



This transcript is part of the Listening Project, a series of qualitative interviews that focus on healthy spiritual communities. What makes a strong, welcoming faith community? How are people finding nourishment in the Quaker world? There are no scripted questions for a listening session; however, a variety of themes might show up.

This transcript and listening session is sponsored by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Money from their Travel and Witness Fund is helping to support our ministry. To donate to the Listening Project, please visit forwardinfaithfulness.org. Today we have a conversation with:

Helen Fox

December 27, 2020

Fort Myers Friends Meeting
Southeastern Yearly Meeting
Age 77
Pronouns: she



Themes: *generations, social justice work, future of Quakerism, accompaniment, welcoming meetings, intergenerational friendships, spiritual peers, intimacy, spiritual nourishment, mutual support, spiritual guidance, clearness committees, community, listening, humility, spiritual deepening, equality, age integration, assumptions, Friends General Conference, gatekeeping, understanding, Quaker structure.*



Helen Fox is a professor emerita, grandparent, and former Peace Corps volunteer. She taught at the University of Michigan for 22 years, which is how she and Johanna originally connected. Helen taught courses in composition, international development, race and racism, human rights, and nonviolent social movements. Her most recent book is *Fractured: Race Relations in 'Post-Racial' American Life*.

Helen was the first Quaker that I'd ever met. Her presence had a profound effect on my spiritual life. While I was enrolled University of Michigan, I took two of her classes, which were both demanding and rewarding. Years later, we met again to discuss our faith lives, with JT eldering for much of the conversation. This interview names some inconvenient truths: we look at times when our communities failed to help people connect across ages. We end by wondering aloud how Quakers could create environments to help older and young people better connect. What are the situations that lead to natural connection? We explore some ideas below.

Note: Some sections of this transcript have been removed for brevity or privacy.

- Johanna Jackson

[As we began, Helen shared about what brought her to Quakerism and what made her meeting so welcoming. We moved to explore what makes a spiritual peer.]

Johanna:

I wonder if we could talk about – well, the word *mentorship*'s coming to mind. Because I think you mentored me into a kind of spiritual life, which really fed me. And I see that that is one thing that's missing for younger people, sometimes. Having really interesting older people who take an interest in them. Did you find – did you end up spending time with other younger Quakers in Ann Arbor or in Fort Myers?

Helen:

Not necessarily younger Quakers, but through my work in U of M¹, I was always around young people. There were always people who would come to me, usually asking for advice. It might start out with a letter of recommendation or help with a paper. My job description never said that I was to be a mentor or an advice-giver. I wasn't an advisor; I was a writing teacher. That's how I started out at U of M – but that's how I got to know people, was through their struggles with writing. So I've spent a lot of time over those 22 years that I was at U of M with young people – if they would come back, if they continued to want to talk to me. And then even now, there are people that are texting me, or they're still asking for something, a few from the distant past, yes. But they're not necessarily Quakers, no.

¹University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, MI.



Johanna:
Really?

Helen:
Yeah. It's like the nature of going somewhere every Sunday, and you see these people, and you see them for a very small amount of time, and mostly you're not interacting with them. And then you go for a cookie or something, and then you have this cocktail-party atmosphere in which there's a lot of loud talk, and you might have a chance to connect with somebody, but they're not really going to connect with you on a deeper level, I don't think. So that's not where I tended to do that.

Johanna:
Huh, that's a good point. I can't think of a single deep conversation I had with you in the meetinghouse.
Wow! That is really something. I've never realized that.

Helen:
Right. It's so crowded! I mean with students, usually the conversations would start out in my office, and we'd meet there. And then sometimes I would tell people, 'Well, let's go for lunch at some place.' And that was a little more private, even though there was a lot of noise around. Because in my office, I often shared the room with another teacher. But the way that the Quaker meeting seems to be set up, it's very unnatural. Other Christian denominations, too.

Johanna:
Wow. That's interesting. Well, is there something that Quakers could change, maybe in a small way, that would open up the kind of atmosphere you had in your office?

Helen:
Well, young people need to have a reason to come in and talk. And I'm not about to just go to young people and say "Let's talk" – no. That's unnatural. So it's a little tricky. That's an interesting question. I mean with me, we often met because of writing, and writing is often so personal. Even if the students weren't writing about personal issues, they were still struggling to make sense of the material and make it say something significant. So it's a natural sort of place to start, I think.

Johanna:
Yeah. So each time the student came into your office, they came because of their own choice. They could choose the terms and how frequently you connected.

Helen:
Exactly. In general, making people come in to talk about their writing, for me, that didn't work. Your question's a very interesting one. It's like, 'Is there a way to create an atmosphere where deep conversations happen?' I'm just not sure that the young people would necessarily approach older people who are not their family. Why would they do that?

Johanna:
Right. It's not cool to do that!



Helen:

Well, no. And it's a little awkward. And why would they think that person would be helpful to them in any particular way? So that's why I'd be so interested in learning more from the young people as to what they're looking for and how the meeting might promote that. I guess I was thinking – when I saw your question, I was thinking, well, maybe they're interested in something more equal. So there are these barriers here, and this whole idea of mentoring is kind of a top-down thing, the older to the younger, where the older person gives advice to the younger one about how to be a better Quaker. And that, like that eldering, I think it can be helpful sometimes, but it's not the same thing you're talking about.

Johanna:

Mm-hmm. I think what I'm talking about is accompanying. Most of the time that you and I met, you didn't give me advice, but you were willing to hear how it was going with me and my dad or how I wanted to live at the Quaker house, but it hadn't worked out. You were just – you were very –

Helen:

But you were very – you wanted to talk about all that. That was real obvious, that that's what you wanted, and I don't think – like most people aren't that way, young people. Right?

Johanna:

Right.

