

Eldership Podcast

[Introduction Music]

@Johanna

The following is an audio recording by JT Dorr-Bremme and Johanna Jackson. We started with some worship sharing that focused on the topic of eldering, specifically what JT does when he's eldering. We shortened this file quite a bit to turn it into an audio recording, so instead of hearing five-minute pauses after someone says something, we shortened those.

We think this could be used as a teaching tool, kind of like Rise Up Singing teaching tapes but with a focus on a spiritual practice, but we're not sure which groups or people it might be useful for. So as you listen, if you find the information helpful to you, then let us know.

We are an elder-minister pair. We're beginning to talk some about the work that we do, and it doesn't speak for all Quakers. No work does. This just speaks from our experience.

Before we start the recording, I want to share that our website is www.forwardinfaithfulness.org. And now we'll start the recording.

[Conversation begins]

@Johanna

When we're working together, you can tell if I'm working by myself because I run my mouth a lot further than it needs to go. But when we work together, we're sort of walking in step together and I'm more careful because you can set up some fenceposts or some guidelines and I can stay within them. So when we speak and work together, the words might come from one person's voice in their sound, but in their essence they're really coming from both of us because it takes the two of us to get the words ready.

@JT

I think that part of what I do, part of what my job is, is to listen for Spirit and listen to Spirit very carefully because, when you are speaking, you can't do that yourself as well.

@Johanna

What does it feel like to listen in that way?

@JT

Well, I usually keep my eyes closed and my body still. And I practice watching the parade or wheel of thoughts and reactions just go past me, because my brain will still try to do those things, but I let them go. And if you're speaking, I hear your words and hold them with love in the Light. I feel the vibration of what you create with your words and the tone or tenor of your voice and your body as you speak and then try to take that into this energy field that I'm creating around me to balance it, to harmonize with it, I think is how you put it, to find the harmonic frequency that stabilizes us as a unit and that lets us continue on in balance. So there's a dynamic balancing. And I opened my eyes, so that may be all I have to say about that.

@Johanna

Well, as you shared that, it sounds like meditating, but different. How is it like meditating? And how is it different?

@JT

Meditation, for me, includes that openness and non-attachment. When I talk about the parade of thoughts and feelings, that is how I've interpreted what I've learned about meditation. It's not about not having those things. They'll be there. It's just that you choose not to become attached to any particular one. And in that process, a space is opened for better listening. And that, I think, is different. The meditation I've learned is mostly mindfulness meditation, and that's paying attention to what is. But the listening is for something else, something outside of me.

@Johanna

This kind of listening, when we work together. That's what you mean?

@JT

Mm-hmm. Because I'll listen to your words, but I will also listen to Spirit, which is connected to us and connected to all of everything at once and will be responsive to what we do. And if I can get my own small self, my ego and my self-identifying mind, out of the way, I can feel those subtle vibrational responses better than I usually do, which is not to say perfectly. They will then guide me toward a way of supporting you. And often, that is in a grounding and anchoring way. Sometimes, I'll put my hand somewhere on your body so that you can feel a different energy or think a different thought.

So the meditation part is making myself ready to do the work. And doing the work is a process of listening and responding. There is something a little more active in it. But I don't get to decide. I don't get to think about it, make a plan, and execute it. I have to simply feel what is happening and do something that's motivated from a different level, something, I want to say, instinctual, but if it were, it wouldn't require so much work to achieve. But it feels on that level. It's on the level of no-mind.

@Johanna

I'm thinking about when we were outside the meetinghouse on election day and people were coming in to vote. And what I was doing looked really normal or looked really common, but it was grounded by the depth of what you were doing. And what I was doing was greeting people at election day and supporting a peaceful vote. And there were people nearby, poll workers, a non-profit handing out tamales. So it wasn't a religious space. But what I was doing was kind of common, and you were the prayer beneath that that was socially uncommon. You're sitting down. You're praying. You were maybe not just praying but taking in and taking out, taking in and taking out. And you needed to operate at a different level to do that.

