



Friends World Committee
for Consultation
SECTION OF THE AMERICAS

Comité Mundial de Consulta
de los Amigos
SECCIÓN DE LAS AMÉRICAS

ABOUT THE WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP

The Wider Quaker Fellowship program of Friends World Committee for Consultation is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows live in over 90 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and even active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. The Fellowship does not charge a subscription fee, but depends on donations from its readers and other supporters to cover costs.

Copyright © 2006 Friends Publishing Corporation.

Permission should be received before reprinting excerpts longer than 200 words.

This article appeared in the October 2006 issue of *Friends Journal*.

Reprinted 2007 with permission.

Friends Journal is an independent magazine serving the Religious Society of Friends. Please direct inquiries to: *Friends Journal*, 1216 Arch Street, Ste. 2A, Philadelphia, PA 19107-2835. tel: 215. 563. 8629, fax: 215. 568. 1377, email: info@friendsjournal.org

The Wider Quaker Fellowship, a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation
Section of the Americas

Friends Center, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA

tel: 215. 241. 7293, fax: 215. 241. 7285

email: wqf@fwccamericas.org

website url: www.fwccamericas.org/about_us/programs/wqf.shtml

Conversations from the Heartland

*or, The Education of “One
Confusing Chick” on the
Frontlines of the Culture Wars*

KAT GRIFFITH



REPRINTED BY

The Wider Quaker Fellowship
La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos

Reprinted from *Friends Journal*, October 2006.

a moment of cheerful recklessness overtook me. I popped the question to the most ferociously conservative of the participants: “So, do you think I’m going to hell?” Angela (who believes, for example, that the arms race is more in keeping with God’s will than welfare programs) burst out laughing, shook her head, and said, “I don’t know, and I’m sure glad I’m not the one who has to decide, because you are *one confusing chick!*” So now I know there aren’t just two categories of people arriving at the Pearly Gates any more, there are three: the Saved, the Damned, and the Confusing Chicks. That’s one more category than there used to be as far as I know—evidence of a person and a God newly more gracious than before, and willing to admit to uncertainty in the realm of salvation.

And there is one more outcome I can report. The God who refused my offers of political activism for seven years running has recently called me to lay down home schooling and return to the big, bleeding world. I like to think I’ve been given a promotion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

For nine years I home schooled my kids and taught group classes to other home schoolers. After teaching a course on the Civil Rights Movement, I came to feel that I was being called to lay down home schooling and return to a more public life, focused on racial justice and immigration.

My kids are now in school and doing great.

I am currently working mainly on the immigration piece of my leading, writing articles on immigration for our local paper, and working with immigrants in various capacities. I am also trying to discern the specifics of what I experienced as a call to work on black/white racial issues as well as immigration.

I find that my years among conservative Christian home schoolers have quite spoiled me for the kind of shrill, partisan politicking I confess I sometimes used to engage in. I have a deeper, more abiding sense of “that of God” in others, and a clearer view of my own privilege—and how it has disadvantaged others around me. I also have more faith that if I really listen to others, it will change me—inevitably, I think, for the better.

And when all my hopes ... in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.' And when I heard it my heart did leap for joy. ... The Father of life drew me to his son by his spirit.

I learned that there is a single lens. It is not the lens of the “Religious Right” or “Liberal Quakerism.” It is not a lens that has received the exclusive seal of approval from any denomination. It is a lens formed through a deeper prayer life and deeper dependence on the Holy Spirit than most of us manage. My vision is not yet adapted to this lens—I am full of spiritual astigmatisms, and suspect I always will be. But the headaches and sense of whiplash are much diminished, so maybe I am on the right path.

I used to think that what God wanted of this Quaker was that I stand up for my beliefs and be willing to suffer for them. Now I think that what God wants of me is that I be willing to lay down my beliefs and suffer the distress of losing them. I didn't know how much harder it was to give them up than to defend them until I tried it. Remember the story when Jesus tells a wealthy young man that he must give up his riches before he can become a disciple? I've always assumed this story was about how money gets in the way of pursuing the spiritual life and Truth. Now I'm not so sure. Being the educated, opinionated, word-rich Friend that I am, I wonder whether Jesus' call to me is that I be willing to lay down my opinions and my words, because only in this way will I truly be able to follow God.

I don't know how my conservative friends have changed as a result of our conversations, but I have reason to believe that not all the evolution happened on my side. At our last “Conversation from the Heartland,” when we were all punchy from exhaustion,

accompany each other as graciously as we possibly can through each other's personal swamps. I believe we are called to uphold the highest standard of holiness as a life goal while supporting our brothers and sisters, wherever they happen to be. I believe we are called to love and forgive our imperfect fellow humans and our imperfect selves, without loving perfection any less.

