In contrast, mending the world in the wider sense is almost a buzzphrase.

#### QUAKERS ENGAGING IN CONFLICT

Despite the fact that it is unexpected, conflict is endemic in Britain Yearly Meeting, as in all communities. Many people started their interviews saying something like ‘I’m not quite sure what you mean by conflict, but I’ve written down several things in my notebook which I want to talk about’. These examples were nearly always events which were known in the Meeting community and had at least in part been played out in the forums of Quaker Business Meetings. I was only offered one example of a personal disagreement between two people, which was resolved by prayer and dialogue. In the main, conflict was experienced and navigated in the ‘Quaker time’ aspect of the double-culture. (Dandelion 1996). This is congruent with Kline’s (2002) findings about conflict among Scottish Quakers. His analysis uses Goffman’s distinction between ‘on-stage’ and ‘off-stage’ behaviour, but also includes ‘out of theatre’ behaviour, which takes place where there are not strong Quaker constraints. ‘On stage’ conflict in worshipful settings is usually denied or controlled, ‘off-stage’ accounts of conflict at social or informal events are more expressive, but ‘out of theatre’, where Quaker rules do not apply, conflict behaviour is unpredictable.

#### AVERSION

A distinctive pattern of Quaker conflict-handling emerged from the data. The first characteristic was the difficulty in recognizing and acknowledging the existence of

conflict. The contributors were well aware that they, individually and collectively, often 'avoided' conflict, using a term from the 'dual concern model' of conflict analysis (Thomas 1988).<sup>9</sup> However, it seemed to me that they went further than this; they failed to recognize conflict, and failed to bring it into public view, because they were afraid of living with it and ashamed of its existence. When conflict erupted or refused to be denied they failed to explore the reasons for it, circumnavigating the real issues and painful feelings in the urgent need for resolution. I described this as 'aversion' rather than avoidance, turning the eyes and the mind away from conflict, with a concomitant sense of distaste.

#### HARMONY OR JUSTICE?

The second characteristic is the privileging of relationship over outcome; the need for community harmony is more important than the right decision. The dual-concern model of conflict resolution proposes two sets of interests or concerns, concern for the outcome of the conflict and concern for the relationship of the actors, which are in tension. The diagrammatic expression of this model suggests that these pull in opposite directions; however, this can rarely be the case and I see these two concerns more as two threads which are spun together in one strand with different tensions. However, among Quakers I found that the thread of relationship exerts more pull than the thread of right outcome or justice. It is usually a more important aim that the group retains its members than that a searching process finds a right way forward even at the expense of disagreement and loss. This aspiration to unity is of course built into the Quaker method of decision-making,<sup>10</sup> which in turn influences all Quaker communications. There is sometimes confusion between decision-making and conflict-handling; they are related but they are not the same, and may require different methods of communication.

Morgan<sup>11</sup> expressed provocative views on the relationship between the substance of justice and the outward form of harmony among Quakers. She devised an orthogonal model (see Fig. 2) which includes attention both to the specific context, the Quaker culture and the way it construes conflict, and the individual and the strategy or style they adopt. It contrasts values commended in the Quaker context, honesty and restraint, with qualities which are unacceptable to Quakers, vehemence and mendacity. In non-Quaker society, honesty and mendacity are constructed as a dichotomy of good and bad, but restraint and vehemence are not. Their opposition is a particularly Quaker polar construction. Morgan's model points to a clear strategy for achieving success in Quaker disagreement in Quaker terms—to adopt restrained honesty. However, her own experience was that this resulted in more concern about the outward form of harmony than the substance of justice. The Quaker collective turned in on itself and presented a solid front which excluded the aggrieved person and did not accommodate their needs. Therefore Morgan herself chose to adopt the course of vehement honesty. She deliberately expressed her view in language which was strikingly different from restrained Quaker language.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately this was probably not effective in achieving justice either.

