More Confessions from a Slow Learner
By Paul Edward Johnson

It took me more than ten years to finally graduate from college. Between the years 1959 and 1971.

To get a teaching degree I had to complete a program consisting of 180 required credits.

By the summer of 1971 I had amassed more than 225 credits. But 45 of those credits were from courses not required to get a teaching degree. And I had yet to take the one remaining course that would satisfy the teaching program's degree requirements: Modern Math. You might say I had a "math phobia."

All I had to do was take and pass that freshman-level math course and I would have my degree and be able to become an English teacher in a small town's high school that had hired me in May to begin teaching in late August.

Mathematics was my least-favorite subject. It wasn't until I was in sixth grade that I had finally memorized multiplication tables. Or maybe it was seventh grade.

After enjoying dinner with my mother and father and my four younger siblings, and after we all washed and wiped the dishes together, Dad would sit me down at the dining room table, sharpen some pencils, and then, side by side, he would again watch me try to scrawl upon a fresh sheet of paper the multiplication tables, starting with 1 x 1 = 1.

"But Dad? How can one times one be only one?"

"Because I say it's one, Paul."

"But Dad, one *plus* one is two. So how can one *times* one be only one?"

"Must I again try to explain this to you one more *time*?"

"Guess so. But this has now been many *times*. And I still don't get it. And this has now been the fifth *time* this week."

"Look here Einstein. That is why one *times* five is five. We are now no longer adding and subtracting numbers. We are now multiplying numbers."

"Do we have to?"

"Do you want to spend the rest of your life doing *time* as a fifth grader at Fulton?"

"God no."

"Then it's now *time* for you to learn your *times* tables."

In eighth grade, fractions damn near fractured my brain. That's because every time at the dining room table Dad would hover over me like a vulture as I tried to somehow discover "common denominators" in fraction problems.

Dad no longer had the patience to simply sit beside me. Instead, he would roll up his shirt sleeves, light up his pipe, and pace back and forth behind my back, while my younger brother Larry sat as far away as possible, within the big winged-back chair over in the far corner of our living room.

And when Dad commanded the "correct solutions," to the fraction problems, I would hold my paper over my head.

He'd grab it, puff pipe smoke, shout "WRONG!" and WHAP my head with his pipe; Revelation Pipe Tobacco flying about and settling all over my hair and upon my quivering shoulders. While spectator Larry folded up into a fetal form.

If there was any lesson learned during these sessions it was learned by Larry. And the lesson Larry learned?

Pay attention in school or suffer Dad's righteous wrath.

During my freshman year in high school, algebra gave me bad dreams, and as a sophomore, geometry gave me panic attacks whenever I was called to the blackboard to draw some kind of geometric diagram and somehow describe a solution to whatever "problem" it presented.

Today, all I can recall from what was taught in that class is the expression "side angle side." Oh, and maybe that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Something I always seem to forget when telling a story.

What *multiplied* my math problems was my father's insistence that I take an advanced algebra course from old Mr. Halley during my junior year. And then during my senior year, a course from Mr. Halley in solid geometry. I failed the first half of that course and had to get a kind lady to tutor me through the second half so that I could end up passing the class.

While trying to diagram solid geometry problems on the blackboard, Mr. Halley would sit in the back of the classroom, toss chalk and felt erasers at me, often yelling "The AVERAGE student learns with only two or three examples, Johnson!" When he did that, the students all laughed, perhaps glad it was me and not them who became the object of his frustration.

Then for the last half of my senior year I made the mistake of signing up for Mr. Halley's trigonometry class, all

because my father insisted I do it. Why in the world he insisted I take trig I could never understand.

Being a slow learner, it took me too long to realize I would never keep pace in that trig class, and it became too late before I realized I had fallen way too far behind in memorizing things that were called theorems, and it was then too late to drop the class without being given an "*F*" for doing so.

Mr. Halley had become so totally exasperated with my poor performance in his trig class that he had moved my desk smack up against the front of his desk, me facing him front on, eye to eye, while the rest of the class sat behind me. It was far worse than having to sit in a corner wearing a dunce cap.

