



August 2020  
Number 107 (2)

# *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*

## *Poetry as Prayer (Supplemental)*

### *A Pinch of God*

Janice Stensrude

Now I lay me down to sleep / I pray the Lord my soul  
to keep / and if I die before I wake / I pray the Lord my soul  
to take. That was my first prayer poem, at the time totally  
unaware of the morbid reality represented in its closing  
lines. When its earliest version appeared in 1711 (and well  
into the next two centuries), child mortality was present  
in every family, low born or high born. I recited it with the  
same unknowing as when I joined hands with my friends  
and chanted London bridge is falling down.

Today, I knowingly turn to Alicia Ostriker, who says that  
“beginning in early adolescence, I sometimes found myself  
experiencing the world around me, the universe around me,  
as holy.” It is the last verse of her poem, “The Blessing of  
the Old Woman, the Tulip, and the Dog,” that comes back  
to me over and over:

*To be blessed  
said the dog  
is to have a pinch  
of God  
inside you  
and all the other dogs  
can smell it*

My prayer is that I live my life in such a way that those  
who come near enough, detect that pinch of God, or as  
George Fox said “that of God in every one.”

**Janice Stensrude** has been seeking experiences with the  
Divine since, as a five-year-old, she hitched a ride with a  
neighbor to attend Sunday School. Her journey came into  
full blossom when she joined fellow seekers among Quakers  
in Australia, Texas, and especially WCTS.

### *From the Editors:*

*As we began making the difficult decisions  
about which selections to accept for publication  
in this Poetry as Prayer issue, a last-minute  
surge in submissions provided enough material  
to create an electronic supplement. It has been  
satisfying to hear from so many of the poets  
and poetry lovers among us. Maya Angelou  
once said, “When we talk to our God, whatever  
language, however we see it, we use poetry.”  
Many thanks to all of you who have shared  
your talk with your God.*

*With the luxury of space at hand, we are also  
including a reflection on the life of Quaker poet John  
Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892), whose most popular  
works make little reference to the fact that the entire  
focus of his life from 1832 until the passage of the  
Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 was a tireless effort to  
abolish slavery. Whittier becomes a man of our times,  
as our nation is shocked into facing the continued  
reality of racism in our society as we witnessed the  
murder of George Floyd on national TV . . . over and  
over and over again.*

Janice Stensrude and Michael Resman, Editors

**What Canst Thou Say? (WCTS)** is an independent publication cooperatively 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, 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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*“The human being does not stop with the naive delight, but he paints a picture, or he writes a poem, which he hopes will communicate something of his experience to his fellow men.” — (Rollo May, Love and Will, p. 263)*

## Imagination

William Shetter

*Tell me what weighs heavy on your heart,  
and I will tell you what troubles me. We share  
and our burdens magically become less bleak.*

*It is our undistracted mutual listening  
that thins the dark veil over us.*

*Then we can turn our gaze skyward  
and see that V, and hear that evocative honk  
of the wild geese echoing in the heavens,  
heralds of the pure imagination*

*that the world unstintingly offers.*

*Our intertwined imaginations  
soar like the geese in the clean blue air  
as we offer our wildest thoughts to each other.*

*You will tell me what the world offers  
to your waiting imagination.*

*And now we know that I will tell you  
what the imagination's wild geese,  
calling to me and you, gift me with.*

*We are in the world's family. In the setting sun  
the geese are heading home again.*

## Autumn Peace

William Shetter

Daybreak.

A cool fall morning.

Nestled in the wooded hills  
a small lake.

No air is stirring, calm  
the world is perfectly silent  
except for the faint call  
of a distant bird.

It is as if all nature  
is holding its breath.

So still is that that we can hear  
the lake speaking.

In the still dawn

I send rising and curling slowly  
the mists of peace into the sky  
this morning seen by none  
but there for all.

First for the frogs and ducks  
and they are silent, too  
but they know how to look.

Contemplate  
and know the utter serenity  
of this moment.

### WCTS has a New Email Discussion Group

WCTS reader Roger Burns asked us to begin an email discussion group on mystical experience and contemplative practice. Mike Resman and Judy Lumb of WCTS worked with Roger, who has done the technical work of setting up the new email discussion group, which is now ready for our use. We are inviting WCTS community to join us in this new email discussion. To join, send an email request to <WCTS.Owner@gmail.com>.

