

# Universalist Friends

The Journal Of The Quaker Universalist Fellowship

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Quaker Universalist Fellowship



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**The Quaker Universalist Fellowship** is an informal gathering of persons who cherish the spirit of universality that has always been intrinsic to the Quaker faith. We acknowledge and respect the diverse spiritual experience of those within our own meetings as well as of the human family worldwide; we are enriched by our conversation with all who search sincerely. Our mission includes publishing and providing speakers and opportunities for fellowship at regional and national Quaker gatherings.

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Larry Spears, Clerk  
Quaker Universalist Fellowship  
15160 Sundown Drive  
Bismarck, North Dakota 58503-9206  
Tel: 701-258-1899 Fax: 701-258-9177  
Email: [spears@btinet.net](mailto:spears@btinet.net)  
website: [www.universalistfriends.org](http://www.universalistfriends.org)

*The mission of The Quaker Universalist Fellowship is to foster the understanding that within everyone is a directly accessible spiritual light that can lead people to equality, simplicity, justice, compassion and peace.*

QUF Steering Committee, November 2005

#### SUBMISSIONS

We are seeking articles from 500 to 3,000 words. These may be essays on personal experience of arrival or maturation in Quaker universalism or of worship or they may be scholarly works focused on Quaker universalism, history, biography, sociology, scripture, and theology, both Christian and non-Christian. We also welcome book reviews, poetry, personal essays, and letters. Use inclusive language. Please send your submissions by U.S. mail on diskette or CD in WORD to Rhoda Gilman, 513 Superior St., St. Paul, MN 55102 or as WORD attachments to email to [rhodagilman@earthlink.net](mailto:rhodagilman@earthlink.net). Please put UF in the subject line. We do not accept anonymous submissions without *very good reason*. **Deadline for next issue: December 15.**

“The fact that this story (science) is based on a particular view of reality makes the scientific method one of the differing stories; indeed we can talk of science as a myth, a story which claims to describe the world as it is and allows us to see within it the context of our lives. Myth, here, is the story that confers meaning and enlightenment and enables us to engage with the world around.”

This book resonates with me for two reasons: the first because as I turn each page I find new insights, a new “aha,” a new joy as I discover “why.” The second but equally important one is that I am bundled into being a universalist, a mystic, a Quaker searching for *truths* and given to poetic expressions.

The gold mine of understanding this complex topic which he has explored over a lifetime, can perhaps be summed up in the following paragraph near the end of his book:

The language of spirituality does not answer questions in an absolute way. Indeed it asks questions. It tells stories. The answers we may give—or, better find—will be the ways we have discovered in our lives and relationships. When these stories are put next to each other, there may seem to be many contradictions. But somehow, I take heart from the great mystics who have proclaimed in many differing words and melodies that behind all stories, there is one story. And that story is known and shared; not defined. It is about love—that other desperately ambiguous word.

## From the Editor

This issue of *Universalist Friends* captures some of the mystical side of Quakerism in essays and book reviews. It opens with an article by Adrian Fisher who explores the metaphor of the seed, a metaphor commonly employed by George Fox and the early Quakers to represent that of God in us all which, with proper nurturing, can grow into a great power for good in a person’s life. The seed metaphor leads us naturally to consider ecology, as Rhoda Gilman does in her review of *EarthLight*.

Robert L. Pugh brings his readers into a Meeting for Worship where he uses the metaphor of human beings as actors to explore the Spirit he sees as Convener of the Meeting and the essence of our inner selves. Such is the view of the mystic, artfully presented by Rhoda in a review of a book by Dorothee Soelle, a German theologian who seeks to describe the role of mysticism in today’s world.

Finally, Sally Rickerman reviews *Consider the Blackbird*, a book on that much-discussed topic, the relationship between religion and spirituality. Our own Quaker Universalist Fellowship has recently published two collections of essays on this topic.

The emphasis on mysticism in this issue reminds me of an incident that happened to me many years ago, when I was an Episcopalian. One of the clergy at my church asked me why I thought the church existed. Without hesitation, I replied, “To celebrate Eucharist.” For me, that was all, the end, nothing more to be said, the church’s sole reason for existence.

