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## SACRED COMPASS: A REVIEW FROM THREE DIRECTIONS

GALEN MCNEMAR HAMANN

“The sacred also shows us the path of discernment is unique to each person.” (xiv) As I began reading Bill Brent’s newest book, *Sacred Compass: The Way of Spiritual Discernment*,<sup>1</sup> I quickly realized that I was reading the book with precisely this belief in mind. With each page I held up the following queries: How would my students react to this statement or word? How would this chapter speak to my classmates at Divinity School? Does this new approach draw from the well of Friends’ approaches to the topic in the past? This review is an attempt to respond to how people starting from three different directions might read the book.

*From the East* is an exploration of how educators may use this book in their classes. *From the West* is an opportunity to explore this book from the perspective of a student of the Divine, a traveler with her compass secured tightly on a string around one’s neck. *From the South* is a reading of the book as a Friend who believes in continuing revelation and accepts this as yet another inspired text written to minister to Friends today. Having taught in Friends education for nine years, and currently an M.Div. candidate at Harvard Divinity school, I find myself facing these directions, turning from one to the other often through out my day. “God’s revelation, even in daily life, continues for all who follow their sacred compass.... The sacred compass shows us that we are on a pilgrimage to our spiritual true north—God” (1). I am grateful for this book as a new addition to my backpack and bookshelf, because I too, as Brent Bill suggests, always find myself returning to the Sacred Compass and facing North in an effort to help myself and others answer our souls’ deepest questions (ix).

### FROM THE EAST—A TEACHER’S PERSPECTIVE

As a teacher, I read this book seeing all of its possibilities for the classroom and all of its challenges. It is a text that uses Quaker theology and language, biblical examples and Christ-centered content.

The first chapter is a good example of this. Titled “As Way Opens,” Brent Bill introduces readers to the Quaker expression, *as way opens*: “a way of developing our spiritual insight, making major decisions and planning” (1). He then continues, offering examples of ways opening from the Bible, from Saul’s experience, and from Jesus’ life.

Using this dual language presents a challenge and a gift for those teaching in Friends schools. It is no secret that although Friends’ schools were often founded to educate Quaker youth, the majority of Friends schools (k-12 and colleges) today are filled with non-Quaker students. In fact, Quaker students are in the minority in most Friends schools. The gift this text offers for teachers and administrators is that it provides helpful language to explain, and examples to illustrate, many Friends practices and terms. Some examples are *lives that speak*, *leadings*, *clearness committees* and more. In addition to elucidating these terms, Bill also allows the teacher to use this book to share the lives of other Quakers both past and present. These include such activists, educators, and theologians as Thomas Kelly, Carrie Newcomer, Tom Fox, Max Carter, Sylvia Graves, and George Fox, to name a few. The challenge for educators in Friends Schools arises with the Christian language: can we use this text as a learning tool for our Jewish, Muslim, Hindi, Buddhist, and atheist students? In my experience as an educator with high school students embracing a myriad of beliefs, as a class they will usually agree that everyone has some kind of spirituality, but many of them have not yet developed a faith in God. This book assumes that the reader will believe in God, and have some understanding of, and level of comfort with, the Christian Bible; this leaves out students in Friends schools or elsewhere who will not assume or accept God’s presence, or Jesus as the Messiah/Christ.

This challenge, however, does not mean that the teachers should abandon or disregard this text. Rather, I believe it should be a tool for educators to introduce Friends practice and spiritual growth through the resources provided in these pages. I would recommend this book for all Friends educators and encourage them to select some of the suggested practices to use in their teaching, or to encourage students to practice—particularly those in chapter four. For example, Brent Bill here offers a variety of writing practices to guide travelers on their spiritual journey. He suggests writing spiritual stories, and gives language to get started. “The most important lesson God taught me was... A faith crisis that helped me grow was...” (27). Mining this book for exercises to engage in with students, as well as passages

to intersperse one's teachings about Quakers, will indeed produce a discovery of spiritual gold.

### FROM THE WEST—A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

In the past few years, I have read many books on spirituality, finding one's faith, connecting to God, discerning vocation, etc., but few from a Quaker perspective. Just as Parker Palmer's writings are an important element of the education of teachers, so too this text from a Quaker perspective is an important one for students of religion: people who are trying to deepen their own spirituality, as well as those preparing for ministry. Brent Bill here offers practitioners more tools to add to their *Spiritual Toolbox*.<sup>2</sup>

Says Bill, "Following our sacred compass leads us to a place where we learn from God in the daily and in the lifelong. This place is one of seeking and sensing God. It is a place of divine directions and spiritual opportunity. Learning to follow the sacred compass means living in a constant state of discernment and obedience to God" (xiii). This explanation of following our sacred compass offers up to students the best of Friends' practices and beliefs: the ability that each person has to access the Inward Light and the practice of witnessing and sharing continuing revelation. Students will have to quiet the busyness and noise of the world around them in order to faithfully listen to this still, small voice within. While one may assume that this would be easy for students who are trying to encounter and proclaim God's presence in their lives, it can be very difficult. As Bill suggests, students are busy "looking for a magical map with the shortest route highlighted in yellow" (xi). This book is an important reminder that the maps we have been given, the Bible, prayer, spiritual friends, and other faith practices, are not as helpful without our compasses pointing to the deepest part of our souls.

