



August 2021
Number 111

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*

Approaching the End of Life

Being with the Dying

Eric E. Sabelman

Before I tell this story, you need to know that the person whose name I use was a real person: Myra Keen, professor of paleontology and member of Palo Alto Friends Meeting. Myra was one of the few Quakers of an older generation whom I knew well, from taking her class at Stanford and working with her on Meeting business. MaryAnn and I would visit her at home and have long conversations, over her kitchen table or while I was fixing her doorbell. The story comes from these talks and from one line in Myra's obituary: "... as a young girl, she got about on horseback and herded cattle." That part of the story is true, but I cannot say what was Myra's last wish, because I was not there.

* * *

This is a story about the young man who sought true knowledge of God, for which he left the city of his birth and traveled far away to study with a wise woman who lived in a cave under a hill.

One day the wise woman called him away from his studies. "Here is a task for you. Old Myra, for many years the teacher of children in the village, is dying. Her family and former students have come to say good-bye to her and have gone again. She is alone and needs someone to sit with her."

"But I don't know her! I've never sat with someone as they died! What can I do?" said the young man.

"You will know what to do. Now, go, before you are too late."

Being a student, the young man went first to get books on the medical facts of death and books from many cultures on rituals for dying.

Carrying his books, the young man walked down the hill to Myra's house. He knocked on the door, and entered when he heard a whispered "Come in,"

He found her lying in bed, alert but frail and, to his eyes, as old as the hills. "The wise woman said I should come sit with you." He tried to think of a ritual he could perform, but having not yet read the books, none came to mind.

"I'm glad she sent you. You are younger than any of my relatives, and all my students are long grown up."

"What can I do for you?" he asked, wondering what being young qualified him to do.

From the Editor:

In my younger years, I was a Support Counselor for Hospice. While sitting beside those approaching the end of their lives, I learned the most valuable lessons about how to live life fully. This issue is filled with rich metaphorical fables and parables, reflections on personal life journeys, practical thoughts about dealing with material affairs, guiding philosophies, memorable quotes, poignant moments, beautiful imagery, powerful nature metaphors, and wild rides. May you be inspired to ride with the wind and sail down hillsides in the snow, making the most of this precious life until you melt again into the Ocean of Light from which you came.

Rhonda Ashurst

What Canst Thou Say? (WCTS)

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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.

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“You can help me be who I am. I am not the old woman you see here. When I was a young girl, I rode my horse across the prairie as fast as the wind. That is who I am and always will be. You are young enough to know the girl that nobody else remembers.”

“I will remember,” said the young man, “but remembering is not enough.”

“It is not. Can you be there while I ride?”

“I can try,” said the young man, and he took her hand in his. They both closed their eyes.

The first thing the young man did was imagine he was the ground – the deep earth of the prairie. Then he added the prairie grass, rippling in the breeze as far as the horizon to the east and the mountains in the west.

He became the stream wandering across the high plains ... and the cottonwoods growing on its banks ... and feathery cottonwood seeds floating in the air. He became the hawk in the sky overhead and the sun just risen to touch the golden peaks.

He became the blackberry thicket that the horse ran past, and the flock of quail flying from the thicket, frightened by the drumming of the horse’s hooves.

He became the horse – strong and sure, hooves pounding the ground, mane streaming in the wind of his running.

He felt the slight weight of the girl on the horse’s back, the touch of the reins as she guided him toward the far horizon. He felt like he could run forever.

But it was not his task to run forever. He withdrew from the horse, back into the cottonwoods and the stream and the grass and the ground.

The horse and the girl ran on, toward the far horizon, leaving him behind. When it came time for her to leave breath behind, still they ran on. There was no call for her to stop before she reached that far horizon ... or even then.

When the young man came entirely back into himself, he laid Myra’s hand on the blanket, gathered his unread books and went to tell his teacher he had done the task she set him.

Eric E. 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>. An additional poem is on p. 9 and there is more from Eric E. Sabelman on the **WCTS** blog, quakermystics.wordpress.com.

