

A Sustainable Life Study Guide

For use with *A Sustainable Life: Quaker Faith and Practice in the Renewal of Creation*
by Douglas Gwyn

Tips for getting the most out of this book

In his back cover comment, George Lakey notes that he read the chapters in reverse order, which felt like “a journey Home.” While most readers will prefer the more traditional front-to-back way of reading, it will be useful to keep an eye on how the many threads of thought are leading to a common destination.

1. Keep in mind this passage from page 123, near the book’s end: “This little book [has been] an attempt to reframe all of our Quaker faith and practice in terms of sustainability. Sustainability is not just another plank in a Quaker political platform. And Quaker faith and practice is not a list of dos and don’ts. It is an integrative whole, where each aspect informs and enlivens the others. This book has presented it as a set of paradoxes and energizing tensions. But all of these need to be contemplated within the horizon of a sustainable life on earth.”
2. Prior to reading each of the numbered chapters, it may be valuable to review the summary of that chapter’s intention from the “Conclusion.”
3. It may be useful to preview the study/discussion questions before reading each chapter.



Introduction

1. The author writes: “Living faithfully in the light not only leads into peaceful and just relationships with other humans. It also teaches one how to live wisely upon the earth” (p. xvi). Do you agree? What are your own experiences or observations on this subject?
2. George Fox spoke of “two thirsts in me” (p. xix)—one toward the satisfactions of this world and one toward the sacred. The first of these thirsts (the “false thirst,” p. xxi) could never be satisfied. What is your own experience of these thirsts? Do you try to balance them or must one take prominence? Have you made peace with them or do you wrestle between them?
3. The author observes that, for Fox, spiritual awakening was a physical, not just a mental experience—“he felt the whole of creation in his body” (p. xxii) and that the physical tremblings Quakers experienced in worship were akin to the earthquakes envisioned in Revelation (p. xxiv). What do you have to say about this?
4. The author writes, “Quaker faith and practice is both spiritual and material. It is what we do with our garbage as much as how we worship” (p. xxviii). Do you think this is true? If so, how are you challenged by this perspective?
5. How do you understand the “covenant relationship” that Fox understands all creatures, including people, to be called into? Do you perceive such a calling? What does it mean for us today? How do we understand it similarly or differently from Fox in his time?
6. The author suggests that our ability to live sustainably in this world is—in a deep sense—grounded in Quaker faith and practice: “it is *everything* we are about” (p. xv). He further implies that the relationship between our faith and practice and a sustainable life moves in two directions (see pp. xxviii-xxix). To live a deeply integrated Quaker faith and practice will call us into right relationship with the earth and, in turn, our actions in the world will affect our personal experience of the Light Within. Do you think this is true? Are there limits?

Chapter 1 — Light and Seed: Quaker Spiritual Practice

1. How do you respond to the author's observation that much of our understanding is "delusion" in the sense that it is mediated through the words of others? If you are engaged with this book, you are probably an active reader and thinker (as is the author). Do you wrestle with the distinction between *immediate* experience of the Light and understandings *about* the Divine? If so, how?
2. "Waiting begins as . . . waiting *for* something to happen, perhaps for God to answer our questions and needs. But over time, through some mysterious combination of persistence and surrender . . . we learn to wait *upon* the Lord, the Presence, the Truth" (p. 1). Have you experienced this transition? Do you agree with the author that it "is the Copernican revolution that begins a sustainable life"?
3. Early Quakers spoke of both "Light" and "Seed" as metaphors for spirit working within us. How are these images similar and different (see p. 7)? Do you attribute any meaning to the fact that today Friends use the first of these terms almost exclusively?
4. Quoting Thomas Kelly, the author describes the result of a life of continuous communion with the Divine, so that "our hearts are filled with a paradoxical combination of *contemptus mundi* and *amor mundi*. God 'plucks the world out of our hearts. . . . And He hurls the world into our hearts, where we and He together carry it in infinitely tender love' " (see pp. 10-11). What does this say to you about living the sustainable life?
5. The author notes that Kelly and other Quaker writers have offered mostly metaphors about the life of the spirit, without offering "how to" instructions. He recognizes that many Friends today seek explicit techniques, such as those found in twelve step-programs or Rex Ambler's "Experiments with Light" (pp. 13-15). What kinds of guidance have been most helpful to you?

