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What Canst Thou Say?

Friends • Mystical Experience • Contemplative Practice

*You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this: but what canst thou say?
Art thou a child of Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest,
is it inwardly from God? —George Fox*

Conflict in Meeting (Supplemental)

Who Is Sitting on the Facing Bench?

Maurine Pyle

Peacemaking first begins in the meeting family and in the lives of its members. So often we Quakers cast our nets far out into the world when we seek to heal the causes of aggression. I start my work closer to home. As Jesus said to the apostles when they were not catching any fish, “Cast your nets on the other side.” I catch more fish that way by opening the conversations about the hidden conflict.

Traditional Quaker practice offers pastoral support through the meeting’s Ministry and Counsel committee, which is a group of seasoned elders. In our yearly meeting the most experienced elders, those who grew up in Quaker families, have died or moved away. Our current population of Friends mostly grew up in another faith tradition where a priest or pastor provided care for members in trouble. We were not trained from birth with the skills to support one another in times of crisis, and we may even feel we have no business interfering. What I mean by pastoral care is offering compassionate listening and prayer for a member when a problem has not been clearly defined. I am not speaking of offering the equivalent of professional therapeutic services. What is needed in the beginning is assistance with discerning the depth of the problem and direction toward solving it. As a result, the community’s fearfulness about interfering in personal matters of members leaves many issues festering and untended.

If a member is experiencing a physical ailment, Quaker communities are quick to arrange meals for the family and visits to the hospital. We are often frustrated and incapacitated when trying to respond to the hot issues in the meeting. We tend to hear about problems in a marriage after one member files for divorce. In the case of suicide or mental illness, silence often envelopes the community. Often there is no appointed ministry committee because the community is so tiny it must handle all of the business of the meeting as a body with no privacy possible. The result is that important pastoral care issues are often neglected. In these situations, a

visit from a traveling minister can offer primary support to a small community. It is important to note that this ministry does not carry any authority from outside the meeting. We come only to listen and to help with discernment within the community, to turn them to their Inner Guide.

Ministry of Reconciliation: Traveling Ministry

When I enter a Quaker community, my intention is to discover what is really happening there and help the community see it clearly. This is one of the benefits of traveling ministry. If we are invited into the inner circle, we can hold up a mirror for what needs healing in the Quaker meeting. A request for a retreat is often more than a desire for education

cont’d p. 3

From the Editors:

We bring these stories of conflict in the meeting not to open a debate; we do not know enough to evaluate or judge these meetings or their members. We stand with these writers as a witness to their humanity; to tenderly view their wounds with compassion. Integrity compels us to admit conflict is a state we all share, despite our better intentions. We invite our readers to join us in holding these Friends and their meetings in the light as they seek healing and wholeness.

—Pamela Richards and Michael Resman

What Canst Thou Say? (WCTS) is an independent publication co-operatively produced by Friends with an interest in mystical experience and contemplative practice. It is published in August, November, February, and May. The editorial and production team is Muriel Dimock, Lissa Field, Mariellen Gilpin, Judy Lumb, Grayce Mesner, Mike Resman, Pamela Richards, Earl Smith, and Eleanor Warnock.

Tell us your stories! **WCTS** is a worship-sharing group in print. We hope to help Friends be tender and open to the Spirit. Articles that best communicate to our readers focus on specific events and are written in the first person. We welcome submissions of articles less than 1500 words and artwork suitable for black and white reproduction.

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Sharing this Issue with Friends Meetings

Your Editors thank everyone who submitted for this issue on "Conflict in Friends Meetings". We are so impressed that we would like to share it with other Friends Meetings. If, after reading it, you agree that it might be helpful to all Meetings, we are asking for donations to help us with this project as it is outside of our budget. Send checks to WCTS, 815 9th Street SW, Rochester MN 55902.

2017 Friendly Mystic Gathering Cancelled

What Canst Thou Say had planned to offer a fifth annual gathering of Friendly Mystics on the theme "Answering the Call: Reflecting the Light" to be at The Cenacle Retreat Center in Chicago, Illinois, but because of a lack of reservations we cancelled the Gathering. Our first Gathering of Friendly Mystics in 2013 had 45 participants, but each of the succeeding gatherings has had fewer and fewer participants until this year it was too few to hold the gathering.

