

# The Spirituality of *Restlessness*

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*The Wider Quaker Fellowship*

*La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Cover photo by Karen Glenn

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## THE SPIRITUALITY OF RESTLESSNESS

Early one morning, at the first hint of dawn, I stood at the edge of a deck that overlooks a basin in the Colorado Rockies. Mt. Sopris, in the west, was just beginning to glow at its very tip as the sun rose in the east. I waited, sipping the monastery coffee that Brother Bernard always made a little too strong, and watched as morning light gradually filled the valley. As the darkness began to recede, I noticed what looked like a thousand tiny white dots moving together in some kind of shifting rhythm, and it was only as more light filled the basin that I realized that they were the tails of a vast herd of elk. It was an epiphany, of sorts, an astonishing beauty that reminded me that only by rising at that hour, only by waiting with no conscious purpose, only by attending to the darkness, could I be present and attentive at that precise moment of revelation.

I had come quite a distance to live that year with the Trappists. Since I was a flatlander from Indiana, the Colorado Rockies seemed like a strange new land. Even stranger to me was the world of Roman Catholic monasticism. I had left the familiar company of Quakers for a community of monks who rose at a quarter of three in the morning, who chanted psalms at regular intervals during the day, and who lived in a world of unbroken silence. I went to the monastery for the same reason that I waited in the darkness at the edge of the basin: I wanted the kind of waiting that has no purpose, a silence that has no words, and a darkness that does not anticipate the light. I had had too much light, too many words, too much knowing and certainty, and I had gotten lost in them. I wanted the not-knowing, the mystery, the darkness, the better to return to the womb of innocence, to come back into beginner's mind, to be instructed by the Inward Teacher in the way a child is first taught to say her own name. I longed for the darkness as a wounded animal seeks the night, to either heal or die, to be

re-created in the silence of God.

To be in the grip of such a longing is to be driven by a spirituality of restlessness. It is to be fired by a passion for that pure truth that cannot be known outside of its own immediate revelation. It is to be driven away from a false peace, from the false securities of settled truths, from captivity to gods who have become too small. There is a kind of Holy Restlessness that drives us into the desert, into silence, into waiting, for seasoned words require silence, and right action requires waiting. We long to know the God who is beyond our imaginings, the God who reveals Herself to us on her own terms. Neither an epiphany of elk nor one of the Living God is possible without the darkness, without the waiting.

Spiritual restlessness is archetypal in the sense that the call to leave the known for the unknown is a call that is found in all religious traditions and is repeated in countless stories of spiritual transformation. It is in Abraham's call when he hears the Divine Voice saying, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."<sup>1</sup> It appears in our Quaker tradition when George Fox is driven to leave home at an early age, to travel near and far to learn from the priests and preachers, but finds no one who can speak to his condition. It is only then, he writes, "When all my hopes in them and 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."<sup>2</sup>

George Fox had a trade; he could have made a decent living, been a respectable member of the church. Why would he go to all that trouble, if not because of some inner urgency? And then, when

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1 Gen. 12:1

2 *The Journal of George Fox* (Rev. Ed.). John Nickalls (ed). Philadelphia: Religious Society of Friends, 1997, p.11.

he does finally hear that voice, he is driven further to stir everybody up and even gets himself beaten up and thrown in jail.

Abraham was a wealthy man. He was a tribal leader, a patriarch. He had power, position, prestige; why on earth would he undertake such a journey? What is this restlessness? Who is it that drives us into the desert, causes us to run afoul of the powers that be; why would anyone leave country, kin, or a father's house which bestows privilege?

You, no doubt, have had to wrestle with your own inner imperatives, your own unsettled spirits that disturb your peace and drive you into deserts that are both terrifying and full of promise. What is that restlessness that stirs in you? I won't make the assumption that my answers are yours. I do know that any talk of spirituality is intensely personal and that none of us can presume to draw the map for another. So I offer these reflections and observations confessionally, not dogmatically. However, I do believe that there are some general principles that can be gleaned from our common experience and shared tradition, principles that are at the heart of transforming faith into practice. I would like to share with you some reflections on what some of these principles might be, reflections that have arisen out of my asking three questions. The first is "Who is restless and why? What can we learn from the soul's disquiet, its inability to find the Center?" A second is "What happens when I simply listen to my restlessness? What new transformations will it call me to? Could it be that I need the darkness to sharpen my vision, the waiting to temper my action, my restlessness to teach me the ways of peace?" And my third question, "What is happening in our communities? Are we, as a people of God, called to a far deeper obedience, a more radical witness than any we have yet seen?"