After suffering several months of humiliation in his trig class, around April he agreed with me that he should simply fail me, knowing I did not need to pass the class to graduate from high school, and so he issued me a hand-written pass each day to go up into the choir room, which was empty everyday during that hour. In the choir room I could enjoy playing the piano. It may have been the kindest thing he ever did in his entire life.

On second thought, maybe the kindest thing he did during his life was tell my mother that she should not enroll in any more math classes after she had completed whatever math course she had taken from him when she was a high school student. She didn't tell me this until I was around age 50 and we were sitting side by side looking through one of her high school annual year books containing a photo of Mr. Halley.

During the past 55 years not a month has passed without me having nightmares of being in Mr. Halley's math classes.

Maybe all of that's why during my long college "career" I had put off taking that freshman class called Modern Math.

When I first sat down in that modern math class in the summer of 1971, I was 30 years old. The students looked to me to be about age 18. And they, unlike me, they seemed to have all taken modern math classes when they were in high school.

Me? I had never even heard of such a thing as modern math. Ancient math, yes. Modern math, what's that?

I soon found out. And found out that modern math was far more confounding to me than ancient math had ever been.

The teacher persisted in drawing circles on the board, circles within circles and circles *intersecting* circles and calling them "sets" and "subsets." And as I sit here now, more than 40 years later, I can't recall any multiplying or dividing or adding and subtracting going on. There must have been, but all I remember now are all those *intersecting circles*.

I failed the mid-term exam. Miserably.

After failing the midterm exam, I went to the instructor's office, sat down with him, rubbed my skull, and said something about how during the many past years of my junior and senior college classes I had racked up a 3.5 grade-point average and scored many an "*A*" in courses that were actually graduate-level classes for people seeking a master degree.

I went on to tell him I had attended each and every one of his classes, taken studious notes, and could not to save my life understand a damn thing he was trying to teach me.

I concluded by asking him, "What in blazes is wrong with me?"

All he could say was, "You may be suffering from some kind of mental block."

The textbook for the class made no sense to me. His lectures were in most instances not seeming to relate to the concepts in the text book. I felt lost at sea without a compass. And because it was a summer school class I only had less than a month to get my bearings. Worse yet, if I didn't pass this class I would not get my degree and be qualified take on the teaching job I had been hired to perform at the end of August.

I guess I could have hired a tutor. Why I didn't think of that I do not know. What I did, instead, was go to the library. Within the library I discovered a section of books that were all about modern math. Maybe as many as 20 books on the subject.

I checked out ten books. That was about all I could carry. The next day I went back to the library and checked out all ten of the rest of them.

Throughout the remainder of the week and throughout the next week, I plowed my way through each book, gradually discovering that while one book made no sense at all to me, another book made some sense and another book made even more sense.

After two weeks of intensive reading, I was amazed to discover I was beginning to learn modern math!

What I was discovering was something I had long ago learned but had somehow forgotten after learning it: there are different ways to perceive the same thing.

It goes back to the tale about the blind men approaching and examining an elephant.

One blind man put his hands around the elephant's tail and said, "What we have here is a snake."

Another blind man clasped the elephant's leg and said, "No. What we have here is a tree trunk."

Another blind man grasped one of the elephant's tusks and said, "I disagree. What we have here is a spear."

And another, grabbing the elephant's nose said, "Nope, what we have here is a hose."

The one who felt the elephant's ears? I can't recall.

Among the 20 or so books on the subject of modern math that I had piled upon my desk, each one seemed to be seeing the subject from a different point of view. But unlike the blind men examining the elephant, they were not each and all seeming to be totally disagreeing with each other.

They were all simply seeing the subject in ways that added to my perception of the concepts that constituted this thing called modern math.

Going into the third week of reading these books, and within just days before the final exam, I suddenly saw the elephant for what he was. Clear as crystal. Then, two days before the exam, I non-stop read the class textbook and it all made sense to me; for the first time!

The final exam was a snap. A piece of cake. A walk in the park. But after answering the last question, I waited until time was up before handing my exam papers to the instructor.

We were the only two left in the examination room.