Chapter 2 — Worship and Ministry: A Prophetic People

1. The previous chapter addresses Quakers as individuals. This chapter stresses our roles as part of a community. How do you think of your Quaker identity? To what degree is your Quakerism something that defines you as an individual, and to what degree does your participation in a Quaker community inform your Quaker identity? If both, do these two aspects enhance each other or compete?
2. The author makes a distinction between meditation—a practice pursued for personal enrichment—and Quaker worship, in which we submit ourselves to be called upon for service in ministry: “The aim of Quaker worship is that our words and lives speak divine truth and love” (p. 22). Is this how you approach worship? What has your experience been?
3. On page 23, the author observes that foundational Quaker metaphors (such as “Light” and “Seed”) have meaning within a variety of religious perspectives, but asserts that they are most powerful within the biblical framework from which early Friends took them. Today our Quaker communities contain a wide range of knowledge and attitudes about the Bible. How does this diversity strengthen and/or hinder us as a people called to service as a community?
4. “To be drawn into Quaker faith and practice today is to respond at some deep level to a calling into *peoplehood*.” How do you respond to this assertion and to the author’s idea of “a chosen people” with a “unique identity and purpose among other communities, movements, and causes” (p. 24)?
5. How are the words “prophetic” and “apocalyptic” used in this chapter? What do they mean in this context? What do they mean to you?
6. “The prophetic word is an insight into the *present*” (p. 33). The author observes that although Quakers have contributed much to social progress, it has been done most faithfully by addressing the concerns of the present situation. In this chapter and throughout the book, the author stresses the importance of *here* and *now* in Quaker ministry. How can we do this in an era in which the long-term future of our environment looms with such urgency? What is your response?

Chapter 3 — Personal Integrity and Discernment: “Mind the Oneness”

1. What does the author mean by “integrity”? How does he describe “truth”?
2. The author observes that “Truth is more fundamentally participational than propositional. We live into the truth most of all through our actions” (p. 40). Does this seem correct to you? What experience have you had of “living into” the truth?
3. Early Friends spoke of our “testimony” rather than multiple testimonies. (See p. 42.) “One of the aims of this book is to show that the testimonies—indeed all of Quaker faith and practice—are not simply lists of things but form an integral, mutually informing and balancing whole, an undivided, sustainable life”(p. 43). What changes for you in thinking about testimony as a single whole vs. as a list of principles or values? Which approach is most helpful?
4. On page 44 the author notes that “An act of unfaithfulness to the truth often provides the painful memory that goads us to rise higher.” How does the John Woolman story illustrate this? Have you had a similar experience?
5. Woolman set high standards for living faithfully. He wrote “To conform a little to a wrong way strengthens the hands of such who carry wrong customs to their utmost extent; and the more a person appears to be virtuous and heavenly-minded, the more powerfully does his conformity operate in favour of evil-doers” (p. 46). What kinds of pressures to conform to a “wrong way” most trouble you?
6. What is the relationship between integrity and discernment? How do they influence each other?
7. Identify an action you are considering. (It can be something simple, such as taking a trip or making a purchase.) Consider the integrity of this step with reference to the four dimensions charted on page 49 and described on pages 50-51. How do these concerns influence your considerations? Do other questions arise?

Chapter 4 — Equality and Community: Testimony in Conversation

1. The author describes community as “an intimacy of relationship and unity of purpose with others” (p. 57). Is this how you understand community? Where do you experience community in your life? (Or where have you experienced it in the past?) The author says most people experience “a deep yearning for greater community.” Is this something you have noticed?
2. On the same page, the author notes that “Friends today think of ‘equality’ and ‘community’ as two different social testimonies, when in reality they are two aspects of our single testimony.” Do you agree?
3. Is community necessary to the “sustainable life”? The author says “We find and follow God’s teaching *together*. Individual prayer and meditation are important. But we find our way forward together as communities where people of different backgrounds meet on an equal basis” (p. 59). What do you have to say about this?
4. Throughout this chapter, the author explores the “dialogical” relationship between equality and community: “they continue to qualify one another” (p. 71). He writes “the movement toward greater equality builds community, which in turn strengthens the motives for treating one another more equally” (p. 64). But he has also warned that “the in-group dynamics of community can abridge larger questions of equality if the two are not kept in constant conversation” (p. 63). Discuss how you see such dialogue in your own meeting or other communities you are part of.
5. Modern Quakers are often troubled by our history of slaveholding, something we sometimes try to forget or explain away. How do you interpret the author’s observation (p. 63) that “equality was the *ethos*” of the Quaker movement; “It had not yet become a thoroughgoing *ethic*.” Are there areas today in which our ethic of equality does not correspond with our ethos?
6. The author expresses concern that “unexamined middle-class smugness about education, cultural tastes, and taboos tend to derail sincere white Quaker intentions to reach out to African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Latinos, and others who would diversify and enormously enrich the Religious Society of Friends” (p. 69). Have you been part of a deep community that was also diverse? Or does community itself contribute to homogenization?
7. See the agenda from 1918 on pp. 67-68. In what ways do you/your meeting participate in a social structure that perpetuates inequality? What would it take to free ourselves of such participation? What gets in the way of disengaging from such participation?