Helen:

But they may be looking for something. That's why I'm interested. They may be looking for something like that and may not really be saying so or really knowing, or. I don't know.

Johanna:

Well, so this teenager that we spoke with, they were the first person we talked with that I didn't know that well. And I asked them, 'Would you like to be part of this listening project? We're listening to young people's spiritual journeys, and we could ask you these questions.' And they said yes. I thought, 'Are you sure?' I couldn't figure out why they'd want to spend time with a couple of adults they didn't know, doing something unusual. My assumption was, this person is a teenager, so talking to adults would be boring. JT and I wondered that, after the interview. Was it interesting? I think it was, based on how we interacted. And so I saw that interview as a time when older people might need to be the ones to make the first invitation, and teenagers or 20- or 30-somethings can say yes or no to the idea. Rather than formulate out what they need and ask for it.

Helen:

At one meeting I know of, people had started a project. They had a project where they were pairing people who didn't know each other for coffee or something, and then you're supposed to go out and get to know that person outside of the meetinghouse. I don't know how that went or if that fostered more of this or whether even the young people were included in that.

Johanna:

Well, I'm hearing of some times when people like me are assuming that teens don't want to do anything like that, because old folks are boring. But that may not be the truth.



Helen:

That's true, that may not be the case.

Johanna:

I think some of our most rich living, in my experience of Quakers, is when we have older and younger folks meeting together for an activity. We can bike, swim, and eat together. We can work for justice. At my meeting, there's a quarterly gathering called Creative Hands. There's a lot of good food, and we do projects with our hands. Knitting and handwork is how it started, but now it's like wrestling, swimming, hiking, making kimchi, making yogurt, strumming a guitar. And the cool thing is that the group is so broad that anybody can join and have something fun to do. But it's also warm and specific. When people come in, they're pretty warmly received. When we were meeting before COVID, we had grandparents and children who were three. That unstructured hang-out time in a cabin or making a craft can be one of the bridges that links younger generations and older ones. I wonder what the other links could be.

I don't know if this is a good question or not, but. When you were spending time with young people in your office as a professor, was there anything that you were doing that you could explain to another adult? Based on what you said earlier, it sounds like you were accompanying young people. What was it that you were doing?

Helen:

You describe it as accompanying, and I like that term, because I know about the accompaniment movement and my stepdaughter has been part of that. But yes. I think I was doing that some of the time. But other times, the purpose of our meeting was, 'I'm going to help you get through this course, or I'm interested in your thinking on this topic.' But then some people would come in and ask me things about life in general. 'What am I going to do after I graduate?' 'Should I go into the Peace Corps?' Or, 'What was Peace Corps like when you went? What'll I do with my loneliness if I go to the other side of the world and I don't see my family anymore?' So it would get more and more intimate like that. I think it's just because they felt that, well, I was in the Peace Corps and now they're thinking of going too. So we had some kind of mutual experience. I'm not sure why they sought me out, but.

In terms of something that I could explain to someone else, I haven't really thought about it. But at one point, at U of M, there was some kind of remodeling that needed to happen, and many of us were all working in one room. And that's a very difficult thing, when you're talking with people about their problems, or their problems with writing or whatever. There was a faculty member who was sitting right behind me, a German teacher. When I retired, one of the nice things that she said was, 'I learned a lot by listening in to your conversation.' Yes. And it's like, oh, what did I say. You know?

Johanna:

Yeah. I know. I keep thinking back to sitting in your office. I think one time you put your feet up on the desk while we were talking. It surprised me so much! Because I was sitting in my chair like this. [*body rigid, like a robot*] And then I thought, 'Oh, it's okay for me to be relaxed like that while I sit and talk with Helen.'

On a different note, I'm not surprised the German teacher said that to you. Because I can't remember what you did, but I remember what you *didn't* do. You didn't try to give me advice.



Helen:

Huh. I've never thought about any of these things before. That's so interesting. [pause] Do you go to Friends General Conference?²

Johanna:

Yes; I enjoyed it.

[JT continues holding space for the conversation and listening.]

Helen:

Oh, I see. I've never been. We've always had a big family gathering at the same time that they hold it, so I never went. But it seems like, at big gatherings like that, and even at the yearly meeting sometimes, that's when these opportunities for more hang-out time and more intergenerational time seem to come up. I don't know how they actually work at FGC because I never was there. But it sounds like you're talking about something that really hasn't been invented yet.

Johanna:

I think it's around. But it's spotty. Sometimes just one person can open up the door for that kind of moment. Like in Ann Arbor – I think the Ann Arbor Meeting has a very strong welcomer, because [Friend's name] is so warm. He's so enthusiastic.

Helen:

Yes. That's what he is!

Johanna:

He could talk to anyone!

Helen:

[nodding] I know. He really could.

Johanna:

He was like the greeters in Fort Myers, in that he was specifically interested in what I said. But I got the sense that he could do that for anybody he met.

Helen:

Yes. It's true.

Johanna:

He's very heart-y. I remember that the most. Warmth is the main quality, I guess. I think it opens doors.

²The Friends General Conference (FGC) "provides services and resources for individual Friends, meetings, and people interested in the Quaker way. FGC is an association of regional Quaker communities in the U.S. and Canada working together to nurture a vital Quaker faith." For more information, visit www.fgcquaker.org



Helen:

Mm-hmm. Well, warmth, yes, but you're talking about something more than just warmth, I think. And I don't want to put it down by saying 'just.' But more than *simply* warmth, because you're talking about spiritual nourishment, too. For a group of people that don't have a set religious ideology, it's not an easy thing to talk about, I think, because we don't know ourselves, how to describe our spirituality. Or it's so personal that you don't necessarily just want to be telling anybody. Right?

Johanna:

Huh. You think it would be easier if we had a creed, and then someone could just instruct another person on it?

