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Book Musings

March, 2013



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Book Musings is an occasional newsletter from staff and friends of QuakerBooks of Friends General Conference. It features books and themes that are of special interest to the author, as well as providing alerts about sales and other opportunities available to readers. If you would like to receive additional newsletters from FGC, [sign up here](#).

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Do Books Change People?

from Chel Avery

NOTE: All books in our catalog that are mentioned in this newsletter will be sold at a 15% discount through March 18 at www.quakerbooks.org.

Dear Friend,

Have you ever been offended by the gift of a book? I once pretty much ended a friendship with someone after she gave me a book. The giver thought it would change my mind over a decision I was making about my life. I suppose I could have interpreted the gift as an act of caring, but I didn't. I experienced it as interference in an area where I wanted my own judgment to be honored and supported.

Looking back on that incident and others like it, what stands out is the great power we attribute to books as a way to change people. We credit books with the ability to fix problems, to improve people, or to be dangerous. I recently read a comment on Goodreads.com: "This book made me a better person." Is it true? Can books do that?



Certain books, for example, *Silent Spring* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, have been credited with great influence toward social change. People say to each other, "You must read this!" as a way of passing on to others their beliefs, positions, or enthusiasms. Community can be built up around books that define shared beliefs and values. (And when those communities endure, sometimes they are called religions.)

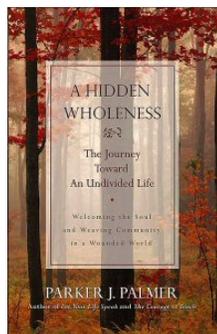
But as individuals, how susceptible are we really to being changed by books? Certainly books can change our *opinions*—although probably less often than we think. Recent research about how people of different political leanings process new information shows that we can all be remarkably resistant to information that contradicts our own positions.

But what about *ourselves*—how we feel and behave in the world, our values, our aims? I suspect that books rarely change people at that level. I think we change ourselves. But books, sometimes, can make us *want* to change, or they can show us *how* to change. I would have been less skeptical if the Goodreads comment had been: "This book inspired me to decide to be a

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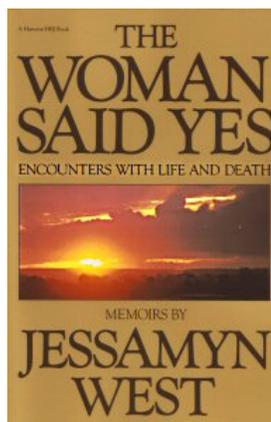
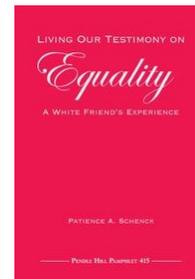
better person.”

I'm half expecting many people will write to tell me how wrong I am—and I look forward to that. How many books have you read that actually resulted in your becoming different? I've been poring through our own catalog listings with that question in mind, and I find that there are many books that have given me pleasure or have taught me interesting and useful things to know, or have evoked strong responses, but there are only a special few of which I can say, “Yes, this book got me to change.” Those that did either opened a new perspective, one that I had already been hungry for without knowing it, or else they provided a model or methods that I wanted to emulate or employ toward a change I already desired.



Parker Palmer's [*A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*](#) is one such book. Last month I wrote of Thomas Kelly's vision of living from the Center, rather than as a “committee of multiple selves.” Palmer addresses a specific way such inner division happens, through the different callings of “soul” and “role.” How often do your roles in the world call for an inner separation between your values and actions? (For example, a role may require you to encourage a client to use your company's product when you privately believe she may actually be happier with a competitor's.) Palmer addresses the wounds caused by these inner divisions and offers ideas for healing, while continuing to live in a world that places such demands on us. his book has encouraged me to seek wholeness, in my own clumsy way, despite “real world” demands.