Upon handing the test to him, he asked me, "How do you think it went for you?"

I said, "I think I aced it."

He said, "Do you have time to sit here while I grade it?"

During what seemed to be the ten minutes it took for him to read through my answers on the pages, his pen never touched a single page and after he finished reading the last page he said, "You not only aced it, you answered every question correctly!"

Two days later he posted the grades for the course on his office door. The posting showed what each student had received on the mid-term exam and on the final exam and what their final grade was for the course. The mid-term was to be worth one-third of the computation for the course

grade and the final exam grade was worth two-thirds of the course grade.

To my astonishment the posting showed I had received an "*A*" for the course. And in fine print, next to the "*A*" was written this comment: "Anyone who can answer all the questions on the final exam correctly deserves an "*A*" in this class, regardless of what they scored on the mid-term exam."

It was only a three-credit freshman class. But looking back at it as I have sometimes done over the years, it was, from my point of view, my greatest academic achievement. But I also made a far more important discovery.

I had discovered how to become an authentic learner. And I discovered that my personal way of learning is just that. It's personal. It's my way and not someone else's way. Although it may be a slower way than others take, it works for me. And if it works for me, that's all that matters.

Yes, I had previously learned after trial and error how to get "*A*'s" in my many history and English and speech and journalism and psychology classes; learned how to anticipate what teachers wanted to read in essay tests; learned how to handle multiple choice exams, and learned how to write research papers that impressed my scholarly professors.

But I had never called that true learning. I called it figuring out how to play the game. In essence, one could call it learning but to me real learning occurs when one moves from darkness to light; from blindness to sight; from ignorance to insight. In ways that are truly most valuable and meaningful.

What was *most meaningful* about that modern math course is how it gave me a visual way of coming closer to seeing my relationship to God and His children.

To me modern math became all about our relationships to and with each other, *plus* our relationships with God.

Maybe that's the whole point of me writing about this.

If this were just about my math phobia? I never would have bothered to write this.

And why did I wait until the end of this story to reveal what now shall follow what has been "all of the above?"

Remember, I'm never good at employing the geometric shortest-distance-between-two-points principle.

The spiritual insights I acquired from modern math's Venn Diagrams are depicted in what I recently discovered while browsing The Internet. I have copied and pasted them at the end of this story.
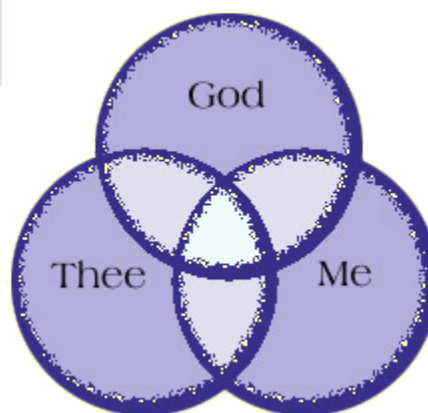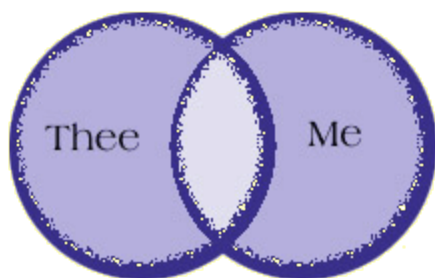
Modern math "explains" the central cause of our world's present cultural and religious clashes; now made more violent as the consequence of our world's "culture claustrophobia" while we press closer together within our Internet; much like hungry bears crowded together within an elevator.

If you wish to stop reading now, do so. But simply remember this: *All* Italians are not *all* members of the Mafia. But *all* Italians *are* God's children.

This is what I discovered upon The Internet:

A number of years ago, while teaching at Harvard Divinity School, Henry Cadbury encountered a distraught former student who had become a minister in a church that was deeply divided over certain theological issues. Wanting to know how to address his congregation on Sunday mornings, Dr. Cadbury advised him to "preach where their circles intersect."

