



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

Gary Fosmire

Clerk, State College Friends Meeting

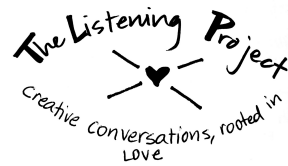
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

Age: 79

Pronouns: he



Tags: *reconciliation, committee structure, grief, grieving, inter-generational friendships, release, releasing, First Day School, Quaker process, maintenance, upkeep, equality, cultural change, ecstatic worship, solace, faithfulness, racial justice, simplicity, surrender.*



*At the time of this writing, **Gary Fosmire** is the clerk of the State College Friends Meeting. Though there are nearly 50 years between us, Gary and I often connect over our mutual love of stories. During the winter in 2021, we joined a COVID bubble together so we could keep visiting with one another. This is one of the few interviews that JT or I completed in person.*

It happened spontaneously. A few days after JT and I had led a workshop about changing the Quaker structure, Gary and I met together at his house. "Now," he said. "Let's talk about your workshop." "Uh-oh!" I thought. The tone sounded like he was saying, "Now, let's talk about your unpaid taxes." I felt myself go a little pale! But we had a hearty and enlivening discussion that enriched us both. Midway through, we began to record it. Here is a transcript of the second half of our very frank, imaginative conversation. -Johanna Jackson

@Johanna

Okay. This is a recording with Gary Fosmire and Johanna Jackson. And we're in the middle of the conversation. There we go. I'll just set the phone over here. Okay. Thank you.

[Johanna takes a look at the lamp next to the chair.]

@Gary

It's my new lamp. I actually bought this to take it upstairs. I haven't made it upstairs yet with it.

@Johanna

I like it! If you'd like a hand bringing it upstairs, I'm happy to do that sometime.

@Gary

I think I – yeah, actually, it was hard to set up. The paralegal called yesterday – or Monday, I guess, from the lawyer's office, and I answered the phone. He said, 'Did I call you at a bad time?' because I was sort of breathing pretty deeply. And I said I'm trying to assemble this light that I bought from Amazon. And he said 'I can call back later,' but I did talk to him then.

@Johanna

Well, it's nice to have here. Okay. We started recording in the middle of our conversation because we realized that might be helpful. So you were talking about how the size of the meeting went down. And you went to Worship & Ministry, because there were still eight or ten committees to fill with people, and you were concerned about that.



@Gary

We did not have near enough people to staff the committees. And so we merged Worship and Ministry with Care and Concern. It just became Worship & Ministry. We got rid of Peace & Social Concerns, and made that a committee of the whole meeting. And that meant that it functioned not at all.

@Johanna

Oh. Was that just a few years ago?

@Gary

Mm-hmm.

@Gary

We took it out of committee of the whole and made it a committee of the meeting.

@Johanna

Okay. I was at that business meeting.¹

@Gary

Yeah. And there were other committees, too. And well, to watch the meeting kind of grow and then shrink or whatever, I was thinking, we used to be much bigger. When I used to teach the high school First Day School,² we met in what is now the meeting office. Then it was the library. And we met around a big table, and there were so many people, we could hardly fit in the room. I took all the students to the work camp in Philadelphia. I had – we just – we had a wonderful time. And now, I look at our high school group now – however many do we have? Three? Two?

@Johanna

Three, and then one person moved to her outdoor program. So now there's two.

@Gary

Right. So it's two people instead of fifteen or whatever we had then.

@Johanna

Yeah.

@Gary

¹ Business meeting is a community forum, usually held monthly, in which Quakers make decisions together.

² First Day School is the Quaker version of Sunday school. It includes programming for children ages 0-18.



And the dynamic of what you can do shifts when that happens. I admire the people that are still in there teaching and caring and loving the kids and everything. Now there isn't a work camp to take them to anymore,³ but still. Just imagine how wonderful it would be if we could say, 'Okay, we're loading up our 12 kids and we're going to the food bank in Washington, DC, or we're going to build a house for so-and-so.' Wouldn't that be wonderful?

We were talking about how we are losing young people and feeling like maybe we'll be gone before long. I mean there certainly aren't any guarantees of anything. But I do think it's worrisome to see Meeting get – the meetings of the Quaker world get smaller, outside of Africa, at least.⁴

@Johanna

Yeah. I feel like that too. You covered a lot of ground there, let's see if I can summarize it a bit. So before we started recording, you were talking about the importance of longevity on a committee, because stability is important for some of the work. And you were talking about some of the factors that lead to us to having mostly older people who are doing committee work. Like people who aren't raising children and building their careers, generally, are the ones on the committees. And then you talked about how vitality used to look at our meeting when we had 15 high schoolers and a mission together or a project to do together. There was a different range of possibilities when we had that many kids. We could do more than we can do with two students, especially with two students during a pandemic.

@Gary

Yeah. And I'm talking about the kind of pros and cons of having very – having committees staffed by the old guard. Okay? We have people who have done this for years, and they know how it's done. They know how marriage is done. They know how to reach out to people. They know how to keep confidences and all that kind of thing. But the disadvantage is that you can exclude new ideas because – not that you can't get new ideas from old people, but you miss the opportunity to hear new revelation from younger Friends that way. You lose that energy and connectedness to the Meeting that they would bring.

3 Quaker work camps in Philadelphia closed in 2005. The projects, however, left an impression on people who had participated. See the AFSC article, "Lessons of Spiritual Strength: The legacy of Quaker work camps." Available at afsc.org/blogs/acting-in-faith/lessons-spiritual-strength-legacy-quaker-work-camps

4 According to a recent search, there are more than 190,000 Quakers in Africa – a number that is rapidly growing. African Friends focus more on evangelism and tend to be, on the whole, more centered on Christianity than American Friends. They make up more than half of the Quaker population worldwide.



@Johanna
Yes.

@Gary
It really is true, I believe, that when you work in the Meeting, you're kind of pouring yourself into it. You are sharing your time and your energy and everything with the meeting.

