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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*

Empowerment

Alice Paul

The Seneca Falls convention of 1848, which launched the American movement for women's rights, barely -- just barely -- decided to include voting rights in their list of demands for gender equality. During the sixty-four years that followed, small dents were made in the wall of opposition to women's suffrage. In 1912, there were only a handful of people who were organizing to try to achieve nation-wide voting rights for women. But no one in America, no one, was certain that that goal could be attained within the near future -- no one, except for one person.

A young Quaker woman named Alice Paul had the vision to achieve that goal, and called people to join with her. And their goal was achieved within eight years. But before victory could be won, Alice Paul had to risk her reputation, her sanity, and her life.

Alice Paul was brilliant and talented. She was quiet, yet oddly she was also charismatic. She had a vibrant vision, and she seemed to know how to do everything. However, her movement's path to victory was not easy. And there were times when matters seemed bleak.

Alice's personal path to success had many twists and turns. In the early part of her life, she did not at all have the personal profile of someone that would be expected to become a leader. But ultimately she followed her truth all the way to the end.

In the middle part of her campaign for women's voting rights, she and her colleagues worked in an office that was based in a mansion that had been donated to their movement. There were occasional times when Alice's colleagues needed to consult with her about

Roger Burns

an important decision yet she could not be found. One day, a rather important issue was pending, and the movement leaders decided to make a thorough search of the mansion to find Alice. They eventually located her in a locked room upstairs. Peering through a keyhole, they saw her sitting upright, with eyes closed in dead silence. She had privately been practicing Quaker silence as a part of her everyday routine.

Miss Paul may indeed have been a genius about politics, but in my lengthy biographical essay about her I argue that her intuitions about what to do were not originating only from her self. To speak personally: everything I've ever read about mystical experience, everything I know from my own personal experiences, everything I've seen in the story of Alice Paul, where she exhibited every one of the five Quaker testimonies of

From the Editor:

Rosa Parks once said, "You must never be fearful about what you are doing when it is right."

Alice Paul, a Quaker suffragette, saw many occasions, along with our other writers, when she felt the power of God. Elizabeth E. Mitchell tells how the energy of nature empowers her. Johanna Jackson and and JT Dorr-Bremme relate how they have become enabled to start a ministry during the pandemic. There is more from Jennifer Elam in the web edition, including art in color <whatcanstthousay.org/s/2022-May-Empowerment-Web-final.pdf>.

—Earl Smith

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, 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.

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“Our power is in our unity, the force of our souls, and the determination of our bodies.”

—Martin Luther King

equality, peace, simplicity, community, above all the absolute epitome of complete integrity, and her clear, demonstrated willingness to die for the principles that follow from these Quaker testimonies, every one of these things shouts at me that this person had a direct and deep connection to the Divine, more so than anyone I’ve ever heard of in modern times.

This is a truth that academic biographers would not be able to address in their writings, because they have a professional obligation to deal only with objective facts. But we who read *What Canst Thou Say?* have the freedom to consider deeper truths.

There was more than one factor that helped Alice develop the courage to stand in her truth and speak with integrity. She was blessed with a family upbringing that gave her strong Quaker values. But she also looked elsewhere to study role models that resonated with her own ideals. And she sought to work with people who she saw were implementing those ideals which she had chosen for herself.

Many people assume that Alice Paul was able to persevere through so many criticisms, obstacles and other discouragements because she must have been emotionally indifferent to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune which seemed to bounce off of her. But a careful view of the facts of her life indicate the opposite.

After Alice underwent her first forced feedings, which took place in a British jail -- an ordeal that lasted three days -- her fellow suffragettes simply walked out and went home. But Alice was the only one who had to be carried out on a stretcher. Her body was less tolerant of torture than were those of any of the other suffragettes. In addition, there were several especially painful experiences in Alice’s life: the death of her father; the mass, intense violence perpetrated by the public crowd during the famous 1913 parade in Washington, which resulted in hundreds of injuries; the horrific details of her own forced feedings. Yet Alice could carry none of these experiences in her active memory. She habitually blotted them out. She did this because she was too sensitive of a person to keep these thoughts at the top of her mind.

