

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KC 31 SIMPLE GIFTS #2

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Dear Mr. Nolte,

'Tis the gift to be simple
'Tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down
Where we ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight

When true simplicity is gain'd
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd
To turn, turn, will be our delight
Till by turning, turning we come round right.

Copland's Appalachian Spring and countless repetitions on children's recorders have made the tune of this song famous. But the words tell more.

In my last newsletter I said something about the Shaker 'gifts', coming in trance, possession, visions, and taking the form of physical objects, messages, or songs and dances. The history of the Shakers, the deceptively naive imagery they wove around their fantasies and daydreams, were very interesting to me. But now that I was about to give them three dimensional shape, I was puzzled. Where to begin?

I was at Temple University, Philadelphia, for about two and half weeks during November and December last. I had a group of ten graduate acting students in the second year of their training in the department of theatre. We would work together without interruption for the whole of that time on a subject of my choosing and I had chosen the Shakers.

Kenneth Cavander is an Institute Fellow exploring in theatrical form our past and present mythologies and our capacities for self-transformation.

But, confronted with the mass of material, original and secondary, at our disposal, it was hard to know where to begin. I think I had begun to see some answers by the time we finished, though, and many of those answers are hidden, like secret clues, in the words of the song. Before I go on to describe what happened let me pick out just a few that took on new meaning as the days progressed.

The Shakers talked a great deal about simplicity - in their life, in their work. But it wasn't easy. It's a 'gift' (i.e. a sign of divine providence) to be simple. Think of the other meanings of simple ... simpleton, for instance. An interesting book that includes long passages of first^{hand} reporting by a Shaker who became disillusioned frequently uses the word "silly" to describe them and their practices. To be foolish (simple) is a gift (talent).

"To come down ..." down from where? From the heights of worldly pride? From intellectual heights ...? Another clue.

Where is the "place just right"?

"We shan't be asham'd" ... of what?"To bow and to bend." It was hard for us to overcome our shame (feeling silly).

"Turn, turn." Turning in the sense of spinning, obviously. The Shakers did a lot of spinning, twirling, rotating. But turn in another sense ... the sky turns blue, the water turns clear ... to change.

And when you change you "come round right."

The Shakers, in a down-to-earth practical way, understood that they were in the process of effecting self-transformation, without the benefits of drugs, modern psychology, or sophisticated traditional rituals and ceremonies. The words of the songs, of which the above is an example, showed the way.

What we had to do was retrace their steps.

The Shakers turned work into a form of worship, but we began every day with a game. At first the game was a means of physical warmup, a raising of energy. The game we played most often was "Pussy Wants A Corner", a variation of Tag in which the player who is It tries to get on to a safe base by tagging one of the others while they are in transit between bases; once It has tagged someone he is free, provided he can reach an empty base without being tagged back. To play the game well - and my actors became very good at it - requires a combination of coordination, speed, fast reactions, and an ability to tease and form instantaneous alliances.

Playing this game, and the others we experimented with, the players lost all their inhibitions and behaved like excited children; and as time went on, this mood of children-at-play infected the rest of the work. We found that for every experience described by the Shakers it was necessary to create one of our own, to be our reference point, our home base, our touchstone. Children at play was one such touchstone. Later, I'll explain how we used it.

The rest of the day was divided into two kinds of work. In one, we created characters, put them into situations and relationships, and started to develop a story line that could be interwoven with some of the factual material we had gathered. The other work involved recreating the songs and dances of the Shakers, following the instructions for their daily work and routines, enacting their ceremonies and holding services or 'meetings' as they once did.

"Hands to work and hearts to God" said Ann Lee.

After a while we started to combine the two strands. Here are a couple of examples.

