

Introduction

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. —Jeremiah 29:13 RSV

During my twenties, I felt a great longing to understand the truth about life. What was the purpose of human existence? Would my consciousness persist after death? Was God real? One night during a time of wholehearted seeking, while walking under a sky filled with stars, my perception suddenly opened in a new way. I had a subtle but awe-inspiring awareness of a Light that flows through all things, uniting everything. In that moment, I experienced myself as part of an eternal divine Reality shining with sacredness. I felt the Light moving through my body and out my fingertips into the world, an invisible divine Power. I sensed that the divine Power that flows through everything is great enough to heal any problem on earth, no matter how terrible or daunting it might seem.

My life changed radically. I became dedicated to a spiritual path, searching inwardly for ways to know more about the awesome Light and power I had encountered. More glimpses of divine Reality followed. It was so much more vast and universal than what I had been taught to imagine as God. To gain a better understanding of what I was experiencing, I opened a Bible that had been given to me when I was twelve. I read about Hebrews and Christians of the distant past who had received guidance to undertake certain tasks, make particular journeys, and share the good news of God's nearness. I searched the library for books about more recent spiritual seekers and read about many people through the centuries who responded courageously and faithfully to a prophetic call. I sensed a resonance between their experiences and my own.

However, it seemed that most of those in Christian history who inwardly encountered God went into monasteries, especially the women. On the other hand, I felt I was being sent into the world, not out of it. When I

studied the early Quaker movement, I discovered a remarkable network of seventeenth-century women and men who lived fully human lives in the world. Coming from all social classes and diverse levels of education, the first Quakers experienced a divine Light that was within them and active in the world. God was not just an idea or belief but a dynamic power they felt in their bodies as well as their minds. Not satisfied with the dry outward husk of religious observances, they learned to feed on the living substance of life with God, whom they experienced as alive within them. Transformed in remarkable ways, they embodied their faith rather than merely proclaimed it. Divine Power moved through them because they wholeheartedly gave themselves to the process of spiritual rebirth.

The early Quakers explained that they were guided by the Light of Christ within them, the divine Light that existed in the beginning, incarnated in Jesus, and animates all created beings. Looking carefully at Scripture, they found many references that described and confirmed their experience. They did not claim to have received something new, but they did claim to have rediscovered the vibrant original form of true Christian faith. At the same time, they recognized that this divine Light is active not only in Christians but also in Jews, Muslims, Native Americans, and Africans, present to everyone as an inward Teacher.

Early Friends expected to live in Paradise after death, but they also believed that God wants to bring heaven to earth and to restore the original harmony of creation in order to bring about “the peaceable kingdom.” They felt called to something far more challenging than merely *believing* in Jesus. They sensed that God wanted them to be co-workers with Christ and the prophets in bringing love, truth, equality, integrity, simplicity, justice, and peace to human relations. They allowed the saving power of the life, death, and transforming grace of Christ to *become active within themselves*, and they took seriously the biblical call to grow into the spiritual fullness that Jesus

demonstrated, the call to be born anew as sons and daughters of God. With support from one another, they changed from being people conformed to their society and out of touch with God to people filled with the Spirit and wholeheartedly responsive to divine promptings.

Once they learned how to undergo the rigors of an inward, spiritual faith, they manifested God's Spirit in outward ways that transformed other people and the society around them. Calling themselves Children of Light, hundreds of the first Quakers were empowered to speak prophetically in public places and to become traveling ministers. Thousands more witnessed to their faith in ways we describe today as civil disobedience—refusing to obey laws they considered contrary to God's will and willingly suffering the legal and social consequences. Their prophetic witness in England and the colonies contributed to far-reaching religious and social changes.

Studying the writings and the lives of early Quakers and tracing their continuing impact in human history has taught me a great deal about how the Spirit is leading me and others in our own time. But it was through joining in spiritual community with Friends *today* that I learned to live the Quaker way. I have participated for over two decades now in the simple but powerful Quaker practices of deep listening, meeting for worship, discernment, and corporate decision-making. I have benefited enormously from being part of a spiritual community that recognizes that ministry takes many forms and that all are called to minister to others. I have also been helped by the example, teaching, and prayerful presence of many wise Quaker elders. Among Friends, I have found the companionship of others who have also been touched by direct experiences of God and who are attempting to live faithful, prophetic lives according to divine guidance. We have been learning together how to hear and respond wholeheartedly to God's call in our time.

I have traveled to Quaker meetings, gatherings, and retreat centers across the United States to share what I

have experienced and to learn from others. I spent several years as resident Quaker Studies teacher at Pendle Hill retreat center and more years living near Earlham School of Religion, a Quaker seminary. I have met Quakers from all over the world and experienced the various forms that Quakerism takes in our time. In the nineteenth century, Quakerism split into several branches, different expressions of the Quaker faith. Most branches, but not all, still identify as clearly Christian, with a focus on the experience of Christ, known within and through the Scriptures. Both “conservative” and “liberal” Quakers hold meetings for worship based in silence. During the silence, we wait expectantly to collectively experience the inward Presence and teaching of God and Christ. In the silence, any Friend present may feel a prompting from the divine Spirit to offer vocal ministry. When a message is ripe to offer, the Friend stands and speaks it aloud. This ministry is received in the silence, in which each person present discerns how the Spirit may be speaking to his or her particular heart and situation through the words that were offered.

Two branches of Quakerism in the world today, known as Friends United Meeting (FUM) and Evangelical Friends Church International (EFCI), now hold their meetings for worship in a different manner. Most of them have paid pastors who offer a Bible-based sermon during the course of their worship services. In addition, there are Scripture readings, community prayers, and singing by the congregation and by a choir. Such Quakers, also called “pastoral” or “programmed” Friends, now constitute the majority of Quakers in the world. Although the outward form of worship varies, Quakers across the theological spectrum still experience the kinds of transformation described by the first Friends and by Quakers throughout the centuries.