So the question would then seem to be, how could Alice have gone through all of the numerous travails of her suffrage campaigning if she were much more physically and emotionally vulnerable to them than other people?

No Separation

Elizabeth E Mitchell

I think Alice Paul was able to cope because of her very strong spiritual center. She was not undertaking her activities alone, by which I mean to say that it is clear to me that she was inwardly and actively sharing her burdens with the Divine Presence, with whom she had a deep connection that she refreshed at least daily, as was discovered by her colleagues.

Speaking more generally, I know that spiritual practice, if pursued consistently over time, will develop one's inward self, and will affect one's outward actions. It will influence us by means that have no need to be obviously seen.

Success begins by first creating a vision within one's self. Granted that this does not necessarily come quickly. I say: pursue your ideals *with your spirit*. Let your ideals grow within you. And then, once there is some growth, pursue your ideals with your heart and hands, and with those around you. And you will be where you need to be.

Roger Burns attends at the Bethesda Friends Meeting (of Maryland). Most of his social witness activities focus on race. This is an excerpt of his essay about Alice Paul, which he hopes to publish in full. For now, Friends may obtain an electronic copy of his current draft of this essay for limited use by sending an email request to rogerburns@pobox.com.



Four trees standing in one spot with just enough space between them for me. My back against one, my feet pressed against another; I am wedged, sitting on air, watching river and sky.

One great extensive live oak reaches great branches in several directions, creating significant space within their embrace. I challenge my aging body to climb up the trunk. Like the foot of a great bird the root appendages extend; here in the curving extensions is an elephant with a raised trunk, here a goddess, here a snake, pressed into and emerging from Earth. I step on these foot-holds and ascend - one foot in the shelf created where a movement of growth diverges, the next foot gaining a toe-hold on a bulge beneath the bark. Hauling myself up into the notch where the great trunk first divides, I stand and survey the canopy before me, filtering views of park, path, cars, and people.

Sun arising: Sol, my heart, Sun Ra, I salute thee. Coterminal with thee, my consciousness is one with those of humankind throughout time worshipping the light. Thou who givest life to Mother Earth. Oh fecund Mother, I praise thee. Breathing with tree, I celebrate THIS.

One animal, me, and one tree, this one, representing Earth's bilobed lungs. We breathe. I breathe. My bilobed human lungs function with a different synchrony from Earth's lungs which are also bilobed, half animal, half plant. I, animal, breathe in the gift of Oxygen; my

other half, plant, breathes in CO2 released by myself, animal. I, tree, breathe out Oxygen that I, animal, breathe in. I, animal, breathe out CO2, tracing the inhalation of tree. I, animal, breathe in Oxygen, tracing the exhalation of tree.

I, Earth, breathe and endlessly create my gloriously complex lungs. Human awareness, beloved species merging minds: Sun, life giver, Prakriti and Purusha in endlessly renewing incendiary conjunction, Happening. This is Bliss.

On the way home, I swing through the sacred grove. Eight slender trunks of some insignificant species—Parks Manager told me such trees are disposable; he would consider my affection for them in the park management plan. I love to swing around and through these slender trunks, leaning to the length of my arm and swinging to catch the next, monkey mind satisfied. I see children playing in a low reaching extension of the great live oak. Tree in me rejoices that monkeys still play in my branches.

On a slope above Mocosca, our beloved local (Hillsborough) river, several large trees surround a sweet green space. In the middle a severed trunk projects ten inches above Earth. Here I stand to celebrate my female connection with all life, with all women of the woods, the wise women murdered as witches, women of the wild everywhere throughout time and space; rejoicing and crying at the times in which this I, Elizabeth, lives.

Most recently, returning to my sacred grove above Mocosa, I find no stump, only a patch of sawdust. Park Management has been through and erased every last trace of the one who used to be there, whose inner-chi I felt still pouring through my feet into me as I stood where it had stood for so long. All the beautiful stumps, the sad remains of the fallen destroyed beauty, have been ground away, their unique contours and speaking lines and colors erased.