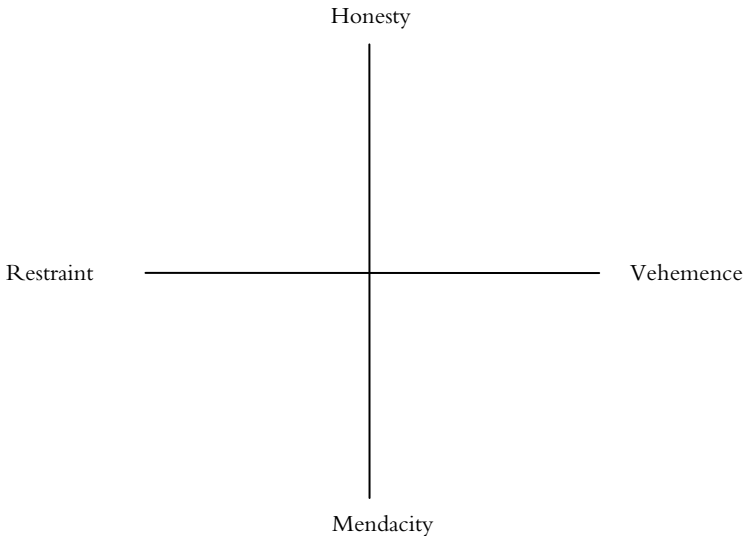


Figure 2. Morgan's Model for Quaker Conflict

#### NON-ARTICULATION

The third characteristic of Quaker conflict clearly has some connection with the previous characteristic relating to strategic Quaker style. I describe it as non-articulation, which may be translated as not speaking out. This is not to say that Quakers are inarticulate, far from it, but they are constrained by the organizational culture into not speaking out on many subjects and in many settings.<sup>15</sup> The silence of worship which underlies Meetings for business makes quietness a commended default option in all circumstances (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 1995: 2.12-17; 3.09-3.12). In conflict a strategy which Quakers often commend is listening, but only one contributor specified that this should be active listening which offers a response. For most people listening was not differentiated from being 'like a sponge and soak(ing) it all up' (Robson 2005: 99).

The lack of human verbal exchange in the accounts of conflict was striking. Questions were not asked, emotions were not named or expressed, issues were not explored in detail, people were not to be upset by the use of words. They were aware of the tradition of Quaker plain speaking, but there was little evidence that it happened now. One participant at the end of six months reflection asked where were the 'Quakers [who] can seem rather brusque; without the conventions of flattery and half truths' (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 12.01). He pined for their presence but observed instead a level of shrinking sensitivity which could not tolerate this style.

It was 'unQuakerly' to show strong feelings, especially anger. One contributor summed it up: 'it's even fine to say that you're angry, but it's not fine...in the sense that people won't like it or won't like you, if you exhibit anger (Robson 2005: 137).

Therefore very few people ever stay to articulate their anger with a tirade in a Meeting. It is much more common to leave the room, the Meeting, or the Society, or to stay away when a potentially divisive subject is discussed. These are all very powerful moves in preserving Quaker 'broiges'.<sup>14</sup>

#### CAUSES OF QUAKER CONFLICT

There were several common causes for conflict. It was practical questions which forced conflict onto local Quakers, where dates and figures had to be decided and agreed to. Fat Cat's example, the failure to 'agree on alterations to the Meeting House', showed acute observation. Developing the Meeting House was often the reason for discord, sometimes of major proportions. Employment, particularly the employment of Wardens or Resident Friends, was almost equally fractious. Other recurring causes of conflict were children in Meeting (felt keenly by parents, but irritation not admitted by others), break up of relationships (disappointment with the reaction of the Meeting), and Quaker education.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, in my data, theological difference was not acknowledged as a cause for conflict<sup>16</sup> (Best 2008; Dandelion 2008). Diversity of belief was recognized but largely practiced in private, with a carefully constructed zone of tolerance. However, this may overlap with what was called 'unacceptable ministry'. Many Meetings struggled with this, often as an unresolved conflict, where particular vocal ministry annoyed the Meeting. This was rarely explained in terms of the theological flavour of the ministry, but usually focused on the form 'too often, too long, always the same thing'. Elders were not seen as able to constrain this ministry, often because they could not agree on what, if anything, to do.

