



*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 spiritual nourishment in the Quaker world? There are no scripted questions for a listening session; however, there are a variety of themes that might show up.*

*The Listening Project is an ongoing endeavor by J.T. Dorr-Bremme and Johanna Jackson. We rely entirely on grants and personal donations to fund this work. To learn more, or to support creative conversations like this one, visit [forwardinfaithfulness.org](http://forwardinfaithfulness.org)*

## **Melinda Wenner Bradley**

West Chester Friends Meeting

Youth Religious Life Coordinator,  
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

Age: 50

Pronouns: she



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**Tags:** committee work, spiritual gifts, a segregated Society, long-term members, newcomers, Nominating Committee, integration, gender, gender roles, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, rest, resistance, foremothers, balance



**Melinda Wenner Bradley** and I decided to meet together for an interview after sharing a lively email exchange. We had been wondering: When are we giving too much? How do we sustain our ministry? And how much of our "giving" is linked to our gender as women? So we met together on a Tuesday morning in March, 2021.

Since many of the themes related to gender, JT decided to step back from the conversation. This gave Melinda and I space to explore as if we were inside a women's caucus. We talk about Quaker structure, The Giving Tree, and what it feels like to live in a Quaker society that's segregated between newcomers and long-term members. I was delighted by Melinda's suggestion that maybe, someday, Quaker committees could re-form themselves to be more like a guild, or a training ground, where many people can learn.

For more information on Melinda's work, visit the [Philadelphia Yearly Meeting website](#). To request a copy of her slides/ workshop, which focus on welcoming and including of children, youth, and families, you can reach out to Melinda at [mwennerbradley@pym.org](mailto:mwennerbradley@pym.org).

- Johanna Jackson



[As we started, Melinda hinted that since the conversation was recorded, she might hold some of her sassiness in.]

@Johanna

No. No, I think sassiness is needed in the Quaker world! [laughter].

@Melinda

Probably anywhere!

@Johanna

Yeah! So let's let it out!

[pause]

@Johanna

Well earlier, on email, we were going back and forth a lot and talking about money. And you said, 'When I was in my thirties, I wish that someone had brought up some of these questions, because I thought that basically I should give myself to the ministry and that was the expectation.' And, now there's – we each are exploring our balances of how much we give and when we give, and when it's free. Yeah. So I was wondering if you could say more about that?



@Melinda

Yeah, well I think I've also said to you that I, actually – and maybe this is a half step or a full step to back up - that I did not grow up in my meeting with any sense that everyday people, like Quakers among us, the Quakers I knew, *carried ministry*. I think that's largely a function of the *kind* of meeting that I grew up in. I also grew up with really no sense of the programmed, the more pastoral programmed branch of Quakerism. Like a lot of young people, I think, in liberal unprogrammed meetings, I thought we were what Quakerism is. So it was a revelation to me, when I participated in the 1987 Quaker Youth Pilgrimage as a high school student, to be with Young Friends from across the country and to learn about Friends' churches and other forms of worship.

So, I didn't grow up with a sense that people could be ministers or have a more formal role to play as elders and people sharing ministry. So it's been – that's been a transition for me, to think about that. For me, I'm pretty clear that my ministry is a teaching ministry. I was, by vocation, a classroom teacher in schools for twenty years, and I think I'm still a teacher. But it really was a switch for me, from, 'I'm a teacher, and I get paid to do that kind of work, so I'll volunteer with the Quaker work that I do.' Volunteerism was something that I grew up with a really strong sense of from my parents who volunteered in lots of different ways for things that they believed in and causes they were part of. So I came at it from a sense of 'Well, when you join a committee, or when you do something, you're volunteering.' And somewhere for me something shifted. It was through that committee work, it was through volunteering to work with the children's program -- that something bigger began to grow in me, or something that was already there was uncovered.

@Johanna  
Mm-hmm.

@Melinda  
Which was a ministry!

@Johanna  
Wow!

@Melinda  
I took a very long time to call it that. And I still find myself, there's just a teeny bit of a catch for me. And I think and hope that's humility — the idea that you have been given this ministry - that there are some things that you carry and hold that are not just yours. That are from Spirit. And God has given you some particular gift. I think we've all been given gifts. But if yours is one that you are called to share more widely, I think that's a pretty humbling thing. To have decided or felt or realized that that's been laid on you.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Lloyd Lee Wilson would agree! See "Spiritual Gifts in the Faith Community" in his book *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*. Available at most Meetinghouse libraries and at [quakerbooks.org](http://quakerbooks.org).



So, because of the strong volunteerism that my parents modeled as I was growing up, I was like, 'Sure, I'll do that thing for you, sure I'll do that thing – I'm a good helper, I'm a worker bee!' And, it was interesting because I think – I think the first time that somebody - not called me out, but called me *into* a different way of looking at it was when we had moved to New York. I was asked to do Quakerism programs for parents at Friends Academy. You know, there's always conversation about the elitism and the Quaker nature of Friends Schools, and this is a school that I would put in the category of being challenged with how to address that within the community it serves on Long Island. As opposed to, I think sometimes the smaller Friends Schools are more diverse in about every way possible and are getting a short shrift when we have that conversation about elitism and the Quaker nature of schools.

But it was a school that was seeking to have people come in and do Quakerism programs. Another Quaker in the school community was part of getting me there to do programs. I was asked about an honorarium, and I was like, "Oh, no need! My daughter goes to school here and I'm a part of the community, and I just want to be able to help." And this Friend was clear, 'No. Your time is valuable; you should be compensated.' But their other reason that was even more important, and helped me to accept compensation for the programs I created and facilitated: 'It's really important for the school' – and you can insert any institution or group here - 'to recognize the value of what you're bringing with a Quakerism program for the school.'

@Johanna  
Wow! Yeah!