@Johanna
And that comes with sharing your passion, too. Being involved and committed.

@Gary
And then if you – well, at least in my case, I have said that this is where I belong. So that sense of belonging colors what I would do even now.

@Johanna
Mm-hmm.

@Gary
Like if I moved away.

[We had been talking about how Gary might want to move to be closer to his children, now that his wife Mary Ann has died.]

@Gary
But leaving the Meeting would be as hard or harder than leaving friends, in many ways.

@Johanna
Huh. Oh. You mean –

@Gary
Leaving my Friends, like Quaker Friends, but also my close friends.

@Johanna
Oh. You're saying that Leaving the Meeting would be as hard as leaving your entire social life!

@Gary
Yeah!

@Johanna



Yup. That's how I felt when I was getting ready to move to Powell House.⁵ I remember crying in business meeting when I felt that it was time to go. And one Friend said, 'You know, we're still going to be there for you' or 'We're going to let you go' or whatever. She said something really comforting, because I was just baffled by the weight of moving on to a new set of work and a new life stage that took me away from this community.

@Gary

Yeah. That's the feeling. But see I – I've invested pretty heavily here. So it's not easy to give that up.

@Johanna

Yeah.

@Gary

It's not – and not that you want to, but it's harder to just be off if I'm unhappy here. Or not even unhappy so much as, well, I have an opportunity here or this will be easier there, even though that certainly could be true.

@Johanna

Yeah.

[pause]

@Johanna

We were talking before about the generation gap and older and younger folks. Can I tell you about some of the emerging structures that younger Friends are using?

@Gary

Uh-huh.

@Johanna

I don't know a lot about them yet, so that's why I say emerging, because we're still learning what we're doing. But last night – after the Nominating Committee⁶ meeting last night, I opened up some old documents I'd had from maybe two years ago, or so. And I had

⁵ Powell House is a Quaker retreat center near Albany, NY. Its mission is to foster spiritual growth "after the manner of Friends." Powell House offers youth and adult weekend retreats, and is known in particular for its youth programs.

⁶ Nominating Committee is the group within a local meeting that recommends people for different service roles throughout the meeting.



collected input from the young people in my Tuesday Worship Group,⁷ which is the group that is kind of like my spiritual home. And I – we had looked at this question of what feeds us and what nourishes us spiritually. And we'd been asking ourselves, 'Is this group still working for us?' And again and again, people said, 'Yes, this group is working for me. I may not show up every week, but this supports my faithfulness in the world, and I come here on a weeknight, and that's a big help. It gives me a group of peers, it gives me accountability.' Now that was two years ago, so. It might be different now. But people said 'It gives me stability,' which makes sense, because all of us are unmarried and without children. So our lives have a certain fluidity that needs a balance to it. As much as we can give it that.

And what we've been realizing over time is that, of the five or six of us, we're small but we are lifting each other up. And that continues to happen. Even though we meet irregularly. JT said at one point, 'Well, there's no committees because we have no money. So we have no finances to deal with, and we don't own a building so we don't need to maintain it.' So we've really pared down the responsibilities, which frees us up to dig in more to the worship piece or the worship-sharing more. And it's not a substitute – it's not an easy translation, it doesn't work for everybody, but it does show that another model is happening. JT and I were talking about how we don't have committees. We're a small group So, JT said, 'I'm worship and ministry, you're pastoral care, N__ is peace and social concerns.' And I said, 'What's A__?' He said, 'All of them.' Which is pretty true, actually. A__ can float between the different roles. It's really true.

And because we don't have the other responsibilities of a building or finance to maintain, we are so free to do work as it arrives. One week JT and I worshipped together, maybe a year or so ago. And we were on the screen. It was just the two of

us. The other folks were busy. And usually we would take 10 minutes of silence, or so, but maybe longer. We might take a full hour if we feel like it. And then someone will say, 'Friends, I'm open to words when you're ready.' And then – well, we wait for a nod from everybody before we move into the words, because some people need more quiet to do their work.

So it was just JT and me. I say, 'I'm open for words when you're ready.' He gave a nod. And I said, 'While we have been worshipping, I have just been thinking about this relationship with my neighbor,' because I could always hear him shouting in my window. He's my backyard neighbor. AND HE LIKED TO TALK LIKE THIS. I could hear him all the time. And I knew his dog's name. I knew his son's sexual orientation. I knew all his resentments against his old girlfriend. I knew everything, because he would shout it out in

⁷ The Tuesday Worship Group is a network of Friends ages 20-60 who support each other in faithful living. For more information, visit www.forwardinfaithfulness.org/tuesday-worship-group



the yard. And I said, 'I am really having a hard time with this. Because he's the only black man on the block. In fact, he might be the only black man for four blocks.' Right? I know his name is K__. I know he used to be a Penn State football player. And he's my neighbor.

And I said, 'You know, while we've been sitting here I've been thinking, gee, that guy really is loud. And look at that for a minute!' We're in the middle of the Black Lives Matter movement, it's May or June, and I had just gone to a Black Lives Matter protest and hung around the edge to be social distanced. And here I am thinking about my neighbor like this. How much of this is my own whiteness going on?

And so I tell JT, 'Something's out of integrity here, if I've got both of these things going on.' And we spoke about that for a little bit. I said, 'You know, there is something that I need to do. I need to do it now, today, actually, because I've been postponing this for a year. I've lived next to this guy for a year and I have never gone over and said hi. Would you hold the space while I bring him a muffin?' So he did.

So this man and I are backyard neighbors, which means there's like a fence between. I couldn't just lean out my backyard and be like, 'Hey, K__.' I had to walk around the block, go down past three houses, and up the other side. So I brought him a muffin. And I was scared shitless, Gary, because I'm like, ah, I'm a white kid, and he knows people don't like him because he's loud. I saw another neighbor chew him up once for being too loud or whatever. So there's all these white people who are like, 'Hey, dude, you have to be like us to be in this neighborhood.' And I'm part of that. So I was kinda scared.

