



February 2021
Number 109

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*

The Journey to Overcome

Sinking Down to the Seed

Judith Favor

The seeds had been in the dark for three thousand years, and I was in the dark grieving my mother's death when I stood before a modest case in the Cairo National Museum. King Tut's tomb had recently been opened. Most visitors exclaimed over gleaming golden treasures, but I was drawn to a wooden box under glass. Seeds of varied sizes and shapes filled each section.

Curious, I asked the museum director why the seeds had been buried with the jewels. He couldn't explain why, but animatedly described what happened after the seeds were unearthed. Egyptian biologists planted some in a patch of earth, and celebrated when ancient seeds grew into vegetables and flowers.

If seeds can remain dormant for millennia and still retain life, what does this suggest about the power of God's seed residing in humankind? Isaac Pennington, a sixteenth-century Quaker, pondered this mystery and came up with wise counsel:

Sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart and let that be in thee and grow in thee and be in thee and breathe in thee and act in thee; and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of life, which is its portion.

In these days of pandemic seclusion, racial reckoning, economic inequities and political turmoil, I find my way from darkness to light

by dwelling with Timeless Quaker Wisdom in Plainsong, (Quaker Press of FGC, CD 2010) set to music and voiced by Paulette Meier:

Give over thine own willing, give over thy own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything, and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart.

Judith Favor is nourished in worship and service by Claremont Friends Meeting in Southern California where an anchor committee supports her writing. This is an excerpt from her book, **Sabbath Economics: A Spiritual Guide to Linking Love with Money**, (Reader's Magnet, San Diego, CA, 2020) <JudithFavor.com>.

From the Editor:

This issue of *What Canst Thou Say?* is coming together in the midst of a combined holiday season and pandemic. I found working on it a nice distraction. We find here uplifting songs, poems, photographs, and essays on the dark night.

Wendy Clarissa Geiger sent me this lovely little song in an email:

Love and joy come to you
To your friends and foes, too
And God bless you and send you
Enemies to love
And God bless your
Enemies needing your love

Judy Lumb, Editor

Don't Be Swept Away: Build a Better Life

Roger Burns

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.

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Many of us have been living relatively comfortably over the course of our lives. On those occasions when we experience a challenging situation, it usually happens in our lives as individuals, and the general advice that is offered is about how to cope as an individual.

Less is written about what I will call “community darkness.” Even before COVID and the pain of the recent national elections, the times in which we are living have become increasingly nasty, with general divisiveness, violence, and a spiritually empty consumerist lifestyle that degrades us. The competitive nature of our current lifestyle also bars many from winning that game, the goal of which is mere materiality. So there are additional challenges when our entire community is experiencing darkness.

It helps to keep in mind that there are useful parallels between spiritual health and physical health. When we eat tainted foods, we can become sick. Similarly, when we spend most of our waking moments in a culture that constantly throws at us dour television news, argumentative social media and instantaneous telecommunications, we can become emotionally degraded in ways that might be subtle but that have a real effect. So just as we choose which foods are good for our bodies, we should consider the need to become an active manager of the inputs that feed into our emotions and our souls.

If you feel that you are indeed being swept away by community darkness, there are several steps you can take: 1) emotionally detach from debilitating inputs in a serious way; 2) arrange to have them take up much less time in your life; (3) seek positive inputs that will enrich your heart and your soul. Actively build a better life for yourself. Seek to elevate your conversations with your family and friends. Perhaps find more high-minded friends and meetings.

Not everyone will have the chance to take these steps. In that case, a more serious revamping of your spiritual life may be in order. Perhaps add more reclusive activities in your life such as more spiritual time, or more reading of books. Also, it will be useful to take up a very purposeful activity, perhaps one that will help or elevate your community, an activity that will in part redefine the center of your life.

In those moments when you are outwardly assaulted by negativity that is trying to touch your soul, you can inwardly mull over how you can improve your purposeful project. In this way, over time, you will grow into being an island of stability, greater contentment, and spiritual strength.

Roger Burns has authored a recent essay titled “Alice Paul and her Quaker witness.” It argues in part that Miss Paul’s activism for women’s suffrage was Spirit-led. It is available online <bethesdafriends.org/resources/Documents/Alice-Paul-and-her-Quaker-witness-2019.pdf>.

The Dark Night Journey

Jennifer Elam

When I was about 40, I had a series of experiences for which I had no adequate framework. I had grown up in evangelical churches that would have told me that the demons had gotten me. And I was a psychologist and I did not talk about my experiences because they would have been framed as crazy. I knew deep inside that neither of those ways of viewing my experiences was right. So I kept looking.