@Melinda  
I realized that if they were having a speaker come to talk about nutrition, or they were having a speaker come to talk about whatever, they would pay that facilitator a speaker's fee! So the same should be true here. And the Friends' point was really, the school needed to value

anything, any message, any programming around Quakerism. And then of course it's always your choice - there have been times where I have been given an honorarium, and have turned it around and given it back to the group. There was a church that I did a Godly Play introduction for the Godly Play Foundation - it had nothing to do with Quakers - and it was a church that I knew that paying the fee for this program was probably a stretch for them, so I tithed it back to them and said, 'Put this into your program that you're about to start.'

@Johanna  
Neat!

@Melinda  
My work with the church had been the start of the conversation, and I was able to make this donation to what comes next. So, it's also been helpful to me to know that you have the



option to do that. But, I think your bigger question is that for people carrying ministry, there needs to be support for them. And that practice is deep in our Quaker history. When people were released to travel in the ministry, there was a time when it was things like, 'I'm going to come over and help your family with whatever is needed in their household.' Farming things needs to be done. Livestock needs to be tended to, children need to be tended to, whatever it might be. Oh! I didn't mean to put livestock and children right next to each other. [laughter] Let's put children at the top of the list!

Yeah, because we know that women traveled as well, in ministry, from the earliest time of Friends. So, that idea of being released into a ministry I think is incredibly important. But that release isn't just that individual support and spiritual support, but also financial support — to help shepherd that and steward that financial piece, for that person.

@Johanna  
Mm-hmm.

@Melinda  
Whether the meeting, for example, is giving to it, or whether they are finding other sources to help support that person's ministry.

@Johanna  
That is helpful.

@Melinda  
And I can think of some Friends who have done this much more than I have, like Windy Cooler—

@Johanna  
Mm-hmm

@Melinda  
—is someone at Baltimore Yearly Meeting who, Sandy Spring Meeting really holds her ministry in care, and helps to support that. She is a released Friend with spiritual and financial support from her meeting. And Emily Provance in New York Yearly Meeting is traveling in the ministry full time. Those are two people that I think would be great for you to also speak with, if you haven't already.

@Johanna  
Yeah. Those are names that are on our priority list! [laughter] But the list also has building a website, and applying for grants, and still transcribing all the interviews, so it'll be awhile! But Windy spoke at our monthly Meeting for Worship for Business, that week that JT and I asked for \$120. And then we had a talk together about whether the meeting might be a steward for



other donations we'd receive down the line. And Windy said, 'Look. You might believe that your meeting can't give large sums of money to an individual, but my meeting gave me \$5000 to support my ministry.' I don't know how the details worked. We're going to talk about it sometime soon. I thought that was really cool, though. They trusted that the donations would come in, the money would equal out, and they just decide to be a steward - a financial steward - of her gift and her calling. That really left an impression on me!

@Melinda

Yeah. And, well, I forgot that State College has dual membership with Baltimore and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. And I think Windy's been there to do a couple of programs around her ministry and the parable of the Good Samaritan?

@Johanna

Yup. Yes. Two in a row. I think she's a great speaker.

*[Melinda shared about an organization that supports Friends who are living their ministry, called Releasing Ministry Alliance.]*

@Melinda

It's like a container, and support, for helping people have their ministry be known. It's a really cool concept.

@Johanna

Cool. Cool. Yeah, I will take a look. Thinking about the roots of our conversation, when we had that email exchange about money, here's something I'm wondering. I wonder: how much of the lessons we learned about *giving* are about *gender*, too? Because for me, I was really - I was taught to give an inordinate amount as a woman. *The Giving Tree* was a highly valued book when I was growing up. And it shows giving until you die! And it radiates the goodness of that! And that was a key lesson that I received while growing up.

@Melinda

And I think we all knew that the tree in the book was, somehow, female-identified!

@Johanna

Yeah it's not just the branches as hair!

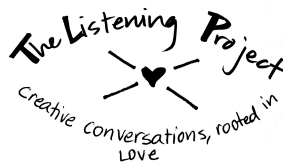
@Melinda

I don't know it says 'she' as a pronoun in the book or not, but-

@Johanna

I think it does!

@Melinda [nodding]



I think it does.

@Johanna

'Swing from her branches.' Yeah. Mm-hmm!

@Melinda

Yeah! Shel Silverstein — he got it right so much, but not with that story!

@Johanna

Right. Right!

@Melinda

Yeah. I agree. And, well, I think that is true. I think there is a lot to unpack there. I feel certain that there are entire studies that have been done about this topic, starting with watching preschoolers play - what comes through in even the earliest ages. Who are the caretakers? What roles are girls given? When we think about Quaker outreach and holding faith communities and supporting them with hospitality and care, there may be the idea that we tend the home fires. And it's so funny because our Quaker foremothers, they were also out and about! They were hardly sitting at home all the time. Which is interesting, because I think of the Faith & Play story about Margaret Fell, which centers around Swarthmoor Hall!<sup>2</sup>  
[laughter]

@Johanna

Huh!

@Melinda

And it is true that for Fell, that was her home that became a refuge for early Friends, and her hospitality, and her willingness to give Quakerism a physical home, as well as in other ways, is really central to her story. And I'm sure that you could do it in another way, but the story also does talk about her being in prison, her being on the road, and traveling. So it is interesting. But, yeah. I wonder how we are conditioned to be givers as female-identifying people. I think part of the flip side of that is finding it difficult to receive things.

@Johanna

Yeah.

@Melinda

The challenge of receiving.

@Johanna

Yeah.

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Fell was known as one of the founders of Quakerism. Her home, Swarthmoor Hall, was a center of Quaker activity, a meeting place for Friends from many backgrounds.



@Melinda

I know that I find that challenging. I know that's difficult for me in more than one way. I think for me this is a combination of how I was raised, and my personality, and all manner of

things that may be too many things to unpack. Also, it goes back to recognizing that you have a ministry, but is that comfortable? What does that mean? I both yearn to be seen in that role, but when I am seen, and am asked to receive that being seen in some way, I get uncomfortable. I'm challenged by that.