For a decade I felt drawn to spend considerable time reading accounts of the origins of Quakerism. I sought to understand the turbulent social context in which it arose, a

period when a fresh examination of Scriptures and new religious ideas contributed to the English Civil War. The beheading of King Charles I in 1649 and a temporary experiment in a new form of government, the English Commonwealth, encouraged apocalyptic expectations. Many people experienced God breaking into history and bringing about something new. It was a fertile period for engaging in bold spiritual seeking. Quakers offered a powerfully prophetic message in this dynamic time. I was drawn to learn about not only the most well-known early Quaker leaders, such as George Fox and Margaret Fell, but also about dozens of other Friends from all social classes and many walks of life. I grew up in the late twentieth century, another time of significant social change and widespread seeking for direct spiritual experience, and I found resonances between the experiences of early Friends and my own life.

My acquaintance with the lives of seventeenth-century Quakers, combined with the experiences of dedicated Quakers today, has unveiled ten essential elements in the process of spiritual transformation. These elements are strands that weave together into a strong cord. In this book I use phrases and metaphors that have been especially meaningful to Friends over the years. Most are images from Scripture that have long been alive for Quakers and descriptive of their experience.

Because I have been drawn to study the passionate beginning of the Quaker movement, half of the sections in this book focus on the experiences of Quakers in the mid-seventeenth century. However, the ten elements I describe in the Quaker spiritual journey can also be seen in the experiences of Quakers throughout the centuries since then. In different time periods, some elements have been emphasized more than others. The stories and writings of Quakers in all centuries are worth studying and have much to teach.

Many people today experience and describe the ten elements differently than the first Friends did, but in our

time we are still called to make a radically transformative spiritual journey, as shown by the experiences of contemporary Quakers included in this book. Comprehending how Quakers have experienced the spiritual journey can help everyone understand and cooperate more fully with the movement of the Spirit that wants to transform the human race now, as we face the challenges of our day.

A Radical, Transforming Faith

*He has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world . . . and become partakers of the divine nature. —2 Peter 1:4 RSV**

Like most of their contemporaries in England, the first Quakers were Christians. However, they fiercely challenged the mainstream Christianity of their time, which they felt had become so much a matter of form and human invention that it deadened people's spiritual sensitivity and hindered genuine spiritual discovery. Seeking truth and direct experience, early Friends discovered a spirituality that brought them more alive. In an unexpected, tangible, but non-physical way, God and Christ became real and present to them, not only transcendent but also present within and among them and active in the world. They proclaimed they had discovered the true, original form of Christianity, a faith guided directly by the living Christ, available within all people as a Light.[†] This Light inwardly illuminated the truth, guided their path, and empowered them to take up a new way of living. It showed them that the Spirit infused and informed every aspect of life. Their belief was founded on experience and confirmed by their reading of Scripture.

Like their contemporaries, early Quakers believed that Adam and Eve's disobedience left humanity and society in a fallen state. The Light revealed that most people, including themselves, lived in bondage to mental, social,

* Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Translation (NRSV). The translations most often used by early Quakers were the Geneva Bible and King James (Authorized) Version.

[†] Quoting John 1:9, they insisted that the same Light which incarnated in Jesus also lights every single person: *The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

and spiritual repression, largely without being aware of it. As they paid attention, they became painfully aware of their conscious and unconscious collusion with the deception and oppression built into the structure of their society. They saw that their participation in certain social norms and practices caused them to be false and inauthentic.

Although early Friends believed in “the Fall,” they testified to a process of restoration and rebirth that frees people of their fallen nature. For them, the Bible was literally true, but they also understood Scripture stories as metaphors that reveal powerful spiritual truths. Humanity originally lived in a state of paradisiacal unity with God and all creation. Human beings, female as well as male, had originally been created in the divine image: *So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them* (Genesis 1:27).

Thus, the first humans were created with a divine nature. When Adam and Eve began to “feed on” the knowledge of good and evil, however, their divine nature became obscured and corrupted. Early Quakers identified the problem not only as disobedience to God but also as a feeding of the intellect to the neglect of experiential awareness of God’s Presence and guidance. A contemporary reading might add that humanity fell out of its original awareness of the oneness of all things and became dominated by the desires and fears inherent in a physical state divorced from spiritual perception.

Being remade and restored to the original divine nature requires fierce truthfulness both about one’s inner life and about one’s behavior and participation in society. It demands surrendering control to God and submitting to the death of the old self, a humbling process that the fearful part of each person resists tenaciously. Following inward guidance, step by faithful step, however, the lives of early Friends changed, both within and without. Through their collective love of the inward, guiding Light of Christ,

and with the support of the community, great numbers of early Friends learned to respond faithfully to the divine call. As they did so, they experienced God's Refining Fire cleansing and purifying them within.

Early Friends believed that the eternal Word of God (the Light) was bringing about reconciliation and restoring humanity to its original, pure condition. Many of them testified to the spiritual rebirth that Jesus described when he said, "*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above*" (John 3:3). As they awakened to Christ within, they gradually became liberated from social conformity and gave witness to a new way of life. Those who fully offered up their lives became inwardly united with God, whom they sometimes referred to as the Fountain of Love; they experienced divine Love flowing through them to others. These Friends regarded their experience as fulfillment of the promise in 2 Peter 1:4 that followers of Christ would be liberated from the corruption of the world's ways and would become *partakers of the divine nature*.

The writings of early Quakers include many references to Romans 8:14: *For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God* (KJV). Early in the Quaker movement, when their language was the most radical, they sometimes referred to themselves as Sons of God, occasionally using the more inclusive phrase Sons and Daughters of God.¹ History shows that thousands of the first Quakers were transformed into wholehearted, courageous agents of major social changes, changes that are still helping to liberate people today. Looking in greater depth at how early Quakers experienced spiritual rebirth may help people today—people of every form of faith—learn to cooperate with the extraordinary spiritual transformation that is being called forth from all of us now, as we encounter the challenges of our time.

Ten Elements of the Journey

The Spirit-filled movement of early Quakerism demonstrates how a community collectively surrendering to the inward Light of Christ can actively participate in the divine transformation of human society, making divine Love and Truth more tangible and visible. This book expands upon ten elements of the spiritual journey experienced by the first Quakers and by Friends in our time. These elements have been grouped into three sections: Awakening, Convincement, and Faithfulness. This suggests a linear process, and, indeed, we experience certain elements more intensely at different stages. However, each of the elements, like strands of thread in a tapestry, weaves throughout the journey.

