

Sink Down to the Seed: Going Deeper in Quaker Life and Witness

by Douglas Gwyn

Address given at Intermountain Yearly Meeting, June 21, 1996

The language of God's guidance as a Light within is very familiar among Friends today. "Light" is a powerful metaphor, describing the many ways we sense God present with us. It informs our consciences and leads us in paths of wisdom and righteousness. Sometimes our language of the Light within is one-dimensional. Listening to spoken ministry or worship-sharing in a Friends meeting today, one might get the impression that the Light is spelled "Lite." It sounds as if the Light only calms, encourages, reassures, absolves us. Early generations of Friends knew the Light in these ways, but also as a power that could deeply disturb, even convict the individual within. If the Light is a power of personal and social transformation, it must be a power that not only calms but disturbs, creating conflicts on the way to a truer peace.

Traditional Friends also had other metaphors to speak of God's presence and activity within us. George Fox used over a hundred images to describe Christ's work in the soul and within the community of faith. One of the most commonly-used images, one that is all but lost among Friends today, is that of *the Seed of God within*. If Light is about God letting us know the right way to move, the Seed is about God's power within us to do it here and now. The power of the Seed rises within us only as we sink down to it.

Probably the most sublime Quaker writer on life in the Seed is the early Friend Isaac Penington. Isaac and Mary Penington were already advanced Seekers long before they were finally convinced of the Quaker way in the 1650s. Isaac Penington's spiritual counsel is deep, rich with evocative images and metaphors, especially of the life of the Seed.

There is often a visceral quality in his writing that helps locate the feeling of the Seed within us. Sometimes he mentions the breath as a pathway to knowing God's will. In one instance he advises, "breathe unto the Lord to reveal what is proper for thee at present." There is a kind of knowledge we can gain and store in our minds. The knowledge of what God wants for us here and now must be found at a deeper level.

The following quotation from a little tract called *Some Directions to the Panting Soul* sums up much of Penington's counsel:

Give over thine own willing; give over thine own running; give over thine own desiring to know or to be any thing, and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee, and be in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee, and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that, and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of life, which is his portion. And as thou takest up the cross to thyself, and sufferest that to overspread and become a yoke over thee, thou shalt become renewed, and enjoy life, and the everlasting inheritance in that.

These words seem appropriate to Intermountain Yearly Meeting's theme of "Maintaining our Spiritual Base in Busy Times." We feel like "panting souls" in the midst of the many commitments, concerns, and identities we try to live out from day to day. Penington uses some uncomfortable words, like "cross" and "yoke." That language is not easy for us, partly because we feel burdened already. Yet he also promises that this very yoke will refresh our strength, renew our lives.

Sinking Down to the Seed: Three Movements of the Spirit

What would such a breakthrough look like in terms of our busy lives? What does sinking down to the Seed mean in terms of the clutter and incoherence we feel in our existence? I do not claim to be a "spiritual athlete" on the level of Isaac Penington or some living Friends I have known. But from my own experience along the path and from my study of Quaker spirituality, I propose three ways to describe the breakthrough: from concern to conviction, from enthusiasm to ecstasy, and from resentment to reconciliation.

From Concern to Conviction

First, the word "concern" has a place of honor among Friends. We speak of the many concerns we carry in our hearts: concern for the environment, for various oppressed or suffering peoples, for military crises in the world, for issues of gender bias or heterosexism. The

word “concern” has a history in Quaker vocabulary. Traditionally, a Friend who came deeply under the weight of a concern was valued, nurtured, counseled, sometimes even supported financially by the monthly or quarterly meeting to work under that concern. A Friend would sometimes “travel under a concern” among Friends and others, to inspire others to work with him or her on that spiritual, moral, or social issue.

But the process of helping a Friend nurture and develop a concern was also a process of winnowing out competing concerns and distracting issues. To come under the weight of a concern is to feel God’s call to act, and there are only so many concerns a person can effectively carry. There is a process Friends have traditionally called “threshing” involved here; that is, separating the chaff of our own thoughts and desires from the pure Seed of God’s leading and power to act.

