



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 is a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas. Through our mailings we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages, cultures 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 active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. Wider Quaker Fellowship depends on the financial support of its readers to provide this service.

Wider Quaker Fellowship articles are also available on the web at
www.widerquakerfellowship.org

Reprinted 2009 with permission of the author and "What Canst Thou Say?"
by 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: 215.241.7250
email: wqf@fwccamericas.org

Workplace as *Spiritual* *Classroom*

KATHERINE COON



REPRINTED BY

The Wider Quaker Fellowship
La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos

Reprinted from "What Canst Thou Say?" February, 2007.

WORKPLACE AS SPIRITUAL CLASSROOM

In 1975 I had high hopes of starting a career in social work that focused on helping others and building a better world. However, my competition had advanced degrees and ten years of experience. Thinking I couldn't afford graduate school, I broadened my search. I accepted the first job I was offered and became an actuary at an insurance company.

Actuaries construct mathematical models and projections of financial products. While this job wasn't my first choice, I felt good about providing individuals and companies with tools to help them optimize their resources, increase their financial stability, and realize dreams. Soon I saw that my industry also helped build vast amounts of wealth, often for those who were already wealthy. I wondered whether I could live with my role in fueling this part of the military-industrial complex. This was long before I became a Quaker, but I had at least some concept of sowing the seeds of war.

I sought advice from my meditation teacher, a quiet and serene soul from India. How would I know when I found the right profession? His response: "It doesn't matter." I was stunned. He said the universe would offer the lessons I needed regardless of my choices. I was to receive each lesson with joy.

With this jolt in my thinking, work warranted a different kind of scrutiny. I was certainly helping the rich become richer, but I was also helping many of the not-so-rich. In addition, the rich provide paychecks and benefits to the not-so-rich. The better my clients managed their financial lives, the more of their energy and resources could go forward toward worthy pursuits. I decided I could stay if I behaved myself. I vowed to keep my eyes open and look for opportunities to do the right thing, whatever that was. If I did my best to make my corner of the business world more humane, I felt justified in infiltrating a powerful organization or two.

I felt no need to hide my true identity. My appearance matched my self-image: embroidered shirts, corduroy skirts, sensible shoes, and waist-length frizzy hair. At twenty-two I looked like I was twelve. Naturally, a Vice-President of Important Matters rarely took me serious. One day a routine meeting turned shockingly contentious and unruly. Incredulous, I concluded that raving lunatics were masquerading as tasteful business people. I started wearing suits and put my hair in a bun. Not surprisingly, it made my job easier. I felt guilty about the deception until I realized that I was dressing to put others at ease, and *packaging does not change who*

I am. A harder lesson was that *I was not a spy; I fit right in. There is no Us and Them. We are all one.*

Another early lesson involved a co-worker I found difficult. A lawyer by training, he needed my mathematical contributions to assemble and package marketing programs. I found his schemes repugnant. He found my counter-proposals equally unacceptable. We clashed at every encounter. I had had enough therapy to know I couldn't change him; I could only change myself.

Paying close attention to our next few battles, I noted that he escalated at certain vocabulary of mine, such as "illegal." I vowed to remove negatively loaded terms from my half of our conversations. I tried to focus on facts—what penalties could be levied by which regulatory bodies, whose licenses could be revoked, and how much it could hurt his other sales if certain details were made public. I offered no suggestions or "improvements," and just waited for his expert opinion. He trotted back to his office exclaiming, "We certainly don't want to do that!" I smugly thought I was teaching him how to be a good person, but I was wrong. *He was teaching me how to be a good person.*

I started to watch for these teaching moments. My best clue was my emotions. If I felt anger rising, I knew a lesson was being offered. Fear was also a good clue. I now ask, "What does God wish me to learn?" When I clash with someone, I ask, "What has this person been sent to teach me?" When I don't like someone, I see if the person is a mirror to show me what I don't like about myself. When in doubt, I look for That of God and try to connect with That. I keep an eye out for suffering and consider it a privilege to provide soothing, understanding, or humor.

Even though I do not receive all my lessons with joy, I make it a point to give thanks. Sometimes the best I can do is *Thank you, God, for this opportunity to learn and improve myself. While I may dread this lesson, I know I will benefit and eventually be truly grateful.*

The world is my classroom. I spend half my waking hours in the workplace and can't afford to miss half of my lessons. My job description from elementary school still applies today: *Pay attention in class. Learn as much as you can.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Coon is a member of Minneapolis (MN) Monthly Meeting and often attends Twin Cities Meeting as well. In addition to interactions with others and corporate silence, she connects with the Divine through solitary silence, music, walking, knitting, and (occasionally) mathematics.