Helen:

Well, I think that's what happens in other kind of places that I'm sort of familiar with. For example, I have a student who's African American, and she belongs to an evangelical church that is both Black and white. It's a place that's Detroit-based – that is, it is heavily influenced with Black culture. And she is so completely infused with the ideology of Jesus and has a very, very personal relationship with God. And she just lets it all out all the time. I've met her mom, and her mom is kind of like that as well. They talk to each other in these terms that Quakers really don't have so much, like 'Just have your faith in Jesus.' It's like they're saying, 'Yeah, you're in a bad place now, but Jesus is there for you.' And Quakers wouldn't necessarily be talking like that. JT, I see you shaking your head.

JT:

Yes. Things are coming together for me.

Helen:

Good. Good. I want hear from you.

Johanna:

You want to say something, JT?

JT:

No. You were about to. Go ahead.

Johanna:

Hmm. Okay. Well, it sounds like her community had a language that encouraged steps forward on a path, which helped people grow and connect. Maybe our language is so vague and so relativist that the way to proceed is more vague than that. It could be however the person feels, rather than finding something defined. But – maybe not. Some of the Quakers I know will say things like 'Are you being faithful? Are you using your gifts?' Maybe that's the Quaker version of saying, 'Have your faith in Jesus.' There are some phrases that encourage certain behaviors or certain kinds of soul-searching.

Helen:

I haven't heard that question, 'Are you being faithful?' I like that. And we also have the clearness



committees³ as part of Quaker life. That's kind of an institution that a lot of other religions don't have. Right? So that means that, if I were faced with a big decision, I could ask for a clearness committee and I come to them with real questions that I expected deep answers to. And I could expect the committee members to also speak deeply. But we would only meet three or four times, probably, before I would then be clear. I've never done this myself, but I've served on a bunch of clearness committees.

Johanna:
You've served on a bunch of clearness committees?

Helen:
Oh yeah.

Johanna:
But you haven't had one?

Helen:
Well, actually, Jim and I had a kind of clearness for marriage. So we did have that one together, but I never felt like I needed that kind of advice to ask for a clearness committee for anything else.

Johanna:
I ask for like three a year, Helen.

Helen:
Wow! Well, you're obviously getting something out of it, then.

Johanna:
I am. They're great! I like them a lot. That's an interesting connection, too. A clearness committee checks all the boxes that you were describing before. For an intergenerational relationship to be real. Like for older and younger folks to connect, there needs to be a reason to meet. And with a clearness committee, somebody needs to ask for help, and then other people need to show up. They don't necessarily give advice, but they stay with the need itself.

Helen:
They listen and ask good questions. Yes, I think that's a real important part of it. And also, you were talking about the meetinghouse being a place where it's hard to foster these kind of conversations. Clearness committees often happen at people's houses. Right?

Johanna:
Yes, most of the time, I think.

³Clearness committees are small groups of F/friends that meet to help someone with a question or life decision. The focus person brings a question, and 3-4 Friends join them in waiting for clarity. The role of these additional Friends is to accompany, ask questions, and wait for guidance. For more information, visit www.fgcquaker.org/resources/clearness-committees-what-they-are-and-what-they-do



Helen:

That's how it's been for the ones I've been on. And so that's a completely different feeling.

Johanna:

Yeah.

Helen:

But with young people – I don't even know if they're encouraged or even allowed to ask for a clearness committee. Like would a 14-year-old be able to do that?

Johanna:

I've never heard of a teenager asking for clearness. Have you, JT?

Helen:

Maybe there's no precedent for that.⁴

JT:

I can't think of an example of somebody that I know personally, although maybe [one younger Friend we know] might have. I just don't know.

Johanna:

I have never heard of anyone younger than me asking for a clearness committee. At least, not in my meeting. Or not that I know of. Well, there is one person I know who asked for clearness, and they were 25.

Helen:

Really? Huh.

⁴The idea of clearness committees for teens continues to evolve. We are exploring this idea in 2021 and hope to share more when it's developed. For more information, contact JT and Johanna at forwardinfaithfulness@gmail.com.



Johanna:

Mm-hmm. Just that one person. And they were pretty well-versed in Quaker ways, so they could reach to people and knew what to ask for. Hmm. Maybe one way forward as a community is just to educate young people about the possibility. If teens and college students know that they can ask for a clearness committee, they can choose when it's right for them. And people could show up in a way that's relevant.

Huh. I feel a lot of hope coming up around this! Because clearness committees are – well, they're a place where other people hold up the walls of a room, and give you that space to just find out what you might want to do inside of it. They're a supported kind of discernment. And then there's room to bounce around inside that room as much as you want, until you realized which way you want to go. And that's really cool.

Helen:

Mm-hmm. That's really interesting. I think a lot of young people, their relationship with older people, those older people are either teachers, parents, grandparents, or somebody who is going to try to mold them and shape them and give them advice that they may not be asking for or be ready to hear. And so they may have that idea that, 'Oh, if I ask for all these adults to come and then I'm going to ask them about this decision, why would that be helpful to me.' So I think what I think would be a real interesting thing to explain to young people what a clearness committee should be, and ask do they want one ever.

Johanna:

Yeah! Even just to say, 'Look, there's this structure set up where you can hang out with older people and they won't give advice, they won't tell you what to do at all.' I think that would be appealing to younger folks. It reminds me of the one woman that we talked to from Long Island, who had a really vibrant meeting. We asked her, 'What do you love about your meeting, and is there anything you would change if you could?' She loved lots of things. But she said that there are a lot of the people with strong personalities at the meeting, who want to instruct her and mold her and shape her. And she didn't really want that.

Helen:

Right. That's why I was thinking mentoring, really, is that top-down approach.

Johanna:

Yeah.

JT:

Can I try something here?

Helen:

Go ahead, JT.