@Johanna

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

@Melinda

It's just this kind of icky tension of, like, wanting to be known and seen, and called on - and I'm fine to be called on to *serve*, but it's like, if somebody wants to name something in me, like a compliment or some recognition, I'm like, 'Uh, thanks - I'm not really sure that's true, but . . .' And I think that's probably a very female-identifying paradigm.

@Johanna

Yeah. Yeah! I recently - I'm close friends with another woman, who has been doing some really beautiful work to unwrite that from her life. And I was raised by a real strong, firm mom: she was a doctor, she knew what she liked, she made the rules. So I was raised in a sort of subculture of womanhood that, I think, included different messaging in this area. But I know so many people who are really uncomfortable receiving recognition. And I don't know any of them to be men. Well, maybe one. But, it's such a - it's such a *loss* to people that identify as women. That, in order to be seen, we have the 'mal-alignment feeling' because we are getting recognized. And we were taught that that's maybe not okay.

@Melinda

Yeah. And, well, we watch it get played out in front of us, in our society and culture, all the time. You know? Women who are leaders when people cannot handle their voice - that's one. Not believing women, too. I mean, I think there's just a lot that reinforces this. I mean, I think about my own parenting. Having an oldest child who's a daughter, and then two sons. And how we've been - and we were always careful in terms of following where the children seemed to want to go with their interests and their voices. I don't think we were quite awakened to the idea that gender identification is something that doesn't always go along with the sex assigned at birth. Back in the early 2000s, when my children were being born.

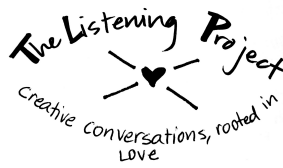
@Johanna

Yeah!

@Melinda

I would probably approach that differently now. I mean, you know, I had a girl, so she was a





girl, and I'd approach that differently as a parent now. With more openness. But, at the same time, in terms of the choices of toys and books and those kinds of things, I remember being careful about leaving it open. Not trying to be specific. But I think there's another layer. Which is more about not reinforcing those roles. It's not just the things you play with or whatever. Because [my daughter] chose to play with dolls and loved babies, and wanted to be a mother. And [my son] also had a doll, Baby Man-

@Johanna

Baby Man was the name of the doll?!

@Melinda

Baby Man.

@Johanna

Oh yeah! Wow! [laughter]

@Melinda

Yeah. He's in my office, actually! I found him in a box, and I was like, '*Baby Man!*' Oh, and actually, they were parents of the dolls together. They're only 25 months apart in age, so they were very close and played together a lot. And they were both like, 'Yeah. We're both Kate's parents.' Ellie had a doll named Kate, who was her daughter.

But I think I was watching for things like, that [my daughter] didn't give in. I didn't want her thinking, growing up, that she needed to give in or capitulate. That she needed to caretake for her brother to the extent that she would suppress things about herself.

@Johanna

Yup. Mm-hmm. [nodding]

@Melinda

And I think both of my sons are very much caretakers. They're very loving, and I think - I'm hopeful [laughter] that as grown men they will have internalized some of these lessons! And they've certainly watched their father. I mean, I'll say this too, I think this is also true about Quakers, and other people of faith as well. But my partner, my spouse Matt, he has entirely, I mean, *unwaveringly*, supported my ministry-

@Johanna

Mmm!

@Melinda

- I'm going to get a little emotional. I was like, 'Hey, I've been invited to go to Peru for a



week. Hey, I'm going to Kenya for ten days. He has never wavered. He's always completely supported it, and that meant that he had to take on more at home. I did not anticipate the blizzard they had while I was gone! He called me or texted me and asked, 'Do the kids have snow boots?' and I was like, 'Oh. I didn't think of that.' I thought of everything else, but not snow boots!

The important point is that I'm glad that my children have watched him do that, too. And, I've certainly supported him and his career entirely, as well. I mean, I've moved and done things. But they have always seen him say yes. And then he would do what was needed to support that yes. So I think that was important to both sons and daughters, for all of them, to see.

@Johanna  
That is cool!

@Melinda  
Yeah. I should probably tell him thank you!

@Johanna  
Mm-hmm. Last night JT and I waxed poetic about [a Friend], saying all the things about her that we're really glad for, And I was like, 'We have to tell her this!' If we have so many positive things to say about her work, and her way of being, then we've got to let her know!

@Melinda  
Yeah, people need to hear. That's true, that's very true.

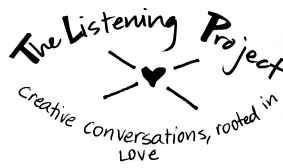
*[pause]*

@Johanna  
I want to ask you one more thing about gender. So, you mentioned once that your path is bringing you now to - is it a Masters in Divinity? It's bringing you to more education.

@Melinda  
Yeah. I'm starting seminary in the fall for my Master of Divinity. And I say this, and we'll see how far it goes, but I think this is to prepare to do a Doctor of Ministry program, which the school I'm doing to has.

@Johanna  
Neat!

@Melinda  
But who knows! I might get two years into an MDiv program and be like, 'This'll be enough



for me.' But my dream right now, my hope, is to keep going. Because I really want to do research and write more.

@Johanna

Cool! So, you shared in an interview once that it's difficult to be heard, because of the infantilization of women who work with children. And you're hoping that this career piece, this additional step, might change how you're heard. So I was wondering, if you did the same experience, the same paths, the same work with youth, but you were a man, what would be different?

@Melinda

Wow. So, with the disclaimer that this is just my opinion — although, I suppose it's based on a certain degree of experience: Yeah. I think I would be heard more. I think I would be listened to more. For sure. Yeah, and I actually feel a little angry about it, and I'm just going to go ahead and say that-

@Johanna

Great!

@Melinda

-and let that be there.

@Johanna

Yeah.

@Melinda

I think that it would be both more novel - you know, a man doing this kind of work, and holding this kind of work, isn't that so cool? - because it's not really typical. I run into a lot of authors and people who do great research and writing about spiritual formation - and there are men in this field, as well as women. It's interesting, though, that there's sort of a different tenor to the two kinds of writing. Often the books written - you know, I have about a stack of books that are written about church and children and the future. All the things that I'm, like, rabidly interested in. And the ones written by women tend to be more family-centered, sometimes, and more practical, in some ways.

