

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

Cai Quirk
Ithaca Monthly Meeting

Also active at:
New York Yearly Meeting
Powell House

Age: 24
Pronouns: *they or ey*



Tags: *LGBTQA, gender fluid, anti-racism work, white supremacy culture, traveling in the ministry, holy discomfort, destruction and recreation, unity, growth, mentorship, young adult Friends, contemplative, poetry, trees, art, photography, nature, blessings, fluidity, pain, belonging, myths, legend, mysticism, exploration, spirituality, protection, spiritual tools, longevity, community, inclusion, renewal, reformation, radical change.*



We met with **Cai Quirk** in early December, 2020. JT and I both met Cai through the FGC Quaker Gathering and through other Quaker circles. We were glad to reconnect: Cai is imaginative, open, friendly, and pretty much embodies the word 'vibrant.'

In this interview, we talk about a range of themes. Some are listed in the tags below. We found ourselves centering on the needs of young adult Friends and on the possibilities of "shifting the center" of Quaker exploration itself – to something that is more queer, more poetic, and more focused on the power of dreams.

Cai is incredibly active in the Quaker community. To read Cai's article on renewal and new life in the Religious Society of Friends, visit www.friendsjournal.org. To hear a podcast on the Sanctuary for Independent Media, visit mediasanctuary.org. Or, take a look at Cai's photo project, in which they examine queer identity, spirituality, and myths. That's available at caiquirk.com. - Johanna Jackson



[We begin by talking about Cai's upcoming article in *Friends Journal*.]

@Cai

In the article I co-wrote with a f/Friend for Friends Journal, we shared a dream that somebody had shared at one of the sessions. And then what followed is that this dream lit a fire in us. Just talking about that, the lighting of the fire and the carrying of that fire on into the world, feels powerful to me. Each person has a kind of candle, torch, whatever inside of them, and collectively we can light larger and larger fires. Fire is not inherently destructive, it can be cleansing and renewing, or both. And yes, it uncreates things, but it also is creating other things at the same time.

We often, in this culture, see fire as something particularly destructive. But in other faith traditions there are deities of change and destruction that make room for new life – like Hinduism has many different deities, some of which are destroyers. And it's not seen in a bad light. It's just that death has to come before new life can come. Modern American culture, which is definitely influenced by Christianity, doesn't have much in the way of these cycles. Yes, there is the death and rebirth of Jesus, but it's not held up as this archetype or renewal, necessarily. Opening to broader metaphors can invite new and further ideas that our culture is rather lacking in.

@Johanna

I'd like to see that happen. Well, could I ask more about the article?

@Cai

Sure.

@Johanna



Okay. You said earlier that you and Allison went to 16 yearly meeting to write it. What did you learn, as you were visiting all of those meetings?

@Cai

There were a lot of interesting and deep and enriching experiences, but one of the things that we focused on in particular were themes that showed up across many yearly meetings. Many were talking about how our community which spans politics and various kinds of different beliefs, come together in something like the rising awareness of racism in our country and Quaker communities.

One of the powerful examples of response was in Sierra Cascades Yearly Meeting. They had tasked the Diversity and Inclusion Committee with coming up with a minute. I don't remember exactly the wording, but there was some language that some other Friends found challenging, and there was discomfort. And the person who was clerking the meeting of Sierra Cascades Yearly Meeting said something about how the discomfort was part of *holy* discomfort and was actually a part of spiritual unity.¹

The minute was approved, with a preface before it. The preface says, 'Some of us are challenged by the language this minute uses. Still, we leaned into it, knowing that we have empowered the Equity and Inclusion Committee to be a prophetic voice.'

@Johanna

Wow. That's cool!

@JT

That's a strong endorsement. That's not always how it goes.

@Cai

Yup. And the way that this was able to happen was somebody named this as holy discomfort. Yes, we are not all going to be comfortable with the ministry that's being shared around this. And Spirit is not calling us to comfort in this. There are people that are very new on this learning curve and there are Friends that have been on this learning curve their whole lives, some who have been forced to be on this learning curve their whole lives. Some people still expect to be comfortable – these are people of European descent who primarily still have this expectation.

I heard recently about somebody who is raising a child, and they will not say no to the child. If the child asks for something and they don't want to give it to the person, they'll distract the child away from it. And one of my first questions to the person who told me about this is 'does this family happen to be white?' The world does not work that way, and the people who can pretend it does are ones who have high levels of privilege. And so just being able to recognize that seems like a fairly basic step in working on anti-racism.