So you weren't talking to the poll volunteers or the students voting or the people nearby, but you were taking in what they say and you're taking something out. It's a lot like running one's hands across the soil because it turns the soil a little bit, but different kinds of soil need different amounts of pressure or the shape of the hand might be different when the soil's clumpy. And what you do is really hard to see, too. Not just that night, because that night it was dark and you were sitting in the dark in a corner. We wondered if what you were doing would look weird because we were around all these people who weren't Quaker, but no one really noticed you after you went quiet.

@JT

That's about right.

@Johanna

But I think when we are in the daylight and working together, something similar might happen. There is a cloak of invisibility that sort of wraps around you, but the work you're doing is just raking the ground so the ground's ready to give fruit.

@JT

Mm-hmm. What you said made me think about the sense of exchange. I've heard it variously put in different meditations with different teachers, but the sense that my breathing in and breathing out is part of that exchange. Breathing in pulls from the environment into my body, and what I breathe out is different. And that's true physically and chemically, but it's energetically true too, and I have some choice or some ability to alter how I make that exchange with the environment. And I remember that night at the meetinghouse on election night. I was in a really deep worship, actually, and I felt so good afterwards. And I remember there was conversation, and I heard those words, and I remember reacting to them sometimes, smiling or laughing. But I wasn't attached to it. I was tuning myself in to Spirit and breathing that into the environment. And I think that's what I try to do as an elder.

We talk about "holding space". And I like using that term, but it's vague in some ways. And as I'm thinking about this now, it feels like I am co-creating a space that is a place that has more love and more peace and more trust than it did because I have decided to make myself into a conduit for Spirit as best I can.

@Johanna

Mm-hmm. I think there's something active in what you're doing that looks passive.

@JT

Mm-hmm.

@Johanna

Yeah. So I have this image that was coming to mind earlier of a sailboat and someone needs to feed the rope, give it more length, make it tighter. And I think that's the elder. The wind is like the voice in ministry. The wind is puffing out the sail, and it's visible, and it's changeable. And that voice can change and the sail might flop around, but the elder is guiding the ship so it catches the wind. And this may or may not be true, but maybe Spirit or God or Higher being is the waves. And the person powering the ropes needs to see where the wind is and see where the waves are and then steer the boat so that they can meet in a way that's harmonious.

@JT

Hmm. There is certainly something active in me when I'm doing the work. And in order to do it, I do need to be passive and still outwardly so that I can be present to subtler energies. And I'm struck by how many different metaphors we tend to use to try to describe the process of being with Spirit and being with each other in this unit. All of them are true. All of them are right. But we have so many of them because they're all lacking something.

@Johanna

The minister speaks. That part's easy to understand. Just talk about something!

@JT

Well, especially in the context of this workshop [we did for State College Friends], speaking was the plan, and there was a lot of planning about what would be said. At the same time, no amount of preparation would allow us to be ready and responsive in an accurate and useful way for the actual event, because there would be any number of people there who would bring whatever they would bring with them and we will be influenced by that, whether we recognize it or not, and need to respond. And that is, to me, where the Spirit connection needs to be. If we're in that worshipful mode, no matter how much we're speaking or not, we are trying to be attuned to the combined energies of the present moment. And in order to facilitate a workshop, one must speak, and that one was you. But for the attunement to be better, then I attend to that part.

@Johanna

Mm-hmm. I wonder if we could tell, without naming the person's name, what happened when you were absent from eldering and I kept speaking in an interview because it was a pretty good learning experience for me.

@JT

Mm-hmm. Well, as I was transcribing that interview, I got to experience those moments where I was asleep. I was not conscious --

@Johanna

And I was running my mouth!

@JT

And I think that that story makes it much more apparent how outwardly *still* I appear when I'm doing this work, because you couldn't tell that I was asleep.

@Johanna

But I did reach for you spiritually and mentally for help, and I didn't get a boundary. And I was like, "All right. We're just going to plow through then."

@JT

Mm-hmm.

@Johanna

So it didn't occur to me to ask, "Oh, is JT here?" I was like, "I guess that's just not a boundary, so I'll just keep talking." So I noticed it, but it was my first time experiencing that.

@JT

And it was more of a feeling about the elder-minister unity than it was about a sleeping human next to you.