At one level or another, Friends often appear not to agree, even about the most basic matters. We have a testimony of simplicity, for example. Some Friends deliberately restrict their income, some avoid driving large cars, while some do not drive at all. Other Friends live in large houses and drive SUVs. We have a testimony of equality. For some Friends gender-specific language is eschewed, along with titles and other remnants of class differences. Others work in hierarchical businesses, live in exclusive neighborhoods, and send their children to elite schools. While we place great emphasis on our corporate discernment and witness, we also recognize that the pursuit of truth requires each individual to walk his or her own path in living the

testimonies of Friends.

So what can be done when, inevitably, Friends differ in their perception of truth? A starting point, as Cadbury observed, is to speak to the common ground, where the circles intersect. However, that is a starting point. Let us take a look at those circles.
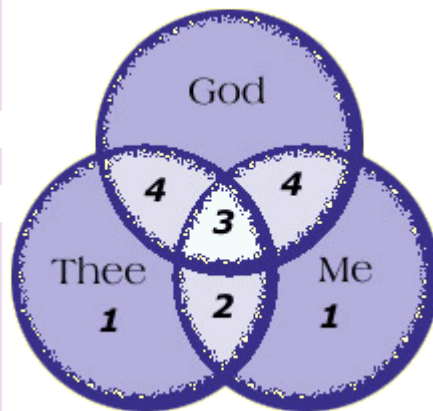
Here we have the most basic of intersecting circles: the beliefs, experiences, theories, discernments, notions and truths of "thee" and "me." As with any pair of individuals, much of each person's experience is unique to that individual (the darker part of each circle in the diagram), but a certain portion is shared with the other (the lighter part).

It is tempting to think that "truth" is to be found where the circles intersect, but that is not necessarily so. The only thing true about the intersection is that the two people agree on that part of their experience, etc. Perhaps they have the same opinion about skyscrapers. They may both be right, or they may both be wrong. The only assurance is that they agree.

It is also tempting to think that, if you add more people to the mix and you find the intersection for most of their circles, then you stand a greater chance of finding truth there. That, of course, is a foundation of democracy: Wisdom resides in the majority. The odds are probably in favor of this view, but, again, it is not necessarily so. One need only consider the history of science to see, again and again, how the majority of thinkers, working from faulty premises or incomplete observations, were certain of one fallacy or another. Or consider the history of civil life to see, over and over, how an entrenched majority can reject the truth of a marginalized minority.

However, the truth that we Quakers seek does not involve just more and more human circles, and we do not rely on human standards to define truth, for the truth we seek is God's presence in our lives. So let us add that important third circle.

In looking at these drawings (known as Venn diagrams), it is important not to get caught up on the size of each circle, or the size and shape of each section of the circle.

These circles simply *identify* areas of overlap; they do not *map* them. Obviously, God's circle of experience would dwarf any human circle to insignificance, and it is absurd to think that any person knows as great a proportion of God as God knows of that person.

There is, of course, much that we do not know of God. However, that which we can discover and experience of God is the object of Quaker discernment. That is what we seek to commune with in our worship, what we strive to serve in our business meetings, what we simplify our lives to focus upon. In Quaker faith and practice, concordance with God is our yardstick for truth.

Therefore, does that mean that we must seek and focus solely upon the bright triangle at the core of our diagram? No. Not at all. For truth does not reside only there.

Consider some specific parts of the diagram. The area shared by thee and me now has two parts, labeled "2" and "3." Part 3 is shared not only by thee and me, but also by God. Truth resides in part 3, not because of thee or me, but because of God. However, thee knows something of God that is not shared by me, and vice versa (the parts labeled "4"). Truth resides also in those parts, because of God.

If thee focuses only on the measure of God that is shared with me (part 3), then thee ignores the portion of truth that is unique to his experience of God. If thee takes a step forward and accepts his full experience of God (part 3 and his own part 4), then thee still fails to appreciate the unique experience of God by me (the other part 4). But what if thee takes one more step, and accepts the experience of God by me?

This is the genius and the challenge of Quaker corporate discernment, the reason we do not operate by majority rule, and the reason we treasure diversity. We gain a fuller sense of God when we can answer that of God in one another, when we can accept as genuine what others experience of God, even if we do not experience it ourselves.