[We take a pause, and JT speaks very slowly. It is difficult to show the pace and intentionality in print; however, picture this message being given out of a place of worship. Some of what he shares refers to the conversation that we did not record.]



JT:

The ideas are coming together, like I said. I'm going to try to phrase things out. So give me a little time. We'll see how it goes. What I've been hearing – well, let me start with the main idea. What I think I'm hearing is that there may be a cultural problem or shortcoming in the Quaker world. In that we don't feel the strong bonds of community, of a community of *practice*. We've compared the relationships of older people and younger people in the context of academia, and how that is different from the Quaker context. In academia, there is an understood goal. There is a project that's being worked on. And in that case, the older person will have some experience, knowledge, and expertise that the younger person won't have. And they can help to guide things. It sounds like both in that context and in the Quaker world, the most important thing is the listening, and the asking of questions. We talked about how listening allows that person to find their way closer to their own truth and their own voice.

When we talk about spiritual peers, we said that some of it is about age, but some of it is not. In the Quaker community that I imagine and hope for, the one that I sometimes find, there is a sense that we are all peers. We are all seekers. None of us has yet achieved nirvana. That is our project, a project that we share. We may not have efficient language to talk about how it works, though. Because when I read that Peace Testimony that you'd sent earlier, Helen, it was steeped in Christian language and Scripture. There were so many points of contact, rooting in the words of the prophets and the apostles. They helped to describe what God and Jesus were trying to tell us about how to live. And that was written fairly long ago.

And now, in the liberal unprogrammed Friends' tradition, we've moved far enough away from that rooting. So we don't have as much shared language to give each other. We know that the teaching can work both ways, between older and younger Friends. I have met very spiritually advanced young people and old people, and likewise not, on both sides. The thing that we're talking about here, I think, is the sharing of that journey. That is something that we don't do enough of. And some of that comes from our – and some of that necessarily comes from just time together. If we are all seekers and that is how we live our lives, then the time that we spend together will necessarily include sharing a journey. But the culture of our white-supremacist American capitalist world clashes pretty deeply with our Quaker world. In terms of taking time, and being slow, and not rushing off to the next thing or the committee business. Which, those things are important and they give us the structure, but we also need to give space within that structure for these other things to happen. Because nominally that is why we are all here.

I somewhat feel that I beat this same drum repeatedly, and I'm not sure how useful that is. But I'm hearing that the deepening of spiritual life in the individuals will ramify out, into the deepening of the community life of the meeting. That we need to have that humility on both sides, but I think especially on the sides of the elders, to do this. Because we've talked about how there can be this hierarchical idea or a dispensing or knowledge or technique that runs from the top down. But we are all – we are all coming together for the same reason, I think. And we can talk about that and be vulnerable about it. The strength that we have is in that not-knowing and the constant asking of questions of ourselves. And also asking questions of each other and of Spirit. A clearness committee is a specific way of doing it, but I think that the thread that I've heard through this conversation is that the informal relationships are extremely important to feeling connected to each other. Yes. I think that's it. I think I'll stop there.



Helen:

Well, I'm really glad you're recording this, because you really have captured something that I think is very clear, interesting, and important. And whether you go anywhere with that, I don't know. But it's not just the hanging out and the canoeing and the knitting that builds a community, because you can do that on an extremely superficial level. Young people manage to do that all the time on a very superficial level. And adults have their own versions of that. I think, one of the great things about what you just said, JT, is that it's like we're all on this spiritual journey together. We're all groping around for it, and we're all – well, even though some of us have been on it, maybe, longer than others, we are all equal on the journey. If we had that mindset, and if the older people were thinking of the young people in the same vein, then maybe the relationships would be different. Maybe we could even dream up sites of interactions that would foster something new, and see what comes of it.

Johanna:

And in time, we could have a clearness committee where someone 70 years old comes in with a question, and people from ages 15 to 90 are the listeners. I don't think I've ever been in a clearness committee with people younger than me as the listeners. That would be really cool.

Helen:

That's a really interesting observation, and I think it would be very helpful. Yeah. To integrate those young people into the spiritual life of the meeting more, not just to be buddies, but really to travel together. Hmm. The closest I think we ever come to these questions, here in Fort Myers or even in Ann Arbor, is when we've had some kind of a presentation that asks people to get into small groups and talk about a deep question, and then people tend to do that.

When we had a weekend retreat on race and racism in Ann Arbor, some of the small groups really achieved that kind of depth. Because people told very personal stories, and they connected to each other more deeply. But none of the young people joined the adults for that. In fact, the way that it was set up, now that I think about it, was that the different age groups would have their different meetings and times to talk about race amongst themselves. We were never all together, and I was one of the organizers for that. Maybe we were wondering, 'Well, is that really a good thing for the young people to hear?' or questions like that. And so we said, 'Oh, well, there are these age-appropriate things, and we can hire somebody to come in and have those conversations.' I don't think they worked well for our young people, because I think they had a lot more knowledge than we gave them credit for.

Johanna:

Yes, that makes sense. I'm hearing two assumptions, two common assumptions that we've admitted to falling into. And one is assuming that young people don't want to be part of the bigger group.

Helen:

Right.

Johanna:

And then the other is assuming young people all want to be with just each other. Which sometimes, I mean, sometimes I *do* want to be with people in my stage of life. But it sounds like, if we have more invitations, then we let those assumptions get checked by reality more. But I'm culpable too. At our meeting, we started up these spiritual friendship groups, after a year of deliberating. And I remember, at

Comment [Windows U1]: Specific meeting mentioned; edit



the time, someone said, 'We'd really like Millennials to join in on this.' And I said, 'Well, that may or may not happen. Because in our meeting, most of the people I know who ages 20 and 40 are so hungry to talk to someone their age that if you give them another opportunity to spend more time with Baby Boomers and older folks, they might not take it. Let's wait and see. They might want to find somebody who understands X, whatever X is.'