@Johanna

Yeah. I couldn't tell you were asleep, but something was missing. Something was absent, and it was the guardrail that I rely on. But I couldn't quite tell it was absent until I had trampled the garden. So what I was physically doing was we were talking to a Friend under 55, and I was offering all these suggestions, saying, "Well, what about this? Or could I help you do this?"

@JT

Yeah. You were really trying to help.

@Johanna

I was really fixing in a way that wasn't appropriate. And I know that's one of my hazards. That's one of the things you help me be clear on. Your work sifting, taking in, and taking out or balancing -- it brings a lot of clarity to me. I'm a little clearer, and I realize a little earlier that something is a bad idea.

In the workshop that we gave recently, this came up. After Analea spoke, I asked for us to take some quiet to take it in. And then, there was this tenderness and vulnerability toward Analea because she had shared something really tender. And all of that was a manifestation of the grounding you were giving because that came at the moment and I didn't know it was going to arrive. I happened to be able to hear it. I want to say it wasn't from me. That was from you, but I just said it. But you provided the opportunity to say it.

@JT

It's always interesting for me to hear what effects you feel of my presence or, as you were suggesting, my absence when you are anticipating my presence, because I can't have a sense of that. I don't, usually. I can't think about what effect I might be having on you because then I'm ahead of or behind the moment.

@Johanna

Hmm. Which is where I spend most of my time.

@JT

And that's why I need to be doing that. I need to be present fully, as fully as I can be as a human, to do the work as best I can with you.

@Johanna

Yeah. And there's a certain degree of "ahead" and "behind" that I need to do, to do my work, because when we're in an interview with someone, I need to track the content in order to accurately respond to it. And so I'm taking content in, and then there's part of my brain that's like, "Update. Revise. Update. Revise," as more comes in. And then sometimes I summarize what I heard the person say. And that kind of tracking takes a certain amount of non-presence because I'm holding on to what they said 30 seconds ago and waiting for it to become relevant again in the next breath that they say or that I say.

And so there's a little -- it's not like being out of the present is entirely a bad thing, because it helps to link the content and build on it or, in the case of the election night, I was just present with the content. I was talking to people. I was hearing about their lives. I was talking to the poll volunteer who'd driven in six hours early in the morning to help people vote. And so there's a certain amount of non-presence that is a way of contributing. I don't know how to say it well. But if I just dipped in to the feeling of what they were saying entirely, I would be missing some of the spine of it.

There are a lot of metaphors I'm using at once, but I think the job of the minister is often to take in content and then the job of somebody in an elder role is to take in the frequency and harmonize. And we need both. If we tried to run an interview where we just listened and we didn't summarize or have a quick affirmation, or sometimes you ask questions, sometimes I ask questions, and if we weren't doing those engagement things, we would probably make people really uncomfortable because they don't want to have a monologue. But if we weren't doing the attunement and the harmonizing and the harmonic finding, then we'd have conversations that look a lot like meeting somebody on the steps of the library and noticing what books they have in their hands and how was coffee yesterday. We'd have the things that run at a different level and lead to different places. So we need both.

It feels like there's something more to say about eldering.

@JT

How has it felt to you?

@Johanna

Yeah. Well, I wish I had my journal nearby, because we made those pretty clear metaphors of what eldering feels like. So it's in the other room, but I'll try and remember.

@JT

Why don't you just tell me now.

@Johanna

It feels like being inside safe arms. It feels like love without burdens. It feels like safety. I said, early on, working with you felt right, like putting on a seatbelt. There's something protective and enclosing in that. Sometimes, it feels awkward, too. I mean I'll be honest. There've been interviews where I'm like, "JT, do you have a question that you could ask?" because I'm, frankly, out of questions and I've been digging up at the bottom of the barrel to find some for a little while. And I'm like, "Damn it. Could you just come up with one, please? I got nothing left!"

[laughter]

@Johanna

And then we wait in that awkward after-you-say-no moment where everyone's like, "Well, now what?" There's some stories anybody could attach to what's happening then. But sometimes it's awkward because you're dwelling in the deep so much that, when I need a little help with the social aspect and you're like, "Dude, I'm doing the harmonic work," then I'm like, "God damn it." The socializing looks easy, but it's not always. Sometimes it is, but sometimes there's a little bit of luck involved and a little bit of risk. I might ask a question that strikes wrong or I might ask a question that sounds wrong to me but I'm led to ask it.

