



February 2022
Number 113

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*

Living Through a Pandemic

Silent Zoom Meetings Open Way to New Home Christine Stinson

Before the COVID pandemic, my Quaker practice was going to a physical meetinghouse, sitting silently in Meeting for Worship, and experiencing Spirit. I would have doubted anyone who told me that online silent worship could be as deep or profound as is in-person silent worship. As eventually happens with so many untested beliefs in my life, that view has now been laid down.

Several years ago, I retired and moved to Florida but did not find spiritual community in the town where I moved. I accommodated by meditating silently on my own and engaging in other activities for social contact.

When COVID led to the shutdown of my other activities, I felt increasingly isolated and, in a moment of inspiration, started looking for online Quaker groups. I discovered the St. Augustine Worship Group (SAWG) and emailed them. They were holding weekly Meetings for Worship on Zoom and they welcomed me to join their online silent meeting. At my first silent Zoom meeting, I immediately felt a deep connection to the group although I had not yet met any of them face-to-face.

SAWG also had a bi-weekly reading group which was currently working through a biography of George Fox and I joined that online reading group as well. Both the spoken and silent Zoom gatherings touched me very deeply. The discussions, reflections, and questions arising from this group made me more certain that these were people... this was a community... I wanted to be closer to.

After some reflection and discernment, I was guided to sell my home and move to St. Augustine Beach so I could be a more active participant in SAWG. My spiritual life has continued to expand and grow since I moved here in May 2021. We now have hybrid Meetings for Worship and hybrid reading groups, meeting in person but in front of a camera so others can join us via Zoom.

I am very fortunate to be part of this vibrant, spiritual community. None of this would have happened except that I found deep, profound connection here through silent Zoom meetings.

Christine Stinson attends St. Augustine Worship Group (FL) where she has a community of Friends who are open to sharing mystical experience.

From the Editor:

In hindsight, the original theme of this issue was overly optimistic. But we decided the queries were still relevant and one day we will be on the "Other Side of the Pandemic". These offerings are filled with the experiences of life during a pandemic. They describe unexpected joys, difficult challenges, gratitude, hard realizations, resilience, powerful changes, fatigue, new discoveries, loneliness, surprises, and hope for the future.

Rhonda Ashurst

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

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

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

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

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

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Do You Ever Scatter Money the Way Dandelions Scatter Seed Spores?

Judith Wright Favor

All seeds have a story. This one begins with the death of my beloved husband on January 1, 2020. To honor Pete on my birthday in February, God led me to give 80 dollars to 80 people during my 80th year, and invite them to pass it on. Seed ideas came first, queries carried on the winds of change.

What if a gift could give hope to a stranger?

Lift a friend's spirits?

Soften a hard heart?

What if cash could ease someone's burden?

Support someone's longing?

These queries went into envelopes, with four twenty-dollar bills and a self-addressed postcard so each recipient could send me the story. Generosity eased my grief each time I put cash into the hands of a child, a student, a musician or a healer. Each chose what amount to keep and what to give. The COVID of it all shaped my 80th year. Pandemic pressures revealed great economic inequities. Gifting took on a new cadence. I prayed that acting like a dandelion would bless each giver's heart.

Dandelions are cheerful and hardy. They don't know if they are a weed or a brilliance, but their flowers are bright, and their leaves are rich in minerals. They grow deep, with tough taproots. Dandelions are patient too: they bide their time and wait to go to seed. When the blooming season is over, they scatter spores on the wind, take root in unexpected places, and create new communities of healers.

When people act like dandelions, scientists call it bio-mimicry. Here are testimonies from friends and strangers who scattered seeds of cash and wrote to tell about it.

Friends John and Sumi set up a Dandelion Fund:

"Thank you so much for your donation to 'All In It Together.' We have a circle of friends who stay close and know each other's financial condition, so we will keep your \$80 in a rotating seed fund to share with others. We want to keep going what you and Pete started. We think of it as our Dandelion Fund. Here's why:

"My Mom, a Lutheran minister, tried to teach me about eternal life, but I found it hard to wrap my mind around the concept. When I was six, playing on a strip of grass where dandelions usually grew, I didn't see any, and I missed them. Suddenly I realized I would see them again next year. Oh! That's what Mom means by eternal life! Later, I composed and recorded *The Dandelion Song* (John York, YouTube). It is my son's favorite.