Despite the Quaker urge to resolve conflict quickly, even without exploration, it did persist in many cases, and was resolved in some. In the course of the study the conflict that appeared intractable in year one was sometimes constructively resolved by year four or five. However, a long-lasting conflict is usually played out in terms of identity conflict, which may long outlast the original occasion of difference. Identity conflict is relatively intangible and based in the history, psychology, culture, values, and beliefs of the group with which one identifies. Methods of conflict resolution most effective with this intractable kind of conflict (Rothman 1997; Winslade 2001) require demanding reflexive exploration of all these issues.

Identity issues frequently arise as a result of insensitive behaviour during conflict that unwittingly challenges the individual's cherished self-identity and that of his cherished group(s) (Sandy *et al.* 2000: 310).

Many issues which started out as a difference on a practical matter soon change into exchanges about what a 'proper' Quaker<sup>17</sup> should do, often focused on procedural matters in the collective method of discernment and decision-making rather than the justice or compassion of the decision itself. An example of this was the decision about the future use of the Quaker International Centre<sup>18</sup> in 2004. Some were in favour of it being used to obtain rent, others in favour of it being used by a Quaker group for a Quaker purpose. The latter faction, which was unsuccessful, felt that debate had been

stifled, but then continued a long campaign of criticism about the way in which Meeting for Sufferings, specifically the Clerks, had handled the matter, asserting that this was not the proper Quaker way to do things.<sup>19</sup> The claim that we are Quakers and we should do it the proper way, not your way, recurs at all levels of Britain Yearly Meeting. Quaker identity is cherished and defended above all else.

#### QUAKER IDENTITY AND CONFLICT

Personal construct psychology (Kelly 1963) asserts that humans construe the meaning of their current experience based on the way they have interpreted their previous experience. Using this framework, Bannister (1985) explores the experience of identity, of self, of belonging. He notes two ways in which identity is formed. First, identity is found by focusing on the common shared experiences in a collective. This is taken from Kelly's 'commonality corollary' which proposes that 'each person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by other persons, and therefore his or her psychological processes are similar to other persons' (Kelly 1963: 90). The point here is that not only do several people undergo a common experience, but they also interpret it in the same way; for them the meaning is common. If there is a lively argument and someone says, 'We need a little silence', the Quakers will know what is happening and probably react with some commonality. A non-Quaker will think, 'What are we waiting for? When do we take the vote?' The shared understanding creates the common identity.

The second method of constructing identity is by focusing on the differences between people,<sup>20</sup> the attributes and experiences which make them distinct from each other. This is based on Kelly's 'sociality corollary', which proposes that 'the ability to play a social role with another is dependent on the extent to which a person can construe the construction processes of another' (Kelly 1963: 95). This is often put more memorably as the ability to walk in someone else's shoes, or to feel what their experience is like. The emphasis here is not on a role prescribed by the organization or society in which the actor lives but on a social process about how they understand and then interact with someone else. To quote Bannister, 'we may seek to inspire them, confuse them, amuse them, change them, win their affection, help them to pass the time of day, or defeat them' (1966: 22). In all these ways the actor is taking part or playing a role in a social process, but it is not a role that has a specific name. It is sociality and it requires open-minded attention and responsiveness to the experience of the other. This may be another way of describing Buber's 'I-Thou' relationship (Buber 2006).

The co-existence of commonality and sociality poses a problem for Quakers. With limited Quaker time individual Quakers are less interested in individual differences than in having the common Quaker experience. They want to practice being Quakerly, that is why they are there. So it is not surprising that commonality is privileged above sociality and the comfort of the 'proper Quaker' way is sought. However, for conflict resolution, sociality, or the ability to walk in another's shoes, is needed, which may be less comfortable. If Quakers have not practised this they may feel at a loss to know the 'proper Quaker' way to do it. They are used to knowing



how they expect other Quakers to behave, but they have little experience of focusing on themselves and creating a new interactive pattern in conflict. Also sociality requires reflection on the self before reflection on the other (Lederach 1999: 123). This is not always an appealing process for Quakers, as Meads (2008) indicates in her accounts of ambivalence and apprehension about the setting up of 'Experiment with Light' groups.