@Johanna

Wow!

@Melinda

Yeah. So there's plenty of research and writing by women in an academic setting, as well. It may just be the books I'm buying, too. But - yeah. I think I would be heard more. [pause] I think, in our society, the voice of someone identifying as a man carries more legitimacy and weight, still.



@Johanna  
Mm-hmm. Yup!

@Melinda  
Again, I think there may be some of this component that's sort of about the novelty, you know: 'Isn't it charming, and interesting, and wonderful, that this man would focus his work on children and-

@Johanna  
His life!

@Melinda  
-and, I mean, you know. With good reason we revere people like Robert Coles.<sup>3</sup> I mean, his *work* itself, it stands there, but - yes, I think so.

@Johanna  
Yeah.

@Melinda  
I - you know, I think I said that to you, that going and doing my MDiv might give more weight to my work - I mean, I don't know. We'll see. I don't think Quakers are *particularly* wound up about people having degrees. I mean, we don't use titles like 'doctor,' 'your honor,' you know. So I'm not sure that it will create any shift for Friends, to have - I mean, I already have a Masters Degree in Education, and I don't put those initials after my name on my signature in PYM<sup>4</sup> emails, or anything like that. It just would feel strange to me, to do that. But it'll be interesting to see how it feels [to have another degree.] There was a time many, many years ago when I was doing Godly Play, and I was training to be a trainer. I was doing that training with a beautiful Friend who's a male-identifying person, and we often facilitated together; we were a team, and loved working together. And somebody observed that my experience was more like down on the floor with kids, doing the work. Like I brought an element of stories from the field, so to speak.

@Johanna  
Yup! Yup.

@Melinda  
And he had a Divinity degree, and was a scholar to a great extent - as well as a practitioner, a skilled practitioner. But the person's observation was that he had theological grounding for the work that I didn't have. Which was true - I mean, sure, I hadn't studied theology

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3 Robert Coles is the author of books on child psychology and child spirituality.

4 PYM stands for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. This is a Quaker body that includes New Jersey, Delaware, Eastern Maryland, and Central Pennsylvania. It is made up of over 100 local meetings inside these states.



anywhere, up until that point. So I think for me there's also a personal component to the MDiv. I mean, first of all, feeling like I should've done it ten years ago. And that's a whole story about being a woman and a wife and a mother. I ended up doing the ministry before I did the preparation for it! You know, I thought - it was towards the end of my time of teaching in a classroom, and I thought, 'Well maybe I should do an MDiv, and then I'll be prepared to take that other path.' Well, the other path — my feet got put on it in NYYM<sup>5</sup> —

@Johanna  
Yup!

@Melinda  
I walked the path, and now I'm at a moment where I can do this. But at the time, the person who shared that was not wrong. But it was interesting that we fell, the two of us, in knowing each other and doing the work, we really fell into this kind of stereotyped dichotomy that he was the learned scholar and I was the, you know, the nurturer.

@Johanna  
Whoah!

@Melinda  
And it worked. We were actually a great team because we brought different things. But for me, I think there was this personal piece that I wanted to do that work that I hadn't done. And it feels a little indulgent! Like I'm going to go do this thing and study and take classes that I've wanted to do for a long time, and that's so cool. Again, I think of it as being preparation for the *other* thing that I really want to do.

And I also feel like - I mean, age is a factor here as well. I will be in my mid- to late-fifties, by the time I'm done, if I do both degrees! And I'm needing to do it part-time, because I need to keep working, because I have children I am putting through college. So there is this weird feeling, like, am I going to have time to do all the things I want to do? And can I make some kind of shift that late? In a life, in a career. So, yeah. I think - I feel a little bit envious of people who chose the path that I'm on, and who know that path sooner. But I also wouldn't be the person I am if I hadn't walked the whole path to get here.

@Johanna  
Yeah.

@Melinda  
This is really not your question or answering your question at all! [laughter]

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<sup>5</sup> NYYM stands for New York Yearly Meeting. This is a Quaker body that provides programs inside of New York state. It is made up of 64 local meetings. It defines itself as a community, an organization, and also as a set of gatherings.



@Johanna

That's fine; it's always interesting, and that's what matters! [laughter] And, it does answer it somehow. [pause] Because you're talking about the motivation for this choice. And the motivation goes beyond, 'I'm a woman and I'm not being heard.' The motivation is much, much bigger and broader. So it's really helpful context. Yeah.

@Melinda

And it feels like a choice for *myself*. It feels like something I'm choosing for myself. And that's - that is something - I mean, I'm going to say this, my husband might not agree. But doing some of the travel I've done, the international travel, that felt like I was *called* to do that, through my ministry, as opposed to being my choice. I wasn't like, 'Hey, I think that it'd be fun to go to Britain Yearly Meeting.' I was asked and invited to go. This feels like something I'm really choosing to do for myself.

@Johanna

Cool!

@Melinda

And that *does* feel cool; that feels empowered.

@Johanna

That is really neat! Yeah. Wow. Every part of the journey was important; this part gets to be enjoyable!

@Melinda

I hope so! [laughter]

@Johanna

I hope so, too! [laughter]

@Johanna

Who knows what September will bring!

@Melinda

Check in in a year; see how I'm feeling then.

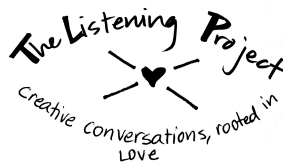
@Johanna

Okay, we'll see.

@Melinda

And you know, the other thing is – one of the things my spouse does say – he will say to me, 'If you're going to do something else, you've got to drop something.'

@Johanna



Oh, neat!