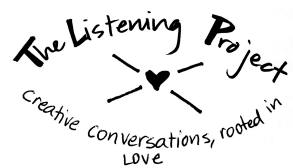
But here's the thing. As I walked over, I knew that JT was holding the space. JT's got me. So I'm gonna do this because I told him I would. I'm like, I'm not going to go back in that room holding the muffin still. Right?

[Gary nods]

@Johanna

So while he's holding space in the worship, I walk out the house, over to his front yard and I go, 'Uh, hello?' He looks up. And I was like, 'Hey, K__, you don't know me, but I'm your neighbor.' 'Which one?' he asked. I told him, 'I'm your backyard neighbor. 'Right there, the blue house. And I brought you this.' I got my little mask on, you know. I got my skirt and my bare feet. 'Do you want a muffin?' And I offer him a muffin.

He goes, 'Look at me. I'm old and fat! No! But you can have a chair. Here,' he said. He tells me to come back tomorrow and we could – I could sit on the deck anytime and we can have a chat. So I asked him, 'How about I bring some carrots then? You know, I could bring you something healthier.' And he goes, 'Carrots, sure.'



So that was the interaction. That was the worship. That was the transformation. That was the beauty. And I walked – I did return home with my muffin, but I had this experience of being supported to do something spontaneous. That was the faithful action. And I think because we don't have to grapple a ton with how much are the committees working or who fills the slots, we can do this kind of thing. Because we have a simple structure, we could just focus on where we were led. It's different, you know.

I think, if we shift the focus a little bit more to look how we're being transformed or who helps us grow, then we might really learn something there. What are the side shoots of Quakerism that seem to really be working for Friends under 55? That's what I want to know. Maybe we need a different structure. Maybe not. Maybe we can hold both extremes at the same time, the committees and the open group, and say, 'Well, some of these structures might mutually conflict. But let's just ignore that for a second and just imagine that they're suspended, and they'll continue for as long as they need.' And then we can look at the beautiful things they're making. Because that day with the neighbor, that was a beautiful thing.

And I wouldn't have done it without JT. I wouldn't have done it without the entire Tuesday Worship group, actually, because it wasn't just the two of us involved. We're part of a community that's also holding the space. So even though N___ and A___ weren't there, I'm accountable to them too. Even if they never know.

When I look at our worship group, I see something opening there. Maybe it could be squeezed into a committee, but I just don't know how yet. I'm kind of beginning to shift my gaze and say, 'What are the new possibilities?' And we can still hold this one right here [left palm out], with the committee structure, but maybe we can add to that. I want more people to have support I had. To have someone holding space while they try and do something brave and then they come back terrified from how it happened to go.

And yeah, we need to make sure the basement doesn't flood when we do that. We need committees for some of the basic work. But is there any way that – is there anything that we could pare down that we're keeping up? Because we're doing so much fucking upkeep. Excuse me. But there is so much.

@Gary
Yeah.

[There's a sense of unity in the room about this last story.]

@Johanna



I think there is a sense in the Friends in my generation, as we come into maturity – I'm going to make a caricature here – but it's like a bunch of older people are like, 'Oh, we're so glad you're here! A young person! We've been waiting for a young person, and we have all these structures that we need you to maintain. Here you go. Here are all our huge, gangling structures.' Right? And the young person's like, 'I'm out of here! I'm going to go work on mutual aid or I'm going to go work with the LGBT community.' They've got something different going on.

@Gary
Hmm.

@Johanna
So that's a caricature, and it's not the reality, but that's the feeling of it.

[Gary nods.]

@Johanna
Oh. Okay. You get it. Yeah.

[phone rings. Gary clicks it off.]

@Johanna
Just don't – is that what you do when I call?

@Gary
No. Never. But the –

@Johanna
And so –

@Gary
I do –

@Johanna
Oh. Sorry.

@Gary
But I think there's a – there are things that are important to the meeting as a whole, and things that are important, too, at different points in people's lives. And so there may be a meeting that doesn't have kids right now, so it's not really interested in religious education,



or at least not in forming a First Day School. But then when they have kids, then it becomes really important.

@Johanna
Mm-hmm.

@Gary
Okay. And some of it is – when we were talking about some of this, I was thinking, at one point, about how someone said once, 'Why don't we sell the meetinghouse and just rent a space?' Okay?

@Johanna
Mm-hmm.

@Gary
Like the churches that float around. And there was no support for that. But the idea was that we spend quite a bit of our time and treasures on our physical plant.

@Johanna
Mm-hmm. Yeah.

@Gary
Now the reality of having a meetinghouse, and having a set place, a place to congregate, is, I think, all important. I wouldn't personally be open to giving that up. But I remember when two Friends came to meeting and joined us. And one Friend said, 'I am really troubled that you're not giving more to charity as a meeting.' And I said, 'Well, you see the budget, you can see what we give.' And he said, 'Well, my meeting before never had a building, they always just rented. And so all the money they had beyond what they needed to pay for rent, they gave away.'

@Johanna
Wow. Cool.

@Gary
And certainly this is a model that can and does work for a lot of people. But it also means that there's not that kind of place of coming together. I'm not arguing in any way for any particular thing, only saying that we do spend a lot of time and effort on just keeping things going.

@Johanna
Mm-hmm. Yeah.



@Gary

Just the amount of time spent for [the person who does caretaking] to go about mowing and snow and everything else. That takes effort.

@Johanna

Yes. But then it yields fruit, too, because any committee can meet there in a non-pandemic year. A Course in Miracles⁸ group can meet there. Healing Circle⁹ can meet there. Whenever I've had a clearness committee, we're outside the meetinghouse on the lawn somewhere. And children can sled there, too. Right? So you're talking about how the institution of the building takes care, and then it gives care too.

@Gary

Right.

@Johanna

Yeah. Yeah.

