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A TRIBUTE: REMEMBERING ARTHUR O. ROBERTS

PAUL ANDERSON

You have led us by example,
you have encouraged us with timely words and deeds,
you have taught us in and outside the classroom
to be seekers of Truth and minders of the Light.

Thank you for your faithfulness.

Thank you for your courage.

The work of Christ is furthered through your endeavors,
and ministries of the Holy Spirit are carried out
through your energies.

From you we learn to be seekers of peace—
as well as holiness,
to be stewards of creation—

as well as builders of the new Gospel Order,
to be comforters of the disturbed—
as well as disturbers of the comfortable.

From you we learn to attend, discern and do the work of God.¹

Arthur O. Roberts made momentous contributions to the Quaker Theological Discussion Group and *Quaker Religious Thought* over the years, and his impact as one of the leading Quaker thinkers and ministers over the last century will continue to be felt for some time. He was among the founding generation of young Quaker scholars that launched QTDG in 1957 (including Wilmer Cooper, Tom Brown, Lewis Benson, Canby Jones and others), and he contributed ten substantive essays to *QRT* as well as over three-dozen editorials, responses, and tributes.² He followed Dean Freiday as editor of *QRT* from 1989 to 2000, and he continued to lend valuable support to both the discussion group and the journal into the new millennium. Arthur

was a Quaker philosopher, historian, poet, preacher, artist, mayor and prophet *par excellence*, and the celebration of his memory in Bauman Auditorium at George Fox University on January 7, 2017 would have been his ninety-fourth birthday. He passed away on December 15, 2016, and he is already sorely missed.

Arthur's life held together numerous polarities. He was a prophet and an evangelist, a philosopher and a poet, a professor and a wood carver, a mayor and a missionary, a professional and a family man. He loved his family, but he also welcomed all prospective students into his mentorship, formally or otherwise. He embraced sanctification, but he levied piercing calls for justice in true prophetic form. He spoke the truth, but he did so in love. At the core of Arthur's life and vision—in his view—was a lifelong commitment to Christ and an openness to the transforming, guiding, and empowering work of the Holy Spirit. In his own words from his autobiography, Arthur describes his transformative experience at Quaker Hill Friends Conference Center in McCall, Idaho, where he accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord as a fourteen year-old. He remembers this as “an occasion both joyous and profoundly significant for life's direction.”³

Tabernacle of logs,
a straw floor;
and people singing,
sharing, caring;
someone repeating
Christ's word to sinners—
in particular me.

My heart beating
("Just As I Am")
to the promised
cleansing fountain,
then saying "yes,"
knowing God heard,
and telling of it
falteringly.

Walking late that night
along a mountain lake,
shivering from cool air;
no more from ecstasy,
for I saw star fire
pierce the earth
celebrating my new birth
and darkness rent,

and heard His voice
in waves lapping
at my shore, and
breathed the Holy Spirit
in a scent of pine!

Indeed, the transformative work of Christ can be seen in Arthur's service and writings over the years; with the language of George Fox, he had come to know Christ *experimentally*.⁴ In 1984, serving on the Department of Christian Testimonies of Northwest Yearly Meeting, I asked Arthur to write a Quaker version of an evangelistic tract as an alternative to "The Four Spiritual Laws." He produced a warm and compelling version of the gospel message, featuring the theme of "light" from the Gospel of John. Published later in *Evangelical Friend*, the outline is as follows:⁵

- Step one: Drawn to the Light
- Step two: Being Judged by the Light
- Step three: Being Convinced by the Light
- Step four: Being Reached by the Light
- Step five: Being Led by the Light

Born in Huston, Idaho on January 7, 1923, Arthur was son of Owen and Bertha Roberts. The youngest of four children, he grew up on the family farm and graduated from Greenleaf Friends Academy in 1940. He entered Pacific College (now George Fox University) in 1940 and excelled in sports, student leadership, and academics. While there, he met and married Fern Nixon, and they were blessed with three children

and nearly twenty grandchildren and great grandchildren. During his college years, a lifetime trajectory of preparedness for ministry was set, and his vocation included both pastoral and academic venues of service.