1 To read more, see Cai and Allison's article, "A Witness to Tethers and Transformation." Friends Journal, Feb 2021. Available at <https://www.friendsjournal.org/a-witness-to-tethers-and-transformation/>. Or access the original minute by visiting <https://www.friendsocialconcerns.org/2020/06/23/sierra-cascades-yearly-meeting-adopts-minute-for-black-lives/>



Going back to the Sierra Cascades minute, what was powerful about it was that it's saying, yes, we know people are in different places about this. And spiritual unity can exist with holy discomfort there too. It's not about all being comfortable with what is there, but being able to come to unity.

@Johanna
Mm-hmm.

@JT
And what did you see as the role of young people in these experiences you had in attending the yearly meetings? What did they do or say? And how did you – how were you influenced by it? How did it affect you?

@Cai
Yeah. So I'll put this in the context of New York Yearly Meeting. For a while, NYYM² has been considering supporting a youth and young adult staff position (or staff positions). And there's been some concern related to funding, as there often is, and that this might take away from witness work. As a young adult involved with Witness work, I had some relevant ministry to share at that meeting. I am 24. I am also the co-clerk of Witness Coordinating Committee,³ so I exist in both spaces. And there is another way that Witness and young people are intersecting. I co-led an event last summer, with Angela Hopkins of the Friends Center for Racial Justice.⁴ It was through the young adult Spiritual Nurture Series,⁵ and drew a whole bunch of young people. So I'm in both spaces.

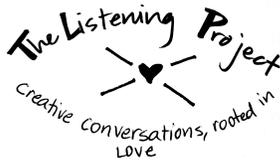
I also noticed, at many yearly meetings that, the ones that had youth and young adult staff positions, they were able to bring more young folks together. So this was more about the ability to bring young folks together than inherently the position, but the position is a part of it. At many yearly meetings where there were young folks gathering together, those were the most deep and enriching discussions around antiracism and various kinds of witness and activism. And the discussions were particularly flowing and nimble in those spaces – we didn't have to start by convincing people that racism exists in Quaker spaces.

2 NYYM stands for [New York Yearly Meeting](#). This is a Quaker body, made up of 64 local meetings, that provides programs inside of New York state. It defines itself as a community, an organization, and also as a set of gatherings.

3 The Witness Coordinating Committee is an outward-facing Quaker group that focuses on faith in action, and how that is expressed. For more information, visit <https://nysym.org/committee/witness-coordinating-committee>

4 The Friends Center for Racial Justice is a Quaker group based in Ithaca, New York. It offers programming and facilitation to build a more just and unified world. Their photo gallery is made up of photography by Cai Quirk. To see the FCRJ through Cai's eyes, visit <http://fcrj.org/photo-gallery/>

5 This group brings young adult Friends together to connect, grow, and discover truth. More at <https://youngadultfriends.weebly.com/>



@Johanna

Yeah. I've been working on that with my meeting for a very long time. It feels like a long time.

@Cai

Yeah. And part of the dream I mentioned, from a plenary speaker at one of the yearly meetings I attended, was related to this. The person has been working on anti-racism in her meeting for 25 years and not seen so much change. She was giving a plenary talking about that, and she ended with this dream that the young adult Friends were coming to business session the next day to split from the yearly meeting and form their own yearly meeting because they were fed up. And what surprised her was that this brought her joy, not the idea of the split, but that people were living into leadings and that something would have to change.

@Johanna

Wow.

@Cai

Young adults have more often growing up in a world where anti-racism is more talked about. It's something that is learned sometimes in Quaker spaces, sometimes in schools, but especially in activism spaces. Just having the facility and the language to be able to talk about it is something that helps get us further in those discussions: there's not the person that says 'why can't we all be nice to each other.' Yeah. That's great, but structural racism exists, and being nice to each other doesn't fix that. And so that was some of what we noticed related to YAFs⁶ across multiple yearly meetings.

[pause]

@Johanna

I don't know why I'm asking this now, but I'm wondering if we could take some quiet.

@Cai

Yeah. Sure.

[We agree that Cai will end the quiet, and then we move into worship. Cai signals an end to the quiet.]

@Cai

Okay.