Let me translate my reaction into experiential terms. For me, the church (or Meeting) exists solely for one purpose: to make manifest within and among us the Holy Spirit of light and power. Period. As George Fox notes, preaching is so that all external teaching may cease; so that people will know the

Inner Teacher within themselves. Here is my own experience, from a slightly different perspective,

... My faith lay in my experiences of God and Jesus. I met Jesus in church regularly through the celebration of the Last Supper [Eucharist] in churches of all sorts, from charismatic to Roman Catholic.... I claim I would know him [Jesus] if he were to walk down the street. (*Where Christianity Went Wrong*, p. 17)

This inward, experiential knowledge is quite biblical, of course. Jeremiah in the Hebrew Scriptures says, "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (31:33)

The Hebrew prophet Joel describes the experience of this promise (God is speaking):

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;  
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
Your old men shall dream dreams,  
And your young men shall see visions.  
Even on the male and female slaves,  
In those days I will pour out my spirit. (2:28-29)

The New Testament book of Acts famously describes the coming of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' disciples:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak

- Are we attracted to either of these words by our own neediness?

- How can we best communicate with others who have differing understandings of these two words?

He says: (p 45) "The division for me on the religious life is not between members of one religion and another, or even between skeptics, atheists and followers of religions. It is between those who include the stories of their fellow humans and those who exclude them."

Each word Harvey uses seems to be as carefully chosen as the jeweler chooses the next exquisite gem and its place in its new setting. This thoughtful care involves his reader in the consideration of his main topic again and again. His writing reflects his sensitive listening to others' spiritual/religious journeys, which he has encountered as he has traveled his own path.

He writes:

"The language (for science) we used to describe what was going on was non-symbolic, non-metaphorical, free from gender distinctions. We were observing the unvarnished unambiguous truth of things... . Perhaps it is an ever evolving story of the way things are, a story open to new observation, to new understanding, an emerging story which in the light of new evidence makes the scientific method one of differing stories."

In Gillman's description of another aspect of the way in which language influences our understanding of whichever discipline we are examining, he paraphrases the instructions which translators were given as they approached the "King James" version of the Bible: "... that the language should be slightly archaic. If sacred text and liturgy are the means of seeing the present time in the context of the timeless, then archaic language and a slight incomprehensibility may well be the means of achieving this." In continuing the analogy not only in the area of religion but in that of science as well, Gillman states,

*Consider the Blackbird* by Harvey Gillman (130 p., QuakerBooks, British Yearly Meeting, UK, 2007)

Reviewed by Sally Rickerman

There are few exquisite pleasures in life. Recently I have had and am continuing to have one! For the price of perhaps two and one-half movie tickets (\$25), I bought and am reading Harvey Gillman's latest book. He was born into and brought up in a Jewish enclave, a working-class neighborhood adjoining Manchester (UK). From there he went to Oxford where he briefly flitted in and out of the Quaker Meeting. His inborn interest in language was further developed as he spent his spare time honing this exceptional skill to be better enabled to explore *truth* from the perspective of religion/spirituality. Harvey then returned to and found Quakerism to be the best fit for his own religious/spiritual needs. His career as Outreach Secretary for 20+ years both encouraged and allowed him to express those needs as he served London Yearly Meeting, as today's Britain Yearly Meeting was then known.

Utilizing his long life interest and study of language—usages and nuances—Harvey Gillman both discusses and offers explanations concerning the relationship between religion and spirituality.

The topics he considers in this tersely written book regarding religion and spirituality are:

- How are they the same?
- Are we throwing these two babies out with the “bath water” to prove that we are *au courant*?
- Are we afraid of one “name” and not the other?
- Are we sure that *our* definition of each is the *real* one?
- Do we include: poetry; myth; story-telling; etc; in our emotional reaction to of these major subjects?
- Are we influenced in our use of either word by our own self image?

in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.  
(Acts 2:1-4)

These quotations, of course, are formative ones for the Pentecostal Churches, which grew from nothing to the largest group of Protestants on Earth in a brief century, beginning in 1906. Among Pentecostals is deep longing for the power and works of the Holy Spirit, which they receive.

Robert Barclay early posts warnings about matters of the Spirit to people whose worship style is silent Meeting:

If this form of worship [silent waiting] is observed, it is not likely to be kept pure unless it is accompanied by the power of God. For it is so naked itself that there is little to tempt men to become excessively fond of its mere form, once the Spirit has departed. (*Apology* XI, 27)

If the soul is busy with its own work, and if thought and imagination stem from self-will, even though the matters they may be occupied with are good in themselves and may even be about God, the soul is thus incapacitated from discerning the still, small voice of the Spirit.... Wouldn't a king's servant be thought impertinent and lacking in discretion if he didn't wait patiently and willingly in order to answer the great prince when he speaks? ...