#### SELF-EXAMINATION

Though the Queries have always asked Quakers to examine and connect their inner experience with its effect on action the contributors to the study gave little account of this. Whatever happens in Quaker silence came over as a blankness or emptiness. There were a notable few who had learnt the skill of self-examination in another context, either in counselling or therapy or in another religious setting. They saw this as adding depth and richness to their approach to conflict, giving them courage to face it and engage with it. But for most it was as if they did not want to find out the difference between what they themselves experienced and what the 'proper Quaker' experience was. Particularly with regard to conflict they did not want to become aware of their own difference from the idealized stereotype. The whole ethos of Quaker culture in which the individual submits their concern or idea to the group for testing works against the idea that the individual is important. To focus on the self in conflict even in private is uncomfortable. One contributor making an anonymous written record of her reactions to conflict in her Meeting said:

It also makes me feel very uncomfortable to write so critically because though my head tells me to get a grip on this for goodness sake, my 'gut' hints that I am a very bad Quaker for saying such nasty things... Oh dear! (Robson 2005: 203).

This is a good example of 'shame', a concept which Scheff (2000) argues is at the root of all conflict, on an intimate or international scale. Shame occurs when one feels negatively evaluated by oneself or others. In my account I used terms like embarrassment or discomfort to describe the awareness of discrepancy between personal behaviour and the ideal. Scheff says discomfort deserves the stronger name of shame. This is not a word much used among Quakers; it was only after finishing my thesis that a non-Quaker asked me where shame featured in my thinking. Quakers use less emotive words if they do consider the less serene activities and emotions. Several times in my data a phrase like 'we are of course human' occurs. This was a puzzle to my secular academic supervisors. To solve it Eva Pinthus, Quaker theologian and ecumenicist, suggested that what Quakers call 'being human' other denominations call 'sin'. For Scheff, shame (or its obverse, pride) is the marker of the state of the social bond between the individual and other individuals which form the collectivity. The amount of shame experienced by an individual indicates the perceived amount of conformity or non-conformity with the community ideal, and unrecognized and unarticulated shame is one of the triggers of conflict.

Shame and sin do not feature in the Quaker community narrative. There are historical reasons for this from the start (Dandelion *et al.* 1998: 110, 154, 207), but also

sociological and psychological reasons. The utopian community of Levana,<sup>21</sup> which was understood to be the Religious Society of Friends after nuclear catastrophe, had no experience of power politics, distress and disease, or sex and showing off to offer its young people. They had to go out into other provinces to learn about these. This fictional sanitized version of Quakerism is also the real experience of others; Kirkby (2001) and Steer (2001) are both highly critical of a community which suppresses knowledge of the 'warring, partying, deal making, cheating, divorcing bit' (Steer 2001), and hopes that all is sweetness and light.

Quakers are fond of the Jungian idea of the shadow (Wallis 1999) which places the primitive, unadapted, and awkward qualities in a separate part of collective experience bounded by the conventions. This enables them to preserve the illusion of the peaceable kingdom from which occasional safaris may be made to look at the wild animals of human experience.

Pilgrim (2004, 2008) describes the heterotopic process convincingly. The metaphor of the individual spiritual journey is inherent in the community narratives of Quakerism, explored in detail by Kline (2002). Though in theory the journey does not stop with the entrance into the Quaker community, many people regard that community and its practices as sanctuary or a haven, or a 'neverland to escape to' (Francis 2006: 113). But it is definitely a distinctive other place perceived as different from all other religious communities, so they expect that distinctiveness to be expressed and exhibited by all the members. If it is found that they are either not distinctive at all, or distinctive in different ways from the weary traveller, the whole of the sometimes uncomfortable journey is called into question.