Dancing with Life, Death, and Rebirth

Jennifer Elam

We are born, live, die and are reborn many times in this life. Sometimes the deaths are small, a small loss but sometimes they are larger, all preparing us for the time when we will lose our own bodies.

The descriptions of grief following loss seem to have consistencies in the process. The emotions we experience in the stages of grief as outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross many years ago have been refined but still seem to apply (not in strictly linear order but...): denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Near-death experiences have also been described by many with some consistency. Joan Borysenko describes near-death experiences as very similar to what I experienced in 2020.

I lived a double life going back and forth for 25 years, from Pennsylvania where I was immersed in Quakerism to Kentucky where I was from. In early 2020, I was in Kentucky settling estates after my parents died, six days apart in 2018. When COVID hit, since I have pre-existing conditions, I did not feel safe to get on an airplane and go back to Pennsylvania. I knew my days of double life were over.

Someone packed up my house; someone else brought my belongings to me; and a realtor friend sold my house. Just leaving home and not going back to my house, and a very rich life with many close relationships, is hard on one's psyche.

My experiences reflected a near-death experience. During 2020, I lived most of the year alone with God. During that time, I was in a state of great joy most of the time as the experiences of my life came up for review.

I heard that I was to mine them for their gold, the strength they had given me, from what I viewed as the most important to the least, from the most traumatic to the most joyful, from the greatest blessing to the greatest heartache. I danced, did art and wrote a lot during this time. For 12 days, I was iced in after a storm; that felt like being in an Ocean of Light. Amazing blessings came forth!

What I would tell young people (or old) is to love life, all of it. John Calvi says there were six important statements to say to one another: Thank you, I love you, I am sorry, Help me, That is not good enough; and NO! Bug off!!

The hardest experiences are the places we learn the most important lessons and build our strength. I would tell young people (or old) to know that you deserve a full life. Be ready to embrace what comes rather than expecting your full life to mimic what we are told in the media is a good life or what someone else is doing that looks appealing.

We all have God-given strengths and power; we are to use them wisely and share with others who are in need but not to throw our

gifts back in God's face by wasting or not honoring them. We prepare for death best by getting our paperwork in order so that those left behind don't have to deal with a lot of hard stuff and by living life fully while we have it; that means: Loving, Praying, Worshiping, Creating/Dancing, Laughing, Crying, Hurting, Honoring the Wisdom, Accompanying Others, Working Hard; and reading and living Matthew 18 as fully as possible.

Jennifer Elam has been a Quaker since she fell in love with Berea Friends Meeting, Kentucky, in 1991. After Parker Palmer came to Berea and told her about Pendle Hill, she became a resident student at Pendle Hill where she developed art and writing as spiritual practices that have continued. She ended up staying in Pennsylvania where she studied, researched, taught and practiced psychology the last 13 years as a school psychologist at the preschool level, her favorite age. She has been quite involved in wider Quaker endeavors for many years. But she lived a double life, traveling back and forth frequently between Pennsylvania and Kentucky. When the Corona hit, Jennifer realized she could no longer live the double life and has now moved back to Berea, Kentucky, where she lives in an apartment in the Friends meeting house.



Approaching Death

David Blair

I am 72 years old. 2 to the third power times 3 to the second power feels like a mystical number! I have reached what Mary Catherine Bateson calls “the age of active wisdom” in very good health, with a full life behind me and a full life ahead of me. More of that life lies behind than ahead. I so enjoy the harvest of my years, and the promise of more to come. For this I am grateful. I am aware, as I could not have been in my youth, that my life on this earth can end at any moment. I am sad to think of leaving my loved ones, imagining their sadness, and curious about what awaits.

This is a good time to reflect on where I have been, and to ask what remains incomplete. Is there a relationship that needs repair and that I have some power to repair? A task God calls me to that I have left undone? Am I listening to the still small voice of the Spirit? Am I prepared to leave behind my comfort if that is where the Spirit leads? “Open my eyes to what is happening in my life. Help me to see your particular path for me. Give me the insight to see what holds me back and the grace to let it go.” This prayer from Meister Eckhart is as important at 72 as it was at 22, and at 22 I didn’t know how to (consciously) pray it.