Wouldn't it be rather ridiculous if he [the servant] ran around doing things which might be good in themselves, but for which he had no direct order; things that other people had been told to do at other times? (*Apology* XI, 10)

“*Things that other people had been told to do at other times....*”  
I fear that our peace creed, so deeply corrupted by our ignorance

of economics, is leading us away from “worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23), away from the power and works of the Spirit, to doing harm while we believe we are doing good.

I leave you with the opening to one of my favorite prayers from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, a confession I learned early to make from my heart for myself, my church, and all humanity: “Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone....” (From Holy Eucharist, Rite II)

Blessings,  
Patricia A. Williams

## From the Clerk

With this issue of *Universalist Friends*, Patricia Williams lays down her responsibility for editing the journal. We greatly appreciate Pat’s excellent work during her term as editor of this publication and her outstanding contribution in editing the QUF Readers 2 and 3. We are also delighted with her new book, *Quakerism: A Theology for Our Time* on Quaker theology in relation to today’s scientific worldview. We have valued her service on the QUF Steering Committee and her willingness to share her views at gatherings of Quakers. We look forward to future opportunities to publish her reflections on themes relating to universalism, mysticism and the tradition of Friends. We wish her well in her important work.

Larry Spears

worshippers in their turn to dominate and subjugate the rest of nature. Soelle concludes that the power developed by science and technology in the 20th century has made this contrast ever more sharp and now threatens “the whole of life on the little blue planet.”

Science itself points the way toward mysticism. To the leading thinkers in quantum mechanics, complexity, and evolutionary theory, “It has become clearer and clearer that everything that exists coexists and is bound into a network of relationships that we call interdependence.” Although the words themselves strongly suggest the Buddhist concept of dependent self-arising (that all phenomena exist in a process of continuous co-creation), Soelle does not take the further step of examining parallels and interpretations that might point toward a more truly universal understanding of mysticism.

Such a step may be unnecessary, however. The drawing of distinctions is itself inimical to the simple awareness of *what is* that forms the essence of mystical practice. Direct experience will convince us far more clearly than words that the indwelling, unrecognized “Buddha Nature” or the “Atman” in all humans is the moral and spiritual equivalent of the “Living Christ” or the “Light Within.” If that can be achieved, then perhaps humankind can realize compassion for each other as the way to survival and turn its efforts toward restoring the earth.

radiation.” Traditional monotheism, she argues, posits a hierarchical universe, dividing creator from creature, and lays the basis for “sexism, feudalism, racism, class-domination, and the desacralization of nature.”

Also consistent with democratizing mysticism is her emphasis upon the historic identification of women with mystical movements. From the Sufi saint Rabi’a al-Adawiya and the martyred Beguine Marguerite Porete to Catholic Worker Dorothy Day, women’s lives and words are constantly present. Nor does she overlook Margaret Fell, “the brilliant woman who toiled with George Fox” and defended the right of women to speak the words of the spirit in Quaker meetings.

Her explorations of eroticism and suffering in connection with mystic experience stay strictly within the Western world. She makes no mention of the tantric tradition in yoga, which draws upon the complementary energies of male and female in achieving ecstasy, nor does she discuss the achievement of equanimity in the face of suffering as the main goal of the Buddha’s teaching. Her examples of mysticism rooted in community include Hasidism among the Jews of eastern Europe, the medieval Beguines, and the Society of Friends.

At times the line Soelle draws between mysticism and simple religious faith becomes indistinct. Defining as mystics such church-based leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Latin American liberation theologians like Leonardo Boff and Dom Helder Camara may stretch the definition of mysticism for some readers. Yet if direct experience of a divine calling and persistence in the face of institutional opposition are the tests, then her argument is credible in most cases.

The keys to mystical theology in Soelle’s view are the immanence of God within the world and “the mutual dependence of God and human beings.” Never fully knowable and always indescribable, the God of the mystic speaks to all of creation with a “silent cry.” By contrast, the image of a transcendent, magisterial, other-worldly God leads human

## Nurturing The Seed

Adrian Fisher

“The cares and pleasures of this life choke and destroy the seed of the kingdom and quite hinder all progress in the hidden and divine life.”