Previous Gathering Proceedings

Thanks to the faithful volunteer work of Janice Stensrude, the proceedings of the first three Gatherings of Friendly Mystics are available at <lulu.com>. Search for "What Canst Thou Say" and you will see the proceedings from the first three gatherings of Friendly Mystics, both full color hardback and black ink paperback. They are also available for free download on our website <whatcanstthousay.pdf> on the Gathering page. Enjoy!

WCTS Has Two Blogs

1) Quaker Mystics: Gathering for Discernment of God's Guidance <quakermystics.wordpress.com> was created to support gatherings sponsored by *What Canst Thou Say*, including information about future gatherings and the epistles from past gatherings.

2) Soon after creating the Quaker Mystics blog, the editors found the need for another blog to support the journal *What Canst Thou Say* <worshipsharinginprint.wordpress.com> to publish essays between quarterly issues, or those that didn't fit in the journal.

If you would like to contribute to either of these blogs, contact Judy Lumb <judylumb@yahoo.com>.

WCTS Price Increase

It has been a long time since *WCTS* has increased subscription prices, but printing and mailing costs have risen so much that we finally have to do it. A one-year subscription is now \$12 and a two-year subscription is \$20. The email subscription is still \$5 per year.

WCTS Editors

In the last three issues we issued an invitation for new staff editors to join the team and Pamela Richards, who is one of the Editors for this issue, answered that call and has joined the editorial team. Welcome, Pamela!

If anyone has themes to suggest, do let us know, especially if you would be interested in being a Guest Editor for that issue <wctseditors@gmail.com>.

Who is Sitting on the Facing Bench? (cont'd from p. 1)

on a particular topic. I have found that can also indicate an unspoken need for reconciliation in the community. To know that you don't know is the beginning of wisdom, and so I enter a community in a state of "not knowing."

Once on a traveling ministry visit I met with the leaders of a meeting who were deadlocked over the issue of approving gay marriage. Over the years, they had settled into a dark silence, walking around the "elephant in the living room." Their healthy development as a community had ground to a halt. People began slowly leaving the meeting, and eventually no one wanted to volunteer for service.

The initial request for my services came from the Nominating Committee asking for help in envisioning their future. I proposed a series of retreats to address the conditions they were avoiding. Following two retreats, it was revealed to me privately that there were two hidden gay people in the meeting and that the gay marriage issue was the tip of the iceberg.

At a subsequent retreat a lesbian member told her story of being suicidal and her fears of asking the community for help. Over a long period, and after receiving assistance from other traveling elders from the yearly meeting, many other hidden issues were

revealed and healed. The presenting problem of gay marriage was eventually reconciled. Now the meeting is a welcoming community for all people.

As a traveling minister I am given access to closely held secrets, sometimes willingly but more often through a process that I call a ministry of reconciliation. Usually it begins this way: someone calls me to request a workshop on what they term "Quaker process." I have found this terminology to be a code phrase for a family fight going on in the meeting. People are too polite to name it so they blame it on improper business process. Quakers are excellent conflict avoiders.

I have a theory that most of us joined the Religious Society of Friends because it looked so peaceful. A few years ago, I received a request to offer a retreat for a troubled meeting in a nearby state. When the request was for a Quaker process retreat, I suspected that a hidden conflict needed healing.

Since no one in the meeting stepped forth to help me design the retreat, I told my contact that I would simply bring my talking stick and open a conversation. When I arrived, I felt the tenseness in the group. Smiles were pasted on with great care, and eye contact was limited. I sensed their uneasiness in being together. I began by introducing the talking stick as a means of free and open communication, which Native Americans have used to encourage truth sharing. Only the person who holds the stick may speak, and the others are encouraged to listen deeply. I reminded them that the talking stick couldn't be used to express anger or blame, only truth. They could only make "I" statements.

The query I posed was, "What suffering of your heart do you need to share with your meeting?" The group centered into an uneasy silence. As

What I Said in Worship

Mariellen Gilpin

I need clearness lessons.

Some years ago I was in a staff meeting with Joe Seeley, a member of this meeting. Joe was a graduate assistant and I was, so to speak, a professional. The last person to come into the staff meeting was an extremely flushed woman. As she fanned herself, she said, "I'm burning up with fever, but I'm here for the meeting." I was really looking forward to being behind closed doors for a couple of hours while I was being infected with whatever the epizootic was that our colleague had. No one spoke. Then Joe spoke. I wish I could remember what words he used, but very kindly and sweetly, he told our colleague the risk to which she was exposing us all. She looked astounded, but didn't get up and leave. But, at least she knew what we all felt.