@Gary

Yeah. So it really does. It really is. I think where one wants to be really tender to that is where the building has become more important than anything that happens in the building. Okay? You know, the kind of building, a giant cathedral, can move many people to be in it and whatnot, but the cost of that is simply astronomical. And I think Friends have tried, in some ways, to thread that line between having a place to meet, having our meetinghouse and whatnot, but not making it a grandiose structure and whatnot. And we try to stay in balance in that way.

And I think, in a way, we want to keep testing that in meeting as we think about what our structure's like, and what it could be. I think about the structure at Friends School. And the number of committees that we have and, lord, we have a lot of committees going. I'm thinking, 'Oh god, another committee meeting, it'll only be the third one this week.' And I think, do we need to have a less committed structure? But then would the work of the school get done? Because we end up going, okay, we need this committee to set this in order for this committee to do that kind of thing.

8 A Course in Miracles is a spiritual study program that focuses on healing relationships in a soulful way.

9 The Healing Circle was an experimental community within the State College Friends Meeting that met to explore hands-on healing.



And the other thing is that we have one person who is now – I was going through his committee assignments. He is now the clerk of, I would think, maybe three-fourths of the committees at the Friends School.

@Johanna
Wow.

@Gary
And only because –

@Johanna
I say 'wow' because I know him through committees, but I haven't ever seen him at worship. So that's surprising to me.

@Gary
Well, he's a birthright Friend, but he doesn't come. He used to come to State College Meeting a long, long time ago when I first came. But then he moved faraway, to a town that's a bit of a drive. It's on the other side of [town name], I think.

@Johanna
That's far. Yep. That's a drive.

@Gary
And it's up a really steep mountain. So to get into their driveway in the winter, you can only be going in one direction. It's that kind of a place.

@Johanna
However, this year [with the pandemic] everything's online. So that offers different opportunities.

@Gary
Right. That's true. But he is just – he's in his last year, I believe, as clerk. And he is not wanting to do all this. He's just doing it because other people have simply said, 'It can't be me, I can't do this work.' I think Quakers do, in a way, have a tendency to throw a committee at things, when there's work to do.

@Johanna
Yes. Yes. And it's irritating, as a young person, because most of the young people aren't on committees, so then they're not – when there's a decision to be made, they're not part of that. Yeah.

@Gary



Yeah. And I mean I was thinking that we used to have a library committee, and then we had a literature committee, and then we have laid those down or didn't staff them, I think. And then one Friend started cataloging the books and whatnot. And I remember people saying, 'Oh, we should get the literature committee going again.' Well, we're – I think that maybe Quakers do this because we're distrustful of a single person, like we're afraid they'll run it something, so we – we quickly move that to a committee.

So if we're working on a task, well, we'll have a committee or a working group or a whatever. I'm not arguing that we shouldn't do that, but just that at times it seems cumbersome. When you think, 'Okay, so we need to have a committee formed to do this or look at this or respond to that.' Then we need to figure out who'll be on the committee. And then we have to try to get everybody's schedules to match.

In a way, we still behave a lot like we were in the '50s when women didn't work outside the home much at all. There were certainly a few exceptions, but mostly women were home and taking care of the kids and working desperately hard to do all that. I'm not saying that. But what we have now are women working out of the home, supporting families, maybe single mothers. At one time, pastoral care was done largely by women because they could go around and help in whatever way.

@Johanna

Hmm. Wow, I didn't know that.

@Gary

So when – now I forgot her name. Anyway, several years ago, a woman fell on the ice and broke both her wrists. She was in a cast on each wrists. And she lived alone, and so the Meeting said, no problem, we'll just bring food. We'll come by and help you bathe, we'll come by and dress you.

@Johanna

Yup. Wow!

@Gary

And there was a stream of women who did that. Right? It was one of the things that I was just astonished by. I wasn't too long in Meeting then, and the help that they gave her meant she didn't have to go to a nursing home, she didn't have to go the hospital and stay, she didn't have to hire help. I don't know that she'd – she might've been able to do it herself, but maybe not. It was, no, we'll just take care of you, and they did. And it was wonderful. It was a wonderful demonstration of that kind of care.



If we tried to do that now, or sometime in the last few years, most of the women would be at work. So it's not like we can say, 'Oh, no problem, so-and-so can go, and this other person can help,' you know. It's a lot more of a challenge than it was.

@Johanna

Hmm. Well, that seems really important because you just named something for me that I had no idea about. You said that you see a link between how – well, you said that what we expect of people on committees comes from an old social order that has passed. It's based on one parent working, and another parent at home.

So we've failed to keep up with the society of two parents working. And meanwhile, well, the cost of living's going up – so two parents need to work. And the cost of daycare is incredibly high. Right?

@Gary

Right.

@Johanna

And so we've failed to keep up with that change. In addition to that, if someone breaks their wrist or their hip – like what happened this week – many of our members live 30 minutes from each other! So it'd be hard for us to visit.

@Gary

Right.

@Johanna

Pandemic or not. So that distance we have makes it very hard to just drop by and bring a casserole or whatever, because the person needs to cross town first or drive in from another town.

@Gary

Right.

@Johanna

Yeah. That makes sense. Like when [Friend's name] needed care after his surgery, it was very intimate care. It was very difficult care. And he lives 45 minutes away. And here I was, someone who technically could use part time work at the time. Well maybe not, because the ministry has become kind of full time. But anyway. He said, 'Would you be willing to help me?' And I said, 'No, I'm not able to,' because he lives 45 minutes one way, and JT lives 40 minutes the other way, and so I'm not able to do that.



@Gary
Right.

@Johanna

And so you – I think you've really described something here! We're talking about the fracture between an old system that, used to work, versus living in a society that matches 2021. We're pressing on with policies and methods that are kind of still from 1950.

@Gary
Right.

@Johanna

Wow. Well that's helpful to hear. I wasn't alive then, so I couldn't have named it.