I know now that I am not in control of my life, and that I do not need to drift aimlessly either. “Throw your commitment and your intention out ahead of you and ask your Higher Self to guide you.” My friend Sylvia gave me this advice, and I remember it.

This is a good age to appreciate paradox. I am grateful for the health, vitality, and family life that I enjoy, and I try not to be too attached to these blessings. None of them will last forever. Can I accept that with grace?

If I have attained some wisdom, who is asking for it? A friend of my age and I have joked that the world is hardly beating a path to our door! As a student in the School of Theology at Boston University and as a participant in more Zoom meetings than I can count over the past year and a half, focusing on the elections and progressive causes, I have been introduced to an impressive new generation of leaders—young, often women and people of color. I still have a role to play. This is no time to say, “leave it to the next generation!” I feel welcomed and respected in these circles, but what exactly do I have to offer? This is a question I ask without needing an answer. It is a continuing exploration. I trust I will receive an answer if I pay attention.

A friend just shared May Sarton’s poem “Now I Become Myself” with me. It ends: “Now there is time and Time is young. / O, in this single hour I live / All of myself and do not move. / I, the pursued, who madly ran, / Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!”

David Blair has lived and worked in China, the Philippines, and Vietnam. His inner journey has taken him to even more amazing places. He is now a student at the Boston University School of Theology.

A Corner of Blue

Eleanor Dart

Off center, key puzzle
pieces lost in dust
under couches, beds
the tumble of closets

In the mirror grey
mist her eyes evade
losing glasses
keys, language

She stands slow.
Why am I here?
Did I want something?
Looks down at her hands.