Sleeping on Sand

Judith Wright Favor

“Your gift means a lot to us, especially at this time. The whole world is moving in some direction, moving toward something new, but no one knows where or what... Sumi and I will share your kindness with folks who also need support. Please stay safe and healthy.”

Dr. Csilla's Dandelion Story:

“Thank you for being with me on your 80th birthday. I sprinkled your eighty dollars toward small gifts for many people. I gave flowers, books and food to patients, friends and neighbors who were dealing with loss and emotional turmoil. You are remembered!”

Latasha Feels Like a Dandelion:

“I sent your money to Black Lives Matter so my neighbors are more likely to become all the dandelion they can be. We want to keep bringing nutrients from the deep earth for others, nourishing bees and giving a leaf or two to strengthen someone's liver. I feel like that dandelion. When summer is done and I faint into oblivion, I will let the Big Light know how you saw the little light in me and did not pull me from the earth. I will ask the Big Light to help me return good for good. Thank you for seeing me as I am, and as I endeavor to be.”

On September first, I joined a handful of friends for the night on an urban beach at Dana Point. Choosing to sleep on a tarp, not inside a tent as the others did, I found that ambient light from homes and businesses, plus reverberations from MetroLink trains plying the Southern California shoreline, kept me half-awake. In lieu of deep sleep, I remained attuned and attentive to the shifting patterns of wave reverberation and fog formation. All night I heard the music of incoming surf and outgoing stones. All night I felt an earthy sense of communion with land, air, sea and sky.

Breakfast at RJ's Café began with a poignant tribute. The empty table beside ours was set with a single red rose, the names of thirteen Camp Pendleton Marines who died in Kabul, and a poem of remembrance.

Bits and pieces of breakfast conversation brought seven very different campers into a surprising kind of resonance. As Cynthia Borgeault phrased it in *Eye of the Heart*, “New meaning is generated in the richness of interpersonal interplay. From the center, things flow out and toward each other, creating combinations sometimes surprising but recognized by the heart as meaningfully coherent.”

A contemplative night on the sand quieted the heady din of multiple ideas. A conversational morning calmed the pressure of plans and intentions. Once I had given my whole heart to sleeping on sand, I felt touches of infinite intimacy with the source of life. Breathing in union with the movement of surf and stars reminded me that living, moving and having my being *en Christo* on the good earth reveals a host of new discoveries.

Surprise is one of Brother David Steindl-Rast's names for God. Since sleeping on sand, *Surprise* has now become my favorite way to address the Nameless One.

Judith Wright Favor is a convinced Friend in Southern California who authored three books during the pandemic: 1) *Sabbath Economics: A Spiritual Guide Linking Love with Money*, 2) *The Companion Journal: 52 Weeks of Love and Money*, and 3) *Friending Rosie: Respect on Death Row*. Available at bookstores, but for a signed copy, order through JudithFavor.com.