### **Who is restless and why?**

We have a very intriguing story in our tradition. It may be

apocryphal; there's no way to know if this really happened, but we've passed it down over the generations and it is full of spiritual insight. I'm sure you've all heard it. It is an account of an early encounter between William Penn and George Fox. Apparently Penn, being of a wealthy class accustomed to the aristocratic dress of his time, was carrying a sword and scabbard at his hip. He asked Fox whether, as a Quaker, he ought to continue carrying it. Fox's response was simply, "Wear it as long as thou canst."<sup>3</sup>

What I find so fascinating about this story is as much in what Fox didn't say as in what he did. How many Quakers do you know who would respond that way? "I'm a Quaker, should I wear this sword?" "No. You shouldn't. Give it up." That's what I would expect. But so sure was Fox's confidence in the Inward Principle, that he had no need to convert Penn to a pre-conceived ethic, because he knew that steadiness in prayer would inevitably yield a result consistent with the Inward Witness. One of the teachings that I take from this story is that the core of our tradition is not found primarily in our testimonies, beautiful as they are, but in our confidence in the ongoing Presence and guidance of that Spirit that first gave them forth and continues to give them life. We encourage one another in the testimonies by first encouraging one another in prayer. Fox seemed to be saying to Penn, and now to us, that steadfast inward attention to the Divine Principle will gradually reshape one's life from the inside out.

Does that mean that we do not express our views on the wearing of swords or more modern ethical concerns? Surely not. Fox, as we know, certainly was not shy about expressing his views on a variety of subjects. But running in, under, and through practically everything he said was his utter conviction and witness that there is that within you, a Divine Voice, a Waiting Presence,

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3 *A Memoir of William Penn*. Allen Thomas (Compiler). Philadelphia: Association of Friends for the Diffusion of Religious and Useful Knowledge, 1874, p.14.

an intense and patient Lover of your soul, such that if you reach for that Presence with all your heart you will find that Presence reaching also for you. A steady and disciplined life of prayer brings us ever closer to that Voice, and the closer one comes, the more one feels a restlessness of Spirit that will not be stilled until we submit our lives in answer to its call.

But let me take this further. If I take some imaginative liberties with this story, I will suggest that Penn was feeling only the first hints of spiritual restlessness when he asked this question, and that Fox did not feel it to be his task to unsettle Penn from the comforts of his position but rather to call him to deeper encounter with the One who would. If this is so, then it is clear that it is not we who are restless but rather the Divine Spirit that lives within us. It is God who is the Divine Disturber of our souls; we are not so eager to upset our own comforts. It is very clear to me that I am capable of resting quite comfortably in my settled convictions. I've worked out my theological and psychological ideas; I'm clear about my political positions on a variety of subjects; I've even learned how to make peace with Quaker silence, to soften its radical edge so that it is a place of comfort and refuge rather than a crucible of transformation. I've learned how to keep the Love of God at some distance so that I can be warmed by it without having to take it too seriously. I've learned how to talk about God without encountering the Living Reality.

But whereas Love at a distance is warm and comforting, Love close up is a transforming Fire. To restore serious disciplines of prayer to the heart of our tradition is once again to bring us close to that Fire. Early Friends knew this. Margaret Fell wrote in an early Epistle, "Now, Friends, deal plainly with yourselves, and let the eternal light search you... for this will deal plainly with you; it will rip you up, and lay you open... naked and bare before the Lord God from whom you cannot hide yourselves... Therefore give

over deceiving of your souls.”<sup>4</sup> These are hard words, spoken plainly and directly by one we often call the “mother of Quakerism.” We resist these words, of course. After all, it is profoundly disturbing when God shows up as Passion, as the Divine Lover who weakens our defenses and invites our yielding to Her embrace, only to call us to transformation. When we yield to that call, an internal reorganization process is set in motion that upsets all of ego’s plans. Comfort and safety are no longer our primary concerns. We are called to an edge where we risk—foolishly, thinks the ego—exposure to disappointment, betrayal, abandonment, death—all of which we *already* know in some measure and have found unbearable. But this is the way of transformation, the path to deeper obedience, more faithful action.

