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What Canst Thou Say?

Friends • Mystical Experience • Contemplative Practice

*You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this: but what canst thou say?
Art thou a child of Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest,
is it inwardly from God? —George Fox*

Cultivating the Mystical

Creative Expression Cultivates a Deepening of the Mystical Carol Cober

The combination of contemplative and creative spiritual practices is life-giving to me. The more I experience intuitive mindful visual arts expression like painting, drawing, collage, and pottery, the more I treasure these resources for my spiritual life. Tending creative expression can be a gateway to a deepening of spiritual unfolding for many people. We observe with new eyes, listen deeply, and move at the pace of guidance with our whole being.

I left a position in a large research company eight years ago to open a part-time private psychotherapy practice so I could have more time to care for my elderly parents. I felt drawn toward a deeper unitive experience of God's presence in life. I needed to tend to my creative expression and I knew more spaciousness would be necessary to follow this leading. In the transition into this new life, I immersed myself in art and contemplative practice classes, and then developed a regular sketchbook practice with a Quaker spiritual Friend. I found specific art coaches and encouragers to support this unfolding.

Intuitive painting relies on inner listening, seeing mindfully, using breathing practices, and developing a felt sense of body awareness. Seeing is much more than just looking, and can guide all of us to see the truth of things in wholeness.



What Canst Thou Say? (WCTS) is an independent publication co-operatively produced by Friends with an interest in mystical experience and contemplative practice. It is published in February, May, August, and November. The editorial and production team is Muriel Dimock, Lissa Field, Mariellen Gilpin, George Hebben, Lieselotte Heil, Judy Lumb, Grayce Mesner, Mike Resman, Earl Smith, Eleanor Warnock, and Rhonda Ashurst.

Tell us your stories! **WCTS** is a worship-sharing group in print. We hope to help Friends be tender and open to the Spirit. Articles that communicate best to our readers focus on specific events and are written in the first person.

Although there are themes announced for most issues, we accept any expressions of mystical experiences or contemplative practice at any time.

We welcome submissions of articles less than 1500 words and artwork suitable for black and white reproduction. Please send your text submissions in Word or generic text format and artwork in high resolution jpeg files. Photocopied art and typed submissions are also accepted.

Send via email to <wctseditors@gmail.com> or hard copy to **Rhonda Ashurst, PO Box 9032, Reno NV 89507.**

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My intention is to meet the Presence and work with the breath awareness and ease in the body while creating. These practices have led to a deepening sense of an interconnection and oneness with others and nature. I feel a deep sense of aliveness within.

Thomas Kelly wrote “The soul ever dwells in the presence of the holy one” in *The Testament of Devotion* (1941).

Support from Quaker Mystical Unfolding

I appreciate the article “Mystical Experience, the Bedrock of Quaker Faith” by Robert Atchley in *Friends Journal* (February, 2017). From the years I worked in Gerontology, I have known and respected the wisdom of Dr. Atchley. I knew him as a Gerontologist and a spiritual seeker. In this article, Atchley notes the gifts shared by Rufus Jones (1863–1948), who he considered the foremost Quaker scholar, writer, and advocate of opening to mystical experience as a central practice among Friends. He wrote that Jones concluded that the founders of most great religions of the world obtained their spiritual understanding through mystical experience. Mystical experience “makes God sure to the person who has had the experience,” wrote Jones.

God is infinite and therefore beyond our ability to perceive or understand completely. Yet Atchley notes that mystical experience is not rare. According to Jones, mystical experience is widely available, if we are tuned in to it. He wrote that “many people have had this vital experience.” God is everywhere we look, if we know how to look.

Surrender and Centering Prayer

The release and surrender which is part of the path of contemplative learning and also is experienced as a central aspect of Centering Prayer as taught by Thomas Keating and Cynthia Bourgeault. In her many workshops and books, Cynthia clarifies that Centering Prayer “is founded entirely on the gesture of surrender or letting go, of self-emptying love.” She describes that by putting the mind in the heart. Practitioners of Centering Prayer do not seek a mystical experience, but develop attitudes of compassion, generosity and freedom.