For each of the ten elements, examples are given of how both seventeenth-century and contemporary Quakers have experienced them. Friends in recent times have been influenced by their exposure to many systems of religious thought, and some of the language we use to explain our experiences reflects this. Our way of understanding and describing our experiences is not uniform. Still, we experience the same elements of the spiritual journey. Our metaphors point to a spiritual reality too vast to define in words. Although early Friends developed a particular way of describing these elements, the spiritual journey they described has been experienced by many other individuals and groups in Christian history.

Awakening

God is present always and everywhere. Many have glimpses of this, especially in childhood. There comes a time, however, when the need to know about the life of the Spirit takes central importance in a person's life. Thus begins a conscious spiritual journey.

Longing in the Seventeenth Century

Early Quaker accounts of the spiritual journey contain striking descriptions of an intense longing to know God, often starting in childhood. Both William Dewsbury and George Fox, for example, while working as shepherds in their youth, brought Bibles with them into the fields. During long hours spent outdoors, they read Scripture and prayed. Sarah Blackborow wrote that from childhood she experienced, “pure breathings and desires, and thirstings after God.”² She described the condition of many in her time “who are in the pantings and thirst, whose hearts are breathing after the living God, in whom desires have been begotten by the eternal spirit.”³ Such spiritual thirst affected people of all social classes.

The longing of many was felt as a desire to be accepted or “owned” by God. When she was in her teens, heiress Mary Springett (later Penington) yearned to know the right, true way to pray. She zealously tried many ways to do so. Being acceptable to God was more important than anything money could buy, and her longing increased as she grew older. In her spiritual autobiography she wrote:

*Oh! the groans and cries in secret that were raised in me, that I might be visited of the Lord, and come to the knowledge of his way; and that my feet might be turned into that way, before I went hence. . . . I would cry out: “I care not for [an inheritance] in this life: give it to those who care for it. I am miserable with it: it is acceptance with thee I desire and that alone can satisfy me.”*⁴

Margaret Fell wrote that from the time of her marriage she was “desirous to serve God, so that I might be accepted [by] him.”⁵

During the mid-seventeenth century, there was a great deal of preaching about human sinfulness. Calvinist preachers taught that sinful behavior was a sign that one

was predestined to eternal damnation. Even children were burdened by a sense that much of their behavior was displeasing to God. In his boyhood, Stephen Crisp could see that he was more careful than other children and less profane. Nonetheless, he felt unable to stop delighting in vanity and doing things he judged not to be innocent. He developed a strong desire for the power to overcome this sinfulness:

I wanted power to answer the requirings of that in me, which witnesseth against evil in me, and this I lamented day and night. And when I was about nine or ten years old, I sought the power of God with great diligence and earnestness, with strong cries and tears; and if I had had the whole world I would have given it, to have known how to obtain power over my corruptions.⁶

Old and young, seventeenth-century people were terrified of being predestined to hell, and they despaired when they were unable to stop committing acts that they judged sinful or that their conscience witnessed to be wrong.

They had been taught that God was in a distant heaven beyond the earth and that Christ was far away, way out there in a resurrected physical body. They longed for God to be close, and, even more so, they longed to be acceptable to God. Many felt a deep yearning to know the true way to worship and how to live a holy life, subjects about which there was a great deal of debate in their time. Joan Vokins often cried out in prayer, “Lord reveal thy Way unto me, that I may walk therein, whatever I undergo.”⁷

Sometimes the longing to know God and God’s way was coupled with a painful awareness of the hypocrisy, corruption, and injustice in society. George Fox was disgusted that so many who “professed” to be Christians acted in shameful ways, from the cousin who wanted him to participate in a beer-drinking contest to the judge who acted unjustly. He called these people “professors” because

they *professed* to be Christians but did not act like Christians should. He longed to meet those who had come into true inward “possession” of their faith.

Longing in Our Time

During the time of the early Friends, religious belief and observance was pervasive. In the twentieth century, however, it became increasingly common for people not to adhere to a particular faith. Even many contemporary Friends who were brought up without religious beliefs, however, have experienced a longing for spiritual truth. Paula Deming was raised to be agnostic and was taught to “sneer at religion.” When she was in her twenties, however, a powerful feeling took hold:

I began to experience a sense of doom, that what we strive for in this material world wasn't enough to satisfy me. But what else was there, other than what I was taught? You might say I experienced longing for meaning beyond the limits that I had learned. Because religion was not acceptable for me, and God was to be despised, my spiritual journey began with fear. I had no language to describe my feelings, and this 'longing for meaning' manifested itself as a feeling that someone/thing was chasing me. Only little by little did I find mention and understanding of things spiritual . . . and this gave me a little leap of joy—a sense of Truth. This unfolding took a long time, and it required much sharing with others, both for affirmation of my experiences and for acceptance of my spiritual unfolding. I was very frightened that my husband and friends would find me unacceptable.⁸

Lola Georg was awakened by a painful period in her life, *when despair, tragedy, and trauma had dropped me to my knees. I did not necessarily see at the time that I was longing to seek a spiritual relationship with the Divine, rather I was looking to alleviate the pain I felt inside. Thinking that there must be something more than the pain and suffering I was feeling, I turned to God with a “what could it hurt?” attitude.*⁹

For many Friends in our time, longing is first experienced as dissatisfaction with the ways of the world and a vague sense that we are meant to live in a better way. As a child, Margaret Hope Bacon sometimes sensed a nurturing divine Presence with her. In her teenage years, however, financial misfortune caused her parents to move from a northern city, where she had been thriving in a progressive school, to a racially segregated southern state. The injustice and cruelty she witnessed there shocked her, and she could not understand why others around her did not express the same compassion and outrage she felt. In spite of her uneasiness with reciting a creed, she began attending church:

*In frustration I turned to the local Episcopal Church, hoping to find at least some statement of moral values. At Young People’s [Fellowship], made up primarily of social misfits like myself, I blossomed. . . . I was able to talk about racism, though in the most general of terms. . . . We had a wonderful priest at our local church, a saintly man who believed in practicing the presence of God. Through his help I was able to surmount problems of doubt and give myself up to the worship.*¹⁰

In Western culture, the lack of closeness to God that is felt by many is fostered by an internal split between the head and the heart. A sense of dryness and anguish covers a longing for God. Steve Smith was raised Quaker in Iowa.