Chapter 5 — Ministers, Elders, Clerks and Group Discernment: The Peaceable Kingdom

1. The author names as a paradox that our “most egalitarian and inclusive form of decision making must be nurtured by gifted, experienced leaders” (p. 75). What are the best instances of leadership you have witnessed as a Quaker?
2. In our meetings for discernment (business meetings) the author notes that all participants have the responsibility to “speak the truth” but also the responsibility to remain silent unless led to speak (see p. 79). These are the same responsibilities of participants in our meetings for worship. He notes later that the aim of speaking is not self-expression, but “usefulness, generosity of spirit, and efficient brevity” (p. 84). Is this a discipline you try to bring to meetings for discernment? What challenges do you encounter? What helps you?
3. The author reminds us that the key to recognizing the moment of decision in a meeting for business is not with respect to the *quantity* of those who agree, but a “shared discernment of a qualitative state” (p. 80). He cites the observation of Jesuit researcher Michael Sheeran in his study of Quaker decision making that those Friends who attend to discernment of a “spiritually gathered moment” are most ready to unite with decisions in which group discernment differs from their personal preferences (p. 83). Have you experienced such moments in business meeting? Do you expect them and wait for them?
4. How is the responsibility of the clerk the same as that of every participant (see p. 85)?
5. The author uses the analogy of a card game for good participation in business meeting. What aspects of participation does this comparison highlight? What other analogy might you suggest for good conduct of Quaker business?
6. What kind of leadership do elders provide? Can you give good examples of effective eldership (formal or informal) in your experience? How important is this function?
7. How does vocal ministry play a role in the lives of our meetings today? Do you agree with the author that “the absence of a vocational sense of ministry among Friends has placed greater stress upon [other kinds of leadership] . . . to nurture unity in group discernment,” with a greater inclination to settle for compromise or insipid decisions (see p. 89)? Do you agree? What factors do you observe that affect the depth and quality of decisions in your meeting?
8. The author quotes George Lakey’s observation about communal decision making—that it can encourage unity, but it can also be a conservative influence, stifling change. He asks, “Can Friends today claim to be free of this problem?” (p. 91). How do you answer?

Chapter 6 — Unity and Differentiation: Tragedy and Renewal in Quaker History

1. The author explores changes and divisions in the Society of Friends with respect to movement along two axes: emphasis on practice (orthopraxis) vs. emphasis on belief (orthodoxy) as one dimension; and emphasis on the inward and experiential (a universalist, mystical mode) vs. emphasis on outward expression and call to change (a Christian prophetic/apocalyptic mode) as the other dimension. (See p. 106.) As an individual, where on this continuum do you feel most comfortable? Do you feel pressures pulling you away from your comfort spot? How do you respond?
2. With respect to the axes on page 106, the author observes “Our integrity lies in the difficult, sometimes painful paradoxes we experience living in the middle of that powerful force field. Each new phase of Quaker history has been an attempt to rebalance the shifting energies of our faith and practice” (p. 108). From your own observations of the Quaker community, where in this field do you think we are most likely to grapple with the nature of our identity in the future?
3. The author notes that the original creation of Quaker organizational structures was a controversial step, but he argues that “a stable vessel was required to sustain the radical, prophetic spirituality and countercultural social practices Friends had developed” (p. 98). Over our history, both the vessel and its contents have changed, with the emergence of new forms of Quakerism. What is the relationship today between the vessel (our structure) and its contents (our faith and its expression)? Do you think the vessel is still stable? Is it possible for it to be too stable?
4. What does the history of Quaker divergence and separations say to you?
5. On page 102, the author notes that “both Orthodox and Hicksite Friends revised traditional Quaker faith and practice more profoundly than they realized.” Does this surprise or trouble you? Why or why not?
6. The author notes that Friends are often ambivalent about leadership. “Leaders can unite, renew, and refocus the body. They can also divide it in the very process of renewal” (p. 108). What evidence have you seen of ambivalence about leadership among Friends? What kinds of leadership have been most helpful?
7. Throughout this chapter the author employs the language of biological evolution, speaking of Quakers as a species that adapts to changes in its environment, alters to fit new ecological niches, and at times gives forth new varieties or hybrids. What do you find helpful or unhelpful in this way of thinking about our past and future? Is there a different analogy you would offer?