My culture has erased its connection to its own human past. I do not know the stories of my own great grandparents. I do not know my heritage descending from 25 generations as other peoples do or did. My culture is deracinated; we have no connection to the deep and ongoing story of our human life on Earth, which once fed us, as the fallen trunk and roots feed the standing forest. Urban trees are increasingly separated; in their loneliness they become weak; management removes them.

Survival of the fittest means survival of the powerful, when it is not permitted to mean survival of those most co-operative and thus fit and meant to live in relationship with Earth. Nature is more powerful than man. This is indeed the great reset, but not some puny political chest-pounding arrogance. No, a wipeout of the ecological niche is underway. To know this and live in connection with Earth and Sun is to be aware, as Earth and Sun are aware through us, all things shall pass.

Elizabeth E Mitchell was born and educated in New Zealand. She has travelled the world and became a US citizen in 1999. She is a self-taught artist, and made her living selling her silk paintings through galleries and the art festival circuit for a quarter of a century. Now retired, she teaches art, silk painting, and yoga in her studio. She has always written, but rarely submits for publication. She lives in Tampa and is an attendee at Tampa Quaker Meeting.



Discernment During Lockdown: Beginning Ministry in Pandemic Times

Johanna Jackson and JT Dorr-Bremme

We are two Friends in our 30s and 40s. For several years, we've felt led toward some mutual faith-based work together. We knew that it included a call to healing and a commitment to spiritual friendship, but knew very little else. We spent time preparing inwardly for our call, moving where led, without knowing the end result.

When we lived in different states, we used to have long phone calls together. During these times, we would slip into worship-sharing or accompany one another through grief. One day, during such a phone call, JT asked: "What would happen if I held appointments with people I knew and I just listened?" His question shuttled us both into a season of discernment: we had been experimenting with different kinds of mutual projects, but this one seemed to take root. About two weeks later, COVID-19 arrived in New York City and Seattle. The nudge to listen felt more urgent and more timely. We knew that we had gifts to offer, but we needed to stabilize our own lives first amidst such grief.

In time, we both felt a consistent thread emerge. We wanted to spend time listening to younger Friends share about their spiritual journeys. Individually, we had each been keeping a list of people that we would like to interview someday. We combined lists. We realized that we were embarking on a kind of project, that we call the Listening Project now. Later on, we would define it as "creative conversations rooted in love."

In May of 2020, we met with a clearness committee. Wearing masks, sweaters, and fleece blankets, three of us bundled up against the wind. From 400 miles away, JT joined via Zoom. We were learning to shape our tools to fit new limitations.

We had been planning a road trip to visit a few of our mentors, but crossing state lines was out of the question in the pandemic. We needed new ways to ground the ministry and to discern. Danelle Laflower, a Friend and elder, sent us an email with a few queries to consider. She asked us: "What do you want to



do? How will you do it together?” Danelle offered encouragement as well as caution: “You know that I want you to follow your leadings, and that I believe you will be supported when you do,” she said. “But I also want to make sure you test your leadings and don’t outrun them – or the Spirit that guides you.”

These queries from Danelle gave us a new way to pause and consider. In forming our responses, we gained clarity as well as courage. Now, two and a half years later, we would like to share these early reflections. They offer a glimpse of the optimism and uncertainty we felt as we began. Here are some of our responses stemming from Danelle’s question: “Why do you, personally, want to do the interviews and the Listening Project?”

From Johanna: I want to find out what the next generation needs and wants when it comes to spiritual nurture. I think that many people are facing the kinds of barriers that I faced as a younger Friend, and I want to start listening to find out more about those themes.

I believe that Quakers have a beautiful gem to offer. There are times when we are so busy protecting the box that holds the gem, we can forget that other people might want to see it. I wonder about this. I think that in order to live into a strong Quaker future, we need to do a better job of inviting people in. That motivates me to do this work.