In 1996, I enrolled in the School of the Spirit and Sandra Cronk was one of my teachers. She had written a book called “Dark Night Journey” and that was my introduction to the writings related to the dark night of the soul. That book changed my life more than any other. I had a frame for my life’s experiences that worked. She taught me well to understand mystical experiences and what to do with them. She helped me breathe again.

To summarize a few of the things I do to promote resilience: pray in many ways; share my heart and listen to friends as they do the same (encouraging support with accountability for all); write (these times require a lot of poetry); make art (a lot of color is required); walk by the creek and check in with Mother Nature every day; and create (not as in arts and crafts but deep listening for the ways of the moment to co-create with God for moving us forward as individuals, communities, a nation, a world).

On the national scene, I have been involved with Braver Angels

whose task is to promote civil conversations among reds and blues. For me, that is where it starts. The rhetoric and vitriol on both sides is promoting violence. A commitment to non-violence while standing for my values is essential, at the same time listening to others and promoting a search for common ground beneath the name-calling and nasty rhetoric.

I see these times in our country as a communal dark night. The times require that we come together as communities and support one another in the tasks we are called to do. I have known since I was a child that I was put on this earth to serve. I wake up each morning knowing I have work to do and pray to discern what that work is—beginning with gratitude for another day. Despair is often there as a temptation. I talk to myself and am clear that I cannot afford to listen to the ramblings of despair’s message. I often write “tea chats”. I write about the conversations among Mr. Fear, Dr. Courage and Mother Wisdom. By writing, I get the fear out of me and onto the paper and keep the inner dialog going.

The personal becomes the universal and the universal becomes the personal; the macro relates to the micro. The polarization hit my family (the micro) in 2014—traumatic hell as I had never known. I thought it was just a small group of people that had lost their way. I had no idea how widespread the hatred and vitriol had traveled. I have survived so far. Our country is surviving so far. I just had a head

start on most of my (F)friends in learning intimately about the national polarization.

I can see possibilities beyond the trauma. I can see possibilities for our country beyond the moment. I can feel deep within the energy begging to shift. Can we look at others different from us in new ways, without “othering”? I hope so, because I have spent my life appreciating the differences among us and that practice has made my life rich beyond measure. We all lose when we cannot embrace diversity, so let’s commit. What seems like a long time ago, I did a dissertation on commitment and teamwork in the context of my profession as a school psychologist in education. Those practices served me well. And I was invited at a young age to commit my life to God. I accepted and have never been sorry. That act has also served me well. Commitment is a foundational building block of our lives. What am I now and what are you committing your life to? What possibilities might my (and yours and our) energy be ready to bring forth into fruition? I can feel it ready to burst forth into new life.

A few nights ago a pack of coyotes left their woods and were howling under my porch. This is not like coyotes. I did not know what to make of that, still don’t. Might they be feeling the energy of change and possibilities in the air too?

Jennifer Elam is a member of Berea (Kentucky) Friends Meeting. She recently moved back to Berea after 25 years of rich life among Quakers in PA...full circle.

Dark Night

David Blair

I live on a dirt road in southwestern New Hampshire. COVID did not keep Lina and me indoors, instead it took us out to walk the roads within a mile of our house. We could greet our neighbors and watch the slow unfolding of spring. This spring did unfold particularly slowly, not just because I was here every day to observe it but because we had a long cold spell that held growth in abeyance.

I took photos as I walked, and in response to a message from a neighbor about the crocus blooming and the maple sap running, I posted some of these photos with text on March 29. Posts followed at least once a week, sometimes more often, and in late summer they began to slow down. On October 22, I sent out my 29th post since March. (*Some of these photos are shown on the next page.*)

Observing nature this closely has grounded me in the here and now, in an appreciation of the extraordinary beauty and complexity of creation. The “here and now” includes the past, for everything I observe has come from something preceding it; and it includes the future, as right now the skunk cabbage up the road awaits next March, when its heat will begin to melt the snow around it so that the first pollinators can find its flower. The lives of individuals and of societies go through seasons too, as Ecclesiastes tells us, and I find this comforting.