As a child he felt “awe and wonder” when hearing stories from the Bible. As he grew, however, his “inchoate longings were aimless or else diverted into the elaborate byways of analytic philosophy, which tantalized but never satisfied.”¹¹ For many years, pursuing academic success by studying philosophy covered over the rift between his head and heart:

*Driven by unrelenting self-expectations, I had climbed an apparently ascending path through college and graduate school into my first full-time teaching appointment and marriage. Each success, each award and public recognition brought private depression in its wake, however, as I once again discovered that the peace of mind and self-acceptance I craved could not be earned by excelling in the games of learning I had chosen to pursue. Still, I knew no other way. . . . Years of academic skepticism had corroded the naive faith of my childhood; I trusted only my intellect.*¹²

Smith dealt with the painful split between head and heart by drinking alcohol to excess. In spite of his marriage to a talented woman, the birth of a son, and success in his career, this drinking became an increasing problem. Finally, prodded by a doctor, he entered therapy and “began the long, hard road to recovery.” First, he replaced one addiction with another. This only led to greater isolation and deeper depression. Then, he broadened his philosophical vision beyond the scope of his previous studies, which he realized had been “technical and precise . . . distrustful of larger questions of meaning and value.” A deep longing motivated him to study how to find happiness and well-being.

A few Friends today have always been blessedly aware of the presence of God. Michael Gibson, for example, maintained this awareness since childhood. It was nurtured by the church he attended:

I cannot remember not having the God connection. Even when I was four and five years old I remember being consciously in relationship with God, and it was, in part, the established church that fed and nurtured that relationship. True, some of the church's teachings and practices have been at odds with my experience at nearly every stage of my life, but I was somehow able to know—I don't know how, it was a gift—that those teachings and practices were not the point, not the content of my faith, but were human expressions of faith. The Life down deep, the living sap, was the point. And I believe I always knew it was flowing in me.¹³

Some find that their longing for a deeper spirituality increases once they have glimpsed the divine Presence in their lives. Jessica Easter's awakening felt like a seduction, in which God was

seducing me into a deeper walk with Her by offering small tastes of what union with Her is like. That seduction has taken me into the farthest depths of myself and the strangest corners of the world. I was hooked. I still am hooked.¹⁴

Awakening to the spiritual journey often begins with some form of longing, sometimes felt as dissatisfaction with the way things are. Longing remains as a strand of the journey even after one finds a connection with God.

Reflection Questions

Longing

In what form have you experienced longing or a desire for deeper meaning and purpose?

Do you long for deeper knowledge or connection with God?

If you haven't felt longing, have you experienced restlessness, cynicism, or despair about the way things are?

What have you done with your longing or your sense that something is wrong or missing?

Can you remember a recent time when you felt a desire for greater connection with God or longed to live a life with greater love and integrity?

Seeking in the Seventeenth Century

Strong longing compels people to seek a way to come closer to the heart of life, to love and truth and God. In 1646 young George Fox began his search by looking for a wise priest or minister who could teach him the way. Like others who eventually became the first Quakers, he attended the sermons and lectures of priests and ministers who had a reputation for spiritual wisdom, traveling long distances to do so. In mid-seventeenth-century England, there was increased freedom for spiritual exploration, and many “nonconformist” clergy were preaching new religious ideas. Only a few decades earlier, the Bible had finally become available in English in a small edition inexpensive enough for ordinary people to afford. The Bible was often the only book that families owned; they read passages aloud together during daily times for prayer.

For decades, those called Puritans had wanted to purify the church of rituals not mentioned in the Scriptures; many of them refused to conform to such practices. Numerous religious groups sprang up, each with a slightly different idea about what constituted a true, pure church. All the Puritan groups in England put emphasis on finding instructions in Scripture about what God wanted. However, the different sects had fierce debates over scriptural interpretations. Those dissatisfied with the state-run church, longing to find a truer way to worship God, joined the new religious sects. They read devotional or theological books, attended midweek lectures, and took up spiritual practices such as fasting. On Sundays they participated in long morning and afternoon worship services and abstained from sports and card playing. The more radical non-conformists were called Independents, Separatists, Dissenters, and Anabaptists. Their descendants today include Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists.

Hearing there were strict Puritans in Leeds, Yorkshire teenager William Dewsbury persuaded his family to

apprentice him to someone in that town. At Sunday services, he sang psalms, took communion, and wrote down the sermons in shorthand. During the week he fasted and participated in all the other recommended practices. When he had free time, he visited ministers in their homes and asked for clarification of various points they had made while preaching. These educated ministers, however, responded solely from their book learning. They did not speak of any direct knowledge of God. Not one was able to describe to young Dewsbury any personal experience of God that had enabled them to overcome sin:

I met with none who could tell me what God had done for their souls, in redeeming them from the body of sin, which I groaned under, and which separated me from the presence of God; although I walked strictly with them in their outward observances and in running to hear one man after another, called ministers, yet I found no rest nor peace to my weary soul.¹⁵

In London, Martha Simmonds, daughter of a family of printers, engaged in a similar search. Wanting to find a minister who spoke truth, she attended a variety of religious services and meetings held in public places or in people's homes. In spite of all she heard preached by many ministers about God and religion, she, too, was unable to find what she was seeking:

For seven years together I wandered up and down the streets enquiring of those that had the image of honesty in their countenances, where I might find an honest Minister . . . and wandering from one idol's temple to another, and from one private meeting to another, I heard a sound of words among them but no substance could I find.¹⁶

When Elizabeth Hooton, a farmer's wife, found the services at the local Anglican church inadequate for her spiritual needs, she joined a group of General Baptists. At

that time the Baptists—also called Anabaptists—were on the radical end of the Puritan spectrum. They believed that baptism was only for mature believers, not infants. In their services they allowed the ministry of lay preachers, sometimes even women. When many of the Baptists Elizabeth Hooton had joined lost the heart to continue their religious observances, she judged that they “were not upright hearted to ye Lord but did his work negligently.”¹⁷ She gathered the remnants of the shattered group and held meetings in her house in the village of Skegby, sometimes preaching to the group. Her husband was unhappy about this, and the marriage nearly broke up. Nonetheless, Elizabeth Hooton continued the meetings, and her children attended them.