Two cats snooze
on worn patchwork.
At the windows edge
a corner of blue.

~~~~

*Eleanor Dart is a lifelong Quaker, now a member of Pima Monthly Meeting in Tucson, Arizona.*

# Young

*Joann Renee Boswell*

approach forty young  
a child really,  
everything still new,  
c a p t u r e d curious continuous.  
confident, turn each year shiny  
coin in my palm  
silver cold with hope,  
temperature existence-reminder  
soul shiver soar.  
standing out barefoot,  
first rain embrace  
this rain raineth every moment.

grey sprouts young  
glitter wisdom wonder,  
self-trust twine sparkle.  
water windowed in tunnel arch  
highway persists through  
riverside mountain. my days  
scatter, November leaves,  
each unique up close  
distance: glorious blur.  
twist golden cascade dance,  
playthings bookmark bliss undone  
skinny-dip ready  
plunge tomorrow's adventure.

grip dreams young  
take up upright  
bass, pole dance, play and song  
write, arboriculture, aerial  
yoga, tap, travel, return  
stage act, French, say  
yes and I can learn now  
neuroplasticity s t r e t c h

bounce century-ward  
rolling up tricks like Great-  
Grandma slack-lining  
stick the landing  
wreathed in generations,  
jaw-dropping inspiration,  
turn the corner  
and l e a p !

*Joann Renee Boswell is the author of Cosmic Pockets (Fernwood Press, 2020), a full length collection of poetry and photography. She is a teacher, mother, photographer and poet currently living in Camas, Washington, filled with coffee, books, handholding, moody music and sci-fi shows. Read more at [joannrenee.com](http://joannrenee.com).*

# Dying Old – To Aunt Clearcy

*Lillian Heldreth*

*I do not mourn your life lost,  
seventy-one is not too old for dying.  
I mourn your life not lived,  
Huddled in your dark room  
with brown-ringed coffee cups.*

*Where you are now,  
I hope  
They'll rip the dime-store plastic off your  
windows  
To shine bright morning  
on your soul.*

*Lillian Marks Heldreth is an 82-year-old retired English professor who still writes occasionally, now and then paints a watercolor, and reads a great deal. She lives a city block from the shore of Lake Superior, "Chii Gumii" (Big Lake) in Anishinaabe, the local native language, which she is still trying to learn.*

# Leaving Life

Donne Hayden

*It is very important that you do only what you love to do. You may be poor, you may go hungry, you may live in a shabby place, but you will totally live. And at the end of your days, you will bless your life because you have done what you came here to do.*  
—Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

In the early days of 2020, confronted with reports of horrific deaths of COVID19 victims and increasingly urgent warnings about how contagious the virus was, I faced, as many did, the very real possibility of death by COVID in the near future. I'm in the most vulnerable group (in my 70's, Type A blood) susceptible to serious complications leading to intubation and death. After lying awake nights last March and April, I accepted that I might very well contract the illness, and if I did, I would probably die from it. I could see my death. If it came sooner rather than later, what did I need/want to make sure was done?

I got serious about preparing legal documents like a simple will, a Living Will and Medical Power of Attorney; I transferred the title of a house I bought with my daughter into her name alone. And then there was all my stuff. An elderly man I knew who was having a garage sale before he moved into senior housing put it this way: "I've never seen a U-Haul truck pull up to a cemetery." Leaving life involves leaving stuff behind. Literally.

I was a bit ahead of the game because, in 2015 when I first retired, I planned to live in a small camping trailer, and I got rid of most things I couldn't carry in it. I gave away

hundreds of books and converted to reading e-books from the library. I gave everything I owned to my only child, telling her there's no need to wait 'til I'm gone. If she wants something she can have it now; I need less and less to feel content: my dog, my laptop, a comfy bed, enough food. Acting on advice given by the Quaker group, Right Sharing of World Resources, I kept two paintings and some small figurines I collected when I lived in South America, things that simply bring me joy. I avoid accumulating things.

It is now May 2021, and I have been vaccinated against COVID so though I might contract it, I'm a little less likely to die from it. The immediacy of death has lessened, but I am more aware than ever that we are all, always, only inches from death—a car wreck, a ladder that collapses, sharp objects, etc. Even if I avoid accidents and live an exceptionally long life (which doesn't particularly appeal to me), my time is running out. I must sort through boxes of my papers stored in my daughter's basement and annotate several photo albums so someone besides me knows who is in the pictures. I have a book mostly written that I need/want to finish.