Two themes that were particularly helpful to students was his emphasis on individual authenticity and the constant presence of God and Christ. While our compasses may all be facing north, we all hold a different compass: "We are called to be the distinct individuals God made us to be, to serve God as ourselves, not as imitations of somebody else" (36). This is an important reminder for students who are being given many a historical and present-day model of what a person of God might look like. As individuals, we have a responsibility

to follow our own sacred compasses, not the path of another. Time and time again, Bill reminds us that God is always with us on this journey. In his own faithful life, Brent Bill's friends now know that they can trust in God's presence with him. "She called because she knew that, no matter how many times I've failed, I try to walk close to God. She was confident that I would listen to her and to God." (148)

As a student, I had only one struggle with the text. I found the density overwhelming when the messages are absorbed in one continuous period, like so many books like these are read. It seems that this book needs some sort of directive in the beginning that would encourage readers to read it in small quantities, with ample silence, and waiting throughout. To this end, I found the number of subsections in each chapter overwhelming and in chapter four even confusing. While mindful of our testimony of stewardship and not wanting to waste paper/trees, I still found myself longing for some blank pages, or space, to encourage more directly this silence and expectant waiting that is needed with such a spiritually dense book.

#### FROM THE SOUTH—A FRIENDS' PERSPECTIVE

Brent Bill offers us his own rich experience as a Friend and as a Friend serving in Friends' ministry: "There are responsibilities that I sense the holy path requires of me—to be more loving (and not just to those I think are deserving of my love) more active physically and spiritually, and more understanding of others' points of view" (168-9). But he does not only teach us from his own life's lessons, as mentioned earlier; he weaves in examples of other Friends' lives, vocations, and theology. The lives that speak through the text offer us a ministry of Friends that serves to deepen our faith and understanding of our own religious faith and practice. The ministry ranges from the founder of Quakerism, George Fox, "Take heed of the promptings of Truth and Love, for those are the leadings of God," (47) to current folk singer and theologian Carrie Newcomer, "Essentially, a life well lived is a spiritual exercise" (93).

I struggled however with one use of lives that speak: the example of Tom Fox. Brent Bill uses him as an example of way taking us to unexpected places: "In November 2005, the Swords of Righteousness Brigade took Fox and three other members of his Christian Peacemaking Team hostage. In March 2006, his bullet-

filled body was discovered. Tom Fox found what countless Christians have discovered—that following the sacred compass can take us to unexpected and difficult places” (128). I found the implication that the murder is an unexpected place to which one’s compass might guide us a difficult one. True, Tom Fox is not the first Christian to die following his compass; in fact, he is in good company, with Christ. But to suggest that this is an unexpected place compared to Bill’s experience of building and living on a farm in Indiana is too much of a stretch for me. Tom Fox’s life is an important ministry for us, but I believe the unexpected place that Tom Fox’s compass led him to was not to “a black plastic bag” (127), but into the hearts and minds of Iraqi people and U.S. soldiers in Iraq.

Friends can also learn and re-teach ourselves the sacred Quaker practices that Bill guides us through: following a leading, discerning, and participating in clearness committees. I was especially grateful for this last *traveler’s aid*. “Besides personal discernment, Quakers have another method of helping people follow their sacred compass. We form a group and call it a clearness committee. Clearness committees have assisted seeking Friends in finding clearness in everything from confirming marriage partners to making career choices. These committees can be used to make any decision that calls for spiritual discernment.” (156) Bill then goes on to give very practical advice on how one should lead and participate in such committees: advice that I see being referenced in many an upcoming clearness committee in monthly meetings.

As a Friend, I cannot ignore that this book assumes one Quaker perspective, that of Christ as the Inward Teacher. Personally, I do not disagree with Bill, but I think as we present Quaker theology in this new decade we must begin to address the diversity of theology that exists within this world. This diversity includes Jewish Quakers, and Quakers who do not believe in a God of the Bible. It may be mentioned only in the introduction or a footnote, but to leave these Quaker perspectives out entirely paints a far too unified and simplistic picture of Friends today.

## CONCLUSION

As we consider Quaker education, this text offers a fine example of ways in which teachers and students, as well as Friends and those of other religious traditions, can learn from the spiritual discernment

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practices of Friends. It is clear, especially from his final chapter, that Brent Bill followed and was faithful to his own leadings by writing this book; we as readers can learn both from his life example as well as his text.

ENDNOTES

- 1 J. Brent Bill, *Sacred Compass; The Way of Spiritual Discernment* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2008).
- 2 As Jan Hoffman described in her 2004 FGC workshop.