In the rural north of England, Francis Howgill had been seeking for decades. He sometimes had intimations of God, felt divine Power, or received inner guidance. However, these manifestations of the Spirit were subtle and not in the form he expected an appearance from God to take. Not recognizing the source, he usually paid little attention and often neglected to heed the guidance that came. His family and friends did not understand his spiritual longing, and Howgill felt a deep loneliness. Joining a succession of churches, he was moved by the tender sincerity of each group. Eventually, however, they all disappointed him. They were focused on understanding the words of Scripture and talked only about what God and Christ had done in the past. They did not know the living God or the risen Christ by direct experience. Howgill wrote:

I fasted and prayed and walked mournfully in sorrow, and thought none was like me, tempted on every hand. So I ran to this man and the other, and they made promises to me, but it was only words. . . . Then there appeared more beauty in them called Independents, and I loved them, and so joined them. And I purchased books with all the money that I could get, and walked with them and owned them as more separate

from the world. . . . But at last I saw it was but in words. . . . They whom they called Anabaptists appeared to have more glory and walked more according to scripture, observing things written without. And I went among them and there was something I loved about them. But . . . I saw the ground was the same, and their doctrine out of the life, with the rest of the teachers of the world, and they had separated themselves and made another likeness. But still all said, the letter [of scripture] was the word and rule, and Christ at a distance without, had done all; and some of them holding freewill, others opposing, and all in [their own] will. But still I loved them and walked honestly among all these; but though I had seen and owned all that I had heard . . . no peace nor no guide did I find.¹⁸

Seeking in Our Time

Douglas Gwyn describes two different kinds of “seeker tendencies” that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States and Europe, at a time when dialogue among Christian denominations had increased as well as access to knowledge of other world religions. One kind of seeker left the mainstream Christian or Jewish faith in which they had been raised, seeking “more adequate answers and authorities” by exploring Buddhist, Hindu, Native American or earth-based “pagan” religious practices.¹⁹ Another kind of seeker stayed within the religious tradition of their upbringing but sought for deeper experience of the truths at the heart of their religion, exploring new practices or visiting different denominations. “Thus,” Gwyn wrote, “even traditionalists became seekers, forced to search for new ways to convey old truths.”²⁰ Some seekers tried one route, then the other.

Louise Wilson’s seeking took her deeper within her own spiritual tradition. She was raised in North Carolina among

“progressive Quakers,” whose worship services included songs and a prepared message. As a child she attended Sunday school, memorized Bible verses, and learned important values from her loving parents. After her marriage she felt called to seek for a deeper life with God:

My conscious spiritual journey began in the fall of 1952. The children were in school, Bob was at work and I had time to look at myself and I didn't like what I saw. I had my social life, my intellectual life, and my religious life. I was many persons, not one, and I continued in a pattern, not liking it, but making no changes.²¹

Finally she began to read the Bible and books of a spiritual nature. Then she joined an interdenominational prayer group.

Timothy Ashworth was led to seek outside the tradition in which he was raised. The son of an Anglican priest, his upbringing made him sensitive to the religious life, but he sought for a vitality he didn't find inside the church. First he attended a school of meditation and took up an Eastern meditation practice involving a mantra. This practice helped him be more present throughout the day. Desiring more, he began to attend Catholic services and soon was discussing theological questions with the priest and reading books on religion. Both meditation practice and attending Mass helped him experience “a tangible spaciousness and depth of presence.”²² He joined the Roman Catholic Church, went to seminary, earned a degree in Scripture studies, and was ordained as a priest.

Still, his seeking continued. A conversation with a meditation teacher led him to make a commitment to surrender one hundred percent to God, something he felt a priest should do. Shortly afterwards, he experienced an overwhelming, sweet, fiery sensation in his heart, along with a powerful shift in consciousness. The experience continued for weeks and reoriented his entire life. As he surrendered to the presence of God within him, he was led,

surprisingly, to leave the priesthood. Later, he married a woman he had known in college and went to Oxford for more studies. When his wife brought him to a Quaker meeting, he began to read about the beginnings of Quakerism, finding a resonance between the experience of early Friends and his own transforming encounter with God.

Deborah Saunders's grandmother was a devout Southern Baptist married to a devout Episcopalian. Hers was one of the few African American families who attended the Episcopalian church in which she was raised. When her daughter was six, Saunders felt hungry for a more personal relationship with God and joined a fundamentalist church. Although they were the only black members of the congregation, they felt welcome. In this community, Saunders read the Scriptures and reached her own understanding of what they meant and what she believed as a Christian. Then she felt God leading her to another place of worship: "I heard that still, small voice within telling me to continue my quest."²³ She joined a black Pentecostal church, where she felt a powerful sense of fellowship and spiritual renewal.

I was caught in a spiritual awakening much like Paul on his way to Damascus. It was my first experience in an all-African American community of faith, and I knew it was where I was supposed to be. My daughter was young, my family was miles away, and God had placed me in a church that embraced me not only as a member of the church, but also as a member of the church family.²⁴

Saunders became the assistant youth director. Seven years later, when she heard the inner call to move to another faith community, she rebelled, and "it took more than a year before I yielded my will in holy obedience."²⁵ When she finally spoke with the pastor, he recommended she try a Quaker meeting. The following Sunday she found herself

sitting in silence in a small New Jersey meeting among a handful of people, most of them her elders. On that day, and on subsequent Sundays, she heard “the still, small voice within” saying to her, “This is the time in your journey, dear child, that you must learn to be still and know that I am God.”²⁶ Although Saunders had never experienced anything like this kind of silent worship before, she found peace. She began to see more clearly the nature of the path on which God was leading her. “At each juncture of my journey I clearly see the lessons learned. At this time, God has chosen the Religious Society of Friends as the place for me to affirm my faith and put it into practice.”²⁷