@Gary

Yeah. And I think it's important to say, it isn't that people don't care. It isn't like we've become an uncaring group. It's that, for a lot of people, there just isn't any – there isn't any room. If you say, 'I want you to go and help somebody,' they might say, 'I've got three kids at home I'm trying to homeschool,' There's this, there's that, I don't have the money. Those are real things. Those are real challenges. That isn't that people didn't have troubles before, or whatnot. God knows they did. But we do live in some kind of middle-class scenario in our heads, I think. Where everybody's doing sort of okay.

@Johanna
Hmm.

@Gary
That isn't true for a lot of people.

@Johanna
Yeah. That I can agree with.

@Gary

So when we have people that are out of work, or people that are chronically sick or we have – we still have need. We still have apparent needs for a robust committee system to address. Committees have the opportunity to do some really good things, if you were on Pastoral Care,¹⁰ for example. But we also have the potential to ask too much. We might ask more of someone than they can give, or that they can give without getting tired or bitter in

¹⁰ Pastoral Care is a committee that performs some of the roles that are typically filled by a priest. Members of this committee check in on people inside the faith community. They address both short-term and chronic needs. These could relate to illness, family struggles, financial concerns, or other kinds of needs.



some cases.

Like, 'Okay, today is Tuesday. So that means there's a meeting for this and then there's a meeting for that. After that, there's the work to be done around this committee.' I think we should be careful to be sure that what we're asking is really important.

@Johanna

Yeah. Yes! Definitely! For every time we put something on our task list. or we decide we need to read it aloud to everyone in business meeting, I think that is an important

question to be asked. Actually, that came up in Nominating Committee just last night. We talked on the need people have, for more joy in committees. How people are doing these herculean workloads, and they're getting tired. It's a hard sell to ask someone to join a committee when you look and see how tired everyone is who's working on it. Right?

@Gary

Right.

@Johanna

So the possibility of lightening the load came up. It came up at the end of four queries. We thought, well, what are some queries that we could start with? And there were four of them. One was: 'What's one thing that brings joy on your committee?' Either I'm on this committee and I feel joy, or I see this other person getting joy. Then, 'What's one thing that could use support on your committee?' Because we wonder what the committees might be needing these days. Then the third one was, 'What's one thing you're currently doing that's not absolutely necessary?' Because those are hard to see. And then, 'What would it take for you to give that up?'

I thought there was some wisdom in the separation of the third and the fourth queries, because seeing that something is not absolutely essential takes some energy. It's a separate step. When I look at how I spend my day, what am I doing that's frittering away my time? It takes energy and honesty and bravery to see that. And then, to be able to let that go is a second step.

So when I look at all the work we're doing, I don't have a handle on what's essential because I'm mostly on the periphery from all the committee work. I'm looking in on it from the side. But people who are in the middle might have an idea of what's essential. And maybe they could tell us. But, gee, it's really hard to let go of something, and truly let it go. Like we do our monthly report for finances. That's our norm; that's what we do. What would it be like if we let that go? Or we do a state of the Spirit report – I mean a Spiritual



State of the Meeting,¹¹ that's it. So what would change if we stopped doing that? What would we miss? I was on Religious Ed a few years ago, and we decided to lay down the Right Sharing of World Resources¹² brunch. It was in the lap of Religious Ed, and Religious Ed was just bedraggled and dragging with all the duties assigned. And we couldn't figure out how to do all that was asked.

@Gary
Yeah.

@Johanna
So we let it go. We didn't schedule a brunch for the upcoming year. And like you're saying, there was some real grief in laying something down because it felt like a statement of negation.

@Gary
Right.

@Johanna
It's as if we say: 'We no longer care about the sharing of world resources like we used to. We just don't have energy for it.' And so I think like I kind of wonder if the first step in this cultural change, or this emerging thing that we're talking about, might be a grieving process. That might be the first step. We're slowing down and saying, 'Wow, we really *can't* do all that we expect ourselves to do. So let's take the top five things that we can let go of, and put them on a list.' Then it's some kind of active release. It's like we're having a – in some way, having a ceremony, or a moment to recognize it. We are going to let this thing go, and we're going to feel some emotions when we do that. So let's gather here together and take a look.

@Gary
Yeah.

@Johanna
It feels kind of hopeful when I think about it, because there's so much we could let go. And I feel like there is a – what is it? You know – have you ever been stuck under a boat in a

11 The Spiritual State of the Meeting Report is a document that describes the spiritual highs and lows for the faith community. In most cases, it is written annually by a volunteer from the Worship and Ministry committee. At least one meeting, however, invites its youth to write their own version of the report, and then integrates these views with the perspectives of adults.

12 The Right Sharing of World Resources is a justice-based organization that partners with women in Kenya, India, and Sierra Leone.



lifejacket and the buoyancy just holds you up there? No? Okay, I haven't either. But I can imagine it. I've been in a lifejacket when I kind of wanted to go down and look at the water, and the buoyancy of that jacket just kept pushing me up. It feels like that, with all that is just emerging. There's a sense of that the buoyancy, and it is trying to lift up. There's a buoyancy I feel with what is waiting to be born. And we're still under the boat so maybe it can't lift up very far. But the buoyancy's there, I think. I can feel it.

@Gary

Yeah. Those are really important queries. And the power to – there's a power of courage that it takes to let things go, too. Or to say, 'I can't do this' or 'I can't do this now.' That's really hard.

@Johanna

Yeah.

@Gary

Mary Ann used to give me such a hard time about the extra jobs around the house. 'Just hire somebody to take care of the yard or shovel the snow!' she'd say. Or whatever. And I'd go, no, that's my job and it's my identity and it has to be done.

@Johanna

Right.

@Gary

And then I'd think, geez, I'm tired. Or I'd come in the house, trying to catch my breath after shoveling snow for an hour and a half or something. But it's really hard to let things go. It requires, I think, as you said, grieving. And it also requires a certain kind of caution to be okay. Am I letting this go because I'm lazy? Or because I'm just not setting my priority here? I'm setting my priority over there, instead. That kind of thing.