@Melinda

I really am glad for him being there to remind me of that. Always in good humor, and always in a supportive way! Never cranky. But it's true, there are a couple of things that I will no longer be doing, come the fall, that I think create the space for this, but that might have been happenstance if that weren't for him asking me to be intentional of 'What do you let go of so you can add something?' And it's just - he knows that I would just keep adding things.

@Johanna

Yes. Yeah. I would too.

@Melinda

Which also is the reason for a regular Support Committee, One time I had a Support Committee that really functioned beautifully, even though we were on the phone with each other - I'm not sure we had Zoom, yet. I was in New York; these two people were both in Philadelphia. And I was talking to one of them at PYM Sessions, and we were talking about the things I was doing. And they were like, 'You need a Support Committee. Can we *be* that for you? It doesn't - we don't have to be in the same place!'

@Johanna

Yup. Yup! Exactly.

@Melinda

I think that's something we need also to be thinking about. When I was trying to decide whether I was really called to go to Kenya and do the work there, I did call upon Friends for a Support Committee in my local meeting. They are wonderful people, and one Friend asked me exactly the questions I needed to be asked. But for whatever reason, I don't think they are really people to hold the work with me, which is more about me than them. So I need to think more creatively. The pandemic has interrupted our sense that we have to sit around the table together, to do some of the things - I mean, we yearn to do that, but at the same time, we've been shown that there are other possibilities.

@Johanna

Yeah.

@Melinda

So I think that that's also important. And my point really was that [my husband] sometimes - well, he's not exactly a Support Committee - he's one person and my spouse, there are other pieces there - but he is somebody who accompanies me.

@Johanna

Mm-hmm.



@Melinda

Things like reminding me, 'If you're going to pick up something, you have to release something.' That's accompaniment. I know that for him, because he knows me well, it's not just 'If you don't let go of something, we might not ever eat dinner ever again.' It's also, he's concerned about my health. My well-being, that encompasses more. So I know that it's not a selfish thing for him. I think it's more that he's looking out for me.

@Johanna

And that line that he shared - that is such an important statement of boundaries and limits! Wow! Quakers really struggle with boundaries and limits, I think. For instance, I called someone to thank them, because at Business Meeting they said, 'I've decided to stop clerking such-and-such committee, because I'm also in this other committee, and I'm choosing one at a time.' And I was like, 'Hallelujah!'

But that's a revolutionary act, right now, with our current culture in the Quaker world. And so are his words, I think.

@Melinda

We also, at some point, said to each other - 'One board at a time.' I was asked to serve on another board, I'm on the Pendle Hill Board now, and that's one of the things that's going to come to an end in the fall, one of the things that I'm releasing. But I said no. That's our other rule, one board at a time.

@Johanna

Nice!

@Melinda

Because board work - it's heart work. I mean, if you're going to serve on a board, you have to give of yourself and be attentive and really hold that stewardship seriously.

[pause for worship. Something moved in the quiet, and we took a new direction.]

@Johanna

What's one thing we could do, as a Quaker body, to get closer to healthy limits with what people give? [pause] Hmm. That's probably a big, big question, and I'll try and take a stab at it, too.

[pause]

@Melinda

It's funny, because actually what rises for me is - I mean, I know there are answers to 'how to set better limits,' but - so this is, I'm coming kind of backwards to answer the question. But one of the things that rises for me is: calling more people *in*.





@Johanna

Yes. Yes! Oh my gosh!

@Melinda

And by saying that, I mean 2/3rds.<sup>6</sup> One of the things that is in this workshop that I have about welcome and inclusion of young people and families with young children is: Don't assume that people don't have time. Don't assume, for someone else, what they can and can't do. I was in a group where Governance and Nominating was giving a report. They were talking about who they had spoken to about serving on this body. And they had particular care around wanting to ask some folks who were young adults [to serve]. And I looked around the room, at the people who were there, and realized that I thought that there were probably two of us who were not identifiably *young* adults in their 30s, but were probably more like in our 40s or early 50s. And so I asked a question about, you know, 35-55 year olds, 2/3rds — were there people in that group who you have thought about to serve? Because that's who's missing, here. And honestly that's who's missing almost everywhere in

Quaker circles. Certainly when we gather for Sessions with the Yearly Meeting, I'm like, 'Where are my people?' We've talked about that, though.

When I asked the question to the nominating committee about people 35-55, their response was to very nicely explain to me: 'Well, people in that age group, they're working, and they may have children. Coming to these meetings is probably hard for them.' And I was like, well, *I'm* here. Why would you assume? All that you can do is identify gifts and ask! Let people decide for themselves if they can serve.

@Johanna

Mmm!

@Melinda

And if you identify gifts and you don't ask, you are *blocking Spirit!* You know, really, if you identify a gift, and feel like you are led to ask [the person to serve the community in some way], you really need to ask. Someone may say no. And maybe the question really is, 'What can we do to support you doing this? What would make this possible?'

@Johanna

Yeah.

@Melinda

Would having childcare make it possible? Would being able to Zoom instead of being physically present make it possible? You know, thinking in broad ways, here. If we asked you to go do this thing for a weekend, and we made sure that meals were delivered to your family

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<sup>6</sup> 2/3rds are people in their 2nd 3rd of life (said as "second thirds.") Generally, they are ages 30-55. These folks are underrepresented when it comes to leadership roles and involvement in the Quaker world.



- would that help? I mean, that's

what Quakers were doing in the 1700s-

@Johanna

That is a good point! And it could be meals that fit your child's gluten-free, dairy-free needs. We can do that!

@Melinda

Yeah! Whatever it might be! It's funny, my answer to your question is: We need to call more people in. And usually I'm thinking about calling those people in, because I'm like, 'Yo. If you don't call those [2/3rd] people in, as time marches on, there's just not going to be anybody.'

@Johanna

Oh yes! That's for sure. I don't know how many dozens of people are saying this! But only in closed conversations, that don't get *out*. The message isn't really getting to people who have the ability to change that. And it's not *changing*.