William Penn, *No Cross, No Crown*

My life as a gardener has often led me to meditate on the “Parable of the Sower.” In each of three similar versions, Jesus tells the parable and then explains it to his disciples. In each, seeds shrivel, are easily uprooted, choked by thorns, or thrive, according to where they’re planted. Lately I’ve been considering the seed and the thorns among which it falls, named as: “the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth” (Matthew 13: 18); “the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things” (Mark 4:13); “life’s worries, riches and pleasures” (Luke 8:11). The parable furnishes a metaphor, and the subsequent explication is not very specific. There is no set of definitions, no list of bad or illegal practices or approved ones, for that matter. The general wording insures that each person can interpret it in an individual way.

On one level, the deceitfulness is pretty obvious: enough physical comfort and material goods so that one doesn’t think beyond oneself. There are all the many pleasures of our American culture whether of consumerism, ownership, lifestyle, or entertainment to which stoking and satisfying of desires we are so accustomed we may not even notice that they are excessive or even distracting. Often the strategies involved in the acquisition or maintenance of wealth, status and power become ends in themselves. But it’s not just social games, pleasures or comforts. Many people are overly busy, stretched thin by their daily responsibilities. To survive in this society we must tend to our business, pay our bills, work, raise children, have long commutes, struggle with ill health; we are all wealthy

in cares. “Wealth” becomes anything that fools us into thinking there’s nothing beyond ourselves and our little lives. I, at least, am often easily fooled. All these aspects of life do provide a worldly identity, even a sense of reality, but one way or another, the presence can be choked out and one can fall away from the holy nature of things without even realizing it—deceived again. All this has been said many times before.

In his essay “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” Thomas Merton writes that besides the identity there exists a true spiritual self. He says we must shake off distractions to find this self at our center so that the seed, or the Word, can flourish. Each of us has a different identity, different life, different distractions. Yet each carries the inner light, the seed, willing or not. In “Quakers and the Use of Power,” Paul Lacey writes of those who deny their strength and ability to take on responsibility, in effect saying “I’m too weak to do anything, I can’t take responsibility for my acts. I’m a victim of X, Y, or Z.” Some people might feel this way about their spiritual lives: too busy, too weak, can’t see it. Spirituality should just happen, maybe someone else could do it for us, or we’ll get to it later.

“The Parable of the Sower” asks us to take responsibility for the cultivation of the seed and offers fruitfulness—to anyone willing to pay attention and do the necessary work. The explication makes clear that we ourselves are the soil in which the seed is sown, our lives are also the land, the seed is that which is sacred, the Word, the Holy Spirit. Yet we are also the farmers or gardeners, responsible for cultivation. From experience I know that seeds exist in infinite variety: they can be tiny as grains of sand, or large, tough, weighty in the hand. They need different conditions just to get ready to germinate—perhaps scarification, cold stratification, heat, or even fire. Some can lie in the soil for years until the conditions are right, and then, miraculously, begin to grow. Thus must the seed of the Holy Spirit be: infinitely various, for each person is unique, each person’s life provides different conditions for growth. If

mysticism represents a merging of currents from many sources. She was familiar with Sufism, the current within Islam, and her discussion of Sufi mystics is a strong part of the book. But although she acknowledged the mystical traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Judaism, and Native American peoples, her treatment of them in this book is incomplete and unsatisfying.

Readers will find mention of Gandhi but no recognition of the Theosophical movement, an early bridge between Eastern and Western mysticism that played an important role in the rise of the Indian National Congress Party. There is also discussion of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, but examples of Buddhist-inspired resistance movements in Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia, along with the worldwide impact of Tibetan refugees and the spread of a radicalized Buddhism to the West in the past half century are missing. Overlooked also is the quasi-Buddhist meditation practice in China that has led to the mass movement known as Falun Gong. Perceiving correctly that a public square full of silent meditators is a formidable statement of opposition, China has brutally suppressed it.

All of these examples go far to strengthen Soelle’s thesis that mysticism leads to resistance. They also point to the universal presence of mysticism among the world’s spiritual traditions and to its potential power in uniting rather than dividing those traditions. Readers may well ask if its time has come, now that the shared fate of the whole human family and our unity with all creation are immediate and inescapable facts.