@Johanna

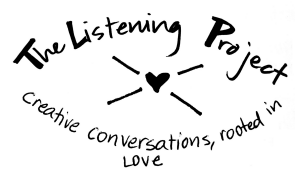
Yeah.

@Gary

That includes, I think, an element of spiritual discernment. Being very cautious about it as you let go. Am I turning my back on something that really is mine and is essential to do? Or is it mine by virtue of having accepted this appointment or whatever?

@Johanna

Yeah. That's true. Can I tell you what that reminds me of?



@Gary
Sure.

@Johanna

There is something I read once, and I can't remember the words of it exactly, but something about a scenario in a Quaker meeting. If someone stands and objects to an action being taken, but everyone else wants to go ahead with it, then they can stand aside. But when they stand aside, they release their objection to the entire *community*. So if they end up – if the community ends up being wrong, or the concern the person raised ends up being right, it's like that's on the shoulders of the entire community.¹³ And if the group can

really wield that, and bear that responsibility, then they go ahead and take the action. It's like a check and balance system.

You talked about the attentiveness needed when letting go. And it reminded me of this process. Asking first: Am I letting go for the right reasons? Am I paying attention for the moment when it will be the *exact right moment* to pick this up again? Because a moment too late will mean that we lose opportunities. And a moment too soon will squish us back in this awkward position that we're already in right now.

So there's this real – you talked about spiritual discernment. Real careful attentiveness. Like when a Friend stands aside in a decision, the community really has to grapple for that moment. They have to ask, 'Are we really willing to accept the consequences of this choice?' It's like a form of surrender, there. Gerald May said – he wrote this book called *Will and Spirit* that I read a couple years ago. And he said when we make a spiritual surrender, yes, we do give something over to God, but we also need to accept the consequences of that surrender.

So one year, I felt led to be unemployed for – indefinitely. Just for as long as I took, while I did some spiritual searching. And at one point, I kind of cried out, 'God, I'm short on money and this is really uncomfortable! What's all this about?' And the words of Gerald May came back, like, you need to accept the consequence of that surrender. They came back to haunt me. But they were right, they were true. So if we do something, like lay down the work that feels like it's extra, then we need to accept the consequence of that release, too. And that might not be all that fun.

¹³ See *Faith and Practice*, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. "Friends may choose to 'stand aside,' recognizing that while the emerging decision does not reflect their personal preferences, the meeting will go forward. A person who stands aside is expected to share their reason with the group. The meeting takes this response very seriously." Available: <https://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/faith-reflected-practice-daily-life/discernment-clearness-and-decision-making/>



@Gary
No kidding.

@Johanna
Yeah! But then we also get to keep the *benefits* of that release, too. That part I like!

@Gary
Yeah! [smiling]

@Johanna
Yeah. I learned this week, I was listening to an interview with Diego Navarro and Marcelle Martin.¹⁴ And Diego was the clerk of Pacific Yearly Meeting,¹⁵ and he talked about some of their practices they're doing at the yearly meeting level that just free up space. And at Annual

Sessions, Diego Navarro was attending a year or two – several years ago, I think, and something with real interest and real life came up during business. And he said, 'We need to talk about this at a plenary.' And they said, 'Oh, uh, the agenda for the plenary is already set and it's already full.' And he said, 'Well, that's a real shame. We're missing out on this opportunity to talk about something that has real interest and real life and it's right here, and it's ready.' Then he said to himself, 'If I'm ever clerk, I am going to have empty plenaries.'

Well, fast forward a couple years, and he became clerk. And he advocated for open plenaries, so there's room to talk about stuff. But boy, was it a tough sell! Because a commitment to empty space is a risky thing to do. And then they had to lay down whatever was *in* that space. I don't know what was in there. But they had to really say, 'We're not going to do this thing that we always did.' And that led to the transformation of the community. They opened up to the empty space and the risks of letting go. They let themselves save room for whatever rose to be relevant that week. Which is kind of cool, when you think about it.

@Gary
That's interesting. Yeah.

@Johanna

14 See: Navarro, Diego. Interview by Marcelle Martin. *Nurturing Community*, 6 March 2018, <https://youtu.be/zQGi0RPcx7g>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.

15 Pacific Yearly Meeting (PYM, or PaYM) is a Quaker body and a regional organization. It is comprised of local meetings from throughout the Pacific region, including California, Hawaii, Mexico, and Guatemala.



He also had three queries for committees to consider before they presented anything at business meeting. I didn't write them down. I want to go listen to it again. But it was something like, 'Is there any other way this information can be shared? Or is this really necessary?' It was something like that. They changed their system, so if people had a committee report, it was sent out on email a few days ahead of the event. And then people had time to read the report. Whenever they had a minute, they'd sit down and read it. So then when they got to business meeting, and they'll all gathered there together, people didn't need to read all that stuff. Instead they'd say, 'Here's the question we have.' And they would bring that to the group. They let go of reading the reports aloud, they let go of that job, and then they opened up space for something new.¹⁶

@Gary
Yeah.

@Johanna
So I think that is really kind of cool. Not easy to shift into, though.

@Gary
No. That's true.

[Man walks outside the window, on the road.]

@Johanna
Yeah. Dude, that man that was walking outside – did you see he had green glasses? He looked like a skier, it's just he's walking on the road here.

@Gary
Yeah. He's my –

@Johanna
He's your neighbor!

@Gary
– next door neighbor.

@Johanna

¹⁶ The queries that Diego mentioned were: "What is it that my committee's working on, that will have an impact on the agenda?" And then, "What is it that my committee's working on, in which we need support?" Friends use this to frame an agenda review, and see what was "really alive" inside the body. Topics on the agenda that needed further discernment, and that had life in them, were given more priority inside the meeting. For more information, listen to the interview at <https://youtu.be/zQGiORPcx7g>.



Yeah. But he's not the borough commissioner guy.

@Gary

No. That's the other side.

@Johanna

Okay. Yeah.

@Gary

We used to have a young couple with their little girls, and they were really – that was really nice, but they moved.