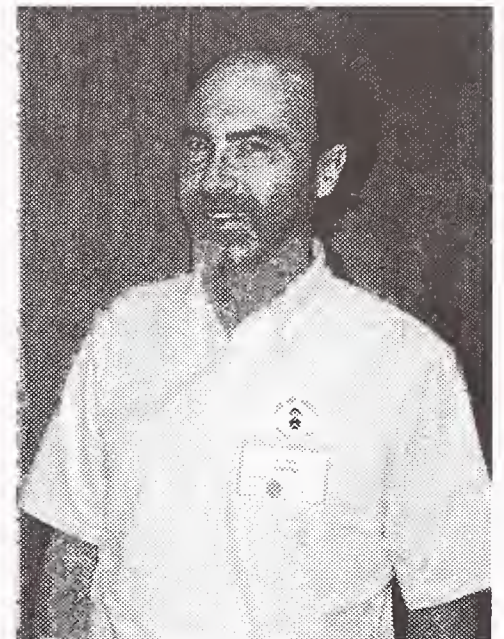
Today we live in a world of mass communications, of immediate awareness of local, national, and world events. Anyone whose heart is tender, whose conscience is developed, feels a painful burden in perceiving the violence and injustice all around us. One may even become immobilized, unable to act upon any concern. We face what theologians sometimes call the “scandal of particularity”—the awful fact that I am just one person in one time and place. I cannot easily accept the limits on what I am and what I can do with my puny time and energy.

Thus, our hearts are full of so many things. The Light shines in us, but is blocked and refracted by these many things. It is bent into many directions and colors, often beautiful in their own ways. But there is a confusion that eventually wearies us. To “sink down to the Seed” within us is to let go of the many things we clutch in our hearts. We have to let go of not simply a few, not even most, but *ALL*. Lay them down, spread them out, re-examine them in the Light. It is a time to know and accept forgiveness—to forgive ourselves and others for not being able to save the world. It is a time to accept God’s forgiveness for our moral pride in trying to take on too much with too little wisdom. To “sink down to the Seed” is not only to let go of our selfish, spiteful, or foolish ways. It is also to let go our best hopes, desires, and energies—let them become compost for the Seed within—consecrate them to God’s will for us.

This act of renunciation, purgation, has some difficult passages. Perhaps hardest is the waiting—waiting for these composted concerns to be broken down and absorbed into the Seed—waiting for the Seed to rise within. If we rest there in God for a season, God will raise us to new life. In traditional Quaker Christian terms, this is the experience of Christ’s Passion—dying with Christ, lying buried with Christ, eventually to be

raised with Christ. As the Seed begins to rise in us, we will find in many cases that it is fed, it is informed by what we have learned, accomplished, and attempted previously. Past strivings haven’t been utterly wasted and discarded after all. The Seed reuses and reintegrates our best energies into something new, something we never dreamed.

This subtle alchemy transforms the base metals of our own efforts into the pure, refined gold of divine purpose in the world. This is the meaning of Quaker convincement. It is not a mere rational assent to a few principles, like “that of God in every one.” In seventeenth-century parlance, “convincement” meant “conviction,” a sense of one’s own inadequacy and a movement into greater intimacy with God, fuller dependence upon God’s power and guidance. The movement from concern to conviction is painful, even traumatic at times. But through that movement, we become simpler, more integrated—the light shines more purely through us—the eye becomes clearer, the heart becomes purer, able to will one thing. And the neatest thing of all: many of us get to go through this harrowing transformation more than once in life!



*Douglas Gwyn.
Staff photo.*

From Enthusiasm to Ecstasy

Our enthusiasms can burn us out even faster than our concerns. While concerns burden us, enthusiasms take hold of us and can consume us with their wild energy. At first, as we surge along with this energy, the experience is exhilarating. It may be a moral passion, a righteous indignation we can really build up a head of steam with. It may be an intellectual passion, something we can bore our friends with for hours. It may be a recreational passion, or even a newly discovered “high.”

Enthusiasm appears to be spontaneous. We all want to be spontaneous, so our passions seem self-evidently good. The Quaker ideal of following the leading of the Spirit would seem to demand this way of being. Yet upon deeper reflection over time, the impulse of the

moment often proves to be the compulsion of a lifetime. We are ruled by these compulsions as long as we continue to live in the whirlwind.