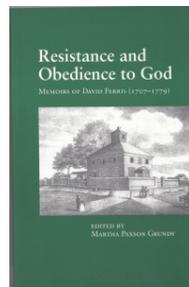
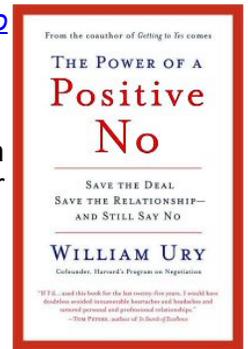
[*Living Our Testimony on Equality: A White Friend's Experience*](#) by Pat Schenck is, for me, one of the most effective calls to change that I have read, precisely because it is written from the assumption that the reader's opinions do *not* need to be changed and the reader does *not* need to be educated. This author starts with the presumption that the white Quaker who has picked up this publication already wishes to live a life and be part of a meeting that is more racially fair and inclusive. Rather than raising defensiveness by treating the reader as someone who needs to be instructed with more information about the problems, information that will somehow change her in areas where she is deficient, the pamphlet goes fairly directly to the questions of “What gets in our way?” “Given our good intentions, why do we stumble?” then gently, encouragingly, and simply, offers a way forward.



A book that had a subtle but long-lasting effect on me is [*The Woman Said Yes: Encounters with Life and Death*](#), by the well-known Quaker novelist Jessamyn West. I read this book more than twenty years ago and continue to think about it. It is a personal memoir of two episodes in the writer's life: a time when she was seriously ill and her mother fought to save her life; then a period much later when West helped her terminally ill younger sister to die as she wished. I don't know whether this book would have had the same impact if I'd read it at another period in my life, such as after I'd worked as a hospice volunteer, but its effect was profound and lasting. It was this book that first made me understand that there are times when the sanctity of life is best honored by trying to preserve it and times when it is best honored by letting life go. I lost much of my fear of and resistance to death after reading this book, and

that has made living a different kind of experience.

[*The Power of a Positive No: How to Say No and Still Get to Yes*](#) by William Ury is part of an informal series of books from the authors of the 1981 classic, *Getting to Yes*. I was working as my yearly meeting's "conflict response specialist," training mediators and working with meetings in conflict, when I started reading these books, and I've never found anything better. I mention this title because it is the one we currently have in stock, but they are all incredibly helpful. Like many Friends, I am pretty comfortable with other people's conflicts, but have never completely gotten over my aversion to openly addressing my own disputes with others. There is always some easy excuse to justify conflict avoidance—this person is too fragile or too unreasonable or the consequences would be too high. The approaches, techniques, and examples in this series have helped me to overcome those excuses when I've needed to so I could deal with what needs to be dealt with.

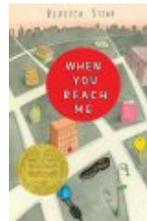


Finally, can I close a discussion on "books that have changed me" without mentioning [*The Journal of John Woolman*](#)? I'm afraid I've become a stuck record on that particular title, so I'll mention a similar wonderful book written by his contemporary, David Ferris. [*Resistance and Obedience to God*](#) is another, shorter memoir by a Quaker doing his best to live faithfully within the moral and ethical dilemmas of the eighteenth century. It includes his loving efforts to persuade his friends to release their slaves. He sets a model that I strive to live up to.

Has a book ever changed you? Which books have helped you to be different?
Chel

Jerimy: [*The Testimony of Integrity*](#)

I needed to fill up these little corners in the bottom of the pages, so I asked colleagues what publications have enabled change in them. Jerimy identified [*The Testimony of Integrity in the Religious Society of Friends*](#). With this 1991 Pendle Hill pamphlet, Wilmer Cooper re-awakened Quakers to the traditional testimony that underlies so much of what we stand for. Integrity works on multiple levels—speaking accurately is only one of them. I, too, have been inspired and guided by this great exploration of what integrity means at multiple levels in our relationship with the world.



Nicole: [*When You Reach Me*](#)

Sometimes a novel sticks with you and makes you look at the world differently. Nicole says that since she read this delightful, quirky story of friendship and time travel, set in a New York City neighborhood, she looks at people differently. You never know who people really are or what their stories may be—the homeless man on the corner may be a time traveler from the future with a mission to perform—and he may need your help! The gritty, everyday world may be filled with mysteries waiting to unfold. Intended for fifth grade or older, this book also speaks to adults, as Nicole and I will both attest!

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