“I pursue my aim of democratizing mysticism without trivializing it,” Soelle writes as she begins to examine the various places and circumstances in which a direct experience of divine reality can arise. Consistent with this aim is her treatment of nature mysticism and pantheism, which “dissolves God’s personhood in favor of life-power, energy, oscillation, and

*The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* by Dorothee Soelle, translated by Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (325 p., Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2001)

Reviewed by Rhoda Gilman

This is a book about the role of mysticism in today's world. It is the final and most substantial work of Dorothee Soelle, a German theologian (1929-2003). First published in Hamburg in 1997, it is slowly becoming known to a worldwide audience.

There may be those who think that between the battling fundamentalisms of monotheism and the secular, materialist scientism of the industrial world, mysticism has nowhere to stand. Yet if we look and listen closely, we will detect beneath the tumult a slowly rising tide of spirituality. Swelling in silence, it is fed by hidden springs of yearning and a wordless, inexpressible touch of mystery that has haunted our race from its beginnings. Over the ages, the human response has taken many forms—some very strange—but the intuition persists that we are part of a reality that we can neither define, describe, nor fully know. And surfacing in vastly different cultures across the globe, it has universally carried a sense of oneness with each other and with all of life. That sense, Soelle maintains, leads directly to resistance against the world-destroying course of global capitalism.

Writing during the last half of the 20th century, Soelle was in many ways a successor to Rufus Jones, Evelyn Underhill, and Aldous Huxley, the thinkers on mysticism best known to Quaker readers. Like Jones and Underhill, she spoke from within the Christian tradition, and she limited most of her discussion to examples from late medieval and early modern times, including among many others Meister Eckhart, George Fox, and John Woolman. Living in the post-World War II era, however, she, like Huxley, also recognized that today's

we nurture the seed and give it some space, no matter how busy we are, then it will grow and develop—our lives will speak in their various ways.

Gandhi also writes of how each of us is responsible for attending to inner changes and that our lives demonstrate our inner spiritual growth. To do this gardening work may require one to shift one's attention inward just to find the seed—not always easy, but the seed is there, having already undergone the process necessary to enable germination and waiting for shafts of spring light. It is never too late, the timing is always right. As a result of that shift, other changes, in philosophy and values, might take place. Or one might feel the seed, the power, the light, already growing, and be led to make changes in one's life to provide a more fertile ground. It depends on the person. Few can retreat to a monastery, as did Merton, or renounce earthly possessions and paying jobs as did Gandhi. But one person might reduce his possessions, another commitments. Some might work to harness their emotions, to rechannel their anger; others might read spiritual books, or keep a journal, or go on retreats. Daily prayer or meditation often becomes essential.

This process can be scary. One discovers before long that it requires self-discipline—and who wants to be an ascetic, an extremist, a religious nut, or to be considered so? One might feel one is losing one's identity. I found the process a little less daunting once I joined the community of Quakers. It helps to know others are engaged in this work, with whom I can compare notes from time to time. Our silent worship serves as a weekly retreat. Our testimonies, which in their different yet overlapping ways center on this inner cultivation, yield guidance. I try to "live plain" as a way of following the Truth, and allowing the seed to grow. Wilmer Cooper, in "The Testimony of Integrity" quotes George Fox as saying, "take heed of the world's fashions, lest you be moulded up into their spirit. That will bring you to slight truth." The plain outer life simultaneously reflects and

nurtures the inner life, so one becomes whole and behaves with integrity. In the same spirit, Leslie Marmon Silko writes, “Great abundances of material things, even food, the Hopi elders believe, tend to lure human attention from what is most valuable and important.” The Hopi “must ‘live by their prayers’” if they are to survive. Thomas Kelly valorizes the discipline of going through one’s days in a constant state of prayer, even when fully engaged in the world. This “plain living and high thinking,” as Wordsworth put it, might serve someone well who is not on retreat, but living in the midst of cares.