#### THE COMMUNITY NARRATIVE

The stories told by all the contributors produced a shared image of their collective experience. This could be described as the dominant community narrative (Salzer 1998). It is the story Quakers accept which explains their history, purpose, and heterotopic understanding to themselves. There was no doubt among my contributors that Quakers would not be Quakers if they did not attempt to improve the world in which they live: 'I do feel we should be up there with what's being decided behind closed doors' (Robson 2005: 133). This was far more than 'love thy neighbour'; it meant that wherever there was difficulty and distress, Quakers 'are very deeply concerned about what is happening, and nearly always attempt to do something about it' (2005: 132).

As above, this responsibility to 'mend the world' has been characteristic of Quakers at least since William Penn. The Quaker organization which sets out to mend the wider world may also perceive itself as already in a mended state.<sup>22</sup> The idea that the Quaker organization is a 'peaceable kingdom' (Isa. 11:6-9) has many strands. The American Quaker artist Edward Hicks painted several versions of this peaceable kingdom where the lion and the lamb lie down together. Scott (2003)<sup>23</sup> suggests that animals acting in this unnatural way are meant to symbolize the transformation which takes place when the kingdom exists. The animals in their wild state represent

the faults found in humanity; these faults have to be tamed if people are to live together peacefully, not banished to the safari park of 'the shadow'.

By the late twentieth century the Quaker Peace Testimony had obtained a special status as the most unifying testimony, although Francis (2006: 107) argues that for newcomers it may now seem an optional extra or a stumbling block. Quaker witness against fighting with outward weapons has varied in interpretation and emphasis since the seventeenth century, and has not been as monolithic throughout the whole Society as the current dominant narrative suggests (Phillips 1989; Ceadel 2002). After two World Wars in the twentieth century which challenged individual young Quakers to place their lives and their integrity at risk, the pressure is much relaxed and rigorous self-scrutiny is less required. The surrounding society is also less in favour of military *bragadoccio*. New Quakers are therefore able to see the society as peaceful rather than suffering or waging peace.

Scully's virtue ethics model (2008), in which she also identifies the dominant community narrative as the 'peaceable kingdom' is extremely useful in explaining the process by which the collective vision is translated into individual action. Fuller exploration of how this model illuminates Quaker conflict, and indeed many other aspects of the 'double-culture' (Dandelion 2008) is awaited eagerly.

#### THEORIES OF ACTION IN THE QUAKER ORGANIZATION

These two strands of 'mending the world' and living in 'the peaceable kingdom' form part of the dominant community narrative, but would also be described by Argyris and Schön (1996) as the 'espoused theory'. Espoused theories are the values on which people believe their behaviour is based, to which the organization has made a public commitment. They are usually fairly easily discovered, in authoritative resources and in overheard conversation, and are keenly defended.

However, the espoused theory is only half of Argyris and Schön's analytic scheme of theories of action, which is applicable to all organizations. Co-existing with the espoused theory is the 'theory in use', which is not so easily discovered. Theories in use are the notional maps which guide action in the organization on a day-to-day basis. They may differ from the espoused theories but people in the organization may not be aware of this difference, and may not be aware of the messages in the theories in use which guide their action. Theories in use can often only be discovered by inference from behaviour, including speech. What people actually do often reveals the theory in use more clearly than what they say, or what they say they should do. These values are not necessarily explicitly in awareness and the dangerous prospect of exploring them is often defensively resisted. I explored the term 'unQuakerly' with the interview contributors, and listened to and observed the responses in and after the workshop. I learnt that it is unQuakerly to be immoderate, to show strong emotion, particularly anger. I also learnt that talking about conflict among Quakers requires the coaxing which Plummer (1995: Chapter 2) describes as necessary to bring stories of sexual variation into public view. Conflict is a subject which is constrained by many invisible injunctions, often rationalized as a need for confidentiality

to protect the participants. These two threads wove together to suggest to me that for many Quakers the injunction in the theory in use about conflict is 'don't ask, don't tell, don't even think about it'. It was common for questions not to be asked, especially to the main actors, for accounts to be limited by the need for confidentiality (or saving face?), and for people to feel bad if they think about conflict in a Quaker setting.

To continue Plummer's coaxing metaphor about sexual stories, I realized early in my research that I felt like a voyeur observing Quaker conflict, and am now cheerfully resigned to this. As spreading the counter narrative about Quaker conflict is so uncomfortable, I can at least get some enjoyment from the early stages of the process in collecting data.