Many Quakers today, whether or not they were raised Christian, find that their spiritual seeking leads them beyond Christianity before bringing them to find their spiritual home among Friends. In boarding school, Alex Wildwood was forced to attend religious services where readings from Scripture were used as the basis for boring and intellectually insulting lectures. This caused him to view Christianity as “a religion of shoulds and oughts, a prescriptive faith morbidly obsessed with sacrifice and suffering.”²⁸ Taught to prize rationality, he became a skeptical, self-reliant atheist. It was in nature that he found solace. Among plants and animals he was aware of “an awesome, mysterious power at work.”²⁹ During the Vietnam war, he engaged in radical social critique and participated in student protests against the military-industrial complex. After the birth of his first child, and through feminist women he knew, he became involved in pagan outdoor religious ceremonies that honored the cycles of life and death, the seasons and the land, celebrating “our embeddedness in the sacred web of life.” Wildwood was influenced by Buddhist scholar and environmental activist Joanna Macy, a person with a prophetic message. Don’t get lost in the distractions of the addictive consumer culture, she taught. Instead, face the pain of really seeing how we are devastating the planet; make the choice to be “conscious.”

In his late thirties, Wildwood went to live in an East London community started by Quakers, most of them activists, and he began attending a Quaker meeting. He liked how Quakers offered an alternative to society's emphasis on extreme individualism. Friends seemed more "strongly committed to the practical relief of suffering in this world, rather than [to] theological speculation about some heavenly realm to come."³⁰ He recognized that something internal had been nudging him toward the Quaker community. He also found additional needed companionship when he became involved in Twelve Step fellowships for addiction recovery. In both Quakerism and in the Twelve Step programs, he found a common commitment to "the surrendered life."

Timothy Ashworth and Alex Wildwood, representing the two different kinds of seekers described by Gwyn, have engaged in a dialogue at Woodbrooke, England's Quaker study center. Ashworth found deep meaning in Christianity and traditional church services but was drawn to seek the depths of the Christian mystery, the essence of Christian faith. In contrast, Wildwood's negative early experiences in Christian churches caused him to seek spirituality elsewhere—in nature, in recognition of the sacredness of the earth, in community, and in activism. Now, his engagement as a Friend has led him to explore the Christian roots of Quakerism.

Reflection Questions

Seeking

How have you sought for spiritual knowledge or meaning in life?

At what times and in what ways have you sought outside yourself for greater spiritual understanding or communion with God?

What kinds of thoughts, feelings, desires, fears, or intuitions motivate you to seek?

Does the tradition of your upbringing satisfy you or have you explored outside that tradition?

In what ways have you been a seeker?

Has your seeking borne fruit?

Turning Within in the Seventeenth Century

Many people were seekers for years or decades before they became the first Quakers. For varying periods of time, they had found a place in the churches of their day, engaging seriously in the practices of each denomination they joined. Eventually, however, they recognized they still felt painfully disconnected from God. Many had expected a glorious Second Coming. A Civil War in England and the beheading of King Charles I had raised expectations that a more godly form of government would soon be established, but the new Puritan government failed to create the holy new society for which many had hoped. Shameful political wrangling and intrigue continued as before, and a general malaise spread across England. Society was still corrupt, and Christ still seemed very distant. Many people, continuing to feel burdened by a sense of their sinfulness, concluded they had not found the living faith for which they yearned. They saw no promising alternatives in the world around them. Disillusionment came suddenly for some and slowly for others. In 1650 Isaac Pennington wrote,

*If ever there was a time for tears without, and a grief of spirit within, this seems the season . . . when after such an expectation of Light and Glory, of settlement and establishment in the things of God, such thick darkness, such universal shame, such dreadful shatterings, have so apparently overtaken us, and are so likely daily more and more to overtake us.*³¹

Only after giving up hope of finding what they were seeking outwardly did many begin to sense that help was available within. In London, Martha Simmonds had some brief glimpses of a spiritual light that made her feel she was wasting her time attending various churches and meetings, pursuing men with scholarly knowledge. Instead, she needed to wait quietly and attend to what was happening within: “[At] about the end of seven years hunting and finding no rest, the Lord opened a little glimmering of light

to me . . . and then for about seven years more he kept me still.”³² During this period, she waited at home for more light to be revealed.

For years, young Mary Springett and her husband had tried out various Separatist churches and engaged in zealous prayer and Puritan practices. William Springett poured his financial resources into supporting the Puritan Army during the Civil War. When he died, his widow redoubled her spiritual efforts, but she did not feel any nearness to God. After the death of her baby son, she finally stopped attending services or following prescribed practices, not wanting to be drawn in by any more vain boasts of purity or false promises of spiritual attainment. She prayed at home and waited for a true revelation from God. Some remarkable dreams suggested that one day her prayers would be answered. In one dream, she met Christ, come among ordinary people and wearing plain clothes.

After spending years traveling to hear the most renowned Anglican priests and Puritan ministers in England, George Fox was still unable to find anyone who could tell him about God or Christ from direct experience. After he finally gave up hope of finding help from other people, he had intimations that he could be taught directly, inwardly. He found support for this in Scripture:

But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.
(1 John 2:27 KJV)

The young man stopped roaming and went home. His parents were displeased, however, that he would not attend church with them. Instead, he spent his time looking inward. Later he wrote:

I fasted much, and walked abroad in solitary places many days, and often took my Bible and went and sat in hollow trees and lonesome places

till night came on; and frequently in the night walked mournfully about by myself, for I was a man of sorrows in the times of the first workings of the Lord in me. . . . I kept myself much as a stranger, seeking heavenly wisdom and getting knowledge from the Lord, and was brought off from outward things to rely wholly on the Lord alone. And though my exercises and troubles were very great, yet were they not so continual but that I had some intermissions, and was sometimes brought into such an heavenly joy that I thought I had been in Abraham's bosom.³³

After he discovered Christ present within as an inward Light and Teacher, Fox traveled to share this good news in towns and villages across England, wearing the sturdy leather pants and jacket of an itinerant laborer. In the little village of Skegby, he met Elizabeth Hooton. The farmer's wife understood the young man's spiritual condition better than anyone else had done. She listened eagerly to the revelations he had received inwardly from Christ. Fox preached to her small group of General Baptists that they, too, could be taught directly by the Spirit, which was present within them as a Light, the same Light that *lighteth every man that cometh into the world* (John 1:9 KJV). George Fox's message emphasized that a measure of the Light of Christ is present like a tiny seed within each person, needing careful attention and cultivation. In most souls, the seed is choked by an overabundance of worldly pursuits and desires or covered over by erroneous beliefs and practices.