## S N O W

William Shetter

It's early in the morning  
Big window faces east  
The sky seems covered with lead  
What I see outside is a feast  
The snow is still blowing densely  
Our street is drifted deep  
Completely choked and filled  
All other movement asleep  
The pine trees are laden heavy  
Their branches droop and fall  
Huge ones on our front step  
Deep drifts 'gainst the door like a wall  
All around nothing but white  
The whole world buried in snow  
Two deer walk by, sinking in  
They tread laboriously slow  
Exultantly thrilled I step out  
And drop down, my feet disappear  
But I'm light as the still-swirling flakes  
All so soft there's nothing to hear  
My spirit up in the trees  
While I dance with every flake  
The thought of leaving this scene  
Causes my soul to ache  
The snow ends its storm, all is still  
An enchanted world in white  
Before the town bestirs  
I hold my breath at the sight  
But enough of initial pure joy  
Real labor is coming in view  
Of digging the paths to proceed  
By moving a ton or two

But where are the snows of yesteryear? \*

\* *Mais où sont les neiges d'antan ?*

François Villon

**William Shetter** has been a member of Bloomington (Indiana) Meeting for more than 50 years. His recent book, *My Conversation with Sophia: Reflections on Wisdom's Contemplative Path* is available on Amazon and iUniverse.

## As Long as a Life

Bethany Lee

Sometimes I go  
To the abbey near my house  
In search of sacred space  
And silence  
In the air are dust motes  
Dragonflies and sung prayer

At the edge of the pond  
At the foot of the hill  
There is a quiet room  
A wall of windows at one end  
Cushions and kneeling benches  
In a neat grid on the floor

From my seat I can see  
A row of tidy white crosses  
Near the monk's quarters  
And a stand of old trees  
Evergreen, collected  
Each moment  
I choose where to turn my gaze

As long as a life  
Within sight of one's end  
Colors the present vividly  
Fosters hope and not despair  
Keep your eyes on the grave

But if the nearness of death  
Stokes fear  
And spins a frantic striving  
Look away for a time  
Sit as pupil beneath the cedars  
Learn the long grace  
Of those who rise  
Live so freely in one place  
And then fall

Who even after death  
Release their essence  
Nourish so well  
With their letting go

## Coda

Bethany Lee

Before a beginning  
Practice the ending  
The last note ringing out  
And the silence after

Practice the corpse pose  
Still mind resting in love  
As it was in the beginning  
It will be in the end

Let every chord sing fearlessly  
To its completion  
Let it decay

Practice the nightfall  
Which holds the dawn  
Within its tinted palm

Receive winter's darkest day  
Solstice swinging up to spring

Allow your heart  
Every small surrender  
The broken cup  
The fallen fruit

Let this come to close  
And this  
With joy in the releasing

Then, still  
Begin

*Bethany Lee is author of The Breath Between from Fenwood Press, which includes "As Long as a Life." She lives in Lafayette, Oregon, in a house at the edge of the woods. Her writing is often inspired by the space at the edge of things—her experiences as a hospice harpist, the year she spent traveling by sea, and the deep silence of her Quaker practice.*

## Compline

Bethany Lee

I try  
Every evening  
To pay attention  
But often by dusk  
I have been distracted by the day  
By the rush of homecoming  
Or the heading out for hurried plans

I may be too busy noticing  
The wear in the mat by the door  
Or the onions browning  
In the heavy red pot  
On the unwashed stove

But at twilight  
Whether I know it or not  
I trip over a point  
That restores my balance

This is the great and daily evening  
Where just for a moment  
Everything comes to level again

Light and dark  
Sound and silence  
Work and rest  
Effort and surrender

If I am very still  
Will I notice the pause  
Like the breath at the top  
Before the wild descent?

Rest easy  
Tomorrow, there will be  
An evening again

## Web

Sandra Larkman Heindsmann

She who made the spider made the web.  
She has threaded everything into Her web.  
Everything is part of Her web.  
Everything is in Her web.  
Everything is Her web.

*Sandra Larkman Heindsmann has been making poems for more than 60 years. An editor and writer by profession, she is a convinced Friend and a member of University Friends Meeting in Seattle, Washington. This is her first appearance in WCTS, but she has been published in two previous Quaker magazines and two previous spiritual/mystical based literary journals.*

## Where the Land Meets the Sky

Sandra Larkman Heindsmann

White gems  
Strewn  
From where the land meets the sky  
To where the sky meets the land  
In the white-flung path  
We call the Milky Way.  
Where come the jewels?  
Where — mined the stars?  
Who has flung, with both hands,  
This abundance?