[pause]

@Johanna

What do you think about a little bit of worship?

@Gary

Okay.

[Gary and Johanna both move into worship, sitting in their chairs. Johanna looks up after the worship and breaks the silence.]

@Johanna

Okay. When you're ready, I have one more question. Wow. It's so good to see your eyes. You have beautiful eyes.

@Gary

What?

@Johanna

I said it's so good to see your eyes. You have beautiful eyes!

@Gary

Thank you. And yours. It's the sorrow of COVID is the isolation and separation and – yeah.

[a little pause]

@Johanna



So the question that rises is coming up again. What would you like to tell younger Friends about the things you most value in Quakerism? Or, what's important to preserve and keep steady, if something did change?

@Gary

I have to think about that.

@Johanna

That's what I thought. Well, good, because I have to go to the bathroom.

[A few minutes go by. Johanna comes back. On the way back to the chair she stops by photos of grandkids on the wall.]

@Johanna

Huh. Look at that! This kid has a Fosmire face. I don't know if it's the chin. I think it's the chin, though. It's the right shape. It's like your face.

@Gary

Yeah.

@Johanna

Yeah. I see it. I mean I guess I know the men in your family more than the women, but look at that.

@Gary

Yeah. Well, so they're all the grandsons there.

@Johanna

Yeah.

@Gary

That's the kids when they were little on the farm in Minnesota.

[Gary shows Johanna some of the photos, and names the people in them.]

@Gary

And these are M's two boys. And then these are J's two boys.

@Johanna

Wait. They were teenagers at Mary Ann's viewing. Right? The two boys here?



@Gary

Yeah. All grown up now.

@Johanna

Yeah. That's a great picture of you, Gary.

@Gary

Yeah. There's one of our other favorites.

[Then the two settle back in their chairs.]

@Gary

Yeah. So to go back, I don't know the answer to your question. I was actually watching a show on PBS last night, called The Black Church. And it's a history of black church from – starting in with the slaves in the South and whatnot and moving up through time. But part of it is they were talking about ecstatic worship. And I thought, in its subdued ways, I think Quakerism has kind of ecstatic worship. And I don't know – my experience with other churches did not give me that same sense of ecstatic worship. And I know that if we said, well, we're going to speak in tongues or handle snakes or whatever, that people would be really uncomfortable with that in Quaker meeting. I would be, too. But there's that experience of this amazing rush through once in a while. It's been enough to keep me coming back all this time.

@Johanna

Yeah. I like that, too. Yeah.

@Gary

And I would hate for that to be lost. I think it also – the very sense of kind of a flat structure also speaks to me in some very strong way. You don't go to the bishop. You don't go to the priest, when you have something to figure out.

@Johanna

Yeah! That's partly why I arrived in this faith.

@Gary

Yeah. And also, with that flat structure, there's the fact that people don't preach. You know, I used to go to church all the time. I listened to the preachers. I liked some of them. I didn't like others so much. But Quakers are so very flat, so everybody – well, everybody is pretty much equal. It's not as good as we'd probably like it to be, but that sense of how a child could stand and say something that would be as powerful as the most weighty Friend you could imagine. And the belief that everybody's voice could and should be heard. There



are not a lot of places where that happens. We're a very hierarchical kind of society, inside the US, saying this person is more important than that person and whatnot.

@Johanna
Yeah.

@Gary
Certainly, in my religious body, I don't want that to be true. I just – I want that – I want there to be a real leveling. I would be a leveler. If I were living at that time, I would definitely be going out there –

@Johanna
You would! You'd be agitating. You'd be moving and shaking for leveling!

@Gary
That's right.

@Johanna
Wow.

@Gary
Yeah. That's right.

@Johanna
And you'd do it in a way that's still gentle, too. But, if needed, I think a little fire would rise up and come out with the gentleness, too.

@Gary
Yeah.

[Gary and Johanna are both nodding.]

@Johanna
Yeah. Okay. So you're talking about true equality, and hearing wisdom, and seeing value in each other. Oh, rats. I already forgot the first one. What was the first one?

@Gary
Ecstatic.

@Johanna



Oh, right. Ecstatic worship. Yeah. So what are other words for that to describe it? That way we can tell people what you mean. Maybe another word is willing, trusting, *surprising* worship. Is that it?

@Gary
Yeah.

@Johanna
Okay. Experiences that might lead strange places. Or a kind of worship that's unpredictable, and that's powerful. [Gary nods.] You know, I think those are – I think those are all alive and well.

@Gary
Yeah.

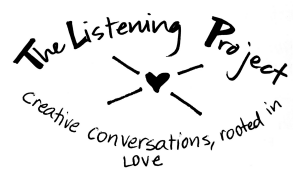
@Johanna
I'm thinking of two stories. And if you want – if you ever want heartening encouragement about that that is alive and well, I have them both in print. But the one's that shorter is about equality. I remember you heard Melinda Wenner Bradley speak, at the workshop in February. She's the Youth Religious Life Coordinator for PYM.¹⁷ And she talked about being inside of a large room, and all of these people were worshipping, and she was on a blanket with a child. They had an all-ages worship, with a basket of toys and pipe cleaners for the children. Melinda thought of that. And some children would just toddle over and get them and toddle back. And adults had them, too.

And anyway, next to the pipe cleaners was a basket of wooden people figures. They were simple figures. And the child she was next to, I think he put them in categories. I think he lined them up in chunks with the little ones, then the medium-sized ones, and the larger ones in different groups. They were figurines from like the '50s, so the woman figures are smaller and the men figures are broader. Right?

@Gary
Right.

@Johanna
And then he lined them all up, and he wove them into a circle where the babies became mothers, and adults became babies. He lined them all up in a circle. And he looked up at

¹⁷ Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (PYM) 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.



Melinda, and he said in a little whisper, *it's infinity*. I thought, isn't that cool? I just love that story, because that's an example of the equality of his voice bringing great beauty to all of us.

@Gary
Yeah.