From JT: I want more connection in these social-distancing times, and I know that others do, too. This version of the Listening Project came from an earlier idea of offering listening sessions. The questions arose

from concerns that I think Johanna and I share, and I have heard a lot of other young Quakers voice, as well as some older ones. These concerns are for the future of Friends as a body and in the world, how we choose to manifest Quakerism with our choices, what we offer to each other and to those we serve.

Just giving space for anyone’s words to be heard can be a holy act. I have been told, and I am acting as if, I have a gift for listening. Indeed, a F/friend told me that I was a good listener last night. If this is a gift of mine, I will try to offer it.

Again, it is personally helpful for me to know that my experiences may be shared by others, but having queries may spark conversation that will help to evoke a sense of some portion of the Body of Friends. I suspect we will find that there are many commonalities between us, even through what may appear to be some obvious differences. With grace, perhaps the answers will come together into a product that is representative in some way and can be presented to others with a sense that it holds truth.

I hope this work will help build lasting connections between people. I hope some of those connections will be personal to me and/or carry through to the work that I feel may be my long-term calling.

On that note, I am glad to have a shared project with Johanna that sparks life in us both, is somewhat public facing, and in which we work as a unit and are seen to work that way. We have felt certain there would be shared work in our relationship, but we didn’t know what, and nothing had clearly presented itself.

We are now finding some experimental versions. Part of my spiritual journey is linked with hers, and part of my growth is my individual work to be a part of our relationship. We seem to have a sort of reciprocal loop, and part of being more “myself” right now is being a little more with her. Doing some sort of ministry or service with (or for) others is something I have waited a long time to feel like I was ready to do. Johanna being with me is some of what has made this moment what it is. Now, I will have a strong Friend with me while I challenge myself in this way, and while we practice working together. There will be learning and growth in many directions, probably with that same reciprocity appearing.

I would like others to see us working together for many reasons. Working together is part of who I am right now. Going forward, I think we will better understand the ministry we are led to do once we begin it. We will have our work reflected back to us. We may find our path more clearly with the support, guidance, and feedback of a wider group. Perhaps others with a similar experience of shared ministry will come into our lives as a result. We may meet those who have already experienced a mutual calling or those who may have yet to. Finally, if we are doing this work in the Light, then Friends will know.

From Johanna: I agree with what JT said. The list at the end opens up another question that we are exploring: “Why do we want to be seen working together?” There’s something about visibility here, but I don’t quite know what it is. I think that we are stepping into a very visible role. For some reason, we need to do that together.

I want to work with JT partly because I want to help reclaim the Quaker tradition of traveling and working in pairs. This is a communal labor: we are holding a concern and growing with it. It feels like my gifts come out more often when I work with JT. I think that he’s right when he says that the community can help us see what the work is as we begin to do it.

New challenges will probably arrive as we do this work. I don’t know what they are, at this point. That’s probably a good thing! It lets me start with some energy! I am fine with learning about them as we go.

Finding community oversight is important to me. One of our early steps has been to find people who can join us for discernment, in the short-term and later on. I am aware that oversight comes with some restrictions. There may be times that I need to wait; there may be some slow labor coming up. However, I think that this kind of pace also brings a degree of safety, which is something that I need.

I want to work with JT because it feels right and safe. It’s like putting on a seat belt: the process is safe with him. In starting this work, I feel a great deal of “up” energy. We are beginning something that has long been developing. It has to do with motion, dedication, passion, and change.

We are taking our first few steps. In the process, we are stumbling around with new footing beneath us. We’re beginning to get our bearings. And that feels right; that feels good. That is how I want to walk.

A few months after writing this reflection, JT Dorr-Bremme and Johanna Jackson began working publicly among Friends. Their ministry, Forward in Faithfulness, promotes inward transformation and collective renewal. Their vision is for Quakers to become creative, relevant, and thriving in the next 30 years. JT and Johanna work with other emerging collectives and ministers. These include the Three Rivers Worship Group and Quaker Aspen, an offshoot of Quakers and Business.