Robert Johnson, in a book titled *Ecstasy*,* offers a helpful analysis of enthusiasm. He prefers the Jungian term, "inflation," being filled with air. The surest sign of inflation is the difficulty we have in stopping when we are in that mode. True ecstasy, by contrast, is a state we can always pull back from. In fact, it is usually only a passing experience. But with inflation, we want to ride the wild spirit for all we can. In the process, we may run roughshod over others or do harm to ourselves without noticing.

Johnson offers a useful electrical analogy to describe the difference between inflation (or enthusiasm) and true ecstasy. True ecstasy works like electrical inductance. Transformers work by inductance: current runs through one coil; another coil is placed very near the first coil; it picks up energy from the first coil without ever being connected to it. It is proximity, rather than actual flow, or conductance, that transfers the energy in a safe form. By contrast, electrical conductance, direct flow from the source, can easily overpower the motor or appliance that receives it, blowing it out. In spiritual terms, then, real transformation occurs by induction, by God's Spirit working within us. God's Spirit works by intimate proximity with our own spirit, without being the same thing. Now, early Friends didn't know much about electricity, but I believe this spiritual principle undergirds their use of the term *inward* Light, rather than the inner Light, the Seed *within*, not an inner Seed. It is the immanence of God within us that changes us, not a sameness between God and ourselves, or God as an inner aspect of ourselves. I can tell you this much at least: if God is *my* inner self, then God is a "dim bulb" indeed.

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How do we overcome our addictions to the rush of inflation, or enthusiasm? Even if we see it doing harm to ourselves and to others, it is hard to stop. Our passions run our lives. To "sink down to the Seed" is to "unplug" the passions and to rest in God. God has sown the Seed in our hearts through compassion to us. The Seed is our ultimate sanctuary, our final refuge, not only from the world, but from ourselves. Resting in the Seed, we can wait out the storm, feel God's mercy upon us. It isn't easy to stop. Sometimes we suffer intense pangs from our compulsive nature when we step out of the whirlwind. It can be helpful to realize that the pain has been there all along, because of the way we've been living; we're just letting ourselves feel it at last. But God's mercy will sustain us in that inward retirement.

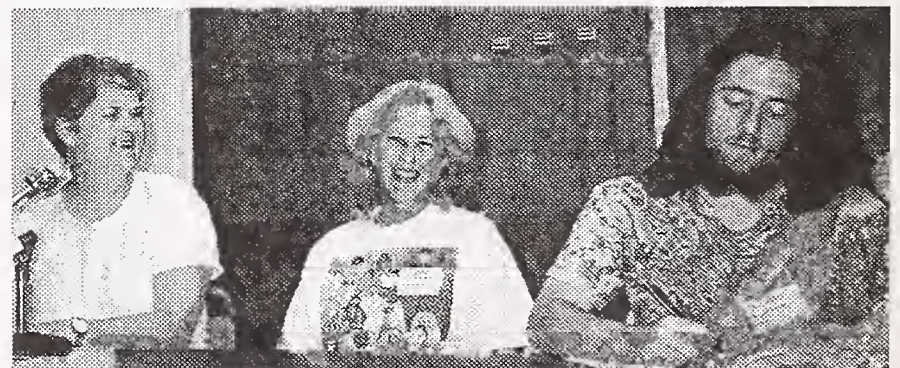
From Resentment to Reconciliation

One of the most damning spirits that can take over our lives, and one of the least acknowledged ones, is the unclean spirit of resentment. Too many of our moral stands and political positions are dictated by our resentment of others. Too often, we place ourselves over against those who threaten, oppress, or simply offend us the most. We establish our position by a simple negation or reversal of what we perceive in them. We say, "Whatever they are, I am the opposite." For some, the foil is the "religious Right," for others, it may be "patriarchy," for others, "those feminists," and for others, "the military-industrial complex." We distill a certain image of "them" and define ourselves over against it.

Moreover, we go on to join forces with others we view as opposite to our favorite foils. Many unholy alliances are formed according to the flawed syllogism that "my enemy's enemy is my friend." Many of us have squandered a great deal of time and energy over many years fighting these karmic battles. Over times, as that spirit wears us down, we may succumb to the destructive spirit of rage, blind fury that lashes out against whatever half-way resembles our nemesis. What may have begun as a liberating gesture of defiance slowly degenerates into an annoying tic, a reflective, hollow vehemence. In the final analysis, resentment amounts to letting the thing we detest most bitterly define us most tellingly.