Feeling a call to pastoral ministry, Arthur served as pastor of the Friends Church at Everett, Washington following his college education (1944-48). The women at Greenleaf Friends Church in Idaho made quilts for young people feeling a call to pastoral ministry; Arthur was among that number. He also pastored churches during his seminary and doctoral studies, and upon returning to serve at his Newberg alma mater, he became founding pastor of Tigard Friends Church (1956-58). Arthur held weekly Bible studies for college students in his home, and he and Fern were founding members of North Valley Friends Church since its beginning in 1972.⁶ Arthur was later drawn into serving as a pastoral resource at Reedwood Friends Church in Portland (1983-89), and he was the founder of “Samuel School”—a program in Northwest Yearly Meeting that helps young Friends leaders discern a potential calling to Christian ministry or service. He led the committee that revised the *Faith and Practice* of Northwest Yearly Meeting in 1987 and contributed in multiple ways to the missional identity of Christ-centered Friends worldwide.

Following graduation from college, Arthur pursued seminary training at the Nazarene Theological Seminary in Missouri, and he completed his doctoral studies at Boston University in 1953. While in Boston, Arthur met and engaged in Quaker-studies conversations with Rufus Jones, Henry J. Cadbury, Lewis Benson, Douglas Steere, Elton Trueblood, and many others. In his autobiography, Arthur recalls being moved by Cadbury’s work on George Fox’s *Book of Miracles*⁷ and being fascinated by the spiritual vitality of George Fox elucidated by Lewis Benson. Upon challenging one of Elton Trueblood’s views on Robert Barclay, he noted that Elton took their engagement seriously and later produced an important book on the leading theologian of the early Quaker movement.⁸ He also recalls discussing matters of racial justice and reconciliation with a fellow doctoral student on the steps of Boston University’s Marsh Chapel one day; two years later that student would lead a bus boycott, “demonstrating that Jesus meant love to go public.” His name was Martin Luther King, Jr.⁹

During his seminary years, when his alma mater in Newberg was considering a name change, Arthur wrote a letter to the Board of

Trustees in 1949, recommending it be named after the founder of the Friends movement, George Fox. As Arthur reflected recently:

I find it interesting that a college board listened to a graduate student studying the history of the church—they paid attention to me. That’s probably the most interesting thing about the whole story. And then, a few years later, a board member Dean Gregory came all the way out to New Hampshire to talk to me about returning to George Fox. I could have gone to other schools and taught, but I felt this is where the Lord was leading me, so I ended up as a professor at George Fox from 1953-1987.¹⁰

Serving as Professor of Religion at George Fox for thirty-five years, and for several years as the Dean of Faculty (1968-72), Arthur was the first holder of a Ph.D. on the faculty of the institution. His report in 1959 on the impact of its graduates helped the institution garner accreditation, and the vast number of significant Quaker leaders he encouraged over the years include: Ralph Beebe, Richard Foster, Howard Macy, Chuck Mylander, Kent Thornburg, Fred Gregory, Hal and Nancy Thomas, Mark and Becky Ankeny, Ron Stansell, Phil Smith, Daniel Smith-Christopher, Ron Mock, and Corwynn Beals. My own first meeting with Arthur was at the Quaker Theological Discussion Group meetings held at Malone in 1976. Within that brief encounter at my parents’ home in Canton, Ohio, Arthur exhorted me to prepare for ministry among Friends. Twelve years later I followed him at George Fox, teaching some of the classes he had taught before retiring.

Arthur continued to serve as Professor At Large following his retirement from George Fox, a distinguished position he held until his death. In retirement, Arthur and Fern moved to the Oregon Coast, and he became the mayor of Yachats. While there he helped the community deal with a number of crises in ways that show peacemaking can happen at home as well as abroad.¹¹ Arthur’s international reach of service included engagements with Alaska Quakers in the 1960s, ministries among Norwegian Friends in the 1980s, correspondence with Russian philosophers in the 1990s, and support of missionary and FWCC work over the years. He founded Quaker Heritage Week at George Fox, and he supported the University’s Center for Peace Learning as well as inner-city and Hispanic ministries of Northwest Yearly Meeting. Arthur was a founding member of the Friends Association for Higher Education and Quakers United in Publication, and his writings over the years kept Barclay Press in the eye of many constituencies.

Perhaps the most characteristic thing about the momentous life of Arthur Roberts is his sustained willingness to seek and follow the Lord's leadings at every stage of his life. He documents his distinctive callings during life's evolving chapters in this poem, published in his biography addendum, *The Bonus Years*.

