

## **Extract from *A Call to Friends: Living in Desperate Times***

### **The critical importance of our meetings**

Over the decades of my life, as I have examined the “times”—the social, political, and economic systems that govern much of our outward life—I have grieved. And, it has come to me over and over that Friends have the answer to what this hurting world needs so desperately. Or rather, I believe that our fundamental tradition is the antidote to today’s ills. This is nothing less than a radical invitation to live in the Kingdom of Heaven of which Jesus of Nazareth spoke. Right here and now, breaking into the corrupt, confused, frightened, sick United States Empire, we are invited to live in a new paradigm. The invitation is plural, to us. We are invited to make our meetings outposts of the Kingdom. Play with the words, use whatever terms you like: kindom, realm, New Order. The critical thing is that together we have put ourselves under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. In Paul’s words, *If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit* (Galatians 5:25 NRSV). Play with the words here, too: Cosmic Love, God, Ground of Our Being, Logos, Inward Christ, Loving Energy, Light—find and use the term that speaks to your condition. The critical thing, though, is *Thy* will, not mine. We come together to demonstrate what a loving community under the direct guidance of Love actually looks like.

This is not a solo enterprise. Nobody can model a new social system alone. We need a group, a meeting, to create a faith community that actually works—and works hard—to love one another, to help one another up with a tender hand, to go forth demonstrating in our homes, schools, workplaces, and spare-time pursuits that there is this whole other way of relating to one another. We are the ones who will discover—together—that there is that within each human that connects with Cosmic Love, that offers instruction and guidance each step of the way into

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a more loving, compassionate, satisfactory way of relating to other people and to the creation itself. We can do this. It is so simple that healthy small children are doing it automatically. It is also the most difficult thing we will probably ever attempt, and its cost is all. We will be joyful—and always in trouble with authorities who try to uphold the systems, principalities, and powers.

Lloyd Lee Wilson explains,

God has been calling people, and is still calling us, to be gathered in order to teach us how to be the Kingdom of God, and how to be the seeds for the establishment of the Kingdom of God everywhere. What we do, as we worship and live and do our business together, is we learn those skills and abilities jointly that enable us to model the Kingdom of God to the rest of the world. This is our testimony as a gathered people. And we do God's desire by taking the seeds of that learning out beyond the confines of our monthly meetings and beginning to transform the world outside the Religious Society of Friends.<sup>1</sup>

It is not easy; it takes work. As Sandra Cronk reminds us,

People will fall. People hurt and wound one another. They turn away from God. The heart of faithful living is to learn how to love on the other side of hurt and betrayal. This is the way of God's forgiving love which restores relationships after there is a break or fall.<sup>2</sup>

If the Society of Friends has anything to offer the world, it is simply the knowledge, the experience, that life is meant to be lived from the Center. This Divine Center enables each of us to live lives, in Thomas Kelly's words, of "amazing power and peace and serenity, of integration and confidence," provided we really want to.<sup>3</sup> This was the radical transformation undergone by early

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Friends. Their experiences are well documented through the many journals and writings left by the men and women who went through the tumultuous process. Kelly summarized it (I've edited his gendered language):

George Fox and the Quakers found a Principle within people, a Shekinah of the soul, a Light Within that lights everyone coming into the world. Dedicating themselves utterly and completely to attendance upon this Inward Living Christ, they were quickened into a new and bold tenderness toward the blindness of the leaders of Christian living. Aflame with the Light of the inner sanctuary, they went out into the world, into its turmoil and fitfulness, and called people to listen above all to that of God speaking within them, to order all life by the Light of the Sanctuary. 'Dear Friends,' writes Fox to his groups, 'keep close to that which is pure within you, which leads you up to God.'<sup>4</sup>

This is our call and our challenge, individually and together: to listen to that Inner Light, to keep close to what it shows us, and to come into obedience to its guidance—as a gathered body.

<sup>1</sup> Lloyd Lee Wilson, *The Exercise of Spiritual Authority within the Meeting* (Lancaster, PA: The School of the Spirit Ministry, 2014), 7–8.

<sup>1</sup> Sandra L. Cronk, *Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #297 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1991), 26–27.

<sup>1</sup> Kelly, *Testament of Devotion*, 116.

<sup>1</sup> Kelly, *Testament of Devotion*, 33–34