## The Earth Prays

Michael Resman

Last fall, my wife and I took a two-week train trip to the West Coast. I took some pictures, but also incubated a few poems. I was able to see that the foot of mountains do creep across the landscape over time. Looking deeply into the incredible forces that formed mountains, I understood that the earth prays.

## Legacy

I well know  
our actions reverberate  
For good or ill  
Far beyond our knowledge  
I accomplish so little  
Is it possible  
these little words  
are my legacy

*Michael Resman is an editor for What Canst Thou Say and a member of the Rochester (Minnesota) Friends Meeting. Poetry as Prayer and a number of other topics are discussed in his book A Contemporary Mysticism.*

## Sequoia

Sequoia  
creation's glory  
  
Living testimony  
transient human lives  
specks in time  
  
Massive trunks  
heal scars  
  
Continue  
reaching for the One  
  
Needles combing the wind  
far about the earth  
hymn singing

## Forever

mountain's toes  
creep  
  
pushed by  
wind and water  
so soft  
immutable  
  
fire  
incredible force  
shoved molten rock  
  
bent  
twisted  
fractured  
  
only to be erased  
by the soft touch  
of forever

# Manifest the Marvelous

Sally Campbell

*Manifest the marvelous*

*And magnify the mightiness*

*But love the lowly tenderness*

*The tendril/blossom loveliness*

*And when you gaze on glowing skies*

*All brightening, morning glorious*

*And ask that age-old question “Why?”*

*Just listen for “I love you, dear”*

*“Please be my partner in the dance,*

*My playmate in this game with me.*

*Let’s manifest the marvelous*

*So all around can plainly see*

*How wonderful they really are*

*And wonderfilled were meant to be,*

*All dancers in the playful dance*

*And players in the daring game*

*If only they would turn to me*

*And manifest the marvelous,*

*The mightiness, the loveliness,*

*The tenderness, the holiness*

*In playfulness and friendliness.*

*I love you, Oh, come join with me*

*And manifest the marvelous.”*

**Sally Campbell** is a singer/songwriter, a member of Morningside Meeting (NYC), retired librarian and a Friendly personal organizer. She loves to give away her CD “Gift Songs and Blessings.” If you’d like one, just send your mailing address to her at [scampfriend@earthlink.net](mailto:scampfriend@earthlink.net),

## Love in the Time of George Floyd’s Murder

O Brother Man, fold to thy heart thy brother:  
Where pity dwells, the peace of God is there;  
To worship rightly is to love each other,  
Each smile a hymn, each kindly deed a prayer.

—John Greenleaf Whittier (1848)

## John Greenleaf Whittier (1807–1892)

Janice Stensrude

Growing up on a farm that produced little more than enough to get by, John Greenleaf Whittier read again and again the six books that comprised his father’s home library, each one a discourse on the tenets of the family’s Quaker faith. A newspaper editor, seeing a poem written by the eighteen-year-old Whittier, encouraged him to enroll in nearby Haverhill Academy, where he managed to complete high school in only two terms. Tuition for the first term was paid with food from his parents’ farm and earnings from his work as a shoemaker. His second term was financed by his earnings as a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse.

With an unwavering belief in Quaker teachings on humanitarianism, compassion, and social responsibility, the young Whittier aspired to a career in politics. His controversial 1833 antislavery pamphlet, *Justice and Expediency*, which called for immediate emancipation of all slaves, alienated both Northern businessmen and Southern slaveholders, crushing the possibility of ever being elected to public office. As a founding member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, he turned his attention to public speaking and badgering congressional leaders into joining the abolitionist cause.

His public appearances sometimes resulted in being mobbed, stoned, and run out of town, and his lobbying activities were curtailed for six years, from 1838 to 1844, when Congress operated under a resolution that barred them from discussing petitions to bring slavery to an end. Whittier stubbornly stuck to his belief that moral action without political effort was an exercise in futility. It was about 1845 when stress from his work as a newspaper editor, declining health, and the constant threat of mob violence resulted in a physical breakdown that caused him to withdraw from public life and return to his Massachusetts home. Out of the limelight, he wrote more abolitionist poetry, continued to support his causes through his post as editor of an influential abolitionist newspaper, and became one of the founding contributors of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Following the 1865 adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment, Whittier’s poetry turned to other topics. *Snow-Bound*—a book-length poem of his childhood home where his household embraced his parents, a brother and two sisters, a maternal aunt and paternal uncle, and a never-ending train of visitors and hired hands—brought him \$10,000 in earnings in its first edition. From that point until his death in 1892, he enjoyed a more peaceful and prosperous existence. Physically frail, with very little formal education, and suffering from poor health his entire life, John Greenleaf Whittier nonetheless had lived a long, productive, and distinguished life as a powerful human-rights lobbyist and a man of letters.