@JT

And how do you feel in those times when I'm with you?

@Johanna

Which times?

@JT

When you ask a question that feels wrong.

@Johanna

It always feels right as soon as the person speaks. There have been several interviews where I say, "This is kind of a bad question, but..." or, "I don't know why I'm led to say this. It's entirely off topic and it's about something specific that I don't know if you even lived, but..." and then they're like, "Oh, I'm so glad you asked that. I really want to talk about that thing." So okay. Great. So it's a fleeting awkwardness. I mean it's difficult each time to live through, and then once it passes, it passes.

Working without you near me, working without your presence and your breath, it's kind of like doggy paddling in the water. It's as if I'm saying, "I think there's a better way to do this, but I'm so busy gasping for air that I don't know." There *is* a more effective way to swim, but I'm already *in* it, and I don't have time to figure that out. When we're in a listening session, I know you're taking in the content and sifting through it in a really deep way. I know that my gift of conversation or storytelling is supported. We can each do our gifts more. It kind of streamlines each of us, and it points us the same direction.

I keep thinking about bowling in the kid lanes that have the barriers.

@JT

Oh. I'm your bumpers?

@Johanna

You're my bumpers! But you're semipermeable. If I really wanted to, I could roll the bowling ball right over them. And still, they're thicker than coffee filters, but they're not made out of brick. You're my bumpers. And so I kind of come up to that spot, and I'm like, "Oh. That's where the edge is. Don't go

there." That's when it's the corrective side shows up, if I'm about to live out a character trait that's not very attractive and is not very helpful. Then the bumpers are there.

You're also my exhale. When we led a workshop the other day and you put your hand on my back, I just felt my whole body exhale. Whenever we're doing work and you touch me, it's like you take in whatever I was unable to release and put something else in its place. I couldn't do the work solo. That's clear to me.

@JT

To hear you describe it as being held in safe arms and loved makes me feel satisfied that I'm doing my work properly.

@Johanna

You would say that!

@JT

That feels like the work of being an elder. When I say holding space, what I really -- and I've referred to this already -- what I'm trying to do is channel Divine Love into this interaction, into this moment, into this event. And that Divine Love is safe, fully loving, sees all, denies nothing, and loves. And those times when you run towards the bumpers and maybe bounce off of them is, to me, when the human mind and heart have begun to interfere. That anxiety about being right or sounding good or looking good or --

@Johanna

Fixing.

@JT

Mm-hmm. Yes. Taking care of other people's problems.

@Johanna

Yes. I can be good at that.

@JT

You can!

[laughter]

@Johanna

I'm very practiced at it. I wouldn't say I'm *effective* at it, but I know how to do it.

@JT

And that is where the Divine Love comes in. It's because that is good work to do, but it is good to be done with the other person being considered and their needs, their wants, their boundaries, their strengths, their weaknesses. And God knows all that. God sees all that. But we don't always. So I just keep my cosmic antenna extended.

My work is to create that safe, soft, loving container where even a slightly agitated or excited human can bounce around and stay within good boundaries and stay in a place of love.

@Johanna

Mm-hmm. Yes. There's one more image coming up, and it's about parenting. I once saw a parent hold their child and contain them lovingly while the child had rage. And the child was beet red, and they were having a tempter tantrum, and they were ready to destroy anything. And the parent said, "Here. Come

right here in my lap." And the parent just *took it* for an hour. They sat in this armchair holding the child. I was in and out of the house doing my work, and the child was screaming, red, infuriated. And the parent just held their arms in a circle around the kid and clamped the kid down to their soft body and held them there so they could thrash as much as they needed inside that space.

And I think they were worn out after doing all that. Yeah. They did it for a long time. And it was one of those moments of rockstar parenting, as far as I know. Something enabled the parent to do that. Something enabled the parent to do that for as long as it took until all the rage was spent. I think about one time we were close together, and you had a picture of me pummeling your chest, and you could take it. And I thought, "I don't want to that. That sounds awful." But that's some of the work. That is some of the work. It's not comfortable or societally appropriate, but it is true work that is not wrong.