9. Beyond bifocals.

As anyone who wears bifocals can attest, while they are an improvement over single lens glasses or no glasses at all, they are still an imperfect solution to flawed vision. I thought I was making God a big, generous offer when I said, "Make me into Jerry Falwell if you want." Certainly I couldn't think of anything else at the time that would be a greater personal sacrifice. In some ways, though, what I was asking for was the peace and ease of a single lens—even one that appalled me—because the idea of bifocals was giving me one whanging spiritual headache after another.

But—God's wisdom is infinite!—I didn't get to become a Falwell clone, nor did I ultimately get to retreat into some nice, "Hah, I was right all along!" Friendly complacency either. Neither lens was handed to me as the right one. Instead, I became deeply ambivalent about how I had understood and lived the Quaker message, and about our collective witness in the world. I came to feel that I had been wrong about a great deal, had accepted and professed a superficial sort of faith, and had only rarely been challenged by my fellow Friends. While I began to wonder if I could really call myself a Quaker, I still wasn't gaining an alternative place to put my feet down. The "Religious Right" certainly did not claim me, nor I it! Some days, I felt I had no place to call my spiritual home. As someone who deeply hungers for connection with people, it was a hard and lonely place for me. However, it was also the place from which I gained a new and living appreciation for George Fox's experience:

CONVERSATIONS FROM THE HEARTLAND
Or, The Education of "One Confusing Chick" on the Frontlines of the Culture Wars

A few years ago, I surprised myself and some friends—I sent out an e-mail to my homeschooling buddies, almost entirely members of the "Religious Right," inviting them to join me in my living room to talk politics. I had to reassure them that this unexpected and somewhat alarming invitation was not a hallucination: "Yup, you read that right."

We had, by that time, known each other for several years, sharing twice-weekly classes for our kids and monthly "Mom's Night Out" gab-fests about our homeschooling triumphs and travails. Our conversations together were wonderful: intimate, raucous, challenging, supportive, delightful—and sometimes head-bangingly bewildering, especially when we strayed from topics such as how math was going for Johnny this month and into politics and current events. I listened one night, silently aghast, to a round-robin prayer that John Ashcroft be confirmed as attorney general. I saw flags sprout on front porches as we started bombing Iraq. I watched while some of my friends demonstrated for days against a "gentlemen's club" downtown, but remained silent about Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. They watched me, too, as I conspicuously declined to put up a flag, instead adding bumper stickers to our car: "God bless the whole world, no exceptions" and "When Jesus said 'love your enemies' I think he probably meant 'don't kill them'—and then, in desperation, "Where are we going, and what am I doing in this handbasket?"

I felt as though I led a double life. All week I interacted with folks for whom it was glaringly obvious that the end was near, and that it was the fault of gay marriage and pornography and liberals. Then on Sundays I went to meeting and interacted with people who also thought we were going to hell in the proverbial

handbasket, but who were sure it was the fault of the Religious Right and the Republicans. I came up with a name for it: worldview whiplash!

So I decided to see if we could get together to talk directly about the issues that divided us—the issues we had mostly avoided in conversations. I suggested a name for our talks: “Conversations from the Heartland.” I wanted to emphasize my intention of getting beyond slogans, bumper stickers, and the logic of politics—to go deeper, to a place of core values and beliefs, to the heart of our faith and our understanding of what it means to live as children of God in this bleeding and bewildering world.

Over the next year, our conversations touched on everything from the Pledge of Allegiance, the war in Iraq, abortion, capital punishment, homosexuality, the arms race, to the nature of God and the nature of “man.” We shared testimonials, laughs, shocked silences, painful disagreements, tracts, pamphlets, sermons, tears, and occasional kumbaya moments. I learned a lot about their positions on many issues, their preferred sources of information, the ways they frame questions, and how they interpret various Bible passages. But the most important things that I learned were bigger and more challenging than that. A sampling of these follows.

1. Cornering the market on self-righteous smugness.

I still remember the day a homeschooling friend of mine burst out, “The ‘Religious Right’ is the last acceptable punching bag in this country. People say things about us that they could never get away with saying about Jews or black people or anyone else.” At the time, I remember thinking, “Well, who punched first? Did you think that telling the rest of us we were all going to hell would make you popular? You dare to lay your self-righteousness on us all, and then claim victimhood?” Since then,

brothers and sisters to self-destruct in peace! Is it really enough to adopt either a laissez-faire stance, which requires only a willingness to disconnect actions from consequences, or a “get the government to do it” stance, which allows us to disconnect ourselves personally from the pain of our neighbors and the messy circumstances of their lives?