Though I fear the suffering that precedes a COVID death, I don't

fear death itself. I find comfort in what I've read on death, dying and near-death experiences, like these words, among the last published by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross before she herself died: "Dying is nothing to fear. It can be the most wonderful experience of your life. It all depends on how you have lived." Over 30 years ago, in a book the title of which I don't remember, I read the following three questions summarizing what the soul is asked at death to assess its time on earth: 1) Did you love? ["The hardest lesson to learn is unconditional love," Kubler-Ross] 2) Did you serve? 3) Did you seek knowledge? (Not a word about being successful or rich or having lots of stuff...)

*Donne Hayden (now retired) has lived a rich and fulfilling life as an English teacher (including five years teaching abroad) and minister (among the UUs and Quakers). She currently lives with her daughter and family in Cincinnati, Ohio, and is working on a book.*



# *The Woods Down Sledding Hill*

*George Eastburn*

## **A Fable**

"They are given to all kinds of marvelous beliefs, are subject to trances and visions, and frequently see strange sights, and hear music and voices in the air." — Washington Irving

There's a Mount Snow in Vermont. There's a Snowshoe in West Virginia. There's a Snow Hill in Maryland. In Pennsylvania, there's a Sledding Hill Farm that has a sledding hill that proves its name every time it snows. The farmhouse and barn rest up on a hilltop above the road. Behind the farmhouse there is an impressive slope of land, the hill, that slopes down into a stretch of woods that once stood below. This is a story of once when there was snow on Sledding Hill Farm and a visitor at the farmhouse.

Hillary was the name of the girl who lived in the farmhouse on Sledding Hill. There was a time in winter, who knows what year, a day that snowed from morning until late into the afternoon. When the snow fell billowy and free and finally gave up the ghost over the land, Hillary took the visitor out to sled the hill. Two sleds. One for her, one for him.

Even though the snow had fallen all day, it was wonderful and light under foot. Weightless. Hillary and he, dressed in snow outfits to stand up against the freezing temperature, dragged sleds lightly to the precipice of Sledding Hill. Hillary turned to him, her hood up, and said, "Watch." She held her sled in front of her with both hands and took a flying run, launching her sled, diving down the white, frosted hill. He followed in

full, flying pursuit. Down they went like the wind. Faster than the wind that seemed to have left the field for the night.

They flew down Sledding Hill to the bottom. The thrill of a flying sensation, traveling down Sledding Hill, made them feel bright and warm. At the bottom, they tugged on the frozen ropes tied to the sleds and pulled them back up, trudging uphill, their snow boots swishing and throwing powdery snow this way and that.

Back on top of Sledding Hill, Hillary, time and again, grabbed her sled in both hands and launched herself onto the magical slope. And he followed. This went on as if there was nothing in the world known as Time. Like out-of-this world flights weightless through a galaxy. The sun slowly fell away. Down at the bottom of Sledding Hill, the woods became darker with each sledding run. The sun was falling behind the earth.

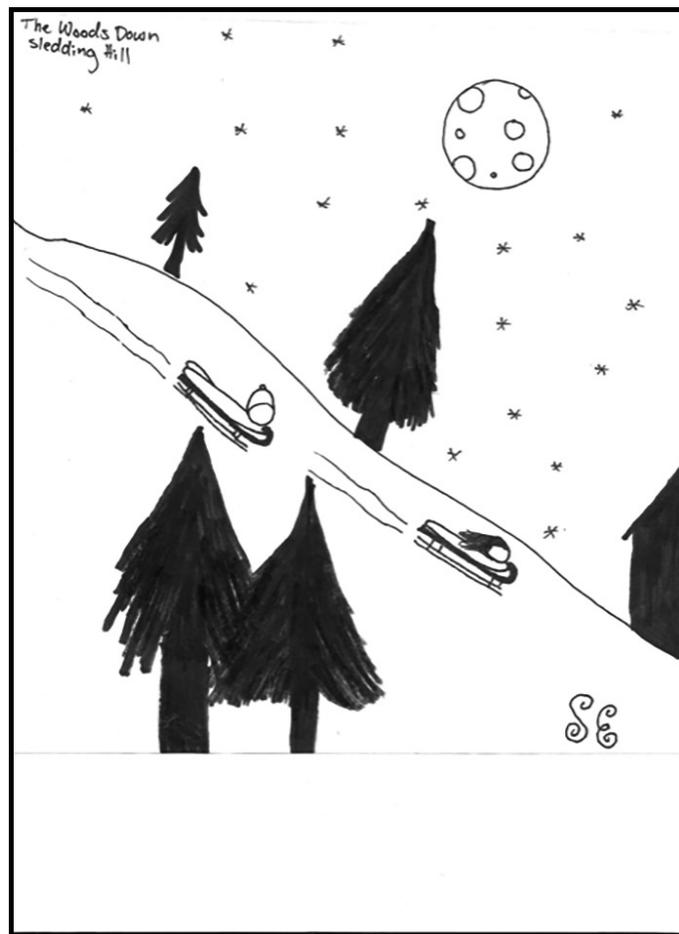
From deep in the woods, another light began to shine out, dimly, like a distant train coming through a tunnel. He stopped two or three times as the light, a kind of fuzzy, blurry glow, like a lamp light, seemed to be coming through the woods. A quiet wind began blowing through the woods. Hillary did not seem to take notice. When it became nearly dark, someone from the farmhouse called, "Time to come in!" Hillary and he looked at each other and laughed and took another weightless run down Sledding Hill. Halfway down Sledding Hill, the fuzzy, blurry glow seemed to float

out to the edge of the woods. Hillary quickly steered her sled a hard turn to the left, stopped, stood up, grabbed the rope tied to the sled and began to trudge back up the hill toward the farmhouse. He kept on that wild, last dark joyful ride toward the woods, toward the glow, that began taking on the blurred form of a girl in a sweater knitted blue and crimson, her face could not quite be seen. Some would call it ghostly. He sledded down, faster and faster, like flying fury.