@Melinda

Right. And, you know, it's interesting, Johanna. Because I had the experience on Saturday morning [when we were at Continuing Sessions for PhYM], when you were sharing a message like this. And right then, I was actually very frustrated. I mean I was glad for you, you know, sharing, what you shared, but I was kind of feeling like, 'I keep *saying* this!' And I was watching the folks on the Zoom screen, nodding and nodding-

@Johanna

Oh my gosh! Yes.

@Melinda

And I was like, I've been saying this for *years!*

@Johanna

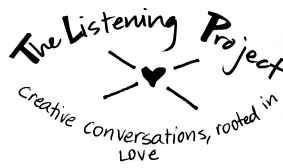
Yeah!

@Melinda

And so I think you're right. We need to figure out *how* those voices get amplified. The people who are saying this need to somehow find... I don't know. But it needs to be better heard. And I think we're bumping up against comfort level, in this case. I mean, I think that there are a lot of people who are very comfortable with things the way they are, and it's gonna mean change. Change can be hard...

@Johanna

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.



@Melinda

But I think, you know - when we decided about whether to change our committee structure in my meeting with Nominating in the last year - I feel like I've told you that story - I was like, 'Why can't we simplify this? And put all these different things we do in six buckets?' And ask someone to serve in one of those - well, not in a bucket, but on a committee - I heard, 'Oh, no. There are like eight of us that do everything. If you only create six things, we're going to have to *serve* on all six, or on half of those.' But I was wondering — if we simplified it, will more people feel that it's accessible?' That was my point. If it's simplified, *will more people find it accessible?* Will they be called in?

@Johanna

Mm-hmm. I want to say something to that.

@Melinda

In terms of finding a place for themselves.

@Johanna

That's it! *That's* the piece. Because there are people in their 30s and 40s who are like, 'Committees are joyless. I'm not going to join one. Because I'm not finding joy, and it's a huge burden of time, and I'm not willing - I need to set really strong boundaries, once I'm on a committee. So I'm not participating in that.' And so, yes to calling people in, but then also, I think we really need to overhaul what we are - what the original question is. Because, in my community, when I talk to people in their 70s and 60s, I'm hearing folks from those generations say, 'Committees are a place where we get great work done. They're where the social fabric of the meeting stitches itself together; we make friends; we get to know each other more deeply.' The committee work goes on, and it's like the pride jewel of a local meeting. In the views of these Friends.

And I'm hearing from people in their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s, say: 'This is frustrating. I don't have time for this.' Or, I'm hearing stories of people who are finding a committee that really worked, by flipping the structure. Like, clerkless committees are working for people! They are working for people who are on FGC planning groups.<sup>7</sup> So, if they're able to reorient the huge workload of being clerk, and also if they can simplify the amount of tasks they even consider *doing* as a committee - then they can *keep* the joy. But, maybe even, we need to go beyond *that!* Because, we have all these people who are on the fringes of our local meeting - here, at least - who, in my local meeting, are not getting invited in for a short-term, 30-day commitment. 'Would you like to work on this project? It's contained. You don't have to sign your soul over to the whole group. You can test it out.' I think that's what we need, too. To make roles that are more digestible!

@Melinda

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<sup>7</sup> FGC is the Friends General Conference, an annual gathering of Quakers and Quaker-curious folks from around North America. It rotates between different cities each year.



Yes! Yes, yes. It cannot feel like this monolith, give-your-whole-life-to-it kind of thing. I also wonder about the idea of looking at a committee kind of like a training ground, with masters and teachers. What if we looked at it like a guild?

@Johanna

Oh, yeah! I like that!

@Melinda

You know somebody in their 30s might be at the level of being the committee clerk and a master level committee member. And somebody who's new to Quakerism and in their 50s, you know, might be at the apprentice level. But thinking realistically about how people can serve and what they can give. And then giving people tools. So when we - when we made this shift in our meeting, I think that all but one or two of the committee clerks are 2/3rds, now. And the clerk of our meeting is a 2/3rd, too.

@Johanna

Wow!

@Melinda

And I think that - and we've talked about this, the idea of generational transition, I think it is a HUGE thing we have with BIG work to do as Friends. Because we need to make sure that the voices are all heard. This isn't about saying that the needs of older Friends and the expertise and the gifts of older Friends aren't needed and welcome. It's part of the whole.

But we're imbalanced. There is this imbalance of how we do that. And - something else you made me think of committees, and committee work, and people's gifts.

@Johanna

Yeah.

@Melinda

I think also, when someone feels like they're being *called in* because of gifts identified, it's easier to want to serve.

@Johanna

Yes! Somebody I know of said that they were asked once, 'Would you join this committee?' And they said to the person, 'We think that you will show up.' That was the invitation! That was the fucking invitation! She said, 'No.' And this was a long time ago, and that still hurts for that person who was asked that way.

@Melinda



Wow. That - that *is* a wound. That

would create a wound.

@Johanna

Yeah. It would, right? 'You're, uh, someone who *breathes*. So we think you should join this group we have going.'

@Melinda

Yeah, that's not great. There was something - there was something else you made me think of that was going on in my head. Maybe I'll think of it. But I appreciated what you shared about that, yeah. It is - there is this imbalance, in this moment. And, again. My meeting is an example of where some change has happened. And it's not unique to only us. So I find, these days, that I want to be careful not to sound like 'No meetings are creating multi-generational inclusion and community!' There are meetings that are doing really good work.

@Johanna

There are.

@Melinda

We need to be hearing from them more. And listening to what they've learned, and what they're trying, and what we can glean from that. So, it's not that they don't exist, but in the places where it's not happening, it can sometimes be really painful. And I think those are the places where people walk away. People leave!

@Johanna

Mm-hmm.

@Melinda

Because they have not found their way in. I think I said this to you before, the story about my friend and the sandwich?

@Johanna

Oh?

@Melinda

When my friend was a little girl, her mother made her a sandwich every day, and always cut the sandwich in half. And one day someone else made her lunch, and the person made a sandwich for her and didn't cut it. And she looked at the sandwich on the plate, she looked at the adult, and she said, *How do I get in??*

@Johanna

Oh my gosh! Wow! [laughter]



@Melinda

And I think, that story is so great-

@Johanna

That's so good!