Our own Religious Society of Friends has gone through periods where it was better at judgment than tolerance, reading people out of meetings for reasons that amaze us today. I don’t want to return to those days. But if there is a terrible danger in appointing ourselves God’s interim judges here on Earth, isn’t there also a danger in turning our backs on this role? When a marriage in our community is in trouble, is our best response silent acquiescence to a divorce? What is the path of greatest growth for the couple—an easy exit, or wrestling with their individual and shared demons? What is the path of greatest growth for our meetings: passively accepting the shredding of our community fabric in the name of respecting the couple’s privacy, or traveling the difficult path of love with the couple, encouraging them to a higher goal, holding out the possibility of growth, and accepting the possibility of a shared failure if our best efforts do not deliver success?

When a woman experiences an unintended pregnancy, is the most loving response of her friends simply their casual approval for an abortion? In many cases, I suspect that facile approval would be experienced as a pale substitute for love. How did she wind up in the situation? Was she looking for love but found an unwanted pregnancy instead? Does she really want the abortion, or simply feel it’s the best of a bad set of alternatives?

There are two easy roles to play when our neighbor is in trouble or behaving badly: one is to judge and condemn, the other is to shrug and say, “Whatever.” I believe as Christians we are given a third—and much harder—way, which is to

attached, despite behavior on the part of the recipient that deeply saddened her. Jeannie doubtless thinks the woman will go to hell unless she repents, but the fact remains that she provided more of a glimpse of heaven—gracious love and acceptance—than of the hell she preaches.

I could tell many similar stories involving deep generosity towards undocumented workers, victims of natural disasters, criminals, and troubled people of various stripes on the part of people whose politics would deny government assistance for these same troubled folks. I have seen them wade in and get their hands dirty, engaging personally with messy situations in ways that put me and many of my liberal friends to shame. The conservative Christians I know often don't seem to practice the judgment they preach.

8. A people less gracious than our theology?

On the other hand, liberal F/friends I know often don't seem to practice the love we preach. Grace is free, but it is not cheap. Too often, I see us providing a discount version: we opt for an easy permissiveness on issues like abortion, divorce, and drug and alcohol use, and call it loving tolerance. We pride ourselves on our non-judgmentalness, and seem to think that we have done all that is required of us if we vote for more money for social programs. But what I see is that we often don't wrestle with the rich, difficult, painful task of being our brother's keeper on a personal level.

Playing that role will take us into some scary, uncomfortable places, where there are marital difficulties, unwanted pregnancies, parenting failures, and addictions of all kinds. We will be continually tempted to either judge our brothers and sisters as unworthy, or to withhold both our judgments and our personal involvement in the name of respecting privacy and individual rights—as if all God wants is that we allow our

I have come to believe that she was right, and that the “they punched first” argument should have no more traction here than I give it with my kids. Yes, “they” often talk about “us” (liberals, Democrats, environmentalists, feminists, pacifists, gays, etc.) in dismissive, insulting terms, and it is offensive. But when I started to listen to liberal F/friends with newly sensitized ears, I was shocked at the casual contempt frequently expressed for conservative, Bible-believing Christians (their preferred name for themselves). We seem to have more faith that there is that of God in axe murderers than we do in Republicans. If I'm looking out for self-righteousness, in a typical week I need look no further than myself.

2. We are all misunderstood minorities!

As a left-leaning, pacifist, TV free, homeschooling, flagless, bike-riding, dandelion-bedecked, non-power-mower-owning Quaker living in a small and heavily Republican town, I confess that I have nursed a sense of injured, misunderstood minority status for quite a while. It has been illuminating to discover that the folks whose candidate got elected president, whose party controls Congress, whose war is being duly fought, and whose letters on honoring the U.S. flag are printed week after week in the local paper, feel just as much an embattled minority as I do!