As 2020 began, I found three Centering Prayer groups and many courses available to me and these resources have nourished me during COVID. Learning through zoom classes at Pendle Hill <pendlehill.org>, in the Abbey of the Arts <abbeyofthearts.com>, the Center of Action and Contemplation <wisdomwaypoints.org>, and Contemplative Outreach <contemplativeoutreach.org> offered a way to learn with others in a time of isolation and brought great blessings. One workshop included poetry that Thomas Keating wrote in the last years of his life published in his book, *The Secret Embrace*. The following poem still resonates with me:

Out of a Stone

*Can the Creator of all lure poetry out of a stone?
Or cause a stirring of Divine Love in a human heart?
All is possible for the Creator of all,
Who loves to manifest the impossible
In endless configurations.
As the false self diminishes,
And the ego becomes a servant,
Everything turns to poetry
And everything becomes a movement of Divine Love.
But, the separate self lingers on.
Once the separate self has been laid to rest,
The Divine Presence alone remains,
And the Creator of all becomes all in all.
The silence of the Creator is thunderous,
Drowning out everything else,
And hiding in endless creativity.*

—Thomas Keating in *The Secret Embrace*

Spiritual Art and Healing into Joy

Often creative expression requires one to trust messages from within so that the painting is imbued with the sense of Light in the message being shown. This is noted across many arts—music, dance, writing, the visual arts. A sense of “knowing” through creative expression can bring a central and profound new way of understanding for the one who creates and the one who receives this gift.

Individuals have described true changes of consciousness in response to a novel, piece of music, poem, or play. Once a painting healed a broken place in my own heart. As I stood in a light-filled museum room staring at Monet’s garden, a place of long-held sorrow and loss within me shifted in a moment of radical grace. Grace arrived as a precious gift, unearned, unexpected. I have heard tales from others of similar experiences in my decades of work as a psychotherapist. For some, deep healing arrives from music or a poem, a time of retreat to the mountains or near the ocean. Suddenly something shifts, the breath expands, and the heart finds a way beyond grief and loss to the clarity that brings peace, joy, and connectedness.

Carol Cober is a member of Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting. She creates to nourish the capacity to see and listen deeply, honoring the sacred. Her art emerges from a contemplative, intuitive, and body-aware process using watercolor, oil, acrylic, and collage. Creative expression has been deeply healing for her. She hopes her paintings offer some beauty and healing to others. She believes we all have potential to find our own way of creative expression listening to the Creator. The paintings on pages 1 and 2 are by Carol <CarolCoberArt.com>.



Streetlights in the Dark

Jennifer Elam

I fell in love with Quakers when I came to Berea Friends Meeting and out of the silence, Carol Lamm sang “How Can I Keep from Singing?” The silence spoke to me. In my childhood, I spent a lot of time in silence and spoke little when away from home. At the age of 7, in a little Methodist church in Kentucky, I gave my life to God and my understanding of that was giving my life to service, God and others.

Shortly after coming to Quakers, I attended an adult education session. I don’t remember the topic but I remember someone saying, “We all talk about God but you and Laura talk about your relationship with God. That means you are mystics.” I had no idea what that meant but I had never heard anything good about people who were called mystics so I was sure they were wrong. And yet, in the 30 years I have been immersed in Quakerism since that session, I have repeatedly been drawn to the work of Quaker mystics, including this *What Canst Thou Say* group.

The words “native homing passion of the soul for the Beyond” speak to me deeply. I feel that I have always felt I lived in what I call the “realms”, that range from the ordinary daily routine of going grocery shopping to deep feelings of the Presence of God with me. I have had many experiences of out-of-the-ordinary experiences of God. In recent times since the pandemic with a lot of us in quarantine, I have found people asking that question again: Is this really God or am I going crazy or neither or both?