“Yes, Lord!” ¹²

DECADE ONE: Do not fear the dark, my boy. Say ‘amen’ and hop into bed! I am with you during the night as well as during the day. Go to sleep my precious child. *Yes, Lord!*

DECADE TWO: You may fool your parents, my son, but not me. What you did is sin. Repent; receive my forgiveness. I have called you to minister. Will you follow me, now? *Yes, Lord!*

DECADE THREE: My son, preaching is more than rhetoric; ministry means speaking gospel truth first to self, then to gathered worshipers and visitors. Will you do so? *Yes, Lord!*

DECADE FOUR: My son, beware subtle self-deception. Wisdom is more than knowledge. I called you to serve family, students, and associates, not to inflate ego. Right? *Yes, Lord!*

DECADE FIVE: In troubled times truth overcomes deceit; love overcomes hate. So, my son, will you convey this message with cogent words and compassionate deeds? *Yes, Lord!*

DECADE SIX: My son, some student faces convey concerns beyond course mastery. Will you discern ways to tender such troubled youth appropriate counsel and comfort? *Yes, Lord!*

DECADE SEVEN: My son, I have called you to write and speak for the sake of truth, not for public applause. Will you be diligent, disciplined, and devoted to your calling? *Yes, Lord!*

DECADE EIGHT: My son, retirement doesn't free you from social responsibility. Will you serve by helping govern this pleasant town, so peace and justice will prevail? *Yes, Lord!*

DECADE NINE: My son, grandchildren are a blessing. As patriarch will you wrap your pearls of wisdom in love, and pray each day for these young adults and their families? *Yes, Lord!*

DECADE TEN: Do not fear lengthening shadows, my dear friend. Enjoy extended family and friendship circles. I'll meet you at your new home some bright morning. *Yes, Lord! Yes!*

So, thank you, Arthur, for leading by example. You have taught us well, but the true measures of our learnings are still in process.

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ENDNOTES

1. Paul N. Anderson, "Thank You, Arthur!" *Truth's Bright Embrace: Essays and Poems in Honor of Arthur O. Roberts*, Paul N. Anderson and Howard R. Macy, eds. (Newberg, OR: George Fox University Press 1996) ix.
2. See his *QRT* essays below; Arthur's responses include: "Christ as Servant as Motivation to Quaker Service," *QRT* 5:2, #10 (1963); "Was George Fox a Prophet?; A Study of the Criteria for Old Testament Prophecy," *QRT* 17:1, #43 (1976/7); "Lewis Benson, Evaluating His Contribution," *QRT* 22:3, #65 (1987); "A Response: Mark Hatfield on the Christian and Politics," *QRT* 24:3, #73 (1990); Reviews of *Exploring Heaven* and *Prayers at Twilight* (by Arthur O. Roberts): Stephen K. Moroney and Tom Johnson *QRT* #103 (2004); *A Friendly Apology for the 21st Century: Responses to Johns and Anderson*, *QRT* #114 (2010). His tributes include: "In Memory of John McCandless," *QRT* 24:3, #73 (1990); "Remembering Ward Harrington," *QRT* 27:4, #86 (1995); "A Tribute to Dean Freiday," *QRT* #110 (2008).
3. Arthur O. Roberts, *Drawn by the Light: Autobiographical Reflections of Arthur O. Roberts* (Newberg: Barclay Press, 1993) 55-56.
4. Note that most of his *QRT* listed below feature important aspects of Christ's work and significance; his analysis of the transformative experience of George Fox in his *Through Flaming Sword* (Newberg: Barclay Press, 1959, rev. 2008) sees the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit as elemental in the experience and message of early Friends.
5. Arthur O. Roberts, "On Becoming a Christian," published also in *Evangelical Friend* 24:1, Sept./Oct. (1990): 16-17.
6. See Arthur's prayer, "North Valley Meetinghouse," in his *Listen to the Lord* (Newberg: Barclay Press, 1974) 37-39.
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9. *Drawn by the Light*, 131.
10. "What's In a Name?" *Journal* (Winter 2016; Newberg: George Fox University): <http://www.georgefox.edu/journalonline/winter16/feature/125-celebration.html#roberts>.
11. His book, *Let the Spirit Soar* (City of Yachats, 2000) tells the story.
12. Arthur Roberts, *The Bonus Years: A Postscript to Drawn by the Light* (Newberg: Barclay Press, 2015) 53.