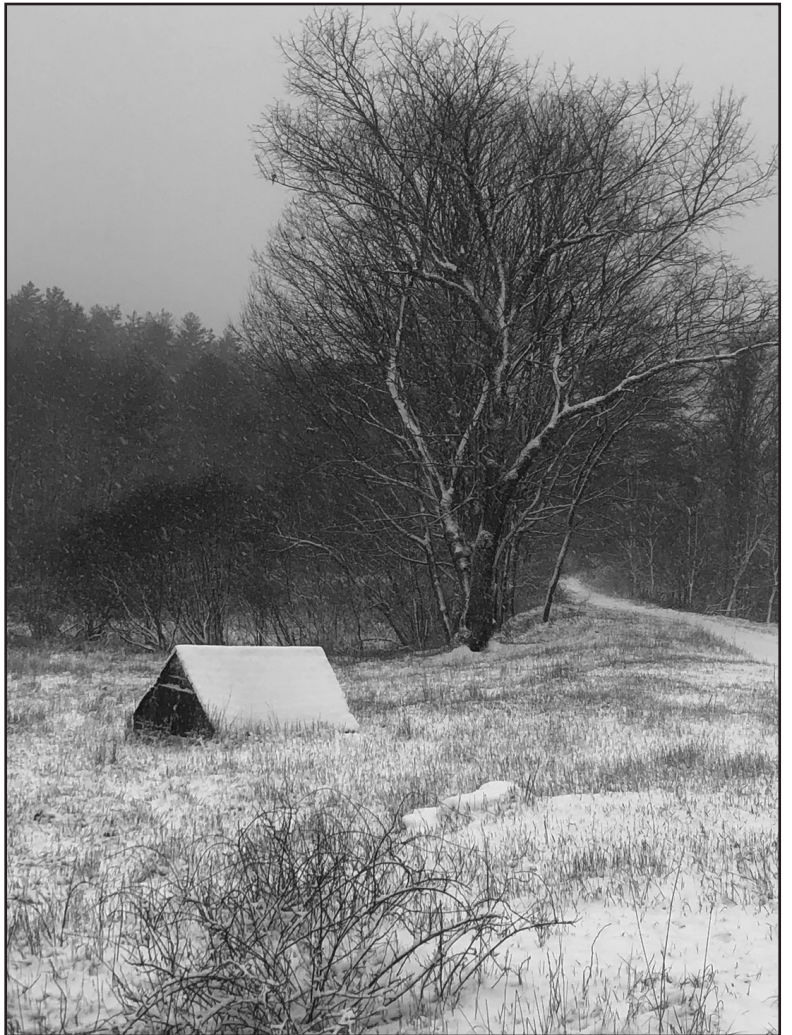
Sharing my blog with neighbors and friends has connected me to them and them to nature. This gift has gone both directions. Many people have told me how much they’ve enjoyed these posts. I have been blessed to have something to share with them. The importance of relationship cannot be overstated. It was relationship that pulled me through my dark night of the soul more than twenty years ago. Without friends, counselors and “random” encounters – all pathways for God to enter my life – I would not have made it through to the Light. Friends and family – and grandchildren! – have helped me so much this year.

These walks, and those hours outside, have been my most powerful form of prayer this year. I have been reading the scripture of creation on these walks, and then in the garden, as I pay attention to the cycles of death and life mirrored everywhere I look.

The other source of resilience for me has been having a purpose. I finished my spring semester at Boston University studying and writing about the mysticism of Meister Eckhart, Quaker belief and “process-relational theology.” The paper became an opportunity for me to articulate the foundations of my faith. With courses behind me, I convened a clearness committee to help me discern my path forward, and with the clarity from that I chose to spend the summer and fall in political and social justice work – and gardening! The garden is put to bed now, the other work continues and I look forward to returning to BU and theology in the spring. I continue to work with important questions about who I am, how I can best serve, what I must let go of and what I can now welcome into my life.

My first dark night—I say “first” because I can’t assume it is the only one in my life—took me deep into myself. God’s grace, expressed through people and nature and moments of insight, brought me into light. I learned to have faith that a way will open. That faith sustains me now. I have chosen a road with some straight stretches and many bends beyond which I cannot see—until I reach them. This feels uncomfortable at times, but it doesn’t scare me. Thanks be to God!

David Blair has lived and worked in China, the Philippines and Vietnam. His inner journey has taken him even more amazing places. David co-founded the Mariposa Museum and World Culture Center in Peterborough, New Hampshire, a museum dedicated to peace and justice through understanding across boundaries <mariposamuseum.org>. He is now a student at the Boston University School of Theology. He blogs at <orionblair.wordpress.com>. See photos on the next page.



Rise Up

Sally Campbell

Rise up, rise up, rise up and follow
Rise up and follow the clear shining light
And when you're weary rest in the hollow
Rest in the deep, healing comfort of night.

Through seasons and lifetimes we're all on a journey
Traveling onward through day and through night
Rising, resting, loving and learning
Ever returning through darkness and light.

Rise up, rise up, rise up and follow
Rise up and follow the clear shining light
And when you're weary rest in the hollow
Rest in the deep, healing comfort of night.

Sally Campbell is a singer/songwriter, a member of Morningside Meeting (New York City), 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. Some of her songs are on YouTube. Look for Sally Quaker Campbell.

Rise Up



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Fear, Love, and Leadership

Pamela Haines

In the wake of this stormy election, and as the waters continue to swirl, what I can't stop thinking about is how scared we all are. In a bitterly divided country millions of us have been scared that the other side would win. We are so separated, and the more separated we are, the easier it is to demonize. Our deepest fears get projected on the "other".