Following Fox's instructions, the group that met at Elizabeth Hooton's house discovered the Light of Christ inside themselves. They began to call themselves Children of the Light, the original name for those eventually called Quakers. Later, Quakers gave themselves the name Friends in the Truth; they called each other Friends, which is what Jesus had said he would call his disciples.

Further north, Fox found more people ready to receive his message to look within. Some had already discovered the indwelling Presence of the living Christ. William Dewsbury and several others joined him in traveling to share the Quaker message. In the region of Westmoreland, hundreds of people called Seekers had been waiting for a divine revelation of the true way to worship God. When they heard Fox speak, many sensed he was the person they had been waiting for, someone with the same prophetic power as the apostles.

Judge Thomas Fell and his wife, Margaret, members of the gentry, were known for welcoming traveling ministers into their home, Swarthmore Hall. When George Fox knocked on their door, Margaret Fell was taken aback by his use of the familiar pronouns “thee” and “thou.” A man below her social class would normally address her by the plural “you.” However, she had dreamed recently of a man wearing an unusual white hat who would come and “confound the priests.”³⁴ She welcomed him to stay overnight in the attic. The next day, after the priest’s sermon at the Ulverston church, Fox was granted permission to speak to the congregation. Margaret Fell wrote about his startling message:

George Fox went to the Ulverston steeple-house . . . and . . . stood up upon a seat or form, and . . . said: “Christ [is] the Light of the world, and lighteth every man that cometh into the world; and . . . by this light [we] might be gathered to God.” And I stood up in my pew and wondered at his doctrine, for I had never heard such before. And then he went on and opened the Scriptures and said: “The Scriptures [are] the prophet’s words, and Christ’s and the apostles’ words, and what as they spoke, they enjoyed and possessed, and had it from the Lord. Then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth? 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?”³⁵

Although people had often praised Margaret Fell for her piety, she suddenly recognized she had been living a second-hand religion. Unlike the authors of Scripture, she did not know Christ directly and could not speak of God from personal knowledge. Fox’s message was piercing:

It cut me to the Heart; and then I saw clearly, we were all wrong. So I sat down in my Pew again, and cried bitterly: and I cried in my Spirit to the Lord, We are all Thieves, we are all Thieves; we have taken the Scripture in Words, and know nothing of them in ourselves.^{36}*

Fell began to spend time in silent worship, waiting to have direct experience of God and Christ. Soon she became one of many early Quakers who shared the message of the inward Christ in writing and through spoken testimony.

Turning Within in Our Time

Sometimes people turn within as a natural movement in a gradually deepening spiritual life. When Louise Wilson first felt the need for a more unified life, she attended a prayer group and read books. At the time her family moved to a new location, her spiritual life moved to a deeper place, a place of inward listening for the still, small voice of God: “Finally I began to get up an hour before anyone else was awakened. I read Scripture. I prayed. I waited upon the Lord, and I made notes on thoughts that seemed important.”³⁷

* Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization were not standard in the seventeenth century. I have made a few changes to these in some of the quotes by early Quakers to make their writing more accessible to contemporary readers, while retaining enough of the original to give a flavor of their texts.

Many people only look within when crisis or despair leaves no alternative source of help. Troubling experiences can be an invitation or pathway to discovering God's inward Presence and activity. Bolivian teenager Raúl Choque Mamani read the entire Bible by the age of fourteen. Then he had a crisis of faith, during which he was plagued by questions

*about the existence of God, the validity of the dogmas, and the role played by Christianity throughout history. All of these questions led to doubt and skepticism, such that I ultimately became an atheist.*³⁸

His new heroes were Marxist revolutionary leaders. He suffered from nightmares, however, and developed a distressing physical pain in his neck. Choque Mamani began to read arguments for the existence of God but still continued to have doubts and troubling dreams. Each night he said the prayer, "Lord God, I don't know if you exist; if you exist I would like you to help me to leave this very difficult situation in which I find myself."³⁹ Day after day, week after week, he waited for clarity and healing.

Kenyan Priscilla Makhino was raised in a Quaker family and attended Quaker schools. After her father died in her childhood, she began to spend time outdoors in prayer. In the woods she "experienced God's first touch."⁴⁰ However, even though she continued to regularly participate in church services, her childhood experiences of God's Presence gave way to challenges, doubts, and fears as she became an adult. She experienced a long, painful sickness. She asked her pastor for prayers, but nothing improved. For many years she felt she was

*in the deep and shut up. . . . My sorrows, troubles, pain, and temptations were so great that I despaired and waited for death to come. All this time I never turned to God for help. But I continued to trust and rely on mankind.*⁴¹

After a doctor refused to operate on a painful condition that she feared would kill her, Makhino spent a night alone in a dark room. There she had a vision of three men dressed in white singing, “You should never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer!” The vision penetrated the thick veil of fear that had been troubling her for years, and she became attentive to God’s Presence in a new way:

This created hope in me for the first time after fifteen years of despair. I woke very early in the morning . . . and headed for home to start a new kind of life. I said to myself, “I will seek and find this God that is Love and the Jesus that loves me.” God remembered me two days later with another visitation.⁴²

Charlotte Fardelmann, a mother, writer, and photographer, was active in her Quaker meeting. When she faced a painful writer’s block after receiving a contract to write her first book, she looked to God for help. In her journal she wrote,

I am always under great pressure—why? I put myself in this position—why? I’m shaking all over. I don’t know who to turn to, how to get out of this position. I’m crying so hard I can hardly write. I’m screaming from the depths of my heart. Oh God . . . Where are you?²⁴³

One Sunday at her Quaker meeting, she stood up and asked for help. In the silence that followed, she sensed a response coming from within, a message in several parts. Inwardly, she heard that her book would be finished by the deadline, that it would be good, and that after she finished it, she needed to take time to do something different. She understood that her writer’s block had been dissolved. Afterwards, words flowed. When the book was done, she felt that God had helped her complete it and now wanted her to take a four-month “spiritual sabbatical,” a time dedicated to inward listening. During those months, she

prayed, read books, went for long walks, and noticed her dreams. After being in an automobile accident caused by her nodding off at the wheel, she arranged to spend a week at Pendle Hill, the Quaker retreat and study center in Wallingford, Pennsylvania. There, a teacher listened to her soul in a way nobody had ever done before. This woman urged Charlotte to make even more space for contemplation and told her that a week at Pendle Hill might not be enough.