Plain living could be considered a form of “self-denial.” Recently I read a blog in which practicing an environmentally friendly lifestyle was likened to the painful self-sacrifice involved in going on a diet. We might think of the practice of self-denial embodied as the pinch-penny, the party-pooper, the censorious grinch, the snarky, self-righteous authority who wants to deny everyone else’s self along with his or her own. Perhaps there should be a new phrase, for in common speech, “self-denial” seems to mean self-punishment or even self-hater a method of manipulating or oppressing others and to have lost whatever positive connotations it once had. We are often urged to indulge ourselves, not deny ourselves. Yet to me, the discipline involved in plain living, and moving towards sustainable living, inextricably connects with nurturing the seed within. Plants can’t grow in toxic conditions; neither do they grow because you will them to. Gardening requires watchfulness and love, requires watering, weed-pulling, daily care and attention. The self is not being denied so much as the identity, as expressed in one’s way of life, is changing to reflect the growth of the spiritual self, the seed, the kingdom of God. It is a journeying towards communion with God, moving past distractions, and involves understanding the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things as what they are engines of unhappiness. Forced good behavior constitutes oppression and repression, but as Gandhi points out, good behavior undertaken through love is

The children entered the Meeting as they do the last ten minutes. After they calmed down, the wise one spoke again about the field slaves. She noted many couldn’t talk to each other because they spoke different African languages. Yet exposure to Christianity was allowed with many slaves, including exposure to the music of Christianity. Music, music, music ... it reminds us of a truth—that we incomplete beings must have each other, are bound together, are together. She encourages the children to join her in singing.

From deep in her chest, deep in the children, and deep in all of the still, silent bodies in the Meetingroom comes the gathered sounds, the words, and the Holy Spirit. “This little light of mine, I’m going to make it shine....” Is there a dry eye in the room?

Yes, the weight of silence changes during the hour. It begins uncomfortably. It becomes a silence of private meditation, prayer, and free thought. It can be a silence fraught with struggles. It can drop with rock hardness. But so often it ends with buoyancy, with lightness, and with liberation from worldly isolation.

These Meeting hours are unlike any other hours. The clerk turns and shakes hands with those next to her. All of us join in as we return to a different, awake social world. Is it show time?

feel God is a terrorist.” We sit with this. Meeting is not a time to quibble over what anyone construes as God. Dorothee Soelle, in *The Silent Cry*, writes “Darkness, night, and suffering cannot be excluded from the wholeness of God as some New Age piety promises.”

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We all sit in silence for the first 25 or so minutes at another Meeting for Worship. I’m unsure of the time as my eyes are closed for the whole hour. The first voice speaking into the silence is that of a 60-year-old woman in great anguish. She discusses her three cancers, the losses of different men in her life, and then hesitantly ponders suicide. She tearfully recounts her stepfather’s terrible child abuse of her. She talks about a visit to a psychic who told her she is a psychic too and told her she’d have a real love late in her life and she would know him with certainty upon their meeting. Then she notes how delighted she was that the man and she found each other, how beautiful it was, but then he recently dropped her for another woman. The unfortunate woman speaks on and on, and when she stops, she still sounds trapped in a dark hole of despair.

The silence then weighs more. Its weight changes during the hour.

Several minutes later, the Silence finds human voice through a wise woman. In her deep strong voice, she notes she wanted to stay home today, lie in bed, enjoy the beautiful sunshine in her bedroom. But her husband of a marriage now totaling 42 years asked her to please come. And here she is, she said, meditating on songs of African American slaves. Here she is, thinking about the death of her son last year, thinking about the devastation, the wide confusion, and on how eventually she came to believe that a Grander Being knew things, understood things, in ways that humans will not fathom. How in the fields, the slaves sang “Keep your hand on that plough, hold on.” Little made sense, yet they held on. There’s so little we know. Yet we know we’re here together now. We know people care about each other here.... hold on, hold on.

a way towards true freedom. One walks a new path, practicing self-denial in a positive sense that connects inner and outer worlds.

The “Parable of the Sower” reminds us that the anxieties of life and an un-centered focus on the material world can make one lose or even kill one’s spiritual self and one’s real life—the part that is open to God, that expands like a plant in fertile soil if allowed to. It offers an evocative image that connects us to all of life on Earth as well as to God. We are to remember and not intellectually, but in an inner, almost physical way the inner life of growth and joy accessible when we heed that message. Centering in that place brings hope, a sense of spaciousness and love and reconnects us with the world in a new way. One true thing is that not only Christians or Quakers, but holy people of many faith traditions speak, write and practice cultivation of the inner spiritual self. They indicate that this practice is not restricted only to saints, visionaries and mystics—the sort of people many Americans, even Quakers, might distrust or see as impractical—but can nurture everyone, regardless of the material circumstances of their lives.