We invented a couple, married, with children in their teens, who decide to join the Shaker Order, but leave their children in the outside world. This couple is called Eli and Dorothy. After a while Eli begins to chafe against the rules of the order; Dorothy meanwhile, has found happiness.

kind

"Fancy articles of any, or articles which are superfluously finished, trimmed or ornamented, are not suitable for Believers." So say the Millennial Laws of the Shakers. Eli breaks one of these laws, and puts a flower, one flower, on a piece of carpentry. He is reprimanded by one of the Elders. (Shakers were governed by Elders and Eldresses, with Deacons and Deaconesses beneath them to conduct day to day financial and administrative chores. Above everyone was the Ministry, at Mt. Lebanon, Vt.) We had a number of different versions of this scene, depending on what story we wished to tell. In one version Eli decorates something to give as a present to another Shaker, a sister who has caught his eye. In another version, he makes the decoration as a way to express his rebellion, but hides it because he's not yet sure how rebellious he wants to be. A third version has him making the decoration to improve the market value of the product (Shaker furniture was sold in The World to help support their organization). This scene eventually had a skeletal script, but was usually improvised

each time. At a certain point the actor playing Eli would find an opportunity to cue in the rest of the company, and the dialogue he was having with the Elder or Eldress would merge into a collective expression of the Shaker day. The other actors would start to speak, repeating laws, the same two laws over and over again, in a kind of antiphony, while they followed exactly, or as exactly as they could, the precise instructions for doing everything as laid down by these laws ... "Brethren and sisters may not pass each other on the stairs ... When Believers go forth in holy order they must take three steps forward of equal length, and brethren should set off with the left foot and sisters with the right ... Kneel before and after eating ... It is wrong to sit with the feet on the rounds of chairs ... When we clasp our hands, our right thumbs should be above our left ..." - and so on, covering every aspect of life.

Meanwhile, as these laws were repeated over and over again, the actors went through, in a condensed version, a Shaker day, ending with a meeting at which they sang and danced. Then as they retired to bed ("All should retire to rest in the fear of God, without any playing or boisterous laughing, and lie straight"), the scene 'dissolved' back into the dialogue between the Elder and Eli.

When we started to put this scene together there was a great temptation to insert our 20th century reactions to this regime into the action. All the actors found the strictness, the pettiness, the sternness of the laws, obnoxious and forbidding. So the Shaker Day became like the dim memory of a chain gang. In time, though, by letting the words of the song which was sung at the end of the day penetrate their attitudes, a new spirit came into the action. The song began:

"Who will bow and bend like a willow
Who will turn and twist and reel ...?"

and ends ...

"Pride and bondage all forgetting
Mother's wine is freely working
Oh Ho!
I will have it, I will bow and bend to get it,
I'll be reeling, turning, twisting,
Shake out all the starch and stiff'ning!"

The fault was not in the laws, or in the work, it was in ourselves. We did not want to bow or to bend. Our wills were too strong. We were starchy. But when we had really listened to the words of the song, then it was possible to recite the laws and perform the work

almost as a hymn of praise. The change was striking. The work rhythms, which the actors first did as a duty, a tiresome chore, became a rhythmic, contrapuntal score, of which the actual song and dance at the end of the day was simply another form, a more intense and lyrical expression.

The Millennial Laws formed the basis for another scene that combined song and atmosphere with a fragment of story. We wanted to show the moment of joining the Shakers, when our couple, Eli and Dorothy, had one last interview with the Elders and Eldresses before being accepted into the so called "Gathering Order". This scene became a counterpoint between the pleasure of the Shakers in receiving new members, and a recitation of the laws that affected married couples or relations between the sexes. So, while Eli and Dorothy were asked whether they had made up their minds, whether they had any doubts left about joining (and this question sometimes elicited a hint of some disagreement between them, the residue of old family disputes or personal pain), and a reminder that they would no longer be man and wife, but spiritual brother and sister, while all this was going on, the other actors would be forming a wall around them, a wall built up brick by brick of figures who said, for example, "One brother and one sister must not be together, alone, at any time, longer than to do a short and necessary duty or errand", in a cold and impersonal tone. This scene was introduced and punctuated with a strange and plaintive song that sounds vaguely like an old Scottish folk song ("Charlie is my Darlin'"), and whose words went:-

O Brethren, ain't you happy
O Brethren, ain't you happy
O Brethren, ain't you happy
Ye followers of the Lamb

Sing on, dance on,
Followers of Emmanuel,
Sing on, dance on,
Ye followers of the Lamb ...