I found 2020 brought great challenges but even with those challenges, I found it to be an amazing year that I consider one of the best of my life. I was in quarantine and for months, most of the time I was alone in the apartment with God. I got along well with both of us and found great mystical joy during that time.

How was that cultivated? I believe that a lifetime and lifestyle of 1) talking and listening with God in the deep places, 2) an intention to serve others and God in all that I did, 3) working through many traumatic times of “dark night of the soul” experiences, 4) being as authentic with myself, God and others as I knew how to be, 5) integrating my deep spirituality with



social justice work, and 6) growing my creativity that I consider to be co-creating with God were the basics of the cultivation.

In 1998, I did a research project in which I listened to stories of over 100 others’ direct experiences of God that I called “Dancing with God through the Storm: Mysticism and Mental Illness.” In that work, I listened to over 100 people’s out-of-the-ordinary experiences of God. I did not include experiences in which people believed they were to harm others because I believe that to be a different set of experiences.

Some were called mystical experiences and some were called mental illness. Which way that went depended little on the actual experience. The frame given to the experience by the person and their closest community was the most important factor that determined how the experience got integrated and named.

When a person has an experience of an opening to consciousness of a bigger reality, often they become fearful and that fear can make the experience

unpleasant. The fear is often a response to their own thoughts based on common frameworks available in our culture. When one's consciousness is opened, if there is unresolved grief and/or trauma, they may be opened to that trauma, along with higher consciousness, and that can cause fear. Therapy may be needed. A therapist familiar with and trained in working in this territory is hard to find but important. Otherwise, they can do harm by increasing the fear. Most important is a community of people who can frame the experience as having great potential for gifts to shine and who can provide support and accountability.

As an experiencer, it did not occur to me to care whether or not my experience would be called mystical. I did not have any participants in my research tell me that it was important to them to have the right label for their experience, other than to know they were not going crazy. Support and accompaniment was the overwhelming need and that continues to be reported a decade later.

What are conclusions from this research? How have these conclusions changed or seasoned with time? The following are conclusions that have stood the test of time and seasoning since the research was done, suggestions that I call "Streetlights in the Dark" for dealing with experiences of God that become difficult. I hope they can be helpful to you.

Streetlights in the Dark

- God is available in everything, not just the sweet spring flowers but also the storms and volcanoes of life.
- People want and need to talk about their experiences. They need places that feel and are safe to do so, but it is important to be careful who they talk to about out-of-the-ordinary experiences of God.
- People are open to bigger realities in many different ways; there is not just one right way.
- They need support and accountability as they go through openings of various sorts. Accompaniment is a word that I borrowed from the peace teams that go to foreign countries. The word fits what people say they need.
- The common understanding is that there is a fine line between mystical experiences and mental



- illness. That hypothesis did not hold up. The same experiences can be seen as one or the other depending on many variables other than the experience itself.
- Experiences with great potential to be a gift to the experiencer can be very uncomfortable and unpleasant at the time.
 - Fear, self-loathing, and the lack of a supportive community are important factors that make the experience more likely to be called "mental illness."

What Has Been Helpful?

Some agreement emerged among participants as to what has been helpful to them along the way in understanding and in direct support.

One need is to find words and frameworks for the experience that normalize and frame the experiences as containing gifts. Even experiences that don't feel good can eventually contain a gift. Spiritual traditions of many kinds can provide that frame; those of indigenous peoples and shamanistic traditions are being explored for the support they provide.

A strong “container” is needed. Some find that container in their own hearts, their journals, and/or their relationships with something bigger than themselves. They have an understanding of the experience that works for them.

Others find containment in their spiritual/faith communities who validate a sense of calling. Some are helped by medical communities, while many report harm being done by both traditional religious and medical establishments that do not value the experiences.

A distinction between the bodily experiences and the conceptualization can be helpful. Often the misery comes not from the actual bodily experience but from the fears provoked by thoughts of what the experience might mean, such as “Am I going crazy?”