My Apokalyptein Pandemic

David Blair

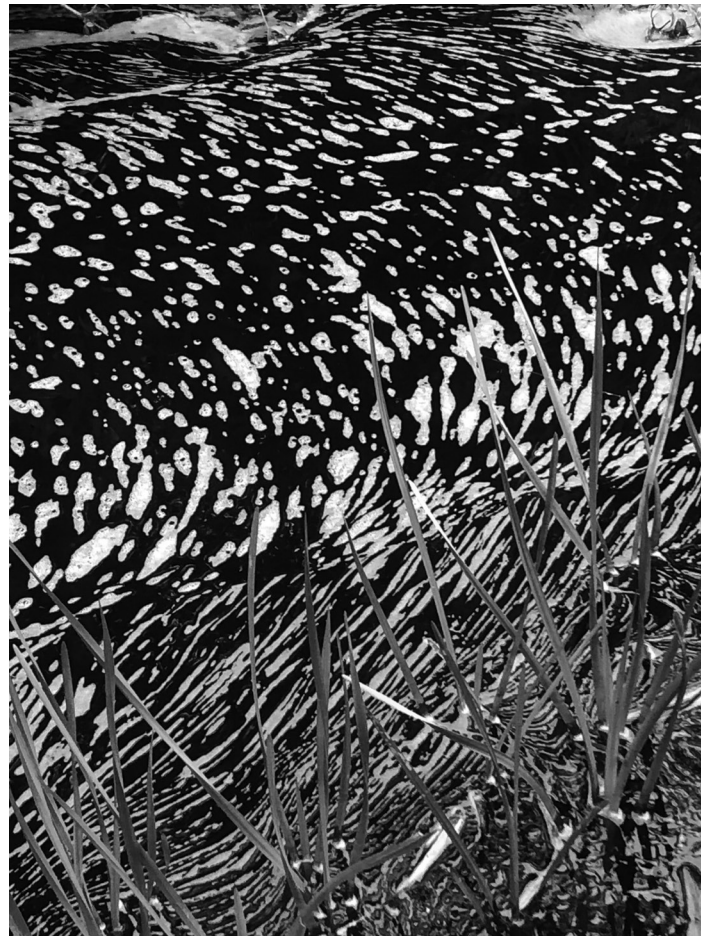
The COVID pandemic has been apocalyptic in the sense of the Greek apokalyptein, which means to “uncover, disclose, reveal.” It has revealed to me more clearly than I ever knew how blessed I am with friends and family; with the dirt road I live on, which offered me endless walks and a chance to wave to neighbors on the other side of the road; with a rich network of relationships built up over many years that has sustained me and my wife Lina through this time.

It has also revealed painful truths that have been in plain sight for a long time but needed to be uncovered again. The marginalized and oppressed – black and brown people, low wage “essential workers,” many of them undocumented, and the homeless – have suffered more than the rest of us. Many people live in a place where they cannot distance; lack access to good health care; don’t have the means, financial and technological, to stay in touch with others; have to make difficult choices – about work and childcare – that do not face me at 72. The young haven’t had the time to build the networks that sustained me and Lina, and many have suffered the separation from their peers.

In other words, I became more aware of the privilege that insulates me from what brought suffering to so many; and more grateful for all that has worked to make the pandemic time relatively easy for us.

I found I do not need to travel as much as before. Staying in our neighborhood and seeing my children and grandchildren, if only for walks at first, has brought great satisfaction. My nature blog expanded as I began to write for neighbors, and our community grew as we shared our observations. I’ve been able to stay connected to friends all around the world, more connected than before. Virtual classes at Boston University’s School of Theology have been very satisfying. Life remained full, and I never felt bored. I found more space for stillness.

As the pace of every day quickens – more driving, and no fewer meetings! – I hope to hold on to the daily walks, which have dropped away some; to stillness; to gratitude for what I enjoy; and to the awareness that many have suffered and are suffering deeply from the pandemic and all that it has exposed. COVID has revealed what has always been there and made it harder to look away.



The pandemic gave us the chance to observe patterns all around us -- from our daily walk.

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.