Jim Corbett offers an excellent critique of the spirit of resentment in his theory of civil initiative. He notes that groups employing the tactics of civil disobedience may become enmeshed in a reflexive need to oppose and create conflict with the government and its policies. The spirit of opposition may eclipse the positive social concern that gave rise to the act of civil disobedience. By contrast, civil initiative seeks ways to initiate justice and peace from the grassroots—to do the right thing in its own right. Conflict with the government may or may not follow. But the point is to act upon the positive good itself, not a polemical "good" that is simply the mirror image of some recognized evil.

John and Diana Lampen are British Friends who have worked for many years in Northern Ireland. I heard them speak about recent breakthroughs there. Friends



IMYM Panel: Jan Miller, Genie Durland, Christopher Kauffman.
Staff photo.

have worked alongside many groups seeking peace there for a long time. After all these years, it is impossible to say what changed and why. The Lampens used the image of a vast accumulation of feathers. One day, one more feather, one more hopelessly insignificant act, finally shifts the balance of the scales. The peace process proceeds slowly and ambivalently. But it has gotten this far by the accumulation of many personal efforts and individual transformations. May God continue to pour feathers on Northern Ireland and on all of us!

One of the most painful lessons is that the work of peace and justice, like the work of the Seed within, is one of patient waiting. Patience is an active condition of the Spirit. It can march; it can demonstrate; it can live in jails. It can survive the long haul of transformation. But it is not fed on the bitter fruit of resentment. The Seed is watered with our tears. It is nourished by acts of good faith, no matter how futile they may seem. And acts of good faith witness God's love to all. They stimulate the life of the Seed in others, no matter how deeply it may be buried in the oppressor, the violator, the victim, or the exploited.

James Parnell, a teen-aged Quaker preacher in the 1650s, was attacked by a hostile mob in the streets of Essex, England. One enraged man struck him with a barrel stave, saying, "take that, in the name of Jesus Christ!" Parnell replied, "Friend, I do accept it, in the name of Jesus Christ." Not long after, Parnell died in the Colchester jail, becoming the first martyr of the Quaker movement.

Was his witness in vain? The fact that we gather as Friends at yearly meetings, carrying forward that ministry of universal reconciliation nearly 350 years later, offers our answer. We carry forward the life of the Seed, rising from concern to conviction, from enthusiasm to ecstasy, from resentment to reconciliation.

I feel awe and gratitude to share in that life with you. ■

Douglas Gwyn has been a world hunger educator with the AFSC, a Friends Pastor in Noblesville, Indiana, and Berkeley, California, and a teacher at Pendle Hill. He is the author of three books on Quaker history and faith: Apocalypse of the Word, Unmasking the Idols, and The Covenant Crucified. He will be at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in England during the 1996-97 year, completing a book on Seekers and Quakers.

* Johnson, Robert, *Ecstasy*, San Francisco: Harper, 1987.

Responses to Douglas Gwyn

A Friday evening panel at IMYM spoke on "Changing Families and Changing Times." Friends addressed their remarks in response to Douglas Gwyn's words the day before. The following panelists share their responses:

Finding a Simpler Way by Rebecca Henderson, Albuquerque Meeting

Trying to maintain one's spiritual center is at the very core of Quaker practice. There are traditions and testimonies that help us do this. It brings to mind the query, in various versions, that asks us to not take on more tasks than we can manage, and to keep our works as well as our possessions simple. The question is whether or not we can find time in our days to nurture that Seed of spiritual sustenance. Those of us who are gardeners and farmers know that we can't just tend the plants once a month. This is not just an academic question.

I remember childhood times when nothing happened on Sunday except going to meeting, preparing dinner, visiting with friends and relatives, reading and ordinary chores. I look at my life now, and at the lives of my friends, where economic necessity keeps us working long, hard hours. Sundays can become like working days. Sunday receives the tasks of personal keeping-life-together, the laundry, the errands, and the self-nurturing "when there's time." There is no sense of leisure to look at the wonders of life around us or the wonders of the spiritual home within.

Instead of creating a week of "First Days" as the early Friends had in mind, we seem to have made First Day like all other days.