Finally, Eli and Dorothy were left alone. They said goodbye. The action was reduced to one gesture - of ending physical contact. Who could bear to let go first? How did they do it ... And the way the actors answered this question for the audience (which differed every time we did it), turned out to be one of the most interesting turning points of our work. At last, having parted, the couple joined their respective Shaker 'families', and everyone sang, still to the same tune:-

I'm glad I am a Shaker ...
(etc.)

Shaker laws allowed for one chink of light in the dark austerity of their rules concerning the relations of men and women. This was the Union Meeting, held twice a week, and lasting half an hour or so, when brothers and sisters were allowed to talk to each other, seated about five feet apart, on any subject they chose. They were all together in one room, of course, and no whispering was allowed, but the Union Meeting gave them a chance to touch, if not physically, at least emotionally. We created a theatrical version of the Union Meeting, in which the ten actors conducted five different conversations between five sets of imaginary characters, switching from one conversation to another, and editing as they went along. This was hard. I was really asking them to do several things at once - create characters and improvise conversations within the frame of reference of a Shaker village, listen to the other conversations that were taking place around them, make instantaneous decisions about when to break into another conversation or pause so that someone else could break into theirs, keep the continuity of the conversations alive when they were not heard by the audience so that when they returned it would appear that time had elapsed and the conversation had progressed, and be entertaining. Later, as we worked on it, we created, not five sets of characters, but ten, each couple having two conversations to maintain, distinct from one another, and also trying to weave into the situation some elements from the story we were creating. All this turned out to be a lot of fun, and less difficult than it sounds; the people who came to watch our rehearsals at the end of the work period found this one of the most attractive parts of the process. We found that the topic of the conversation, the actual words spoken, and the theme, were less important than the mood. Once the mood had been established, then the couple could continue almost indefinitely, and the actors became very expert at instant editing of each others' conversations, so that frequently the pause, at which one conversation ended and another began, leaving something important, amusing, or emotional unsaid, was more dramatic than a fully worked out scene could have been.

We tried several versions or variations on this idea of collective speech. In one, half the actors played one character, the other half another - in this case, two characters who were at a moment of decision in the story. Each group of five was mixed, both men and women; curiously, this didn't produce the effect of conflict, so much as a kind of telepathic communication between the members of each group. We rehearsed this section in a half light, so that voices seemed to drift out of nowhere, and after a while one lost the feeling that there was anyone else there apart from the two individuals, the two characters who were holding the conversation.

Another variation, with which we began the story, was a trick, or

an illusion, we tried to play on the audience - having the spirits of Shakers 'invade' the bodies of the actors, on the premise that the Shakers, who had always believed that they would prevail in the end and their way of life come into its own some time in the future, would now wish to return to earth to tell their story. The basis of this idea was something that happened more and more often during the time of the great revival that took place in the middle of the 19th century (I spoke of this in my last newsletter). During that time, one of the 'gifts' that often came to a Shaker was the presence, or the spirit, of a dead Shaker, who would offer advice, criticism, or encouragement to the Shakers of the time. Theatrically, this works out as an exercise in making an audience believe that the actor's voice is moving around, in a ventriloquial sort of way, from body to body. Actors had to abandon their individuality to some extent and find a common expression of a feeling that transcended sex and age. It was an interesting experiment, but it needed a lot more ^{time} than we had in order to bring it off to perfection, so that an audience would really begin to believe that disembodied spirits were flitting around from place to place in the theatre.

One of the hardest things for us to accept about the Shaker experience was the naivete and literalness of some of the 'gifts'. They took many forms, some bizarre, some ludicrous, some unselfconsciously sentimental. During the period in which our story was set, some time between 1840 and 1850, the gifts proliferated. Brethren and sisters would receive fruits and flowers, sapphires and other precious stones, golden censers of Christ's love, plates of Wisdom, baskets of Simplicity, balls of Promise, belts of Wisdom, breastplates of Truth - and remember, all these objects were invisible to anyone but the Shakers who received them. The gifts were not all images of material objects. They might be an activity. People would have a gift of laughing, or a gift of a game, or a gift of a new and elaborate ceremony with many stages. Gifts would come in the form of songs and dances, or spiritual labor, such as sweeping out the dwelling places with spiritual brooms. Flags were waved, trumpets sounded, swords brandished - all gifts from heaven, from spiritual parents, or from Mother Ann herself. The solution for all this was very simple - on one level. All the actors had to do was pantomime everything, just as the Shakers did. The problem with this, though, was that they felt foolish, the actions were meaningless, and we felt no closer to the state of mind in which these gifts had been received.