@Melinda

It's adorable, but it's also, like, there are a lot of people who look at the meeting like a sandwich on a plate and go, 'I don't know how to get in. There's no place in for me.'

@Johanna

Yup! Yeah.

@Melinda

So I think, meetings often feel like: 'We are genuinely welcoming you! We want more youth and families!' and, you know, they're really trying to do welcome. But you can be welcoming and not inclusive. And it's that *belonging* piece. I was hopping out of my seat on Saturday morning when Melissa Rycroft<sup>8</sup> was talking about belonging [at Continuing Sessions]. I'm like, 'That's a whole slide in my workshop that I love!'

@Johanna

Nice!

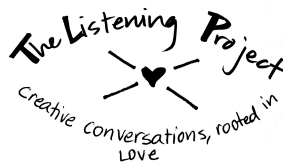
@Melinda

Because Diana Butler Bass, who's a theologian and progressive Christian writer, she has written about a certain paradigm shift. For a long time, for the last hundred or 200 years, in church, we have seen it as Believe - Behave - Belong. You believe; and then you go to the church; you behave; you know how to belong in the church. And that's been the flow of things. And Butler Bass says, no. We need to flip it the other way, back to what it was to early Christianity. And it - she grounds this in the gospels and a reflection on Jesus's teaching. Which, of course, early Friends were also seeking to return to that primitive early Christianity, in terms of norms and some of the pieces of who they were as a community. Butler Bass writes: 'It's Belong - Behave - Believe.' That you have to feel that you belong, first. And so for these meetings who say, 'Well, we're welcoming' - well, you may *welcome* people very warmly and graciously, but have you made them feel that they belong? Are they three years into attending worship and still don't know how to belong? Are they serving on a committee, attending meeting for business, part of fellowship and spiritual growth programs?

@Johanna

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<sup>8</sup> Melissa Rycroft is (soon-to-be) clerk of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, or PYM held a lively discussion about Membership and Belonging in March 2021. For more information, visit <https://www.pym.org/on-belonging-how-quakers-can-be-more-inviting/>



Mm-hmm.

@Melinda

They may have figured out how to *behave*, with our Quaker practices, but if they haven't felt that they belong - well, we have to start first with *belong*. And there are more things - they're in my slide, in the presentation - about how Jesus wasn't like, 'Are you a card-carrying Christian? Okay. Do you believe?'

@Johanna

Oh! Wow! Damn!

@Melinda

It was a community that they made - and of course it wasn't Christian, it was Jewish. And they explored how to behave, through things like the parables. And what he taught. And how he lived!

@Johanna

Mmm.

@Melinda

And so, it's a return. It's going back to that idea of how to belong. And Melissa was right - I appreciated what she had to say - that that's different than welcome. That's why when I say 'welcome' I usually say 'inclusion' and I mean belonging as part of that. I did some work with a meeting, in a different yearly meeting, and something that you said, this is what it made me think of. It's a big meeting, with a lot of people.

@Johanna

Yeah.

@Melinda

We talked about people's yearning for community - and they talked a *lot* (in a survey and focus groups) about committee work. When you go and speak to Friends, in some meetings, committee work gives people purpose, and meaning, and community with each other, but then there were other people who reflected on, "I don't know how to get in."

@Johanna

Mm-hmm! Yeah. Yeah.

@Melinda

And because they are a large meeting, one of the things that I suggested was, 'You're not a village; you're a city. And as a city, you need to think about intentional neighborhoods.'

@Johanna



Mmm.

@Melinda

And those neighborhoods are an opportunity to create multi-generational community.

@Johanna

Oh, neat!

@Melinda

Like, *intentional*, multigenerational community. In smaller groups. And, you know, some meetings do Friendly Eights.<sup>9</sup> Or Friendly Twelves. Or Friendly whatever. We discovered in our meeting that if we were going to have families be involved, it had to be more than eight. We called them Friendly Gatherings; I think people decide to call them other things too. But that opportunity - I think we have to be intentional about helping people find their way in. It has to do with being intentional. We can't just *assume* things will happen-

@Johanna

Yes!

@Melinda

We can't just assume, 'Oh, well they've been coming for a few years. They probably are ready to serve on a committee.' I think we make a lot of assumptions when there needs to be intention.

@Johanna

Yeah. And it sounds like we're talking about the work of integrating.

@Melinda

Yeah.

@Johanna

We have a segregated society, between what I call 'oldcomers' and what I call newcomers. And if we're not doing the work to integrate, we will die.

@Melinda

Yeah. I really think that this is at the heart of the vitality of the future. And for there being a future of Quakerism. In this part of the world, that is. In this part of the world.

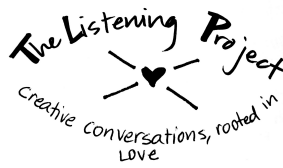
@Johanna

Yeah. Right. And we keep talking - I think my frame is North American Friends. With a US bias, over a Canadian bias.

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<sup>9</sup> Friendly Eights are mixed social gatherings, usually at people's homes, and usually with eight people involved who may or may not know each other well.





@Melinda

Yeah. I don't know a lot about Friends in Canada. I know just some connection through the Quaker RE Collaborative. I know that three years ago - was it three years ago? - it was pre-COVID. There was a time that they decided not to have their Annual Sessions, I think because there weren't enough people to actually gather.

@Johanna

Mm-hmm.

@Melinda

There was a real - I remember at the time, whoever said this, spoke to a sense of mourning.

@Johanna

Yeah. Yeah.

@Melinda

Do you know more folks in Canada?

@Johanna

Well, I have a friend in Toronto, who is the Friend in Residence there, and he was asked to elder at the Young Adult Friends Gathering somewhere in Canada. And much of the gathering was spent on the pain of how few young adults there were. They were really far apart. So, as bad as it is for me in the US, I get the sense that 30 year olds in Canada are even further away.