# A God in the House: Book Review

Janice Stensrude

Kaminsky and Towler (Eds.), *A God in the House: Poets Talk About Faith*. North Adams, MA: Tupelo Press, 2012

Ilya Kaminsky (a Russian Jewish poet) and Katherine Towler (an American novelist and daughter of an Episcopal priest) interviewed nineteen award-winning American poets. Carolyn Forché, a poet and teacher of literature and writing at Georgetown University, is the first of the nineteen to speak. Forché grew up in a Catholic household in a Catholic neighborhood. She “knew one Protestant girl” and “saw one Jewish girl once, walking down the road.” She began her exploration into the outside world in her last year of high school, when she began reading the works of Protestant religious thinkers.

“I would splash and play in the fields of spiritual thought,” Forché says, “read the Zen sutras and then jump off a cliff into the arms of something about the Dharma, and

then go back to reading the Bible, and then have a certain dalliance with Judaic thought.” Forché built on her childhood religious upbringing and became a self-described syncretist. And along the way, she became an activist for human rights.

Forché is representative of the experiences of these nineteen poets. As the others, she is a seeker, and in her case, built her spirituality from the wisdom of many different cultures, finding in each the similarities, not the differences. All like Forché, in one way or another, define their writing as a search for meaning. “We are meaning-making animals,” remarks poet Jane Hirschfield. Gregory Orr, the last voice in the collection, says that early in his poetry-making he believed that existence was meaningless and that he created meaning with his poetry in order to sustain himself.

These poets’ descriptions of faith travel in both directions— from scarce to profound. There are nineteen definitions of God, nineteen definitions of faith, and a dozen or so definitions of prayer. Buddhist, Native American, Wiccan, the various shades of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are all represented, often culminating, like Forché, in a personal fusion of religious traditions. Dunya Mikhail says poetry is her religion.

Each interview is followed by a poem written by the interviewed poet. These are not just seekers after God or faith, but seekers after truth, justice, and community. *A God in the House* comforts, disturbs, inspires, and makes me feel less alone in the world, knowing there are others who strive to live in peace and hope for that “better world.”

## WCTS

### Subscription

### Manager Found!

Ask and ye shall receive. (*Matthew 7:7*)

George Hebben of Kalamazoo (Michigan) Friends Meeting, has volunteered to become our new Subscription Manager. He and Mike Resman are working together for a smooth turn-over of data and responsibility.

Thanks to Mike Resman, who has faithfully kept track of our subscribers and generated mailing labels for many years.

Thanks, George, for volunteering to take over this very important function for *What Canst Thou Say?*

### SUBSCRIPTION FORM

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## Please write for *What Canst Thou Say?*



November 2020

**Jesus: Love in Action**

Editor: Rhonda Ashurst

*The Religious Society of Friends is rooted in Christianity and has always found inspiration in the life and teachings of Jesus. How do you interpret your faith in the light of this heritage? How does Jesus speak to you today? Are you following Jesus' example of love in action? Are you learning from his life the reality and cost of obedience to God? How does his relationship with God challenge and inspire you? (Advices and Queries #4, Britain Yearly Meeting)*

Deadline: August 15, 2020

February 2021

**The Journey to Overcome**

Editor: Judy Lumb

*"The dark night of the soul is a journey into light, a journey from your darkness into the strength and hidden resources of your soul" (Carolyn Myss). How have you overcome adversity in your life? What strengthens your resilience? Who helped you find your way back to the Light from a dark night of the soul? How has this affected the rest of your life?*

Deadline: November 15, 2020

May 2021

**Grief**

Editor: Earl Smith

There are so many reasons for grief. Grief is a sibling of loss. So also is love. We have loss of life, loss of position, loss of family through a divorce, loss of attachments, and loss through sudden changes in schedule. How has grief changed your life? What stage of grief (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance) was the hardest? Is it true that time heals? What helped the most in dealing with grief?

Deadline: February 15, 2021

## **What Canst Thou Say?**

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**Poetry as  
Prayer  
(Supplement)**