@Johanna

And when she told me that story, I thought, 'That is just too good.' It's just too good. So I wanted to share it with you. And there's something else in what you listed. Ecstatic worship. In the groups that I hang with, in the Quaker world, the ecstatic worship is the core piece. That's for me, that's not for everyone. But in the groups that I've been traveling in – dude, we are really supporting each other with the mystic worship.

I just read a journal entry from two years ago where we sat in worship for two and a half hours together. And we kept getting these real confusing messages to tell people. Like at one point, all I could say was 'I'm getting the word library.' And then a few other messages that were very cryptic. They seemed to be in response to something, but I didn't know what. And this went on for awhile. Finally, our one friend said, 'I'm confused.' And I was like, 'Well, that makes two of us!' But we stayed with the messages, and the words coming in. We stayed with the work. And we had – oh, we had really surprising things happen in that worship.

So I'm glad to know what the core is for some of the Friends in our community who are older than me. Because I am one of those people who is angling for change. But I need to know, first, before I advocate for that change, I need to get an idea of what is most sacred.

@Gary
Yeah. That's Interesting.

[pause]

@Johanna

I wonder if I should also answer my question. [pause] I was thinking about this the other day. I think the real unique thing about Quakers – well, I just have one. I think it's listening. That's how I would sum up Quaker process, in a word. Listening. I don't know if this would go by the books and fly or not, but I think Quaker process is listening for guidance at every step of the way, whenever we are stepping or moving somewhere. I am running into people who are telling me Quaker process is waiting. I don't know if that's really true, though. I think that, in order to listen, we need to wait, but when we say Quaker process is waiting, we might be missing something there. Like when we hold someone's name over for a



month before we approve them for membership, and we do that 'because that's Quaker process,' well, what does that mean? *Why* are we holding their names for a month? Maybe because it might give us time to really think about whether our community's really ready to welcome this person in. Or it can give us time to think about what inside this person is really inspiring. I don't know.

But I think that when we do our best, we are waiting so we can *listen better*. And that's the shining gem for me, listening. In a life with so much movement, so much chaos and noise, the silence helps me find my way. The protection that comes from listening while I walk has really begun to serve me, in my life

When I came to Quakerism 11 or 12 years ago, I was living in a dormitory. I ate all my meals around other people. I overheard every conversation they had around me, while people ate their meals. So I heard all their criticisms, and their references to corporations, and their beliefs about women, and their beliefs about drinking, all of that while I ate. And I just thought, 'I don't want to take this in while I eat. I don't want to eat this with my meal.' But what was cool was, inside all that chaos, I could go to the meetinghouse and find some solace. One time I did that. I slipped inside uninvited. I think the door was left unlocked by accident. It was the evening. It was dark out. But I was feeling upset about something, and I could go inside of there and just cry. And it brought me great comfort to do that. It brought me great peace. Being inside the meetinghouse was a symbol of the solace I had yet to find. It was an example of the quiet I had yet to build, inside my life. And it gave me so much strength to have that space, for listening, and for release, inside of that dark and sacred quiet!

So I think, for me, the best part about Quakerism is the listening that we do. You know. In a world that needs listening so much, that is really important.

@Gary

Yeah. I think I'm affected by the silence as a living silence, not just the absence of noise. And there are times when I'm just desperate for people to stop talking, but they don't. It could be at a committee meeting, it could be listening to the news, or listening to a speech. It could be any number of things. And I think there's an old – there's actually a book in our library called *Let Your Words Be Few*. And it's a – well, I don't think I ever read it. But I think it's a book about Quaker preaching. And it might be about speaking out of the silence, that kind of thing. At times when I'm in a committee meeting or school board meeting or whatever, I just want to say, 'Let your words be few.' Try to make them important or try to find the important words and share those, not just this kind of nonstop talking.

@Johana

Which is funny, given how much we've been talking today!



@Gary

Yes. But here's the thing. I actually grew up in – my mom and all her sisters and all my aunts and uncles just talked all the time. And so I was like, okay, I get it. That was just the way it was. But I appreciate the silence and the opportunity to be able to then listen to something higher, or something. It's not like I sit every week and God's bombarding me with messages that I can pick up. I figure that He's probably bombarding me a lot, but I'm not picking them up. But just to sit in meeting and feel that stillness just kind of coats you and permeates you. That's a good feeling. So anyway.

@Johanna

Yes. That's beautiful. To hear it, the stillness coat you and permeate you.

@Gary

Well, it's my story.

@Johanna

That's beautiful. You know, I always love talking to you.

@Gary

Uh-huh.

@Johanna

But today especially. The part that I loved best was we warmed up into something, and then we found a common ground in it. And we both commit to doing that work of warming up and looking for the common ground.

@Gary

Yeah.

@Johanna

And I think, well, it's more comfortable to be warm and common with somebody than at odds. with them. But there was just this moment while were talking, and I was like, 'Oh, this is it. Not only are we listening to each other, but we're building something together.'

@Gary

Right.

@Johanna

Because we started from our responses to the workshop or the content.



@Gary
Right.

@Johanna

And then – well, we had different responses to the workshop. So we started kind of far apart. But then – I don't know. We didn't just grow like this. [hands go straight up in the air.] We kind of grew like this. [hands grow up, and then parallel each other on a snaky path.]

@Gary
Yeah.

@Johanna

And that is – oh, it's just such a balm. It's just such a good feeling.

@Gary
Yeah.

@Johanna

It's a very good feeling. Okay. All right. I'm going to turn this thing off while we keep talking.

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Thank you!

Discussion Questions

1. *How do you balance maintenance with freedom in your own life? What structures or buildings do you maintain? What kinds of freedom or simplicity do you value? Have you*



ever adjusted that balanced, and decided to maintain more or less?

2. *Which communities are dear to you, as you grow and live?*

3. *Tell about a time that you observed the 'old guard' doing most of the work in a group. It could be a family, workplace, or religious group. What were the pros and cons of this?*