JT Dorr-Bremme and Johanna Jackson live in State College, Pennsylvania. To read more about Forward in Faithfulness, visit <forwardinfaithfulness.org>. You can also view their QuakerSpeak video, “Envisioning a Strong Future for Quakerism.”



A Spiritual Journey

Margie Simmons

I just had my birthday this month, and since we are starting the new year of 2022, it seemed like a good time for me to reflect on my spiritual journey over the many years that I have lived and have been a Quaker. When I started composing this, I was feeling anxious, vulnerable, and inadequate while writing it. That changed when a member of my meeting told me, "Giving a message would be your opportunity to fail magnificently!" Her words and Pastor Mark's recent reminder that "God loves me just as I am" helped in giving me the courage to follow Spirit's leading and keep writing even though the message may not seem to be perfect. A friend of mine was told when he was trying to learn how to snow ski, "If you're not falling down, you're not getting any better". So, here we go. This story is very personal. It's about my experience of Divine Love.

I grew up in the Episcopal faith. My mother was adamant that we go to church on Sunday and take communion. As a child, I sat through many sermons wiggling in the pew due to boredom. In Sunday school, I remember playing on the felt board with felt pieces cut in the images of baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and the donkey. I was creating a Jesus story of my own when the Sunday school teacher said emphatically, "No, this is how the Jesus story goes." Over time, I lost faith in the Jesus story and stopped going to church. I still had this lingering feeling that there was a God, but felt I didn't need Jesus and all those Bible stories.

As I reached my teen years, my father died suddenly and my mother became incapacitated. My brother and two sisters were grown and living their own lives. I felt very lonely and lost in the world for a number of years and wasn't making very good decisions. I only graduated from high school because I had a job in the high school's attendance office. If I showed up for work in the afternoon and was absent from school in the morning, my job would have been in jeopardy.

Just after I graduated from high school, I found myself pregnant and married to an alcoholic. I did have a beautiful daughter, but the marriage wasn't working and I got a divorce after five years. Struggling as a single parent, I wanted to go to college and have a real career

in order to support my daughter better, but I couldn't afford it. I ended up working as an executive secretary in the welfare fraud department -- a job I did not like.

My life gradually improved in my late 20s when I met and married my second husband. He was a good father to my daughter and I was finally able to go to nursing school to become an RN.

One Sunday, we stumbled across Santa Barbara Friends Meeting. It was so refreshing to hear that Quakers believed in ongoing revelation and not a fixed dogma. I was struggling with the intensity of nursing school at the time but attended the meeting regularly because things just seemed to go better for me the following week. I now realize that the prayers coming from those wonderful Friends in my meeting plus God's loving care were lifting me up even though I wasn't aware of it at the time.

At thirty-five years of age, I went through another divorce which I had not wanted. I was grieving heavily from that experience when I traveled to Pacific Yearly Meeting in Chico, California. I remember that I was headed toward a workshop I had signed up for, but couldn't find the right classroom. Nevertheless, I was drawn to another drab classroom where people appeared to be gathered in silent worship. It was there, while sitting in the silence, that I had a mystical experience. Out of the silence, I experienced such Divine Love and Light that it shook me to my core and made tears stream down my face.

When I got back home, it was difficult for me to resume my normal life of taking care of my daughter and continuing my nursing career in home health and hospice work. I wanted to go back to that mystical experience again but knew I had to get my feet back on the ground somehow and regain my purpose in life.

At first, I didn't know what to do with such a profound experience. After a few months, I had the chance to travel to Pendle Hill, a Quaker study center located near Philadelphia, for a weekend retreat. During that weekend, I had the opportunity to meet with John Yungblut, a Quaker author and teacher, who had organized the retreat. I told John about my

experience of Divine Love and asked him to help me interpret it. His answer was simple but so wise. He said that since I had experienced how much God loves me, maybe, just maybe, my task was to try to love others in the same way. Yes! Hearing these words from John was the reason I had traveled to Pendle Hill. I was so grateful to him and deeply felt this was my spiritual path to follow. Now, God's grace was with me. I had been broken open and transformed by God's love. I was seeing with new eyes and had new energy. Even passages from the Bible had new meaning for me. I could now feel the words in my heart, especially the passage from the Gospel of John 15:12: Jesus told his disciples, "Love one another, even as I have loved you."