Suggestions for Living with a Pandemic

Joy Conrad-Rice

- Do one action at a time. Observe yourself doing it. Do it slowly with appreciation.
- In the early morning, drink water.
- Then make something to drink, something to help alert you to the world.
- The next day at the same time do the same routine again, slowly with appreciation.
- Don't do social media. Ever.
- Stop reading messages from your Meeting about virtual engagement. Notice, when you are sent an invitation for a virtual Meeting for Worship or Business, how you feel after you don't open it and don't read it.
- Take quiet time every day, at the same time, if possible, in a quiet place and by yourself. Look out the window of wherever you are living and wonder.
- Wonder about the light, the air, the trees, the birds, the bats, the bushes.
- Feel yourself sitting in your chair, notice how your eyes adjust to whatever light is coming into you. Breathe slowly and deeply.
- Do not fuss about not being able to go someplace or do something during lockdown, during quarantine. Accept it as temporary. Get your COVID vaccines.
- If someone you are living with is mean to you, write about it with brutal honesty. Consider sending it to a Quaker magazine signed Anonymous.
- Be smart about what you eat and drink.
- Move your body somehow every day.
- Call or write to a friend.
- Say hello or wave to someone you see walking on the other side of the street.
- Stand up straight.
- Do not wear the same outfit two days in a row. Smile at your old tops, your bottoms, your slippers, your boots. Women, wear a snug camisole, not a bra. Men wear pants with drawstring at waist, not a belt.
- On a walk, wear gloves, carry a plastic bag and pick up trash. On a scenic drive, carry a large plastic bag and pick up cans and bottles. Put them in a recycle bin for later.
- Read a book.

*Joy Conrad-Rice is a free-floating Friend,
floating between the USA and Canada during COVID.*



A Future with Hope

Earl Smith

Here we are, two years into a new decade, into a time of uncertainty. The pandemic left many of us with feelings of anxiety, isolation, and depression as we struggled with being overwhelmed in our personal lives.

The political division and tension filling the news have also added to the anxiety. At the end of 2020, some state legislatures still had not decided who should have been considered an essential worker during the lockdowns.

An unexpected challenge that I experienced during the spring and summer of 2020 was overcoming the feeling of isolation. Although my worship attendance was only interrupted during the spring of 2020, the daily quietude I experienced was unnerving. My apartment building of 50 people was totally quiet all the time. I recall walking over to the village park on Easter afternoon. It was a warm, sunny, day but nobody was out either on their porch or in their vehicles.

Someone has noted, “2020 was such a bad, terrible, no-good

year that even complaining about it got old.” As the year progressed, a state of restlessness seemed to overcome the nation. When would we get back to the way things had been?

This restlessness led to increasing reports of depression, alcohol and drug problems, and relationship problems. A Centers for Disease Control study reported that as the number of COVID-19 cases increased and decreased, it mirrored the number of people reporting depression or feeling better about their lives. Depression affects a person’s sleeping, eating habits, and interpersonal relationships as well as on-the-job activities. Anxiety that is withheld results in ill health -- either emotional or physical.

My anxiety led to what has been called Pandemic Fatigue. It is an emotional result of being worn out by following the precautions and restrictions instituted by the disease. The decreased level of activity, especially during lockdowns, leads to boredom and other psychological issues which then

cause abandonment of caution. One way to counter this has been by participating in online religious education and fellowship activities. This has been especially helpful when Friends felt unable to get out of their homes.

The prophet Jeremiah lived at a time when his country, Judah, lost its independence. Chapter 29 is a letter to exiles in Babylonia who are isolated and restless for a quick return. Jeremiah refutes this possibility but holds out hope for their eventual return.

Many have a desire to see things return to a time before the pandemic, but that is unlikely. Yet we can know that God has plans for our welfare which gives us a future with hope (Jeremiah 29:11). Our new normal will be one that exceeds the old normal if we walk by faith and hope for a bright future.

Earl Smith is an editor of WCTS, a member of Stillwater Meeting (Ohio Yearly Meeting, Conservative), and lives in Barnesville, Ohio. He has served Friends in many capacities, including legislative advocate and minister.

COVID as a Life-changing Teacher

Rhonda Ashurst

My life is different since the Pandemic began in early 2020. At that time, our parents were still quite independent; Scott and I spent a lot of time with friends and entertained frequently; we traveled; and Reno Friends Meeting was slowly growing in our beautiful Meeting House.