At first I thought this was preposterous, but I have since learned just how many ways “my” views do dominate in ways that are invisible to me. My friends who consider Harry Potter to be Satanic are assaulted by Harry Potter references and imagery wherever they go. Those who find much popular music and television offensive cannot escape it in public places. They cannot buy a modest girl's bathing suit anywhere in town. They cannot offer a prayer as part of their graduation speech at the high school. One child was recently disciplined for talking about his faith with a child who asked about it in his art class;

the incident nearly led to a lawsuit. They usually cannot have their children excused from school reading assignments they find offensive and inappropriate for children, such as Maya Angelou's account of being raped by her stepfather in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Billboards advertising exotic dance clubs, abortion services, and adult bookstores fill the roadsides. The bands sponsored by the city on the village green, with names like "Three Beers to Dubuque" and "The Alimony Blues Band," don't exactly extol family values at their 100-decibel concerts that can be heard for many blocks. Teetotalers often find it more comfortable to stay home than to attend the frequently beery city events supported with public dollars. Public references to evolution are common; and the textbook industry, while certainly a subject of considerable alarm among evolutionists lately, hardly feels like conquered territory to Bible-believing Christians.

The point is not to compete for the longest list of oppressions and injured sensitivities; it is simply to realize that we all tend to notice the ways we are different (and perhaps not accommodated by the majority), and not notice the ways we are, perhaps needlessly, offending other minorities. My friends and I have gotten quite good at navigating this issue—they ask me if they should put their son's bow and arrow away when my son is visiting, and I ask if there are any books or authors they would prefer I avoid in my classes. It's amazing how far a little respect and flexibility will go in allowing a peaceful, fruitful coexistence.

3. Out on a limb for God.

Whatever I think of their politics, I see my conservative Christian friends putting out for their faith in ways that put me to shame. They sell their house to finance a mission trip, and move the family lock, stock, and barrel to Africa with less than a year's income in sight and nothing to fall back on. You may

7. A people more gracious than their theology.

I struggled for years to express to my liberal friends that whatever their politics may look like, my "Religious Right" friends are really nice. Now, this never took me very far—they looked at me as though I'd just said something like, "Hitler was very kind to his grandmother, you know." Niceness seemed utterly inadequate to overcome red-in-tooth-and-claw politics. It seemed to be a weak, irrelevant, and tepid defense of people who appear publicly bent on tough love minus the love. But I have finally learned that it isn't about niceness, it's about grace. The deeper truth about many of these folks is that they are more gracious and more generous than the God they say they believe in. (I am indebted for this insight to Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, the Quaker pastors who co-authored *If Grace is True: Why God Will Save Every Person*. They have met a lot of people like this, too!) To be sure, these folks promise that God will deliver hellfire and damnation to everyone who doesn't buy the theological formula that they do. However, when confronted with their (inevitably sinful) neighbor, they are often strikingly kinder, more generous, and more lovingly committed to helping than one might expect. Frequently, they are kinder and more loving than people who never threaten the fire and brimstone stuff but who simply can't be bothered to help, either.

Jeannie, for example, while unalterably opposed to abortion, supported a woman in crisis for months with visits, prayer, casseroles, untold hours of childcare, and rides to doctor's appointments. The woman had become pregnant through an extramarital affair, had an abortion after prolonged indecision, suffered severe medical complications and nearly died. Jeannie never abandoned her or judged her unworthy of help, heartbroken though she was about the outcome. What Jeannie offered to that woman was much, much more than the exit-via-abortion solution. And she gave help and love without strings

activist. God wanted me to be capable of true openness to people on both sides, as well as to the Spirit as it spoke and moved through them, whoever they were and whatever they believed. When I spoke with sincere respect and love of people who held views with which I disagreed, even when I didn't know they were in the room to hear me, I realized something: God had truly reshaped my heart.

6. Sit down, shut up, and keep listening.

You know that saying about how life will keep giving you the same problem over and over until you get it right, and then you'll graduate to the next problem? Well, I spent much of the next couple of years in a state of political semi-paralysis. On issue after issue, I grappled with my homeschooling friends, offered myself up to God as a worker for God's Kingdom, and felt my offer rejected. It seemed that all God wanted me to do was stay home and teach my kids math and spelling and keep having these incredibly difficult conversations with the "Religious Right" without getting to do something fun like shout slogans and denunciations through a bullhorn! I got the "respect thing" in relation to the issues of homosexuality; but I think on some level I felt I had "been there, done that; now I want a *real* job!" I kept hoping that each issue we discussed would lead to some clear call for me to *do* something. To my disappointment, it didn't. But with 20/20 hindsight, I can see *why* not. It took me a long time to not only get better at listening and respecting, but to get to the point where I could see through their lens, at least a little, and allow myself and my faith—and, ultimately, my political and social witness—to be transformed by that experience. It was kind of like finding a pair of spiritual bifocals; I was learning to see each community through its own lens, and, in a blurry sort of way, through the other's lens, too. What did I see?

not care for the nature of their mission work (I don't), but their willingness to go out on a limb of faith and prayer for God and sacrifice personally to give their most precious gift to others awes and moves and challenges me. Have I given as much? Will I ever?