We persisted, though, and gradually a glimmer of light began to appear. One discovery we made, from reading the original sources, was that the Shakers themselves had as many shadings of belief

in these phenomena as we did ourselves. The whole spectrum was represented, from unquestioning acceptance to downright scepticism, and everything in between. This gave us the confidence to trust our own instincts in the matter. Then, as time went on, and we worked on other aspects of the Shaker life, such as the discipline of the day, the actors found themselves looking forward, after a few hours of keeping the right thumb always over the left, or not speaking except for the most necessary duties, to the 'foolishness' of the songs and the gifts. The way into the truth about the gifts, it seemed, was through the simple physical actions of the rest of the Shaker existence. And there was another thing. The gifts were, after all, directed from one person to another. The actors found that the objects they were supposed to see took on a greater reality when they forgot about the difficulty of making them tangible to the eye of an audience and concentrated instead on the emotion that prompted the giving of the gift in the first place. As characters developed and relationships became possible between them, the problem of how to represent the gifts diminished. The discovery of a breastplate of truth and its bestowal on another person became as serious and truthful as the enactment of imaginary rituals amongst children.

Here I'm compressing into a single paragraph the results of many hours of rehearsal. From a psychological point of view there is no great revelation involved. But to look at it analytically is not enough. The actors had to work through the whole process themselves, and what was interesting about it was that they came to it through physical actions, and the acceptance of humdrum repetitive routines, and shedding their sophisticated assumptions about behavior.

Much of this work was incorporated into a scene that combined elements of the story with song, dance and elaborate gift-giving ceremonies. It began with a song, to which everyone danced. The song, one of the more popular revival songs, was 'given' about 1847, and was meant to be accompanied by gestures:

Hop up and jump up, and whirl round,
Whirl round,
Gather love, here it is, all round
All round.
Here is love, flowing round,
Catch it as you whirl round,
Reach up and reach down,
Here it is all round.

The song ended, but the action did not. The dance became a series of individual movements developed from the accounts of Shaker meetings during this period - one person rocking back and forth, another speaking in gibberish while his arms revolved like a

windmill, a third shivering, another stamping and 'shaking off the flesh', one person whirling till he collapsed. This episode was broken by the realisation that someone had the gift of a message. This person, in Shaker language he would be called an "Instrument", went to one of the spectators and said:

"You are safe. Mother Ann has sent angels to protect you. The angels' wings are spread all around you. Their wings make a beautiful canopy of feathers. They are dressed in gowns of glory, shining like the sun. Mother Ann blesses you."

Then more gifts came - crowns of Chastity, bracelets of Humility, and so on ...

Meanwhile, in the course of developing a story, we had assumed that someone, in the middle of all this, would be left outside, seeing his or her brethren experiencing all these marvelous things, but feeling none of them himself. This individual - who was different at each rehearsal - would become noticeable, and at one point the attention of the group would be concentrated on him. This point came when one of the believers would be given a gift of a trumpet, and offer it to this Doubting Thomas, who would back away, unable to see what the others saw, or to blow the trumpet, or to make believe any more. This would become the signal for the others to turn on him, in one of the characteristic Shaker methods of bringing backsliders into line - and enact the "Warring Gift".