Then, as if he were floating on a cloud of powdery snow, he was gone. Into the woods. Gone. Below Sledding Hill. A visitor no more. He found himself in the woods, in dim light, all around seemed shaded in a blue and crimson haze, with a presence coming over his shoulder that he'd always known and will always know. He somehow realized that his name was now Octavio. He didn't know why. All around him was a sense of wonder and good, a feeling that nothing could go wrong. He began walking thru the still fresh snow in the woods with the blue and crimson haze all around, guiding his way, a light he had not known before, a haze that illuminated this place.

There was that feeling, the presence on his shoulder guiding him. And he wasn't afraid. All was changed, all was Good. He began seeing ahead, a settlement that radiated something that seemed like celestial light. The girl from the edge of the woods was walking beside him, he could see her now, her hand on his shoulder, going ahead.

Suddenly  
 Up the hill going out of town, old hometown.  
 There,  
 by chance, already past Memorial Park,  
 to the crest of the hill on Main St.,  
 noticing a house on the corner.  
 And all time breaks away.  
 The house of a girl named Sidney comes to mind.  
 It was a distinctive name for a girl in  
 the 1950s.  
 And affection comes to mind  
 and into the heart.  
 So quick, it's timeless,  
 whatever it is when the blurred image of  
 a girl from memory comes close  
 reveals itself and warms the heart  
 and soul.  
 Lost her somewhere in junior high school.  
 For all time,  
 later learning, cold, online that she passed away  
 10 years ago, at her home, with another last name.  
 And her history  
 was missed here for all time,  
 Sidney's spirit lives.



**George Eastburn** is a member of Abington (PA) Monthly Meeting and a member of William Penn Charter School's board in Philadelphia, PA.

**Sharon Eastburn** is a participant in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's Young Friends program. (She contributed the drawing.)

## *Gifts of Aging*

Janice Stensrude

The true gift of aging is humility, as so perfectly expressed by two creative spirits who lived long enough to understand it.

Growing old is really extraordinarily interesting. —Doris Lessing (1919-2013)

There is nothing graceful about growing old.—Katharine Hepburn (1907-2003)

# Sea Creatures

Eric E. Sabelman

No matter how the rest of our lives go, we all think that the beginning and end are highly significant. But what if birth and death are not such momentous events, after all? What if our souls are like sea creatures, curious about the world above the sea? Any sea creature that swims - we are not talking about barnacles - may raise its head out of the water. It may be frightened of the sun, and soon dive into the cool deep to soothe its fears. It may rise quietly, making hardly a ripple, and no more disturbance as the water closes over it again. Or it may swim with all its might, leaping its full length out of the water, returning with an awesome splash. Some sea creatures breathe air, so they come again and again to the surface. Others breathe water and may journey to the top only once. The ocean is big enough to hold both kinds. As a sea creature, you may have eyes that can see in air, but a neck as short as a turtle, and so see nothing but wavelets all around. Or you may have a neck as long as a plesiosaur, giving your eyes a high vantage - but perhaps eyes adapted for water, seeing only dimly the distant land. I hope that you see wonderful things, all your life long.

*Eric E. Sabelman is a member of Palo Alto Friends Meeting. He has tried to remember and write down ministry he has given, so as to share it with more Friends than were present at the time. "Sea Creatures" was spoken in worship 22 years ago. Some of his stories are recorded by Tom and Sandy Farley <spont.com/w2wcd.htm>. There is more from Eric E. Sabelman on the front page and on the WCTS blog <quakermystics.wordpress.com>.*

*What themes would you like to see in future WCTS issues?*

*Email us at: <WCTSeditors@gmail.com>*

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



*November 2021*

### **Cultivating the Mystical**

*Editor: Judy Lumb*

Rufus Jones wrote “The mystic ... is not a peculiarly favored mortal who by a lucky chance has received into his life a windfall from some heavenly Bread-fruit tree, while he lay dreaming of iridescent rainbows. He is, rather, a person who has cultivated, with more strenuous care and discipline than others have done, the native homing passion of the soul for the Beyond.” How do you cultivate the mystical and what has been your experience?

Deadline: August 15, 2021

*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

## ***What Canst Thou Say?***

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*Approaching  
the End  
of Life*