When there is a stage of misery, people need validation that their psychic pain is real. Rest and separation from the world may be needed for a while, but as soon as possible, a place needs to be found where the experiencer can serve a positive role in the world.

Sometimes the pain experienced is the clean pain of an egg breaking open and is pain to be felt, not fixed. When understood in this way, the pain becomes more bearable.

Experiencers need other people to be honest in specific ways. Feedback is needed when realities do not match, but not by denying the experiencer’s reality or calling it delusional. Each person needs to be able to state their reality without anyone being wrong.

A major task of experiencers is to find their own center and grounding and that has to come from within. Calling one’s reality delusional keeps the person from being able to rebuild trust in their own center.

Often words are inadequate to the task of communicating about mystical experiences. Using creative arts, movement and writing can often reach the place from where the words come when words are inadequate. Language is only a representation of experience but creates its own reality.

Many experience a powerful energy along with their mystical experience that needs to be directed toward constructive creative outlets or it might be at risk of becoming destructive.

Direct Support Needed

Persons having mystical experiences need to be supported to integrate their experiences into their spiritual lives, giving them meaning:

- They might need a safe place to tell their stories with all the paradoxes and be respected.
- They might need to feel safe that they are not going to be called crazy, discounted or put down.
- Many have not been able to find their authentic voices in the world that demands conformity. This breaking open is a necessary step to breaking through some kind of block, but the value of that process needs acceptance.
- Unresolved trauma and recent losses may emerge needing treatment.
- Some may need help dealing with the outside world. The opened sensitivity makes the violence of the world magnified. Television and even the news may become unbearable.
- Resources are often needed to recognize that moment when it is time to go back into the world in a new way of functioning.
- It is important to find normalizing rather than pathologizing frameworks for the experience. How the experiences are framed helps to create further experience.
- It is important to find one’s own voice amidst the possible chaos. Being with others who do not need to believe or dis-believe the stories is helpful.
- Experiences are often both/and rather than either/or in nature, so it is important to transcend dualities such as sick/well, or psychotic/spiritual.
- The body often becomes the target of hate and fear, so it helps to be in one’s body in loving ways. It just needs big love.
- Persons having mystical experiences need to be supported to integrate their experiences into their spiritual lives, giving them meaning.

Jennifer Elam has been a Quaker since she fell in love with Berea Friends Meeting, Kentucky, in 1991. She recently moved back to Kentucky because when COVID hit, it became clear she could no longer lead her double life of going back and forth from elsewhere to Kentucky. She continues her passionate writing and has created three art shows in 2020 related to COVID. The paintings on pages 4 and 5 are by Jennifer.

For Those Who Doubt They Have Mystical Experiences

Eric Sabelman

Our habit is to filter out perceptions irrelevant to the task that occupies our attention. We might experience sudden, unintended shifts in attention that have no apparent cause:

- a “dome of silence” that surrounds and follows you for a while,
- an object (like a blade of grass or a star) that stands out from a background of similar objects,
- discontinuity of thought when passing through a door (“Why did I come into this room?”),
- non-linear passage of time—not just *deja vu* (“I have been here before”) but simultaneity (“I see the Sun rising and setting at once”),
- words not in any recent conversation that repeat themselves (“forever and ever”), or
- sensing a companion who walks beside you unseen (easier for children than adults).

Remember that humans have a built-in ability to personify almost anything. If we perceive something that is meant for a larger segment of Creation—a sense of kinship, a warm feeling of Universal Love—we might translate it into a message spoken to us by a Person. When we translate such a message into words, the words will be in a language we already know, but God’s mother tongue is not English ... or Spanish, or even Hebrew or Aramaic or Sanskrit. All translations miss a lot, but we are obliged to try anyway.

We can of course alter consciousness by intention: anything from listening to a choir singing to dropping LSD could do it. The value in intentional experimentation with altered consciousness is that it prepare us to recognize when it is thrust upon you unintended. If you (like me) ever experience detachment of your Self from your Body while climbing a ladder, preparation is what stops you from letting go of the ladder and floating away ... which your Spirit may do, but your Body dares not.