I know this is an issue that has caused bitter conflict and divided families. So it was enormously heartening to hear from two people I know with family members who are solidly in the category of "other". But these two women simply refused to be divided. They decided that love could win over fear. They dug deep to stay grounded in their love, to stay confident that we are all good, to hold to a belief that ultimately we all want the same things. They decided not to try to convince their family members about the rightness or logic of certain beliefs or points of view, but to tend deeply to the relationships.

This is what I want for all of us. It requires a lot. When we're scared, it's easy to feel like victims, to feel jerked around by others who have more power, or are led by people who have more power. And when we feel jerked around, it's not easy to stay grounded in love. It's certainly not easy to practice new forms of leadership—to lead in places where we're not used to leading, or to follow leadership that we're not used to following. Yet our times are calling out for the courage to try.

In this process, we'll have to give up some assumptions about "the other". To lead well, we have to like people. We have to hold out a vision that includes them. We have to have some compassionate and respectful understanding of the ground on which their beliefs have grown. We have to cultivate the humility to be open to learning from them, even as we may continue to hold out a different perspective.

To be led may be even harder. What would it take to listen for truth in someone we've never considered as an equal, or have learned to despise? Can we face the possibility of being changed? What would it mean to be genuinely curious to learn how someone ticks—either from a position of trying to lead, or trying to follow? Can we imagine finding a heart connection with somebody we had thought was outside the fold and lost to us forever?

I have to believe that whatever we might be required to give up in this process is something that we would be better off without. No matter how closely we have clung to it, no matter how central it has seemed to our definition of who we are, if we approach this project of "de-othering" with integrity, nothing of enduring value will be lost and we will emerge more fully human.

This doesn't mean everything else has to stop. We get to continue to mobilize around policies we care about. We get to share our thinking as clearly and compellingly as we know how. We get to strategize about how to win. But ultimately, this deeper work of the heart may be what saves us as a people.

Pamela Haines works in early childhood education, has a passion for the earth and economic integrity, loves repair of all kinds and writes widely. Her latest book is Money and Soul; Quaker Faith and Practice and the Economy. "Fear, Love, and Leadership" was first published in Pamela Haines' blog, <pamelalivinginthisworld.blogspot.com/2020/11/fear-love-andleadership.html>. It is used here with permission.

WCTS has an 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 did the technical work of setting up the email discussion group. Thanks, Roger! If you are not already signed up, we invite you to join this email discussion. To join, send an email request to <WCTS.Owner@gmail.com>.

Oh America, Blessed Community

Ken Jacobson

oh America, blessed community,
we see that our civil war
never quite ended;
dear God of our healing,
teach us to end the civil war in our hearts,
to make a just and loving peace within and among us,
to keep growing and growing our more perfect union,
one nation under God,
amen.

Ken Jacobsen has lived and taught in Quaker schools and communities for many years, along with his wife Katharine. Since her passing in 2017 he carries on this work from their poustinia, a retreat house for sojourners at their lakeside home in Wisconsin. Ken is a member of Stillwater Meeting, Ohio Yearly Meeting

Blessings

Michael Resman

Unseen	neighborhoods
Unbidden	cities
Entirely undeserved	countries
God pours Grace upon us all	A flowing unending stream
Spreading out	sustaining every moment
Engulfing	Breathe God in
	Breathe God out
Individuals	All will be well
homes	All will be well

Michael Resman is a member of Rochester (Minnesota) Friends Meeting and the What Canst Thou Say editorial team. "Blessings" was published in 2018 in his book, Poems from the Myst.

Afterthoughts

What We Do Unto the Least

Jay Misra

If you met Jesus on the cross crying out in thirst, tell me, what would soak into your sponge? Vinegar or water?

If you met Jesus on the ground, fallen would you bend down,

To whisper into his ear that if his faith in the Father was true then it would give him the strength to carry his own cross or would you pick up the other end?

And if you met Jesus praying in the garden, would you tap him on the shoulder

To let him know that if his will was really in line with the Father, he wouldn't be suffering, or would you drop to your knees and pray with him?

If you met Jesus on the cross crying out with thirst in what would you soak your sponge?

That which you do unto the least of these ...

Jay Misra recently started attending Rochester (MN) Friends Meeting. There he met Michael Resman who told him about What Canst Thou Say?

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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

August 2021

Approaching the End of Life

Editor: Rhonda Ashurst

As the vessels that hold our Life Light dissolve, we are poured into the Ocean of Light from which we came. For most of us, this is a slow process that happens over decades. As you approach death, what is falling away? What are you learning about who you really are? How are you preparing for death? What advice would you give younger people about living life fully?

Deadline: May 15, 2021

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

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