@Melinda

Yeah.

[Johanna taps her watch to remind Melinda that we are getting close to 11:00.]

@Melinda

Yeah. I'm good until 11:15.

@Johanna

Oh. Okay. All right. [pause] Well I want to say one more thing about healthy limits is, then. And that's that I want to be part of a faith community where, when people set a healthy limit, other people celebrate it. And that's kind of hard for us to do right now. Like, I know from somebody who is a 2/3rd, they said: 'I need to remove myself from this committee; I cannot do all this work.' And that person stayed on the committee for another year because no one could find someone to replace them! So that's an example of overextension. When the community couldn't just adapt in some. Like, set the committee work down. Or, I don't know. Just do less of it!



And I think - doing good work is awesome! But tiring people out to the point that they leave, because we're asking them to do too much work, that isn't awesome.

@Melinda

No, and we run into the culture of filling things up, and thinking that busy-ness is good, and well, I fall in to this too much of the time, too. But I don't think I fall into the, like, 'I'm so busy, it's my badge of courage' category. I think that - I think that we - my God, wouldn't it be great if our meetings were a source of encouraging rest?

@Johanna

Oh my gosh! I love it! I had a meeting like that on Sunday, but that - that's a rare meeting! Wow, what a question.

@Melinda

Well, and I - I think, we're getting to the end of our time, but I think there's a piece here that has to do with how we approach worship. So, here's my radical thought for the end of our conversation. I think that a piece of the future for unprogrammed Friends in the United States is thinking more seriously about semi-programmed worship.<sup>10</sup>

@Johanna

Yes.

@Melinda

Da-da-DuN! Because I think that there are more people, whether there are people out there who haven't found Quakerism yet, or there are people under 18 - I mean, I wouldn't just say it's children - for whom some semi-programmed worship, every once in awhile, would serve to create that *way in*.

@Johanna

Yeah! Yup.

@Melinda

I think we run into the fact that people need rest. I think this goes back to what you were saying, too. People need rest, and the number of times I've heard people saying - including parents, and validly - say, 'I just need that time on Sunday morning to be still and quiet.' And I get that, and I feel that we need to speak to that, and find a way to nurture and take care of that. But I also feel like we come together for communal worship. Because it is our communion. And I don't think - I think the silence can be a tool of oppression, and a tool that

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<sup>10</sup> Semi-programmed worship is a Quaker term for a gathering that focuses on silence, but may also have include singing, a short reading, or other activities. Some people consider worship-sharing to be a form of semi-programmed worship. For more information, visit [www.newassociationoffriends.org/quaker-terms](http://www.newassociationoffriends.org/quaker-terms)



keeps other people out. And, particularly thinking about young people and children, although I don't think children are the only ones who struggle with silence and sitting still for an hour. I mean, that's nonsense!

[Johanna points to herself]

@Johanna  
I like *some* of it...

[laughter]

@Melinda  
Right, and adults make plenty of noise in a meeting together, too.

@Johanna  
They snore!

@Melinda  
Well, I've been sitting in meeting before thinking, what kids would've made this *worse*? We're all moving around and rustling things-

@Johanna  
-Fishing inside our plastic bags-

@Melinda  
Tissues, too! So I think there is a complex connection between our exhaustion, our yearning for stillness and silence, and then how that reinforces these barriers.

@Johanna  
Oh, wow.

@Melinda  
So, like, what if a meeting [laughter] were to find other ways to value rest and space?

@Johanna  
Yeah.

@Melinda  
How - what would that open up as possibilities in terms of worship?

@Johanna  
That's cool! That's what I'd like to *you* say at the next Continuing Sessions. Then I can attend and watch and see all the Friends there nodding!



@Melinda

Well, I know what people will say. 'Oh, that's a great idea! Except I don't want to do it in *my* meeting!'

@Johanna

Oh! [laughter]

@Melinda

That's like when PYM laid down all the committees and working groups, several years ago, with the new structure. I remember going to one of the phone-in meetings, and somebody in leadership, was explaining why this was happening, and people literally were like, 'This is really, really revolutionary. It's wonderful. But you don't mean *my* committee, right?' [laughter]

@Melinda

And I was like, 'Yes! Your committee, too!' So I think people would be like, [lightly clapping hands] 'That sounds wonderful, wonderful! But not my meeting.' - for that idea, too.

@Johanna

[snort] Yeah.

@Melinda

So, we'll see.

@Johanna

Well this is a joy. In spite of our frustrations, we get to be a little ally cohort here. As much and as often as we want.

@Melinda

And we ended up being a little sassy anyway.

@Johanna

We did! We did. And that last thing? You said, 'We have a culture of filling things up.' Someday, I would like to explore with you, What would a *culture of emptiness* look like? And I think it has a - I think that's like a direct link to meetings that are source of enduring rest. That could be really neat, to talk about that. [sigh]

@Melinda

Yeah. Bookmark it.

@Johanna

All right. I love you!

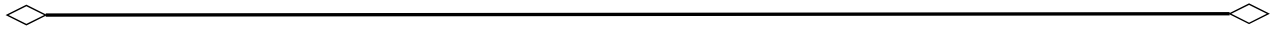


@Melinda

Oh, you too, Johanna! It's so good! Say hi to JT, as well.

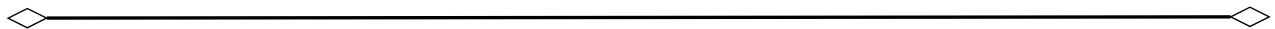
@Johanna  
Okay! I will.

[We close with joy.]



### Discussion Questions

1. *What do you think a culture of emptiness might look like? Or a culture that fully supports rest at the core of its being?*
2. *What experience(s) have you had with semi-programmed worship? What were their effect on you?*
3. *What do you do to set good limits on the service that you give?*
4. *When is a time that you looked at a group or organization and wondered, 'How do I get in?' What did you do, in that case? What makes a welcoming group for you?*



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