@Johanna

Thank you. I was beginning to feel like there are so many things we could talk about tonight which, for some reason, it didn't dawn on me before. But you're so active – outwardly with Quakers and then inwardly you're active with your spiritual life. So I guess my question is, what are we here to talk about today?

⁶ YAFs are Young Adult Friends, generally between the ages of 18 and 35.



@Cai

If there are things that feel like they want to expand beyond this, I would be happy to do another discussion at some point that could go longer, because there are so many different topics!

One of the things that you asked about was about gifts. In writing the afterword for my book, somebody invited me to write a letter to my younger self related to being gender-fluid and queer. The prompt was to imagine telling yourself what you wish you had known when you first knew you were gender-fluid or that your body and your being didn't match up the way others' seemed to. Talk to that young person. Write them a letter. Here's part of the letter.

The letter starts: *Dear little one. You are perfect just as you are. And yes, the 'just as you are' changes every day...*

[And then Cai read JT and Johanna several paragraphs aloud. These may be published someday, so they are not part of this transcript. But, with Cai's permission, we will share one paragraph that is related to spiritual gifts.]

Beloved one, you will not be understood by all. Do not try to change yourself for them. Do not try to fit in a narrow box. You are more glorious than any one box. Others are too, in different ways, though they may not know it yet. This knowing has been waylaid by a world of machines, boxes and ladders, and by people who think we must fit in these rigid forms. You will try this for a little while, try out different boxes. Though it may feel like being waylaid yourself at times, do not be discouraged. This part of your journey is about learning to understand many points of view, to be able to speak in different languages even though they may all be in English. To be a piper and draw folks along in new ideas or old forgotten ones, you'll need to meet people where they are. Your roles will be many, a constellation rather than a single star in the night sky; mediator, translator, facilitator, interpreter, bridge, go-between, catalyst, enabler, problem solver, messenger, piper, communicator, creator, sower of seeds, advocator, agitator, healer, intuition guide, spirit-walker. Your place is in the middle, though others may perceive this middle as far on the edge and there are many other middles out there. You are in the middle of not only different groups of people but also between humans and nature, in the spaces between the past and present and future, understanding pieces of many communities across different times, and between what is and what could be.

... Let the joy and wonder fly free. Follow and be followed in the journey. Be the piper of today.

@Johanna

That's beautiful.

@Cai

Thanks.

@Johanna



Wow. I felt like you took me on a guided meditation that comforted but didn't coddle me, It ignited my imagination, but it didn't stray.

@Cai
Cool.

@Johanna
Yeah. One of the lines I liked was that you were raised by the trees too.

@Cai
Me too. I wrote a poem several years ago, or poem / freewrite, that was something like 'I was raised by the stream' and playing on that double entendre of being *near* a stream and raised *by* the thing. And I only realized a while later, when I reread *Braiding Sweetgrass*, that there's a piece in there where somebody else talks about that, being raised by something – by the river or something. I don't remember what it was for that person. And so I hadn't even realized the inspiration flow in that. But it's just such a beautiful play on words. And I've been thinking about further plays on words that I can use to inspire writings like this, this poetic prose.

@Johanna
Yeah. I think that is what it – it's lyrical.

@Cai
Mm-hmm.

[JT continues holding space]

@Johanna
They sound lyrical to me.

@Cai
Yeah. It's one of the things that I've noticed. Writing like this is a healing process in finding what really is meaningful for me in that. One of the things I've noticed is that, in the writing that I do, my musical training or the musical instinct carries out in that flow of words. In the myths that are my upcoming photobook,⁷ one of the ways I went through and edited them was reading them aloud. And sometimes, I would change a particular word only because the rhythm of it didn't fit in the rhythm, in the flow of the sentence.

@Johanna
Oh yeah. That reminds me. I want to ask you something.

@Cai
Yeah. Go ahead.

⁷ Find Cai's photo project and information about the upcoming book at caiquirk.com



@Johanna

There's something so *alive* in you that I think is so absent, dead, missing in the Quaker body. How does the Quaker body come alive like you've come alive?

@Cai

One of the things that I've noticed is that it seems like Quakers today are kind of falling into some of the patterns that early Quakers were rebelling against in the church, of 'This is the way you experience spirituality' or 'You will come to meeting, and you will talk in a calm voice and use proper English,' or 'Oh, we don't do singing here.' Instead could we encourage folks to figure out how the connection to the divine is manifesting for them? There is so much power in inviting folks to experience how to do that seeking, and to not be seeking alone. Sometimes Quakers say 'find your own path,' which turns into 'Have fun. We'll be over here. Don't stray too far.'