And I was so busy saying this, that I didn't even think about inviting high school students to the friendship groups! I just assumed high school students wouldn't be interested in it! So I don't think we really invited them. Nobody went to First Day school and said, 'We're starting this new project, do you want to join?' We just put a notice in the bulletin, which is what – I don't know – maybe high school students read the bulletin, but I think not. And this reminds me that we have so many structures that just cut out young people. And it can be hard to see them. Even when we are doing our best. The young person from New York who wanted to go to yearly meeting, how old was she, JT?

JT:
19, I think?

Johanna:
She was 19. That's right. She was in her first year of college, and she really wanted to go to business meeting⁵ at her yearly meeting. But the structure made it really hard for her to do that. Because she was the clerk of the Junior Yearly Meeting, so the only way she could go to business meeting was to step out of her clerk role for half a day. Then trek across campus, get to business meeting late, and be the only young person there. We're really forgetting, I think, to invite younger people in. And I don't know why we forget. I really wonder, because I'm forgetting too. So what's causing that blindness? That's a blind spot that a lot of us are acting out.

JT:
Hey, can I beat my drum again?

Johanna:
Go for it. Yeah.

JT:
Well, that, to me, speaks to probably the infiltration of the broader culture outside of the Quaker world, that there are these particular sorts of relationships that we expect people to want to have and that, in the Quaker world, we actually want something different. Because we're doing something different here. And we have that the sense that – well, I think that it's not an easy problem to solve. The theme of all of this, for me, is that it involves a deep spiritual practice that leads to a humility. When we admit that we're all equal, then I can learn something from a 14-year-old even if I'm 74. Right? And then we can meet as peers, as equals in some way. Because we're in this particular condition of being spiritual seekers, of being human. I think you're making a good point that if we were to invite each other more, we'd find out how much interest there might be.

⁵Business meeting is a community forum, usually held monthly, in which Quakers make decisions together. In this case, Friends from across the New York region gathered for business.



But I think also that – well, one of the things that I was imagining was that – there was an older man I met, in the first meeting that I went to. And he was the first person who really talked to me at meeting. Well, he literally cornered me while I was trying to squeak out of the fellowship coffee hour chat. I found the coffee hour to be off-putting. You mentioned that before, Helen. Well, when I first started attending Quaker meeting, I actually had some pretty deep experiences of Spirit and love in the room when we were doing worship. I was with all of these strangers. And then worship ends, and we all get up, and the mood totally changes.

Helen:

It totally changes. Yeah.

JT:

And that's where I see that we can spend a different kind of time together. Maybe you sit and you have a meal, or you just have some coffee and snacks or play a game, but you extend that time and leave space to do it intentionally. You meet with the intention of talking deep experiences. At my first Quaker meeting, [Friend's name] cornered me at the end and said, 'Hey, you're new here. What brings you here? How was that for you?' He showed interest in me. He asked questions. I don't think it's a coincidence that he's also a sober alcoholic who has a lot of 12-step practice under his belt. That, to me, leads to a lot of the humility. Realizing 'Wow, I really don't know everything. Look at my life – I had to learn a lot of stuff, and I'm still learning a lot of stuff, I've got to practice hard in order to live my life the way I want to.' So that inner work helps us meet a person in a certain way. Right? Yeah. I'm done now.

Helen:

Yes. Did that end up being a good experience for you, JT? Being cornered by this person and then asked these questions? Or did you –

JT:

It did ultimately end up being a good experience. Yes. It was uncomfortable at first, but I could tell that his interest was genuine. We did have an ongoing relationship later, outside of meeting. We went out for coffee. I met him at his local community garden and we played there. I could call him on the phone for consultation, advice, and humor. And it was a fruitful relationship. It was like that man that you talked about before, in Ann Arbor, with the warmth and openheartedness. He had a genuine interest in welcoming people. It felt that way to me.

Johanna:

Yes. I think that's important. As a young person, I keep running into these structural barriers that keep me from using my voice. And when I talk to other Millennials, I see that sometimes the only way we can break through those barriers is if we have an advocate who paves the way for us. Someone who says, 'Oh, I'm sorry you ran into that barrier. Well did you know we have this other practice you can use, and if you make a slight change, you can get around that barrier?' We need translators who can describe all the intricate Quaker cultural things to us, so that we can make a way open. I've had people do that for me before.

Helen:

What are some of the barriers? You say you keep running into barriers that stop you from using your voice. Can you give just like one example of that?



Johanna:

Sure. I've had some experiences in Quaker circles when people say, 'Oh, we don't do it that way.' I feel like they are saying that if I want to do an idea, I need to contact a committee that meets irregularly and then they'll think about it. In my experience, sometimes, the committees don't get back to me with a decision. I think they have too much to do. Sometimes I run into barriers about what can, and cannot, be brought to business meeting. That's confusing. Sometimes I have concerns or ideas, and there's just like no clear outlet for them.

[Johanna shares an example of a committee that she once considered joining, and what dissuaded her.]

There have been times that I offered something, such as leading a workshop, and I didn't hear anything back in reply. There are times when I'm in Quaker circles, and someone presents an idea in business meeting, and several people have concerns as a result. It is easy to close down a good idea. What I would like to hear more of is someone saying, 'Oh, maybe this could work,' or, 'Wow, I'm glad you thought of that. Let's talk some more.'

In my Al-Anon group, when I was active, the group worked differently. People affirm each other – regularly – after the sharing. That's something that I see that missing from many of the business meetings that I've been to. This is a generalization. As a whole, though, I think we may need to make some changes.

[Johanna shares an example about going to business meeting with an idea and being disappointed by the results.]

