A Tale of the Talking Stick:
Quaker Leadership in the Wider Christian Community

by Nancy Thomas
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Several years ago, I read an article on the Internet posted by Quaker philosopher, theologian and poet Arthur Roberts. It was entitled, "The Talking Stick," and in it Arthur told about crafting a stick that represents an important Native American tradition, at the request of a friend who is herself part Cherokee. Since then, he has fashioned many talking sticks and given them to people who might use them—elementary teachers, youth workers, and others who lead group meetings.

I fall under the category of "others," and the article definitely awoke my interest. From having lived among and studied the traditions of peoples of other cultures, especially their communication styles, I understood what Arthur meant when he suggested that the talking stick might also be called a "listening stick." In many tribal or peasant cultures, the focus of a communicational event is more on good listening than on good speaking. Among the Cherokees, the chief passes the talking stick to whoever has the right to speak, and the rest of the group assumes the concurrent right to listen carefully. It's more than a matter of taking turns; it involves a shared responsibility and is the Cherokee manner of "doing all things decently and in order."

In a letter that accompanied the article, Arthur invited any of us who would like a talking stick, to approach him. I thought of the class I was scheduled to teach and decided to experiment. Arthur let me choose from his collection, and I picked a branch with some artistic twists and knots, beautifully finished by skillful craftsmanship. I put it in my suitcase, and in August of that year Hal and I traveled to Asuncion, Paraguay for two weeks of seminars, including my one-week intensive on "Culture, Spirituality and Mission."

I intended to use the stick symbolically, in part to represent the spirituality of a particular tribal culture, and in part to encourage the class to listen well to each other. I did not imagine a literal use, to aid in taking turns, feeling that more appropriate for young people. These seminars were part of a doctoral program in theology, and the ten students in my class were all leaders in their denominations; several pastored churches with over 1000 members. They came from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Mexico and Hispanic Canada and the USA, and they represented groups as diverse as Presbyterians, Baptists, Nazarenes and Pentecostals. And here I was, a Quaker woman in the middle, trying to bring it all together.

I began the class Monday morning with a devotional, using the talking stick, describing Cherokee customs and the importance of good listening. I then reminded the class of Jesus, the Teacher in our midst. I symbolically gave the talking stick to Jesus and placed it on the table in the center of this circle of scholars and learners, among whom I felt privileged (and a little frightened) to be a member. And that was that.

Or so I thought.

Near the end of the week, on Thursday morning, we were discussing the shadow side of spirituality, wrestling with sin, Satan and the problem of evil. Coming from diverse cultural and theological backgrounds, each student brought to the table a distinct perspective. Sometimes the discussions in these classes get loud and lively. This was one of those times. At one point, about five people were speaking at once, and the decibel level was rising. Of a quiet nature myself, I usually shy away from these types of encounters. Unless, of course, I'm in the role of teacher, and then I struggle to find a helpful way through. Having a soft voice does not help.

But at the precise moment I needed it, inspiration struck. I stood up, in the middle of the noise and confusion, walked to the table in the center and held up the talking stick. The room exploded into silence.

Confusion registered on the faces of some. Others seemed a bit affronted. ("What's this crazy woman trying to do?") But slowly light began to dawn. Without a word I walked over and handed the stick to Jorge, a usually quiet-spoken man whose observations had set off this controversy. It was still his "turn." He took the stick, paused a moment, then held it high in the air, a grin of victory on his face. Everyone laughed and seemed relieved. I still wasn't sure how this would turn out. After all, these were not elementary school students. And the discussion was important to the subject of the course.

The next forty-five minutes were fascinating. The students themselves negotiated the passing of the talking stick, and took it most seriously, at the same time accepting a certain playfulness in the practice. The discussion continued on the same level of passion and intentionality, but with what I discerned as a new level of listening. More than trading points of view, a spirit of responsiveness to each other became evident. There was obvious relief in the sense of order, facilitated by the talking stick. By the end of the morning, while we still hadn't definitively solved the problem of evil, we had clarified some of the important questions and received insight. Class consensus was that it had been a significant and enlightening discussion. Not to mention fun.

I didn't expect to use the stick again, but the next day, the last day of the class, in the middle of another heated discussion, one of the students went over and picked up the talking stick. Again, laughter. And again, a willingness to let an instrument facilitate order, an order that did not stifle, but rather channeled communication.

At the end of the day, and of the class, Jorge came up to thank me, and I had another inspiration. I had previously decided that if the talking stick proved meaningful to the class, even if only symbolically, I would give it away to one of the students. I acknowledged Jorge's gratitude and handed him the stick, asking if he would like to take it home to Ecuador with him. He asked with surprise, "You want to give this to me?" I assured him that was indeed the case, and his smile as he took it from my hands still warms me.

It interests me to know that one of the reasons the dean of this multidenominational school invited me to teach the class on spirituality was because I am Quaker. He is convinced that the lively, largely extroverted Latin American protestant movement needs exposure to Quaker values.

What aspects of Quaker leadership values does the talking-stick experience illustrate? The conviction that Christ, the light of God, somehow illumines every person speaks to the temptation of the leader to consider herself the "expert" (nasty little word). We are aware that the task of the teacher is to encourage active participation in the adventure of learning, so that everyone might draw from and share their own experience, knowledge and insight. While this may not be a particularly Quaker insight, our focus on the universal light of Christ encourages a more horizontal leadership style, especially in the teaching role.

The belief that the light of Christ somehow illumines cultures as well as people let me respectfully draw from the Cherokee culture in a theological class on Christian spirituality. It made a difference.

The sense of Jesus as the Presence in our midst powerfully affects my leadership style, giving me courage, perspective and the hope that something real and good will result from a particular gathering. I even used the famous Quaker painting in my introductory PowerPoint presentation to this class. I let the talking stick symbolize the fact that Jesus is our Teacher. To me, this isn't wishy-washy mystical spirituality; it's reality and it affects how I teach and how I respond to those in my class. We are all disciples of Jesus, and Jesus is actually with us.

Other Quaker values that came out in the class include the focus on good listening and the bent toward non-violence. I love a lively discussion, but if there comes a point when emotions and egotism get out of hand, we need a calming influence, a means to slow down and find our way back to respect and listening. As a teacher, I don't always do this well, but I'm learning. (My soft voice probably has more to do with personality than Quakerism. Not all Quakers are introverts.)

As a leader and a teacher, I'm grateful that I walk with Jesus. And it's good to realize that in every situation where I am called to play a leading role, Christ is somehow in every other person in the gathering, our Teacher, our Guide, our Leader.

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