*EarthLight: Spiritual Wisdom for an Ecological Age,*  
edited by Cindy Spring and Anthony Manousos (343 p., *Friends*  
*Bulletin*, Oakland, CA, 2007)

Reviewed by Rhoda Gilman

This volume is a choice compendium of inspiring and sometimes classic writing that will be treasured and referred to not only by Friends but by other readers for whom ecology has profound spiritual implications. It draws upon the 54 issues of *EarthLight*, a magazine published under the oversight of West Coast Friends from 1990 to 2006. Most, but not all, of the essays, poetry and art are selected from its pages. The 61 titles in the book are divided into seven topical sections, each of which is introduced in the manner of Friends by a few quotations and queries of self-examination. These have been provided by Quaker storyteller and author Sandra Moon Farley.

Perceptive readers may see between these covers footprints that trace the long trail Friends have trodden since 1990 in coming to recognize environmentalism as an ethical and spiritual concern on a par with peace and social justice. It was in 1985 that Marshall Massey electrified Intermountain Yearly Meeting with a prophetic address in which he pointed out the stark reality that human activity was fast destroying the possibility of life on earth and that Friends were responding with little more urgency than most other complacent Americans. His message led immediately to the creation of a national committee on Friends in Unity with Nature (now renamed Quaker EarthCare Witness) and by 1990 to the establishment of a magazine to spread the word.

From its beginnings *EarthLight* was universalist in scope, embracing the entire human family and the Earth's diversity of spiritual traditions. Yet the distinctive Quaker context and perspective apparent in its early issues faded with the

somberly speaks "Remember thou are dust and to dust thou shall return." (*Book of Common Prayer*, Episcopal)

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In another Meeting for Worship, no one speaks for the entire hour. In the long silence, I return to a conversation with a man whose wife has recently died. There is heaviness in every syllable he utters. "I wander. Yes, in limbo. Yes, I'm in between stages of life but in some enormous nothingness. Doing the minimum I can to not be fired, to not call negative attention to me. Yet little matters. My sleep is weird. I won't let myself sleep at night. I sleep an hour here or there in the day only. Sometimes when I'm supposed to be working, I pull my car over on a busy city street and nap." As we talk, he realizes he is tightly avoiding an agony that comes when he nods off to sleep. Sleep is a vulnerable place where our feelings go uncontrolled. He notes he avoids their large living room because there he most feels the emptiness and loneliness. In later talks with this griever, he tells me how he now sits in the living room nightly to talk to his dead wife's presence to move toward, not frightfully away, from the agony. At times, he wails into the blackness—"I want you back!" He cries and cries. In the long, long silence of needed grief, I sit with my needed grief. "I want you back, but know you won't come back," I think, as I recall my mother's death when I was a child, almost forty years ago. The man and I sit in the same staging room in silence, two mourners, together and lost. Lost, yet found in Silence.

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Lao-tzu said, "Embrace death with your whole heart."  
Socrates said, "Practice death."

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In a recent Memphis summer, a terrible 100-mph wind-shear storm shut down the city for many days. Members of Memphis Friends Meeting still gather, though most are without power and have damaged homes and yards. As we worship, one Friend says, "This destruction is everywhere. At times I

I love each other, but too seldom see each other as their lives are taking them far away from home. And besides, they're adults. They'll never be little girls again. Then cascading down this loss-cliff, my history of losses is all in the present the deaths of parents, of friends, of others I've valued. Then future inevitable losses are here—my wife, my brother, friends, uncles, aunts, and our health. There's no protective distance. The divine chanting that enveloped me in all wonder now envelops me in all loss.

In the week before the Yearly Meeting, I traveled alone and visited elderly relatives I see too rarely, and saw family tombstones in eight cemeteries around South Carolina. Some living relatives' tombstones are already in place, waiting the carving of the date of death. In the chanting, I see my tombstone and the stones of those I love, only awaiting carving.

George Fox writes, "I saw, also, that there was an ocean of darkness and death; but an infinite ocean of light and love, which also flowed over the ocean of darkness. In that also I saw the infinite love of God, and I had great openings."

So often great openings to the Divine include the experience of attachment *and* loss. Aren't the two intractably intertwined? Mysticism has many sides. It's not just the ever being born but it's also the ever dying. It's not just the adherence of all, but it's also the annihilation. Rumi writes (*The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks), "don't let your throat tighten with fear. Take sips of breath all day and night, before death closes your mouth." But when you let go the fearful tightening of your ego and its body, you may be released into the ocean of darkness *or* the ocean of light. The light we accept as Quakers is juxtaposed with a dark night of the soul. I try to accept this as I know the angel of birth walks with the angel of death, and that both walk with me.