...Then we were rushing to finish, because it was almost 11 o'clock and we needed to clear out so Meeting for Worship could start. By the time I spoke, everybody was a little antsy. I remember turning to the clerk and asking, 'Do I have three minutes? Do I have five?' Because everyone was like, 'We've been sitting for two hours and we've got to clear out so Meeting for Worship can start.'

Helen:

Yeah.

Johanna:

So, those are some experiences that are difficult for me. I think there are ways to be heard, but sometimes I don't know what they are.

Helen:

Yes. I can see where that would happen, and it sounds like you're talking about a lot of structure-bound negativity. And I'm wondering how true that is across the board.

Johanna:

That's something we're still exploring. One thing I know is that different people may have really different experiences with the same structure. People who have joined our community in the last five years have, I think, had a really different experience.



Helen:
So that's good.

Johanna:
Right. That's progress.

Helen:
At places like FGC,⁶ and at your yearly meeting, don't they give the opportunity for you to propose a workshop, for example, and you could lead one? You could say 'Here are the kinds of questions and the kind of things we're going to do in my workshop, and just come and we'll do it.'

Johanna:
Yeah.

Helen:
Have you ever tried that? Have you done that?

Johanna:
No, I haven't suggested a workshop at FGC. Usually I want to go to the singing workshop. And all the workshops are at the same time. But you're right, there is a lot of openness and good stuff happening at FGC. I know many of the people on the planning groups, including some of the clerks. There's a real strong effort to find out how young people can integrate with those committees better. And to make sure that young people are on the workshop selection committee, so that they can have a voice in choosing workshops that would be interesting for them.

Helen:
Right. Because you just do your workshop, and then you're there for the rest of the week or however many days, and you have time to do all the rest of it. It seems like that is one place where there is a helpful structure. Now, a teenager wouldn't be able to do that, but.

Johanna:
Yes. But, Helen, should I have to drive 12 hours somewhere in order to offer something to the Quaker community?

Helen:
Well, if it is one option, it is –

Johanna:
True. You're right. It's a good place.

Helen:
That doesn't change your own meeting. That's true. And I don't know what your yearly meeting is like...

⁶Friends General Conference is an annual gathering of Quakers in North America. During the pandemic, it has been held remotely. Pre-COVID, it moved to different locations on different years.



Johanna:

I don't either, actually. Not much at this point.

Helen:

You don't go? What is your yearly meeting, is it Philadelphia?

Johanna:

Well, we're part of two yearly meetings. We're part of Baltimore Yearly Meeting and Philadelphia.⁷ But most people don't really go. I've gone to the BYM Women's Retreat, because someone at my meeting recommended it to me. But my meeting is actually known for not really showing up to yearly meetings much because we're – well, I'm not sure why. I guess we're far from the very urban center and that's part of it. So it's a long drive. But there might be some historical or cultural reasons too. No one is recommending PYM yearly meeting to me, so I pretty much don't go.

Helen:

I see. Huh. Wow.

Johanna:

Yes. Well, on a different note, you mentioned FGC. I think this would be a good time for JT and I to talk about the nourishment or the openness that we found at FGC. I don't know about your perspective, JT, but I think that we've each been nourished by the people we met there.

JT:

Mm-hmm.

Johanna:

So how does the culture of FGC fit with the humility that we were talking about?

JT:

Oh. Well, I guess there is – to me, I see there are a couple of steps in between. That the Gathering is for just being together in Spirit, the workshops in the morning have structure and whatever you want to call it, curriculum, and people choose one that suits them. But all of the workshops are directed towards experiencing Spirit in some way, whether that's flying kites and riding bikes or extended meeting for worship. Right? There's a guy who does that every year.

Johanna:

That's you.

⁷Baltimore and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting are bodies of Quakers that cover a wider region – in this case, several states. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (abbreviated as PYM or PhYM) includes New Jersey, Delaware, Eastern Maryland, and parts of Pennsylvania.. Baltimore Yearly Meeting (or BYM) includes Friends from Virginia, Maryland, parts of Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia. It is rare for one local meeting to belong to two yearly meetings, but it is possible.



JT:

That's me. No, no! *[laughter]* Not really. But the ones I went to were called Moving into Mindfulness and Opening to the Heart of Worship, and the latter one was specifically about practices that will deepen one's experience of silent worship or in silent worship. And I guess that touches some to the questions that you were talking about with our last conversation and some of the things that have come up in this one about worship. What do we do there? Right? What is this silence? If I'm a teenager and nobody's explained it to me, why am I here? And actually, I thought about the sort of afternoon stuff that happens at FGC, too. There are many, many options, and people form ad hoc events like interest groups as things come up. Those are good ways to bring together seekers and spiritual peers around a common concern, like you mentioned, Helen. Having questions for people to discuss. That's a very good way to intentionally build that kind of community spirit and bond, I think.

So I think it's a whole combination of things. The event is intended towards spiritual deepening. Those who go there are self-selecting, and therefore, I would say, probably interested in that kind of deepening. They're networking with people who are interested in that. And that the presence of all of those people all doing that at the same time in the same place for a prolonged period really does summon or conduct the energy of Spirit in a way that I've never felt anywhere else. And that's where my spiritual-deepening idea comes from. I've consistently felt more of the things that I think are *good* about Quaker community and that I want to see in Quaker community in those larger gatherings. They have less of the – maybe less of the commonplace to them. We go to our meetings every week, and we see the same people, and we know who's on the committees, and we have a good idea of who's going to say what about this thing at business meeting, and that can end up being a constraint on the movement of Spirit. Did that answer your question?

Johanna:

No, it didn't. But it was great to hear. It's really helpful. You're talking about how, at FGC, the structure supports spiritual deepening, and the people are self-selecting, and the purpose is different than a monthly meeting. And so you're finding more of what you seek at FGC. Right?

JT:

'You' meaning me? Or meaning one?

Johanna:

Well, you said that *you* are. So I'm asking. Are you finding more of what you seek at FGC than at monthly meetings?