@JT

When I think of that parent, the way you describe that scene, I think that that's how we all want to be loved by our parents. I know I do, or I did, because it's that Divine Love that sees exactly how you are and, in that moment, maybe you're pretty awful.

[laughter]

@Johanna

Yeah.

@JT

And there is a steady, calm, loving presence anyway.

@Johanna

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

@JT

And I think of how you were when I came here for this visit.

@Johanna

Oh, God. I was wrecked!

@JT

Wrecked.

@Johanna

Wrecked and wracked, like wracked by Spirit. Not permanently wrecked, but temporarily. Quite wrecked.

@JT

Mm-hmm. You had pain, anguish, fear, grief. And it all came out in a scream.

@Johanna

That was terrifying. It really was.

@JT

Yeah, it was.

@Johanna

I didn't know I was going to scream like that. I just knew I was carrying a very heavy load, and I had reached the limit of how far as I could carry it. I remember that.

@JT

And it chilled me, to hear you scream. But I also knew that I could hold it, that it wouldn't destroy me, that it wouldn't even harm me, as long as I could bring God with us while we were there together. It wasn't easy to let that cold fear pass through me. It had to come in, but it had to go out.

@Johanna

Mm-hmm. That's interesting. A lot of eldering seems to be about releasing.

@JT

Yeah. In regular society, that's what we don't do. Most of the time, as humans, we get stuck in our experiences and our reactions and the stories we tell ourselves about what events mean or why someone would say something or do something. And those things help us, as humans, to learn and grow and survive, especially survive. But we don't always tell ourselves the right stories. We don't always learn the right lessons.

@Johanna

We don't always learn the right lessons, but with the channel and the focusing warmth of eldering, we have a better shot. I mean some of the work I'm beginning to do is very terrifying. I know I'm not alone. Even when you're not here, I know I'm not alone. But there are times when it rips me apart. And you saw me after one of those times. I had done what I needed to do, I had taken my next step with the spiritual work, but it was difficult and it left me in a different condition.

[At this point, the recording is interrupted by an electrician at the house who has some information to give. We pause and then return.]

@Johanna

Okay. When it's time for you to finish some of your work, how do you feel?

@JT

I usually feel a kind of stillness or stability, a balance inside me. And there's a sort of contentment that comes with that. I think that a lot of the discontent that I feel in my life is related to some of the things we've talked about of grasping and reaching to the past or the future, and if I've spent a long time in the practice of not doing that, I feel some of the peace that comes with it. And if I'm working with someone else, like with you, then I feel a satisfaction that I've given some ballast. If things go well, I feel how -- sometimes I'm told how -- my presence has helped to stabilize the other person or people.

@Johanna

Somebody, I think it was you or our friend, said that faithfulness leads to joy. And I think when I look at someone's face after they've been eldering, their face is *shining*. They may be crying, but their face will shine. And it happens again and again with different people. When I was at FGC and I sat with some elders, I was very troubled about something, and I shared it with them, and they listened. I felt shame around it, and I shared that, too. And we worked on the shame and the troubled feeling together. And at the end, I remember the faces of one of the elders. It was as if he was just -- his head was just tilted back a little bit and it looked like he was drinking in pure oxygen, just drinking in really good air, and he couldn't help but feel blissful.

And that's how you look sometimes after the Tuesday Worship Group has met and we get ready to close and everyone's a little dopey-sleepy. But there's something on your face that is so contented. It's not

content as in "settled-for-less." It's content as in deeply filled up, like anything your heart desired just occurred for you. And I think that's what I see. And what I feel after we finish an interview, often, I just feel deep joy, just deep wonder. I have a little more light in step or spring in my step. I think any time we bring our gifts to a moment and they're the right gifts and we use them rightly, we can't help but feel the satisfaction feeling. Just like when I hold back a gift, even a little bit, I feel the jolt inside. It doesn't feel good.

Someone in our Tuesday Worship Group once said that, "I want to know what JT does in the quiet. Something he's doing is really working for him. I want to get closer to that." And I think there's something so true about that. I know of some people who are curious about the prep work that you do, so that the silence works for you. I don't know what the prep work is, or whether I'd be willing to do it. But I do want to feel that satisfied the feeling after, the one that I see on your face.