4. Labels for them but not for us.

It is a great temptation to have a shorthand way to name groups of people. I apologize for my facile labels, and I need to stress how complicated, multifaceted, and non-monolithic the "Religious Right" *really* is! One woman in our group believes that men should get to rule the household, the church, and perhaps the country, and another ran for mayor with her husband's enthusiastic support. One believes it is women's responsibility to dress with extreme modesty so as not to tempt men, and another strongly encourages her daughter in competitive sports and in wearing the often skimpy apparel that is practical for the activity in question. One won't allow her children to read books about dating, much less engage in the suspect activity; another says, "I don't celebrate high school dating, but I respect my kids' autonomy and don't forbid it either." One runs her household with all the spontaneity and flexibility of a military academy, and another says, "I value honest communication with my kids more than control over their every move." One cloisters her children "to keep them from sin," while another says, "If my kids aren't out in the world we live in, they're no good to anyone!" We tend to lump all these folks together because they seem to buy the same rhetoric, but in fact they are just as complex, multi-faceted, and poorly described by labels as we are. When was the last time you saw yourself and your positions described with accuracy, nuance, and sensitivity in the newspaper? Conservative Christians are usually no happier with how they are portrayed, and now that I know them better,

I'm not either. We do a great disservice to our society when we take media labels at face value, and allow them to replace direct communication with the individuals so labeled.

5. Disarmament and surrender.

The first things I learned in our “Conversations from the Heartland” were about the other folks with whom I was conversing. Gradually, however, I started to notice things about the other person in the room: me. One of my first discomforts was the spiritual disadvantage under which I felt I was operating. My friends were absolutely certain that they were right. I was open to the possibility, at least on my good days, that I was not, that my views might need to change. My doubt seemed an unfair handicap, a sort of unilateral disarmament that I suspected they would never tolerate for themselves, but were only too happy to exploit in me. I found that I needed to try to accept and embrace this defenselessness, to accept that only if I put my faith in God rather than in my arguments would I stand any chance of coming to Truth with a capital T.

Do you have any idea how scary this was? And how bad I was at it? There never was a subject on which I didn't have an opinion. And in energetic defense of my gazillion-and-one opinions, I have been known to use words like an automatic weapon—pull my trigger and out comes a ceaseless torrent of verbiage mowing down the opposition. Stand back!

But here I was, feeling that I had to admit the possibility that perhaps God wanted me to believe what the “Religious Right” believed. I still remember the day I called up a cousin of mine and asked tearfully if he would still love me if I became a born-again Christian, or a follower of Jerry Falwell. (“Uh, yes” was the disconcerted answer.) I still remember the day I said, “God, if you want me to believe that homosexuality is a sin, as of right now I'm willing to go there, but you'll have to take me

because I don't know how to get there on my own. I am in your hands—not my will but Thine.” It was the hardest prayer I ever prayed.

After I prayed, I waited ... and waited ... and nothing happened. Months went by, and then I thought, “Oh goody, I guess I was right all along (ha ha, they're wrong!); homosexuality isn't a sin, and I should go out and be an activist and work to persuade others of this capital ‘T’ Truth. I'm ready, God!”

So I waited ... and waited ... and again nothing happened. Months went by, and I heard no clarion call to action, but still I was not at peace. In fact, I was getting testy. “For Pete's sake, God,” I complained, “here I make this special offer and you let me languish. Aren't you going to use me? Don't you want me to do anything?”

Again I waited ... and waited ... and nothing happened. And then one day in a discussion in my Quaker worship group, I felt led to tell the story of my numerous conversations on homosexuality with conservative Christians, what I had learned of their views, and my own evolution of sorts on the issue. As I was speaking, it suddenly dawned on me that a new member of our group, who was listening very quietly, who was a former Baptist, perhaps did not share my views on the subject. I became a bit uncomfortable, but finished my story, and then called him up a few days later to tell him that although I had fairly strong views on the subject, I did not want him to feel less welcome in our group if he disagreed, and I hoped I had said nothing that made him uncomfortable. He replied that, in fact, he did disagree with me, but that I had spoken respectfully, and nothing I said had offended or made him feel uncomfortable or unwelcome.

And suddenly I felt sure that this was the outcome that God had wanted for me all along. God didn't want me to be an anti-gay crusader, and God didn't want me to be a gay rights