JT:

Yeah. I think it's telling that my most – well, the deepest spiritual relationships I have had have come from people I met there.

Johanna:

That's true. My core group of friends come from FGC.

JT:

Right. I mean I met you, Anne, Ben, LJ. I met Alice before, but it was the contact that we had at FGC that really solidified our friendship.



Johanna:

And some of the people who have walked with each of us, we met at FGC. Some of the older people who watched us evolve came out of the FGC circuit. There are a couple of elders out there who have their eye out, I think, for where they might be needed, and then that's where they go. And I had – I had some impromptu clearness committees, when I was really distressed one year, where [three Friends' names] stayed with me for a few hours while I integrated some new knowledge in my body. And that was really helpful for me.

JT, What you said about the FGC structure is true. I would add one thing. I think that there are people in FGC who are choosing to show up in a way that is pretty rare in a monthly meeting. Or maybe a lot of the really dedicated Quaker people are just all going to one spot, I don't know. I do think some of the barriers I keep running into in other Quaker spaces, which are confusing, are actually political barriers. Or they're 'we-don't-do-it-that-way' barriers. What I see at FGC and a few other meetings is different. It's like the people there are saying: 'Do you want to offer a talent? Sure, we have room for that. How about now, would this be a good time?' There's an openness there. There are a lot of ways that people can offer their talents at FGC.

[pause]

Helen:

You could start your own spiritual formation group or build a different community.

[Johanna shares some of the benefits of her current community.]

Helen:

I see. Yeah.

[pause in conversation]

Johanna:

I have energy for about one more question tonight, and then time for some rest.

Helen:

Yeah. I'm feeling the same way, too.

Johanna:

All right. *[pause]* You said in an email this week that you were feeling – well, when we asked you whether there was anything you were hungry for in the Quaker world, you said, 'Actually I feel satisfied.'

Helen:

Mm-hmm.

Johanna:

And I was wondering if you could say more about that.



Helen:

Sure. Well, it sounded like it came from somebody who felt hungry for something. They either knew what it was or didn't know what it was, but there was that feeling of *lack*, which I don't feel about my Quaker community. And it might be the particular community that I'm part of, it might be just my stage of life or something, or. But I can't really talk about what I don't feel...

Johanna:

That's true. Okay. Well, what are some beautiful things that you see Quakers doing, that make you satisfied?

Helen:

Caring about each other, taking care of each other, certainly without judgment, apparently. To me, when I came to Ann Arbor, I was not a Quaker. I had often worked with Quakers, but I was not particularly interested in finding a spiritual home – all of that stuff, it just – I didn't use that language, but actually that was a point at which I was hungry for a certain kind of community with shared values. And that is what I found in Quakers.

The Quaker Meeting wasn't exactly what I had experienced previously, in my graduate program in Massachusetts, because there we had people from all over the world and there was a very strong spiritual sense that you could feel among all these international peers. But it was a new kind of community.

So I was missing a certain depth of connection when I came out of that program. And then it turned out, in Ann Arbor, in my department there were also a lot of Quakers. There were a bunch of Quakers who were on the faculty there. And they immediately recognized me as a Quaker. I didn't know I was a Quaker until they invited me to come to Friends Lake. I went a few times to Friends Lake, and then somebody said, 'Well, would you –' well, anyway, it's a long story, but then I went to Meeting for the first time. And I immediately felt like, 'Yeah, this is something that I'm looking for.' It wasn't exactly the same as where I came from, and that's a good thing, because we probably wouldn't fight as much as in that other group.

What I was hungry for, at that time, was for that kind of – it's not just connection or community or these buzzwords that we use. But it's more like not having to explain yourself to people because you know that they all value certain things in life. It was a feeling like coming home – like being home. A feeling of, 'Yes, I'm home now.'

Johanna:

Hmm. That's what I felt when I started going to meeting, too. A feeling of coming home.

Helen:

Yes. So that was something that I didn't know I was looking for, but it turned out that I was. And then I've been pretty happy with it. So that's why, I guess, I'm saying I'm not really looking for anything more.

Johanna:

I was surprised by your answer in writing, because I'm talking to a lot of people who are hungry for something more.



Helen:

Well, I thought that you were, and that's why I was so interested in knowing what they were looking for. And now, I guess I have some more of an idea of it, and that part of it is this structure and that this is how we do things. So yeah.

Johanna:

Thanks.

Helen:

I mean right now in Fort Myers, we're talking about and kind of struggling with very nuts-and-bolts and bread-and-butter kind of questions, like do we want to build a new meetinghouse. Do we want to build a place? What should it look like? Do we want to build it bigger than we are so that we expand? And that's one of the things that I'm looking for is, 'Let's make Quakerism more of a thing in this country.' My gosh. There'd probably be a lot of people who would like that and might come and might actually come to make it larger. And then, as the older people struggle with their physical problems one after another, then they're less and less able to participate in meeting, and so then you have – you continue to have energy coming up. So I'm looking for that, but that's more of a nuts-and-bolts kind of – it's not a spiritual question.

Johanna:

But it's something that supports spiritual growth. It's like a prerequisite.

Helen:

Not necessarily. Because I feel like even though now we're meeting over Zoom, and we're far apart, I don't feel like it gets in the way of spiritual journey or spiritual formation or anything. There are a few people who do say that. They say 'I cannot connect over Zoom,' and part of it is they're uncomfortable with the technology, but part of it is it just doesn't work for them. So some of those people have disappeared, because they can't or don't feel comfortable attending in person or on Zoom. And that's a big problem. But I feel like we're keeping the core of the important things that we do for each other, despite all these issues that might come up that just make it difficult to meet physically. So somehow, I kind of wonder, if I asked that question of the people in our meeting, what people would say.

Johanna:

If you asked which question?