@Johanna

Yeah. Sometimes I think we need ceremonies to help us explore.

@Cai

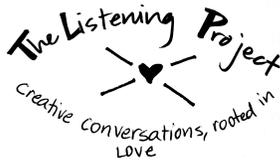
Ceremonies can be important, and there's value in not saying 'Here is one particular ceremony that will stay the same forever.' But at the same time, most people aren't open to any ceremony or any kind of ritualized action. For me, in releasing a lot of those pieces of 'shoulds' and 'oughts,' I've opened further to where Spirit is really leading. When I step away from the thought that I should read all of Thomas Kelly and Parker Palmer and other impactful authors, but instead spend a lot of time with one book, this is often way more powerful than trying to read everything.

There is so much out there in Quaker culture or other spiritual cultures that could open us up, when we are stuck, to those possibilities of where Spirit is leading. And yet, so often it just feels like the invitation to delve deeply is not nearly what it could be and that some of what's talked about is 'Okay, you're a Quaker, great, you come to meeting for worship on Sundays, you recycle, you drive a Prius. Great. You're a Quaker.'

This summer, I looked at our *Faith and Practice*⁸ a little more deeply (which I probably should've done in the last 24 years that I've been a Quaker). One of the things was it had many categories under 'Seeking with Spirit...' It had 'Seeking the Spirit in Silence,' 'Seeking the Spirit in Solitude,' 'Seeking the Spirit in Prayer.' The last two were 'Seeking the Spirit in Meeting for Worship' and 'Seeking the Spirit in Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business.' This doesn't really get talked about, these invitations into these other ways of exploring one's own spirituality. Yes, there is a communal aspect. There is also an individual aspect. There is also a small-group aspect. There are just so many different ways of possibility.

In the struggle to feel like a unified group, we lose a lot of the specificity. So in, for example, Hinduism before British contact or before European contact, it wasn't 'here is the religion and

8 *Faith and Practice* is a practical, soulful Quaker handbook. It is available to borrow in most Meetinghouse libraries, and has different versions created by different regions of the US. A sample chapter is published online by North Pacific Yearly Meeting: <https://www.npym.org/?q=content/friends-experiential-faith>



everyone believes exactly this.' There were beliefs and myths and ceremonies and rituals that were similar in different places, but kind of ebbed and flowed in their meaning and importance, and ones that only existed in certain places. Some would worship this deity because this happened at this particular lake right near their village whereas, 200 miles away, they would've never heard about it.

And so the collection of beliefs wasn't this inherently unified piece, but rather a tapestry across time and place. And when the British came, they saw people worshipping and tried to transfer the same words that they had about their own religion to what they were encountering there, which was much broader than just a specifically codified religion. And so I think in the struggle to name what Quakerism is, it gets overgeneralized and starts to limit continuing revelation in each person.

I recently had a deep mystical experience – I was talking to this spirit, kind of a manifestation of the larger Spirit. I had never really had anything like an in-depth conversation before. I'd had words given to me before and messages in meeting and things like that, but this was like a conversation.

And the sense that I got in response to a question that I asked was that Spirit is everywhere, and it's not uniform everywhere. Each tree, each person is a node in the fabric, inherently connected, not separate, but also not all the same. And so how do we, at the same time, nourish that within ourselves and nourish that relationship to community and Spirit, and community to Spirit, inner self to Spirit? There's many interrelated relationships.

@Johanna

And there are so many barriers to being – to inviting community to be fluid like that.

@Cai

Mm-hmm.

@Johanna

For me, as my spirituality grows, it gets weirder.

@Cai

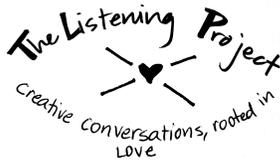
Mm-hmm. Yeah.

@Johanna

And that means it can be hard to tell people about it, sometimes. At one point, when I was learning a lot about healing, I started to write about it. And I shared those journal entries with my meeting. I put them on a shelf next to the meeting room and told people that they could take a look if they wanted. Which I think was a good thing. But I learned that the deeper I go, in my spiritual path, the harder it is to translate it to some people. Some of the language was completely new. The experiences were weirder.

@Cai

Mm-hmm.



@Johanna
Okay. Yeah.