The most truthfully jarring worship in the Christian liturgical churches for me is the Ash Wednesday service. As the ashes are imposed on foreheads of those kneeling, the priest

appointment of non-Quaker editors and disappeared entirely after 1996 when under K. Lauren de Boer it became a voice for the broader sacred ecology movement. As such it carried the work of a number of widely known authors — Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Gary Snyder, Maya Angelou, Starhawk, Joanna Macy, John Seed, and Thich Nhat Hanh, among others. Their contributions, along with the work of many lesser lights, give this new anthology both brilliance and depth.

By 2006, however, the magazine itself succumbed to the crushing financial pressures that have eliminated so many small printed publications in recent years. It had apparently failed to attract any strong following among Friends, and other sources of support were insufficient. All of us should be grateful to Cindy Spring and Anthony Manousos for their labor in preserving the best of its contents by compiling this volume and to *Friends Bulletin* for making the book available.

## Stagings

Robert L. Pugh

“The invisible and imponderable is the sole fact”  
(Emerson, *Letters and Social Aims*).

You show up at the theatre to watch the show. But before it starts, there is shouting from the stage. It's *at* you! They're telling you “You are the actor! You're empathizing well with the role. You act like it's *really* you. You're so convincing!”

The spotlight on you makes you nervous. Relax. It's only beaming on the external, world-filled you. It's not your essence. You don't have to work this role just now. Close your eyes and help the theatre disappear. Open the gates of your spiritually gated life. Find comfort in your breathing. Find comfort in the non-verbal sounds and stirrings of those Friends in the circle around you and in the distant murmur of the children from another part of the Meetinghouse. Be peace. Be spirit. Be courage to let your self experience *longing* for God.

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“More ego, less God; more God, less ego.” In the early part of Meeting for Worship, I try to lessen my ego, to resign the roles I act, to release my tendency to over control life and minimize emotional response. I wrestle with my self-deceptions, my vanities, my obsessiveness, and my anxieties. So often a prisoner of my misperceptions of what constitutes reality, happiness and self, I try to release this world-filled self into the Patiently Waiting Spirit.

Who are we meeting with in a Meeting for Worship? More with One than anyone.

Time passes. Though the container of the Meetingroom may bulge with perceptions and misperceptions, the Divine Force convenes us in the heart of the Meeting. Often a deep,

peaceful spirit prevails as this Convener finds the long middle of the Meeting the staging area.

The deep, calm, peaceful, steady spirit in me *is* me and the same in you *is* you. We're not these well-learned, well-worn roles. We only have brief parts to play in this long, amazing human story, and we're not these forces we push so hard against. We're not these struggles. They will pass. Every body, every place, every structure our eyes see will pass and disappear. We may be upset about our bodies: their sizes, their illnesses, their aging, their lack of cooperation with our plans. Be upset. Then also be aware it's not the deeper you or the deeper me. Allow the Spirit to watch it. Watch it from some distance.

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Now I'm not watching anything from a distance. My daughters could be 9 years old and 5 years old. It's maybe 8:00 p.m. and the three of us are lying on one of their beds in the middle of our evening calm down, end of day ritual. Our eyes are closed and we're doing what I call “tones,” but you may know it as “om” or group meditative chanting. We three are in the bigger-than-us Sound, though we have no label for it other than tones. Life is too perfect here to even be labeled “perfect” as the process of labeling removes one a bit into the observer role and the Sound isn't observing, and we *are* the Sound. It feels so great. It's floating and melting around the room. It sings just right. Oh, the precious in-breaking of the Divine: the Chant chants me.

Then wham, I'm unbalanced, falling off a cliff. I'm ungrounded. I'm not there. “There” was around 1987 and I'm instead in a June 2004 Southern Appalachian Yearly Meeting in a workshop with about 30 others on “Sacred Chanting.” Somehow the combination of the group worship with my eyes shut for an hour, while thirty or so of us are repetitiously, slowly chanting together, stumbles me into a mystical experience of joy mixed with one of utter loss. I'm on the edge of weeping. I ache that that wonderful phase of life is gone. My children and