Doug Gwyn's topic reminded me that I need to revamp the activities of my days, and also revamp at least one day a week for nurturing that Seed. I need to ask what it is that nurtures me. Can I do those nurturing things now? What do I need to change? Maybe a call about a Meeting committee could happen during the week instead of after Meeting. And maybe we could have more than a minuscule greeting time after Meeting.

These are hard-pressed times, economically and politically. It takes strength to say the necessary "no" to some tasks around us in order to maintain our spiritual base, to tend to our patch of ground around us and inside our hearts. We have choices about these things, but we need to ask for spiritual strength and guidance from Spirit in order to make those choices that will allow spiritual growth. What stays? What goes? It's not easy, but not choosing makes life even more difficult. ■

Rebecca Henderson is clerk of Ministry and Oversight for IMYM.

More responses on page 8.

A Quaker Woman by Genie Durland, Lamb's Community Worship Group

Doug's talk brought to mind for me our period of greatest activism—a time when Bill and I were full-time advocates, educators, witnesses and practitioners of war tax resistance and other forms of religiously motivated civil disobedience. During those years we learned how hollow and meaningless such activity is if not based in prayer. Only through a communal discipline of prayer and contemplation, involving all those of us who worked together, could we gain clarity about the direction of our work and rootedness in its true purpose. We learned the hard lesson of the importance of letting go of the outcome of the witness. We learned that faithfulness is everything, and that the "results" of our faithfulness in the world may never be known to us, but are safe in the hands of God.

I also heard my heart reminding me that the bottom line of these kinds of realizations has to do with being, not doing. If I am filled with concern about what I am/should be doing—however important and compassionate my doing may be—I may fail to remember that my doing can only arise authentically from who I am. Learning this has led me to search for my true being. Who am I that I might do what I do?

As for anyone, this is the search of a lifetime. At age 61, mine has led me to declare that the most important thing I can say about myself is that I am a Quaker woman. My hope and prayer for the rest of my life is that those words—a Quaker woman—might contain whatever God asks of me. The familiar gospel passage tells us that "God so loved the world that he gave his only son..." That teaching is stated in the past tense for the simple reason that it refers to a past event, the earthly life of Jesus. But when Jesus left his earthly life he gave us the gift of his Holy Spirit to be an eternal presence among and within us. That reality enables us to say that God so loves the world that she gave us ears to hear, eyes to see, mouths to speak, arms to hug, hands to work, feet to stand firm. God so loves the world that he made each one of us in God's image. God so loves the world that she gathered a great cloud of witnesses in succeeding generations to do her work and be her love.

God so loves the world that he made you and me—Quaker men and women. ■

Genie Durland is a past presiding clerk of IMYM.

Addressing My Condition by Christopher Kauffman, Moab Worship Group

The IMYM 1996 keynote address given by Doug Gwyn seemed to address my condition directly. The theme of this year's IMYM is one that I deal with on a daily basis. "How can we maintain our spiritual base in busy times?" Doug spoke on many aspects of this subject and his words rang true in my ears. I would like to talk about the two most powerful ways in which Doug's speech affected me.

Doug spoke about something called "the curse of particularity." The curse is that we are only on this earth for a short while and we are limited in the number of causes that we devote our time to. This part of the speech brought me a sense of peace. At any one time there are a hundred causes I would like to support, but I only have time for two. I came to the realization that God created our limits as well as our abilities. We can be content with the small things that we are able to accomplish.

Doug's words also made me fear. I felt as if Doug were talking directly to me when he mentioned how too often Quakers only see the comforting peaceful side of God.

Doug reminded us that God is also transforming, directing, and powerful. He reminded us that we are not in

control. The thought of surrendering my will to the leading of God is a scary one. However, at the same time that I fear the idea, I am also irresistibly drawn to it.

I thank Doug for his moving and insightful address. ■

Christopher Kauffman, a college student, participated in the Quaker Youth Pilgrimage in 1994.



Richard North, panelist (left), speaking to Doug Gwyn (right).

Poem

by Michael Hartman, Strawberry Creek Meeting

Mighty is our God,
to fill our hearts with joy.
She parts the veil of eternal time
to touch our mortal soul. ■

Strawberry Creek Meeting Newsletter, January 1996.