Eric Sabelman recently retired as a neurosurgery bioengineer, but continues as a lecturer at Santa Clara University. He first attended Orange Grove Meeting in Pasadena in 1969; he is a member of Palo Alto Friends Meeting. Some of his stories are recorded by Tom and Sandy Farley <spont.com/w2wcd.htm>. There is more from Eric Sabelman in the print version of this November 2021 What Canst Thou Say <whatcanstthousay.org>.

Thank You, Mariellen!

WCTS Editorial Team

For many years Mariellen Gilpin was the heart and soul of *What Canst Thou Say*. It is time to thank Mariellen properly for her years of devotion and service to *What Canst Thou Say*.

In 1999, five years after WCTS began, the team advertised for additional editors to join and Mariellen responded.

By 2004 she was the one who received all the submissions. She thoroughly enjoyed that first look and lovingly engaged with the authors and potential authors. Besides receiving the submissions, Mariellen searched through blogs and other online sites for materials appropriate to each theme.

In 2004 and again in 2014 she was the central figure in our 10- and 20-year anthologies. She was also the central figure in our annual gatherings of mystics from 2013 through 2018 where we all enjoyed meeting Friends whose writing we had been enjoying.

In early 2019, Mariellen had begun to slow down and asked to be relieved of the duty of receiving submissions. Then we really missed Mariellen’s recruitment of articles and general engagement with authors and potential authors. By the August issue, we barely had enough material to fill our ten pages, which had never happened before. In that issue we published an “Editors Appeal for Submissions” by the Editorial Team.

We have solved that problem, mostly with an email listserv for discussion of mysticism and to remind our community of deadlines and themes for the next issues of WCTS. But we still miss Mariellen’s wisdom and gentle encouragement.

Thank you, Mariellen, from the entire WCTS community!

Sad news!

John Gilpin (Mariellen Gilpin’s husband) passed away at Carle Hospital on Monday, Sept. 13, 2021. Please hold Mariellen Gilpin in the Light! Friends may send cards to her at this address: Heritage Health, Room 108, 620 E. First St., Gibson City, IL 60936.

Go Down Low

Sally Campbell

C Bb C
Go down Slow down Go down low. To a

place that is real. To a love you can feel, In

Bb
which you can rest and know you are blest.

C Bb C
Go down Slow down go down low and

Bb C
lis-ten and breathe and listen.

Sally Campbell is a singer/songwriter, a member of Morningside Meeting of New York City, New York, retired librarian, and a Friendly personal organizer. Many of her songs are on YouTube under "Sally Quaker Campbell" <[youtube.com/user/scampfriend/videos](https://www.youtube.com/user/scampfriend/videos)>.

Please write for *What Canst Thou Say?*



February 2022
**The Other Side of the
Pandemic**
Editor: Rhonda Ashurst

The pandemic has given us time to disengage from our normal patterns and reflect on our lives. As we transition out of our cloistering, our lives may be different from what they were before. How have you changed? What have you learned about yourself? Were there unexpected blessings, unforeseen challenges? How will you hold onto the intentions and practices you want to keep?

Deadline: November 15, 2021

May 2022
Empowerment
Editor: Earl Smith

“You must never be fearful about what you are doing when it is right.”
—Rosa Parks. What gives you courage to stand in your truth and speak with integrity? How do you encourage and support those who are disempowered to make a stand? Tell us your stories of empowerment.

Deadline: February 15, 2022

August 2022
Truth
Editor: Judy Lumb

Each of us has a particular experience of God and each must find the way to be true to it. We can find truth in other people’s opinions and experiences if we listen patiently. Was there a time when you discovered you had been mistaken about some truth you had long nurtured? How did you confront your error? Was it public or private? Do you respect that of God in everyone though their truth may be different from your own? How do you reach across those differences?

Deadline: May 15, 2022

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2811 West B. Ave, Plainwell MI 49080-8601

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