#### NON-ASSERTIVENESS, NON-CONVICTION

Those I interviewed surprised me with another aspect of non-articulation. When asked to give hypothetical advice to a new Quaker about conducting a personal conflict, drawing on any resources they chose, they were largely flummoxed. Most of them were uncertain, unable to draw on either the Bible or *Quaker Faith and Practice* with precision, or at best, 'they will find a paragraph which tells them what to do' (Robson 2005: 98).<sup>24</sup>

They seemed unaware of useful strategies (except unspecific listening) and did not wish to appear confident or capable in handling conflict. Indeed, for some, confidence seemed unappealing. One said: 'I think I'd be allergic to someone who thought they could [advise on conflict]' (Robson 2005: 123).

The only person who cheerfully embarked on a simple one-paragraph description of what a Quaker, or anybody else, should do when they find themselves in conflict rather wryly described himself as considered to be slightly belligerent. In fact on this occasion he was merely well grounded and confident, not uncertain and hesitant. Lack of hierarchy was often stressed as a valued Quaker characteristic, and it seemed another expression of this could be lack of authority. The contributors did not want to appear authoritative, perhaps they were aware that if they made assertive statements about how a Quaker should conduct themselves in conflict they exposed themselves to attack from other Quakers. They did not even include 'think it possible you may be mistaken' (*Advices and Queries* 1995: Para. 17) as part of a recommended process, though it clearly positioned them in a comfortable place.

This connects with the 'absolute perhaps' (Dandelion 2004b, 2008), where it is more comfortable for a Quaker to construct a personal narrative which depicts him or herself as a seeker who has not yet found and who obdurately remains open to new light, without having any firm criteria about what is light and what is darkness. Personal narratives are tentative rather than assertive, re-adjusted in private. Counter narratives which are assertive and authoritative may be ignored,<sup>25</sup> or may encourage assertiveness in others, which might turn into conflict, which is unpleasant, unQuakerly, and might result in exclusion. This appears to be a process in which the aversion to conflict and the unwillingness to be certain both reinforce the other.

## GRASPING THE NETTLE

Some months after completing my thesis, I presented a version of this analysis to the Hardshaw East (Manchester) Peace Group. Among the audience was a Friend from Ireland Yearly Meeting who said that her experience in Ireland was different. There, Friends did not avoid conflict, they engaged in it with conviction. They were not uncertain, but asserted different certainties within the community. She was aware of two difficult issues which were on the agenda for the next Ireland Yearly Meeting, the substance of Quaker belief and the Yearly Meeting's response to homosexuality. In Britain Yearly Meeting diversity is espoused as a positive value in both these matters and they are rarely argued on the public stage. However, the epistle from Ireland Yearly Meeting (Epistle from Ireland Yearly Meeting 2006) showed that there had been 'forthright exchanges' on both these topics with a range of views, but also recognition that 'different views can exist within a fellowship of love under the governance of the spirit of Christ'. This Christian language would be unlikely to appear in contemporaneous Britain Yearly Meeting: the tone is not sufficiently 'liberal' or 'perhaphish'. The condition of Ireland Yearly Meeting would appear to be different from that of Britain Yearly Meeting, as the condition of Ireland is different from that of Britain. In Ireland religion is still embedded in public and political life; the wider context for Quakers in Ireland is sectarian affiliation which engenders deep animosity and tragedy. In contrast Quaker disputes must appear mild. Britain has succumbed to postmodernity in which religion occupies a much smaller importance in the public consciousness, and where its reputation is often judged by the ability of the church to present a united front on contemporary issues.

The heterotopic boundary between Quakers and the wider society is differently placed in Ireland Yearly Meeting and Britain Yearly Meeting. The degree of difference between the surrounding society and the small Quaker group varies on different topics in the two settings. Regarding conflict, both Quaker groups reflect the society round them. Britain Yearly Meeting reflects the polite and restrained tradition of not talking about religion or politics with its theory in use not to talk about such topics; in a tradition riven by religious affiliation enacted in politics Ireland Yearly Meeting is robust enough to grasp the nettle of conflict with firmness.