Helen:

'What are you searching for? What is it that you really want but that you're not quite getting?' I bet there would be some people who would have long answers to that question.

Johanna:

Yes. And I think part of it is – what I'm curious about is what makes people come alive. And I like talking to older and younger people who seem to me like they're really *alive*. I guess I'm learning that, in younger people, that often shows up with things like hunger and yearning, both of them. But that's not the only facet. It's just the one I see a lot of this year. And maybe things like marvel and wonder and joy and learning are other facets that we could keep looking at.



Helen:

Yeah. When you say *alive*, I wonder what it is to not be alive.

Johanna:

Oh.

Helen:

No. Seriously.

Johanna:

I have some stories about that, too. That might be another day!

Helen:

Because one of the things that I think that I've – and maybe I'll just leave you with the thought – one thing that I've learned over a lot of experiences in my life is that everybody is alive, you just have to reach that aliveness in people. They may not be showing it to you, but that doesn't mean that they're boring or dead. It's there. That's the 'Light within' when we say Quakers see the light in other people or we see that of God, that's what I think of.

Johanna:

Hmm. That's a new way of looking at it. I think about curiosity, too. I'm interacting with some people who are both contented with their lives and feel no reason to grow very much more. And when I meet them –

Helen:

Is that what they – I'm sorry. Is that what they tell you? Or is that what –

Johanna:

That's what I – that's what my judgment is, based on their actions.

Helen:

Yeah.

Johanna:

And so this is my judgment. But I do wonder. 'What are you curious about? What are you interested in?' And from what I see, I'm not sure. I really don't know. What I see is that some people seem to be saying, 'I'm kind of comfortable doing what I'm doing. I'm just going to keep doing this.' And if it works for them, great. But if it works for them and blocks others, then that's not great.

Helen:

Uh-huh. So it's more than being satisfied with themselves. It's being – maybe, they're gatekeeping. Right?

Johanna:

Yes.



Helen:
Saying, 'You're not going to.'

Johanna:
Yes. That's the word, gatekeeping. That, to me, that's spiritually dead.

[Johanna shares an example of someone saying no in a way that felt like gatekeeping.]

Johanna:
The message was not, 'We're all tired, but we wonder if you can find some other people who could find a date and time and then do it.' Or, 'How can we help you make that idea?' There is such fatigue going on, I think, and that makes it hard to say yes to new ideas. So when someone comes along with a new idea, people may end up thinking, 'Oh, I'm worn out.' We have a lot of stuff to maintain at once, and not a lot of people to do the work. So I think then it's harder to say yes.

Helen:
Right. The structure is part of it, part of what gets in the way. But then there also seems to be a – maybe there's an active don't-rattle-my-cage kind of thing.

Johanna:
Yeah. That's what I'm feeling.

Helen:
As if they're saying, 'Don't make me have to think differently, because that's scary for me.'

Johanna:
Yes.

Helen:
I mean getting older is scary enough, as you will discover!

Johanna:
So I hear!

Helen:
And so people are going through more things than you may know, and there may be other reasons they're kind of holding on to that structure. And that fatigue sounds like there might be something underneath that.

Johanna:
Yeah. That's the truth.

Helen:
But anyway, yes. That's interesting.

[We took a pause here and then wrapped up. We parted with warm goodbyes.]



Johanna:

Thanks for this time, Helen. I think it's time to move. I've got to go stretch or something.

Helen:

Yes. Really, me too. Well, it was so nice to talk to you both.

JT:

Likewise. Thank you, Helen!

Thanks for reading. We offer this transcript for free, in the hopes that the ideas presented here will help us build a diverse, inter-generational faith community. Please consider donating to this effort. Sharing a person's story in a faithful way requires more than 15 hours of work for each transcript. To donate to the Listening Project, visit forwardinfaithfulness.org/donate

*To learn more about Helen's work, including some updates on her retirement, see www.umass.edu/cie/helen-fox-edd-1991. Helen's most recent book is *Fractured: Race Relations in 'Post-Racial' American Life*. It is available through Amazon.*

*Helen was the first Quaker that I'd ever met. Her presence had a profound effect on my spiritual life. While I was enrolled University of Michigan, I took two of her classes: *Nonviolence in Action and International Development*. Her classes were demanding and rewarding. I looked forward to them.*

One day in class, Helen mentioned her involvement with the Michigan Peace Team. MPT, now called the Meta Peace Team, is a grassroots organization committed to nonviolence. Its Peacekeepers work locally and internationally. In 1998, Helen and other Peacekeepers stood as a human barrier between the KKK and anti-Klan protestors in Ann Arbor. The clashes between the two groups were alarming. However, the Peacekeepers had negotiated with Ann Arbor police for the ability to stand in the middle.

When Helen shared this story with us, I was amazed. I was amazed to learn that people would put their bodies at risk for the sake of peace. I also felt inspired. It was hearing this story and observing how Helen lived her life that convinced to start attending my first Quaker meeting.

When the KKK came to Ann Arbor, I was nine years old. I remember the priest at my parents' church warning us about impending violence. He pleaded with people to stay home, even from the counter-protests. "Don't even go to look," he'd said.

Given the lack of training in our congregation, this was wise advice. However, it also shows a certain value system, one which tends to put safety ahead of faithfulness and witness. There is a



fascinating account of MPT's role in keeping peace at that KKK rally. To learn more, visit the Ann Arbor News archives at <https://aadl.org/node/322561>.)

- Johanna Jackson



Discussion Questions

- 1. What, if anything, helps you find depth inside your relationships? Are there times when levity, or even shallowness, is important for you?*
- 2. Who are the people you know who are "doing something unusual?" What values or commitments sustain them in this work?*
- 3. What nourishes your spirit? What language do you use to describe faith and trust in the world? What's your own version of 'Have faith in Jesus?'*