Something inside Fardelmann leapt up in recognition of the truth that she needed to take more time to look within. The following year, she spent nine months as a resident student at Pendle Hill. It was a period of turning inward, and God stripped away her old self and gave birth to something new. The daily morning meetings for worship at Pendle Hill were “a time of being melted, of sitting in the Spirit and being worked on deep down.”⁴⁴ During classes, daily kitchen chores, and interactions with people at meals, she was aware of paying inward attention in a new way. Daily she wrote down “thoughts, feelings, lessons learned, inner messages, and quotes I liked.”⁴⁵ She reviewed her journal, making notes in different colors and drawing pictures. During a two-day silent retreat at a little hermitage on campus, she wrote, “I think God is laying hold on me. . . I feel very vulnerable like a lobster that has shed a shell and is waiting to form a new one.”⁴⁶

Stephanie Crumley-Effinger, Director of Supervised Ministry at Earlham School of Religion (ESR), struggled with great fatigue after several surgeries. Her doctor recommended Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. This practice and other efforts to recover from her illness pushed her to turn within, in silence, in a deeper way than she had ever done before. During a sermon she delivered at ESR, she spoke about the call to empty of her self in order to be more open and available to God:

Despite being a quiet-appreciating Quaker for almost forty years, in learning mindfulness practice I discovered the extent to which, even in the silence of waiting worship or individual centering, my still body harbors a relentlessly busy mind. The call to be still and focused is a gift of many scripture passages, including, from Luke 10:41b-2a, Jesus inviting Martha to stewardship of that moment, from Mark 4:39 the story of Jesus stilling the storm, and from Psalm 46:10 the admonition to be still and know God. In these and many other sources, the Christian tradition is replete with guidance to take time from the fullness of activity and thoughts, to make room for God. For many years I had also appreciated lines from Thomas Edward Brown's poem 'Indwelling,' especially the lines "thou art all replete with very thou, and hast such shrewd activity" and being "small and full." Indeed I had often prayed to be large and spacious so that there would be more room for God. What I had failed to appreciate, though, was that my very ways of seeking God were themselves part of being small and full and "replete with very thou." I had largely mastered the first level of being able to sit quietly, the second one of being less reliant on words, and the third step of moving my thoughts from making "to do" lists to focusing on spiritual questions and themes where God was working with me. But now I was being challenged to move to a fourth level of making room, that of stilling even my theological questions and thoughts, so as to present my mind and heart fully to God in the silence.⁴⁷

In *An Interpretation of Friends Worship*, N. Jean Toomer, an African American pioneer of the Harlem Renaissance, acknowledges how difficult it is to turn

within. He suggests that the first step is take an alert, upright, but relaxed position. When the body has become quiet, then one can seek to “still the mind, gather it, turn it steadfastly towards God.”⁴⁸ He acknowledges that this is difficult because “it is contrary to the mind’s nature to be still. It is against its grain to turn Godwards. Left to itself it goes on and on under its own momentum, roaming, wandering.”⁴⁹ Because of the mind’s “incessant restlessness,” repeated effort and daily practice are necessary over the course of a lifetime.

Toomer writes that when joining with other Friends in a meeting for worship, he centers down and tries to open himself to God’s Light and to the other people present. His intention is to become “just a little less conformed to the unregenerate ways of the world, just a little more conformed to the dedicated way of love.”⁵⁰ He encourages a bold but humble expectation that “here, in this very meeting, before it is over, the Lord’s power will spring up in us, cover the meeting, gather us to Him and to one another.”⁵¹ Even if nothing spectacular happens, he hopes to participate in an act of true prayer and worship. After focusing his intention and expectation, he waits:

I wait before the Lord, forgetting the words in which I clothed my expectations, if possible forgetting myself and my desires, laying down my will, asking only that His will be done. In attitude or silent words I may say, “I am before thee, Lord. If it be thy will, work thy love in me, work thy love in us.” . . . Sometimes, while waiting, a glow steals over me, a warmth spreads from my heart. I have a chance to welcome the welling up of reverence, the sense that I am in the presence of the sacred. Sometimes, though rarely, the practice of waiting is invaded by an unexpected series of inner events which carry me by their action through the meeting to the end. I feel God’s spirit moving in me, my spirit awakening to Him. Hardly a

meeting passes but what I pray that I and the members of the meeting and people everywhere may have this experience: that our wills be overcome by God's will, that our powers be overpowered by His light and love and wisdom. And sometimes, though again rarely, I find it possible to hold my attention, or, rather, to have my heart held, without wavering, upon the one supreme reality, the sheer fact of God. These are the moments I feel to be true worship. These are the times when the effort to have faith is superseded by an effortless assurance born of actual experience. God's reality is felt in every fibre of the soul and brings conviction even to the body-mind.⁵²

For Friends in the past and today, frequent practice in turning within, along with patient, repeated expectation of God's Presence, eventually leads to the kinds of experience that bring conviction, which is the subject of the next section of this book.

Reflection Questions

Turning Within

What has moved you to look more deeply into your own awareness?

Were there particular moments when you first sensed something divine within you or received divine guidance?

Have you always been aware of the indwelling divine Presence?

At present, when or how do you turn inward?

What makes it difficult to be still and look within?

What helps you to be patient or to “wait expectantly” when turning your attention to the inner dimensions of life?