During the forty years of my nursing career and also in my personal life, I have had ample opportunity to practice loving others. Many times I failed at the task but kept on trying because it was what I was led to do with my life. What surprised me the most was that the more I was truly able to love others, the more love I received in return! My mystical experience of Divine Love did lessen over time but stayed with me all these years. I experience joy when I receive glimpses of it now and then.

I'd like to share a quote from Rufus Jones, a well-known Quaker historian, theologian, and philosopher:

"Friends come back from their worship with a new sense of ordination, but not the ordination of human hands. Something has happened in the stillness that makes the heart more tender, more sensitive, more shocked by evil, more dedicated to ideals of life, and more eager to push back the skirts of darkness and to widen the area of light and love."

In closing, I would like to leave you with my prayer and also a few queries:

*Dear God,
Please help me to become less driven and more centered.
Continue to lead me in becoming more loving and caring
toward the earth and all living things.
Guide me away from fear and darkness.
Guide me toward love, forgiveness, and the Light.*

The queries are:

- 1) Has there been a time when you experienced Divine Love or something close to it?
- 2) If you can, how would you describe that experience?
- 3) Did the experience change your life in any way?

Margie Simmons is a member of West Hills Friends Meeting in Portland, Oregon, and lives in Beaverton, Oregon.

Be Gentle with Yourself

Song by Sally Campbell

*Be gentle with yourself, for you are my beloved.
Be gentle with your friends, you know I love them too.
And those you cannot love, just turn to me.
Together we will find a way to turn the anger, hate and
pain into harmony.
Be gentle with yourself, my dear and tender loved one.*

*Be friendly with the earth, this place I made for loving.
Be friendly with its folk, its plants and creatures too.
See in its fine detail and grand design, the certain sign
That I love you and want you to come join me in this
dance divine.
Be friendly with the earth, my dear, creative loved one.*

*Be daring with your power, the strength you have for
loving.
Be daring with the fire in your body, mind and heart.
Now is the time to see that you are free to leap and dance
Or lie still simply breathing, gently resting in true liberty.
Be daring with your power, my dear and brilliant loved one.*

*Be open to the light that shines in all that's loving.
Be open to the light and let it shine through you.
But when you're in the dark and cannot see,
Reach out to all those other friends lost here on this planet
home. Become family.
Be open to the light, my dear and my own loved one.*

Be Gentle with Yourself

1. Be gen-tle with your - self for you are my be - lov - ed Be gen-tle with your
 friends you know I love them too and those you can-not love just turn to me to-gether
 we will find a way to turn the an-ger hate and pain in-to har-mon - y Be gen-tle
 with your - self my dear and ten-der loved one. Be

Sally Campbell is a singer/songwriter, a member of Morningside Meeting of New York City, New York, retired librarian, and a Friendly personal organizer. Listen to "Be Gentle with Yourself" at youtu.be/cyB1DBg01CQ. Other songs are on YouTube under "Sally Quaker Campbell" youtube.com/user/scampfriend/videos.

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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

November 2022
Spirit-Led Action
Editor: Rhonda Ashurst

Looking back over the past month, year, or decade, what are the times that you knew Spirit was answering your need or guiding your actions? How do you experience these leadings? How do you test/season your leadings? Have you believed you were misled only to find that, in hindsight, you were led to exactly where you needed to be?

Deadline: August 15, 2022

February 2023
Unitive and Numinous Experiences
Editor: Michael Resman

Academics divide mystical experiences into two categories, unitive (being one with everything) and numinous (the presence of the divine). There's debate about whether one is more advanced than the other. Have you known both? How did they differ? How do they fit within your spiritual life?

Deadline: November 15, 2022

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Empowerment