I want to ask you one more question.

@JT
Okay.

@Johanna
It's hard for me to ask because I think it may make you uncomfortable.

@JT
Well, great.

@Johanna
Yeah. Have fun. Have fun with it. Here you go.

From my perspective, I've known you for a while, and I've known that there was a time when you were entering into this gift. And now, here is a time that you're settling into it a little more fully. You're no longer at the beginning anymore. So my question comes from that experience of you. For people who are entering into a a new gift, or a new role, or a new time, what might you say?

@JT
For any gift? Any role?

@Johanna
For eldering.

@JT
Hmm.

@Johanna
You very recently did the beginning work, and now you're doing the middle-stage work, I think. So for people who are wondering if they have an eldering gift or wondering how to nurture it as they are just starting out, what would you say?

@JT
As you started to ask the question, I thought that one of the hard parts for me is that I have to -- part of the practice that's led me to this place is spending a lot of time in silence, because that has helped me with the practice of accepting what I find in the silence. That's usually what I find in myself. And that's often troubling or disappointing. But what I find in that time, also, is that it [the silence] does not destroy me.

Even if I feel distress and emotions we have described as negative, I traverse that territory repeatedly until it becomes familiar. And the fear of the unknown begins to disappear. The sense can grow, the sense that what is in the unknown is not to be feared. And with that comes a repeated confirmation that in the presence is peace. I may be particularly disposed in this way, but I believe that others have the capacity to listen and to hold without judgement the way I do.

@Johanna

I think you're right. When that kind of listening happens, it's beautiful. Whoever lives that, they live it in their own kind of beauty, their own kind of way, but it's always beautiful.

@JT

Yes.

@Johanna

I like what you said about fear. You said whatever is in the unknown is not to be feared. I think that's really helpful. A year ago, when we asked our worship-sharing group about whether our practices were working for us still, I remember you said that the shorter periods of silence really worked for you more. Because they were more -- you didn't use this word, but they were more "contained." And you could dip into the silence without getting immersed in it. You could venture in just a little bit. And what you've found in longer stretches of silence sometimes terrified you or revealed things or maybe hurt. But there was fear mixed in with going into the deep end of the pool. And so you were glad to have a structure where you could experiment with silence in smaller doses. It's like starting from the shallower end and choosing to walk a little deeper, and then come back to shallow when needed. In my experience of you, your preparing time was very important. And at the time, maybe you were judging yourself for it. But you really needed these steps, just like I needed my steps in living my gifts.

In theory, silence doesn't seem as if it would be really terrifying because as Quakers, we're always reaching for it. So it's like, "What's the big deal?" We sit in silence for an hour. That's what everybody does. Right? But there's something different! There's something more that you're doing that is harder. I don't know how. I don't know what it feels like exactly. Sometimes, I'm in this role, but not as often. I do know the feeling of living into a new gift, though, and it can be terrifying. There's a lot of risk involved.

[At this point in speaking, Johanna got caught up again in fear. JT brought her back by touching her hand.]

@JT

And we make room. But that is why there is peace in presence, because those things are not here, they are not now, and they may never be. Our fears are only possibilities or stories we've told ourselves about our past. When we are in silence, we realize the truth that there is only now, always now.

[Here the recording ends with some transition music.]

@Johanna

Well, thank you for joining us for this conversation. We're sharing a piece of our lives, and we'd like hear from you. We are wondering if there are things that you might add to this description. If you have the gift of eldering and it works differently for you, how does it look? Or maybe you're kind of newer to Quakers and you're learning something from this. If you have thoughts or feedback, then you can send us an email. The email address is forwardinfaithfulness@gmail.com.

Before we go, we'd like to share that this conversation doesn't speak for every Quaker. No conversation does, but this one especially, because eldering is a really inward experience. And so we've explored what

it feels like for JT to elder and what it feels like for me to be near him using his gift. But I'm guessing that there are people in our community who have really different experiences. So if you're using this tape to learn, we just really want to emphasize that too. All right. Take care.

[Outro music]