Someone would declare that they could see the Devil in the doubter. Others would call out, "Help him shake it off ... Shake it off brother ... Woe! Woe! Chain the Devil, chain the Devil, kill the Devil, kill the Devil ..." Everyone would hiss, stamp, groan. One person would notice that the body of the unbeliever was covered with live caterpillars. They would energetically sweep the caterpillars off the person's limbs and squash them under foot. Sometimes the caterpillars would be discovered in the person's ears or eyes and have to be squeezed out until the doubting brother or sister was thoroughly clean. After some time undergoing this treatment the Shaker would see the trumpet he had been unable to visualise before. He would blow it, the others would shout in triumph and praise the goodness of Mother Ann, and in return the newly cleansed Believer would offer up a gift of his own, a drum. The drum was received gratefully by everyone and someone else, with a gift for melody, received a song. It went

I have a little drum
That Mother gave to me

The prettiest little drum
That ever you did see
I'll drum night and day, I'll drum night and day
To call volunteers to fight sin away.

was

The tune/martial, vigorous, with repeated phrases that sounded like bugle calls.

Everyone danced, the straying sheep was brought back into the flock, and the scene ended with a parade, drums beaten, flags flying, everyone singing, "I'll drum night and day, I'll drum night and day ..."

Within this outline we had several variations, depending on which aspect of our story we wished to explore that day. If we were working on the rebelliousness of a character, we would make the inability to see the trumpet come out of a protest; the actor would make an ugly sound with it, and someone might say, "The Devil's tune ..." If the emphasis was on a relationship, between the married couple, for instance, there was an attempt by the other half of the couple to help - by making the sound of the trumpet for the other, by trying to divert attention. There were many possibilities. The structure of the scene was strong enough to allow all kinds of human responses to be struck within it. But the main sections - the songs, the gifts, the Warring Gift (when they all gathered round the doubter and professed to see caterpillars and to drive out the Devil), the dances and the ceremonies - - all these were authentic and recreated by us as faithfully as we could from the documents describing them.

This fidelity to the facts was not practised out of any pedantic desire to be accurate. We had found that the emotion grew out of an action. It didn't matter, at first, that we could not understand the sense of the action. If we did it with enough trust it would lead to the essence of the experience. In the words of the song, "'Tis the gift to be simple."

This simplicity, with its second meaning of 'foolishness', was one of the lessons we had to learn. As I said, at first the actors found it hard to trust in the naivete of the gift-giving ceremonies, and our reading told us that this feeling was common among Shakers themselves. And then, as time went by, and we worked on the routines of the daily life of a Shaker, the gifts became a necessary outlet for emotion, a release of pent-up feeling, a pleasurable physical abandonment. When we came to the stage of rehearsing in front of an audience one of the most frequent questions the actors were asked after the session was, "Did you have to become as religious as a Shaker to do this?" This was an

interesting question to us, because it meant that we had blurred the distinction between acting and 'real' behavior. The audiences couldn't quite understand how the actors could^{do} all the things they did - the whirling, the different voices, apparently seeing and handling the gifts - unless they were somehow 'really' believing - not as performers but as people with a spiritual calling. For the actors, arriving at this point had been a matter of overcoming many inhibitions - "we shan't be asham'd" - and allowing the physical action (bowing, bending) to lead to an experience with its own autonomous emotion, a 'gift'.

By the time we had finished our allotted two and a half weeks of work, we had accumulated about 3 hours-worth of scenes, songs, dances, and ceremonies. One of the most elaborate involved a Mountain Meeting, which originally took place in the open air, during which the Believers saw fountains of clear water spring from the earth, scrubbed each other with it, then drank Mother Ann's spiritual wine, became intoxicated, were visited by the spirits of a tribe of dead Indians whose dances they copied, were given a box of muskets by George Washington and a basket of musical instruments by Queen Isabella (the men fired the muskets at the Devil while the women played a courtly song to accompany them), and then, at the climax, one of the Believers falls down in a trance, and returns with a spiritual feast from Mother Ann herself, the feast to be shared with the audience, who are offered manna from heaven, white wine, and milk and honey. And there was much more.

It may be hard to believe that these Dionysiac scenes were played out by sober, strait-laced New England Shakers in the hills above Hancock, Mass., or Niskeyuna, NY., a full 2200 years after Euripides wrote the Bacchae. But it's true

I will end as we did, with one of the oddest songs they created, sent by Mother Lucy (an early Shaker Minister) to the believers in Watervliet, October 19th, 1839. Each letter is sung to a different note:-

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Mother sends her love and blessing
To comfort and strengthen all.

Sincerely



Kenneth Cavander

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