Over the last two years, our parents have become increasingly dependent on us—partly because of COVID and partly due to aging. Now we consider ourselves part to full-time caregivers depending on the week and the situation. Oddly, COVID seems to have made it easier for our parents to rely more upon us. As my mother said when she gave up driving, “You’ve been doing all the shopping and errands and taking me everywhere since this started, so why should I keep my car?” We are closer to our parents because we spend more time with them. I talk with my mom daily and see her multiple times a week. We have a nightly check in with Scott’s 96-year-old father on FaceTime. This was incredibly helpful when he was on lockdown in his senior residence at the beginning of the pandemic. I’ve had the opportunity to learn more about him, as he talks a lot more on FaceTime! We are closer now than we were before the pandemic.

I’m so grateful for the technologies that have allowed us to connect with loved ones. For example, we now have a weekly FaceTime happy hour with my aunt and uncle in California. We use

Zoom and FaceTime to have meals and visits with friends and family when we can’t see them in person. I’m closer to more distant loved ones than I was before the pandemic. We don’t entertain much anymore and spend time with a smaller group of close friends. I’ve learned that my partner, family and close friends are the most important people in my life, and I spend more quality time with them. I’ve eliminated many competing distractions that I used to think were so important. Travel is minimal and often to visit family or escape to remote cabins and campgrounds. COVID has helped me live the Simplicity testimony in new ways!

Reno Friends meets mostly on Zoom with occasional in person gatherings, usually in our Meeting House garden. An interesting and wonderful result is that we are reaching more remote attenders, including families. Reno Friends is the only Meeting within a few hundred-mile area of northern Nevada and California, so providing a virtual connection has actually grown our beloved community.

Far flung attenders have become regulars and those who may not have felt up to coming to the Meeting House under normal circumstances, were able to attend from home. I discovered that I could connect and center down in this new sacred space, which surprised me. We’ve enjoyed glimpses into all our homes and have become acquainted with family members

and pets. We have had some rich and wonderful spiritual discussions, which were better attended with deeper sharing than in the past. We even held a Zoom Christmas Party last year where we all wore fun hats and shared our favorite Christmas memories.

When it looked like we might be able to return to the Meeting House, I decided it was important to figure out how to do hybrid Zoom. Little did I know what a consuming project this was going to be, but with some help from Scott, we got it to work using mostly our old equipment from a garage. Now, we will be able to keep our remote Friends connected when we return to meeting in person. As a Meeting, we are discussing ways to use Zoom in the future, including keeping spiritual discussions on Zoom so that people don’t have to travel at night, using Zoom when snowy conditions would make travel unsafe, and possibly moving our Meetings for Business exclusively to Zoom so everyone can have access.

I anticipate that on the other side of the pandemic, Zoom and FaceTime will continue to be important ways to connect and bring people together. But I do look forward to more in person time and returning to our Meeting House.

Upon reflection, I must say that COVID has been quite the teacher. I wonder sometimes if that is the purpose it serves on some higher level. I observed that doomsdaying, misinformation, divisive politics,

panic, total withdrawal and hoarding are unhelpful responses to a pandemic. I finally disengaged entirely from the news because of its negative effect on my psyche, seeking out only reputable data sources for information. COVID has shown us how interconnected we are in this world. It affects us all and only by coming together to care for each other, can we enter a post-pandemic world. It has shed poignant light on the inequities, inadequacies and injustices of our systems and I've often experienced grief, sadness, outrage, and helplessness as I realize the magnitude of what must change for us to live in a peaceful, equitable and just world. As a result, I try to do what I can to help ease the suffering of others and to support activism that shares my values. Still, it never feels like enough.

I've learned a lot about "pivoting." In fact, I had to do so much pivoting I developed Pivot

Fatigue. My biggest challenge was decisions around how and when to hold Silent Worship. Were we meeting on Zoom, in person, or both? Did we wear masks or not? Was the garden safer? Then the wildfire smoke descended on us and stayed for weeks, so we returned to Zoom. When it subsided, we met in the garden. Then cold weather came, and we returned to Zoom.