How can I be both kind and clear? Clear in my experience has meant an excuse for abuse. Kind has meant swallowing my words so as not to offend the offender.

I have a friend who had a growth in her throat, a form of cancer that the surgeon told her was very rare. The only cases he'd ever seen had been in adults who had been severely abused as little children. The cancer killed her. I told her the lump in her throat was caused by unshed tears.

I need clearness lessons.

Mariellen Gilpin is the heart and soul of *What Canst Thou Say?* This is what she said in Meeting for Wroship March 12, 2017.

we passed the stick for several hours in surrounding silence, we heard the hidden pain in the community. Some women began weeping. One of the founders, whom I had been told was an angry resistor, softened and showed her deeper nature to the group.

An emotional shift occurred as members saw her in a clearer light. She had been standing in the way of change because she felt she was the holder of the founding vision. At the close of the ceremony the group had moved to a place of reconciliation without actually naming the conflicts. We closed the circle with gratitude for a new truth revealed and a deepening of Spirit.

Later, in response to their request to learn more about Quaker process, I invited my companion-elder to lead a discussion. At that time she was serving as the clerk of her yearly meeting and was well suited to the task. From the outset of her presentation some of the meeting members began to attack her verbally with intellectual sharpness. I discovered that many of them were leaders in local, national and international organizations.

I allowed the aggressive behavior to continue for a while and then I stopped the action, asking them to notice how differently they were speaking to one another than they had in the morning session. They appeared shocked. One said, "This is how we speak to one another in meeting for business."

Laying down our secular experience as leaders is often difficult. Assuming the role of servant-leader in a Quaker setting asks us to do symbolic foot washing. Jesus was the role model for this type of leadership, which instructs us to act as the humblest, not the smartest, person in the room.

What did we learn in our time together? As a spiritual midwife, I offered them the opportunity to look

deeply in the mirror at their reflection as a community. I had come without any prior knowledge of their conflicts, yet we were able to uncover and heal them. One year later I happened to meet one of their leaders at a conference. She said that the meeting community had experienced a turning point at the retreat.

In the 21st century there have been major changes in our Quaker culture with secular ways of organizing the meeting creeping into the structure and process. For example, instead of turning to elders for help we might turn to the DSM5 (a mental health diagnostic manual). And since we have become less attentive in a traditional Quakerly way, we often fall apart when conflicts arise between members or over what we like to call "Quaker process."

Many times I have seen a single angry episode break the membership into small isolated groups with no one talking about the problem in an open manner. They smile and suppress the conflict. I call this condition "terminal niceness," and Quakers suffer greatly

from it. Some people feel it is not nice to call attention to conflicts in the community; it is not nice to get angry. But tamping the fire down will not eliminate it. The flames just travel underground for a while and then pop up elsewhere. My prescription regarding conflict is that there is no way around it—we have to go through it!

These stories I am telling beg the question—Where is the source of authority in liberal Quaker meetings today? We often no longer rely on the authority of scripture, such as *Matthew 18*. Nowadays there are few, if any, seasoned elders in our meetings to stand up for traditional Quaker practice. So, in the absence of these tried and true methods, it is vital that we pay careful attention to conflicts in meeting as they arise. As Simone Weil has said, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity."

Maurine Pyle has traveled the wide world for Friends to bring a message of peace. Now, as an ESL teacher, she lives in southern Illinois, where the world comes to her door.

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A Place Where My Heart is Teachable

Gail Koehler

Almost 15 years ago now, I was told by a weighty Friend in our Meeting that a new attender had left our Meeting because of something I had said. Immediately on hearing this, I was angered, outraged, distraught that nothing had been said to me at the time so that I might have learned from the experience, and that our Meeting might not have lost a possible regular attender. But there seemed to be no mechanism or model for this person to have approached me or even asked anyone else to help her let me know how upsetting my comment had been to her.

Then about 10 years ago when my two sons were about mid-elementary age, we had quite a number of boys regularly attending First Day School: that day we had probably 6 or 7 boys, ages 9 through approximately 11 or 12. I was the adult in charge as we attempted to clean up our activity and head back upstairs to the meeting room, and aim, finally, for outside and some much-needed play. Some of the boys, including my sons, began using a soccer ball, meant for outside use, inside our cramped community room.