## NOTES

1. These were a two-day workshop at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in February, a session of Britain Yearly Meeting in May coinciding with the publication of the book *Conflict in Meetings* (2000) and a session of Quaker Life Representative Council in October. The Tuke Centre, attached to The Retreat, York, also ran a three-day course on conflict for Quakers in June.

2. For most of the time of the study I was serving as Clerk to Brighouse Monthly Meeting, and as Clerk of Quaker Outreach in Yorkshire with associated responsibilities in Yorkshire General Meeting.

3. These were in sequences with 7 Key Informants, 25 Grassroots or 'conscientious core' Quakers from across the north of the UK, and 8 'Edge Quakers'.

4. The cartoon appeared in *The Friend* (4 June 1999). It is reproduced here with permission of the Barnes family.

5. By 2005 there had been no referrals to the Finance and Trusts Committee, though there were unresolved conflicts in the General Meeting area.

6. These and other phrases and sentences are from contributors quoted in Robson 2005.

7. *Advices and Queries* are a 'reminder of the insights of the Society', which are supposed to be read regularly in Quaker Meetings. They are found at the start of *Quaker Faith and Practice* and also published as a separate pamphlet.

8. 'True Godliness don't turn men out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavours to mend it' (William Penn in *No Cross, No Crown*, cited in *Quaker Faith and Practice* [1682]: 23.02).

9. This model is used in a popularised version in *Conflict in Meetings* (2000), in which the different conflict-handling strategies are likened to animals. See also Wrench 2006 and Robson 2006.

10. For a thorough, though transatlantic, analysis of this decision-making process, see Sheeran 1983.

11. Personal communication with Olwen Morgan (2004) following exchanges on Quaker-B asynchronous message board.

12. For instance, she referred to her opponents as 'arseholes'.

13. Early in the study a Quaker who was a local councillor commented on his different experience in local politics and Quaker community. In the former he relished the rough and tumble of slanging matches, but he found contention among Quakers very upsetting because he did not expect it in that setting.

14. 'Broiges' is a Jewish term indicating an ongoing, but fully savoured, resentment or grudge. This was explained to me by Judy, a fellow student at Sheffield, and confirmed by Maureen Lipman (*The Guardian* [10 February 2006 and July 17 2006], online: [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk) [accessed 2 August 2007]). One of the most experienced contributors had already commented 'there is for some [Quakers] a strong resistance to letting go which I would like to explore'.

15. The ethics of fee paying education provided by the seven 'Quaker Schools' are often fiercely debated. One view sees this as a means of spreading the Quaker message and providing a protected educational experience, the other sees the financial barriers as immoral.

16. Later experience in my own Monthly Meeting suggests that tensions on such issues exist but are rarely explored (see Mellor 2008).

17. See Collins's version of the prototypical Quaker (Collins 1994: 19).

18. Quaker International Centre was a property in central London, close to Friends House, which had been used by Quakers as a centre for international hospitality since the 1950s. Changing social needs had made it economically unviable by the 1990s.

19. See the data from Workshop 2 (Robson 2005), reports of Meeting for Sufferings and letters in *The Friend* throughout late 2004 and early 2005. Pages 17–47 of *Quaker Work in 2006* (part of the Documents in Advance for Yearly Meeting 2007, published by Britain Yearly Meeting) records the findings of the working group enquiring into Meeting for Sufferings' decision-making about this matter.

20. This does, of course, depend on the person having achieved some sense of their own uniqueness. See Kelly's individuality corollary (1963: 55).

21. See Davison 1982, a drama presented to the Yearly Meeting by the Quaker Youth Theatre. The actors are now in their forties.

22. For a full discussion of the theological grounding of this belief, see Dandelion *et al.* 1998.

23. In her introduction to the *Proceedings of the Quaker Theology Seminar 2002–2003*.

24. Compare this with Scully (2008) on the lack of theological framework.

25. See Shellens's (2004) account of the fate of the Quaker Women's Group's Swarthmore Lecture.

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