@Cai
Yeah. And it's something that I have specifically sought out, specific mentors in this, people who are willing to be open to whatever Spirit is actually calling rather than what is the custom.

@Johanna
Yeah.

@Cai
I have a mentor who does a lot of energy work and is very open to mystical experiences, like we talked about that experience that I was telling you about and ways that I can further develop instincts – instincts feels like too secular a word, so in a spiritual sense.

I'm learning how to further develop that, such as in ways of spiritual protection – when I feel myself sinking into a deep trance or something like that, there's times that I just know I have to put out an anchor. And some of the times, it's an anchor to my body. Sometimes it's an anchor to other people or a tree nearby or is a protective barrier or something like that. And it's different every time. And so just having a mentor who not only can recognize where instincts are good, but also consider some ways that we/I can develop some different techniques further, is helpful. We develop a kind of tool bag to more easily draw on – having those tools ready and there becomes second nature and it enables less focus on the process and more to the spiritual experience and what is being called.

@Johanna
Yeah, that's it. That's the beauty of having a mentor.

@Cai
By being able to let the convincing fall away, we go more deeply spiritually together. Just like I mentioned earlier, when talking about the racism in Quaker spaces, when we have to convince somebody that it exists, it's just such a shallower conversation. In these spaces where we were talking about a queer experience of the divine, we could just say that, and then go on from there. We delve into those places of, really, where is the Spirit calling, not just do you believe me or not.

@Johanna
Right. Which, that disbelief is happening everywhere. I know of some meetings that are struggling with it. I was in a group last year, and a Friend of Color gave the group a call to action. The call was completely dismissed. People really weren't ready to hear it. It took months – it took a long time – because white people, my self included, couldn't hear it through the din of our own whiteness. The message was true, but it was blocked.

And later, there were people doubting the message. They were saying, 'Are you sure?' 'Are you sure that x and y was the original message?' It got harder to do the work that this Friend was



calling us to do, which was hear her message, because all these people were echoing each others' doubts. Because we're – we weren't convinced that the message was *real*, and the person that gave it was real, and the person really was listening to Spirit. So that makes it really hard.

@Cai
Mm-hmm. Yeah.

@Johanna
A lot of folks aren't convinced that white supremacy even *exists* inside our group!

@Cai
Yeah.

[All heads nod.]

@Johanna
Yeah. Do you have a community – you mentioned mentors. Do you have a community of more than two, where the parts of you that are really alive are echoed in others?

@Cai
Sometimes. I've been leading a book group, and we've been having some really interesting and rich discussions. We're reading the book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, and the stories connect with so many of us in spiritual ways similar to how others feel about the bible.

A f/Friend of mine mentioned that he has a men's group that meets at least twice a year. And they have since the 1990s, The pandemic marks the longest that they had gone without seeing each other in person. I want that, I want that kind of society, but queer. I don't know yet who it might be or who is ready and willing to commit to something like that, but to have such an ongoing group committed to each other seems so wonderful.

@Johanna
Yeah. To have a group going like that, maybe for the rest of our lives.

@Cai
Yeah!

[Cai mentions that it's time to go to another meeting, but that they're happy to continue the conversation again another time.]

@Johanna
Okay. Cool.

@Cai
This was fun. And it's good to be able to be in a space where I can just talk about these things and not have to clarify. I mean, yes, there's some clarifying, but again, not having to prove that



something is valid. I think that's a piece that Quakers can work on!

@Johanna

Yeah. I agree. Well, Thank you, Cai.

@JT

Thank you.

@Cai

Yeah.

@Johanna

I'm going to miss you. I don't usually say that after Zoom.

[It's time to go. We say goodbye and wrap up.]

Thanks for reading. We offer this transcript for free, in the hopes that the ideas presented will help to build a diverse, inter-generational faith community. Sharing a person's story in a faithful way, however, requires more than 15 hours of work per transcript. Please consider donating to the Listening Project. A donation of any amount encourages us as we continue to do this work. For more information, visit forwardinfaithfulness.org/donate

Thank you!

Discussion Questions

- 1. Have you ever had a time where you felt unity or wholeness, in addition to discomfort? If so, what was that like?*
- 2. What do you do in your life that helps you come "fully alive?"*
- 3. What is your relationship to mentorship, and mentoring? Do you have mentors? Do you want them? What do you value in a close friend, coach, or mentor?*