Now we are considering when to return to the Meeting House and offering 1st and 3rd Sunday Hybrid Worship. With the increased needs of our parents, I decided I didn't have the time or energy to continue as Head Worship Clerk in 2022. I wasn't the only one who was burned out. Our Correspondence and M&O Clerk was also overwhelmed with the deluge of communications all this pivoting required. We held a Worship Sharing and spoke of our fatigue and need for help. Nearly all our regular attenders came,

and many offered support. It looks like we will move into 2022 with more involvement from a variety of Friends, which I think will be good for our little Meeting.

When I hit a wall back in late summer, I planned a retreat to the redwoods in November. While I was there, I reflected on the last two years. I saw that, like the redwoods, I am strong and resilient. But I also became clearer about my limits and the boundaries I needed to set, so I can take better care of myself both during and on the other side of this pandemic. COVID, you have been a life changer, a blessing, a challenge, and a tough teacher. But, like most difficult times I have lived through, you have shown me new and better ways to be with myself and in the world.

Rhonda Ashurst lives a quiet, contemplative life with her partner in Reno, Nevada. She writes a blog: <rhondaashurst.com>, practices yoga and Tai Chi, and serves the cat. She attends the Reno Friends Meeting.

Mediating Trauma/Grief/Challenges through Creative Expression

Jennifer Elam (psychologist and dancer) and Gloria Bruner (music therapist and violinist) are offering a Zoom class called "Mediating Trauma/Grief/Challenges through Creative Expression". Trauma is a story that has forgotten how to dance; we must teach it to move. Please invite us to your meetings or other organizations. <gloriabruner@gmail.com>

An Epistle from the Heads of Quaker Agencies

On December 9, 2021 the leaders of seven Quaker organizations, American Friends Service Committee, Friends Committee on National Legislation, Quaker Council for European Affairs, Quaker United Nations Offices, Friends World Committee for Consultation, Britain Yearly Meeting, and Quaker Peace and Social Witness, issued an "An Epistle From the Heads of Quaker Agencies." They reaffirmed their commitment to building a just and peaceful world. "We meet at a time of transition. The COVID -19 pandemic has changed our lives and the societies we live in, amplifying the inequalities which were already present. ...

"We have explored the difference between climate justice and sustainability. We recognise the need to look at the climate crisis holistically, as a social, political, ethical and spiritual issue, beyond a focus exclusively on emissions targets and personal lifestyle change. We see that those who are most affected are the least responsible, and that their voices are often silenced. We place the need for justice at the heart of our response, advocating solutions that redistribute power away from dominant states and commercial interests, and centre the most affected. We shared examples of taking a justice-based approach to climate action in our work and reflected on the positive impact of a strong Quaker voice at COP26 in November 2021.

"We have been led to explore how we are called to engage in 'peacebuilding at home', what that may entail in our different contexts, and how it relates to closing space for

civil society and dismantling systems of oppression. We recognise a need to confront the violence that exists in global North countries and to work to address the root causes of violence and injustice wherever we engage in peacebuilding efforts. We see advancing justice as fundamental to peacebuilding and the need to listen and learn more from those most affected by violence and injustice.

"We reaffirm our commitment to dismantle and prevent the presence of institutional oppression within the lives of our organisations. Walking alongside one another, we commit to doing better in creating welcoming, affirming and supporting work environments for staff and volunteers, both in policies and practice. We have explored what it means to be an anti-racist and anti-oppression organisation and recognise that more work is essential to build our shared understanding. We emphasise the need for staff initiatives to go hand-in-hand with intentional and accountable governance efforts; while encouraging and allowing space for discomfort and difficult conversations. While centring the leadings of those most adversely impacted by oppression, we acknowledge that we should not overburden them with the work that needs to be shouldered by those holding power. ...

"We call on Friends to be humble and to be bold, to be faithful and determined, to work inwardly and outwardly, within our Quaker communities and outside them, to build the just and peaceful world God tells us can be ours."

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

Email us at: <WCTSeditors@gmail.com>

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May 2022
Empowerment
Editor: Earl Smith

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

Deadline: February 15, 2022

August 2022
Truth
Editor: Judy Lumb

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

Deadline: May 15, 2022

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

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