Chapter 7 —Peace and Nonviolent Action: The Lamb’s War

1. This chapter can be read as an overview of the evolution of the Quaker peace testimony and the author’s commentary about it. His first observation is that “peace is not the absence of conflict,” and that any peace that ignores the presence of conflict is a “false peace” (p. 113). Does this ring true for you?
2. Quakers have been criticized as being “conflict averse” within our own communities, avoiding expression of disagreement or anger until the problem explodes or parties withdraw from the community. Is this a misapplication of our peace testimony?
3. How do you understand the term “the Lamb’s War”? Is it relevant today?
4. On page 21, the author writes, “Personal peace is found only through confronting and standing against one’s inner contradictions.” How does this statement reflect a deeper analysis of the peace testimony than what we often encounter?
5. The author says that “those who pose a choice between working for peace and working for justice don’t really understand either” (p. 121). Discuss this statement with reference to the diagram on page 120.
6. The author claims that the 1661 declaration of peace, familiar to most Friends, is one of the great peace witnesses in Christian history, but he laments that it was also a compromise with civil powers and narrowed “the larger social equation of peace” (p. 123). What do you think this document says to us today? Does it lead us forward or hold us back?
7. William Penn described the “two-track logic of modern Quaker peacemaking”—our roles as prophets of peace and as reconcilers of differences (p. 124). Both of these roles have been criticized from within and without the Quaker community. “Prophets” arguing for nonviolence in all situations have been accused of imposing privileged, free-world values on oppressed people whose condition they do not share. “Reconcilers” have been accused of granting legitimacy to violent movements by befriending their leaders and establishing trusting relationships. Do you think both of these roles are appropriate for Quakers?
8. Do you agree with the author’s implied concern that we often overemphasize the peace aspect of the “seamless garment” of our broader testimony, in which “every aspect of Quaker faith and practice is implicit in every other” (p. 122)?

Chapter 8 — Simplicity and Sustainability: Daily Delight

1. The author asserts that sustainability is not just a new testimony, but is “a way of re-viewing the whole of Quaker practice, of integrating the dynamic tensions we have contemplated along the way” (p. 129). How is this so?
2. What is the difference between sustainability and simplicity? What is their relationship?
3. On page 133, the author refers to realities of warfare and ecological destruction that have given new meaning to the term “end times.” Do you feel that you are living in end times? Why or why not?
4. On page 134 the author describes our modern parallel to the scribes and Pharisees of the gospels: “hard-working, middle-class people” who are disturbed by problems of our times “but find it difficult to renounce the material comforts and consumer items they have worked hard to attain.” Do you relate to this description? What makes it hard to renounce middle class comforts?”
5. The author states “Quaker faith and practice is outstanding in its ability to combine the prophetic and wisdom streams of the Hebrew-Christian tradition” (p. 135). What does this mean and why does it matter?
6. What does simplicity mean to you? In what ways do you seek to practice simplicity in your own life? Consider the North Carolina Yearly Meeting (C) statement on simplicity from page 140.
7. Thomas Kelly’s approach to simplicity stresses the role of time and attention in our inner lives (see p. 141). The problem, he says, is that each of us tends to be “a whole committee of selves.” Is this observation true for you? Why is it a problem?
8. How does the author understand “stewardship”? How does it relate to the concept of “dominion”? How does it relate to “simplicity”?
9. What are the ways the author considers the subject of time in this chapter?
10. Why is this chapter titled “Daily Delight”?

Conclusion — The Sustainable Friends Meeting: Occupy!

1. Discuss the ways the concepts of “place” and “occupy” are used throughout this chapter. What do they say to you?
2. In this chapter, the author strives to weave together the “tensions and paradoxes” of the eight axes of a “dynamic matrix of life” (p. 149). The empty center, balanced between the 16 counterparts, is where he calls us to dwell. How do you understand what this means?
3. Where throughout this book does the author show reasons for hope? Where do you find hope?
4. This book acts less a “blueprint” for a sustainable life than as a study of “structural principles” for such a life. Which principles most challenge and/or inspire you?
5. In drafting your own “blueprint” of a sustainable life—for yourself or your meeting—how would you begin?