In typical mothering fashion I warned them about possible damage. They assured me they'd be more careful. I turned my back, and: CRASH, the ball hit one of the overhead florescent light fixtures, with glass shattered everywhere. In an instant, I realized that my reflex was to not be a Quaker presence at all, but only a furious parent. And I knew that I would behave better (!) if I had adult witnesses. So: "Nobody move!" I barked at the boys who froze, startled, guilty, and pretty certain I was going to yell (at least my own two knew that would be what I could be expected to do under the circumstances).

Instead, I turned from them and fled up two steps where there were two of the best possible Quaker male figures we had in our Meeting. "We need help!" I yelled, and turned again to get back before the broken glass meant we also had injuries. The two male adult Friends came down, and stepped up so completely I was able to step back, quiet my raging emotions, and appreciate their gentleness, wisdom, and appropriate firmness. They asked all the right questions in an objective tone, such as "what happened here?" and "what do we need to do now to clean this up?" that I would NOT have been able to. Having this experience with the children was a powerful object lesson for my dealings with Friends of all ages.

Over 5 years ago, a conflict developed between an adult male attender and myself. Both of us were loud, opinionated, and sure we were right. I had attempted to change the way I dealt with him, but my efforts were, I suspect, too little too late in the developing tension. Harkening back to that broken glass experience several years prior, I came up with the idea of an experiment, a sort of combination clearness committee and worship sharing, which I called a "facilitated conversation," because I believed we would have a better interaction if we were accompanied by others.

Using the appropriate committee as channel (Lexington Friends split Ministry and Oversight into two committees), I made my suggestion, the committee took leadership and made their own changes as they deemed fit, and finally, four of us—two men, two women—sat for an extended time of worship sharing. This session accomplished a "clearing the air" between

the two of us who had been experiencing tension, while being held in the Light, during which we benefitted from insightful queries and prayerful attention. The previously fraught relationship completely changed after this single session, and we have been able to interact in a helpful, appropriate fashion going forward.

At this point of my journey, I appreciate in a deep way the titles chosen by Quakers who work in conflict. George Lakey, in his 2010 *Friends Journal* article: "On the Value of Conflict," for example. The Committee on Conflict Transformation at New York Yearly Meeting call their video series "Conflict in Quaker Meetings: Crisis or Opportunity?"

Facing conflict in humility and knowing I can proceed only as led by Spirit, I have experienced a deeper and more true place than I had known before. At its core, what conflict demands of me is that I cease to even try to rely on what I think I know, and it forces me into my community for assistance, accompaniment, and a deep shared resting in Spirit. For this I am tremendously grateful. I close these offerings with a line from Brian Drayton: "it is very important to take seriously the admonition to 'give thanks continually,' because the grateful heart is teachable and not self-sufficient." (page 13, *On Living with a Concern for Gospel Ministry*). Facing conflict in Meeting with Friends produces a similar result: Spirit leads me into a place where my heart is teachable, and utterly aware it cannot be self-sufficient.

Gail Koehler worships at Lexington Friends Meeting in Kentucky, and serves on the Religious Nurture and Education Committee of Ohio Valley Yearly Meeting.

BOOK REVIEW: Beacons of Larkin Street

Beacons of Larkin Street by Judith Favor, 2017. Berkeley CA: Apocryphile Press. Reviewed by Judy Lumb.

WCTS contributor Judith Favor has written a novel set in 1976 in San Francisco. It is a well-crafted novel that addresses issues of women church leaders and their relationships with each other. All the characters are female: an elderly Episcopal priest, a runaway teenager, and the five Beacons (the leadership committee) of Saint Lydia's, a non-denominational, diverse church. Even the city of San Francisco herself becomes a character in the descriptions of action locations.

The Beacons were so highly offended by the lecherous nature of their male priest that they set a trap for him that caught him with a prostitute in the North Beach area, which made it easy to get rid of him. The book begins: "I'm fed up with the old boy's club," Dot pounded a fist on the table where the five Beacons—the deacons of Saint Lydia's Church—sat trying to decide who they should hire to become their new pastor. "We need a woman minister this time!" ... The Beacons thought all their problems would be solved by their choice of a female Episcopal priest, Rev. Ruth from Ohio.

Poetic Welcome

*To Reverend Doctor Ruth Ridley
Salter, Interim Pastor
From Paige Palmer, Beacon of
Saint Palmer, Beacon of Saint
Lydia's Church
San Francisco has magnetically
beckoned you into our
gravitational field
To face a multitude of challenges,
friendships, traumas and
healings
In our interracial,
interdenominational,*

*transformative church
community
Members of multiple races and
languages, creeds and spiritual
practices
Heterosexuals, homosexuals,
bisexuals, transgenders and
fluid identities
Make androgenous imprints on
art and culture, philanthropy
and politics.
Some see San Francisco as a
happy place, a crucible of
possibility
Others view San Francisco as a
wild town with hidden dens of
danger
Residents include risk-takers
and idealists, innovators and
opportunists. ...
It is good to stand in San
Francisco—anywhere will do—
and
Consult your heart: What do you
want from this city?
Consult your mind: What do you
bring to this city?
Whether you stand shy in
the shadows or bond on a
promontory
No one—old-timer or
newcomer—can take the city's
full measure
For San Francisco remains
elusive, immeasurable and
unpredictable.*

Rev. Ruth came to the priesthood later in life after a highly successful career as a research chemist. In accepting the call to Saint Lydia's, she was emerging from her first assignment as the Assistant Pastor under the protective arms of her mentor in a large church in Ohio. Using her highest intellectual facility in order to impress the Saint Lydia's congregation, Rev. Ruth spoke on Tertullian, an obscure Christian scholar.

"Beacon Dot Davis wanted to jump up and interrupt the dominating white woman preaching with uppity diction. 'Every soul, then, by reason of its birth, has its nature in Adam until it is born again in Christ; moreover, it is unclean all the while that it remains without this regeneration; and because unclean, it is actively sinful, and suffuses even the flesh (by reason of their conjunction) with its own shame.'

"Dot had wanted to shout out, 'Tell us about the love of Jesus, not the theology of Tertullian!' Her fists clenched in fury, apricot fingernails digging into palms. Frustration formed a tight band across her broad black forehead, giving her a headache. During the sermon she'd raised her eyes, hoping to see Jesus up there, waving. A short laugh got past her lips before she clamped them tight."

Similar reactions came from the other Beacons and conflicts with Rev. Ruth arose immediately. As hopeful as they were, a woman minister was no guarantee that their problems were solved. As each one of the Beacons works out her own relationship with Rev. Ruth, they all become very interesting, well-drawn characters. Issues of gender confusion, diversity, theology, and power structures are covered by delightfully delving into the lives of each of the five Beacons and Rev. Ruth.

I thoroughly enjoyed this romp through the innards of Saint Lydia's to a very satisfying resolution of the major issues, which gives us some loving models of conflict resolution. The epilogue indicates a sequel is in the works, so I look forward to spending more time with the Beacons.

Judy Lumb is one of the WCTS Editors. She is still a member of Atlanta Friends Meeting even though she has lived in Belize for 30 years where she is a publisher for Belize and for Friends.

Please write for *What Canst Thou Say?*



November 2017

Sexuality and Spirituality

Editors: Betty Brody with Judy Lumb

“What is your beloved more than any other, O fairest of women? ... My beloved is fair and ruddy, a paragon among ten thousand. ... His whispers are sweetness itself, wholly desirable.” *Song of Songs 5:9-16* (New English Version). Is it possible that Spirit wants us to bring all of ourselves to relationship with Itself? Is it possible to have a full relationship with Spirit without including our sexuality? Have you experienced sexual arousal during any of your spiritual practices? Can sexual practices stimulate spiritual growth?

Deadline: August 15, 2017

February 2018

Nudges

Editor: Earl Smith

“Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life.” (*Quaker Faith and Practice, Britain Yearly Meeting, 1955*). How has God been nudging you into faithfulness? Did you write a letter after days of uneasiness and find it changed the debate? Did you “happen” to call a friend just when she needed you? God is ever guiding us—what nudges have you experienced?

Deadline: November 15, 2017

May 2018

Other Livess

Editor: Rhonda Ashurst with Judy Lumb

Do you sense you had an earlier life—perhaps a dream set in another time and place, in which you are someone else? Have you met someone, or been in a place or a culture, unfamiliar and yet eerily familiar? Have you experienced yourself in another lifetime, another personality? Is there work in this life that began in an earlier life? Is your work now enhanced (or not) by your sense of an unfinished task from that earlier life?

Deadline: February 15, 2018

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WCTS c/o Michael Resman
815 9th Street SW
Rochester MN 55902

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**Conflict in
Meeting
(Supplement)**