In my own life, I found that once I heard that “yes” in the depths of my being, once I yielded to that call, prayer became a lifeline, because I was shocked to discover how easily I fall into delusion, into denial, into complacency. Now, I pray the way an alcoholic goes to a meeting. I know that if I don’t, I will die. I know that I need the Divine Disturber of my soul to keep me honest, to keep me from falling asleep, to keep me close to the Fire. I don’t know how many more swords I am wearing. I’ve given up the ones I can see, but what frightens me are the swords that I carry unconsciously. Who will save me from them? I pray to the One who will deal plainly with me, who will lay me open, the One from whom I cannot hide. I pray for my life, and I do find comfort, but it is on the other side of restlessness. It comes as the still, small voice on the other side of Fire.

I have taken a lesson from this, one that I have come to trust. It is that *there is a Holy Restlessness that gives way to inward stillness*

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4 Margaret Fell. *An Epistle to Convinced Friends in 1656*. Philadelphia: Book Association of Friends, 1885, p.92 (at Digital Quaker Collection of Earlham College, [www.esr.earlham.edu/dqc/index.html](http://www.esr.earlham.edu/dqc/index.html)).

*only when we bring our lives into ever greater conformity with the leadings of the Inward Guide, and if we want to discern those leadings, we must spend regular time reaching inwardly for the Divine Presence. We will certainly find comfort there, but we will also find discomfort. Attend to it. It may be the Divine Disturber speaking to your soul.*

I imagine many of you know this restlessness and have been attending to it. For others, you have more than enough restlessness in your outward lives, you don't need more of it inwardly, and your primary experience of God is as Refuge and Strength. This is as it should be. Still others, perhaps, have known and felt this Fire, your souls have been drawn to it like a moth to flame, and after years of tempering your souls by its heat you now have come into that peace that passes understanding. You now rest in depths of stillness that I've only read about. You are the true Elders and I hope to join you there someday. But I must speak from my own condition, and I know that I'm not yet there; I'm in the midst of my restlessness, on my journey of transformation.

### **What is the way of transformation?**

So when I turn to this question and ask myself, what is the way of transformation? I move forward in Quaker history to the 18th century and find help in John Woolman. It was during the French and Indian War that Woolman set out on a journey to visit the native people who were living at a settlement called Wyalusing, on the banks of the Eastern branch of the Susquehanna. He was stirred by his desire to learn from them what he could and to see if they might be, in his words, "in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of Truth amongst them."<sup>5</sup> Most of us probably know this story too. He discerned, tested, and answered a leading that took him into territory where there were hostilities between the native people and the white settlers. We know its

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5 *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*. Phillips Moulton (ed). Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1974, p. 127.

conclusion, which was that he came to a place where he was taken into a silent gathering. He felt an inward stirring to speak, and requested that no further translation be offered, for he knew that the Spirit that spoke in him would speak in them. We know that Papunehang, the chief of that tribe, was heard to say in the presence of a translator, “I love to feel where words come from.”<sup>6</sup>

I have read this story many times for its sheer beauty. With each reading I have anticipated this conclusion, scarcely noticing his narrative leading up to it. Recently, however, I read it more carefully and was riveted by Woolman’s step-by-step faithfulness along the way. Soon after the leading first arises in him, he says that he is frequently drawn inward into prayer. His desire is, in his words, “that no motion might be in the least degree attended to but that of the pure spirit of Truth.”<sup>7</sup> He listens and attends to the various stirrings of his spirit, those that draw him forward in love, those that cause him to look more closely into his own motives for undertaking the journey, and those that cause him to fear when he hears of hostilities in the region where he is headed. At one point in mid-passage, he writes that he was “brought into a painful exercise at night, in which I had to trace back and feel over the steps I had taken from my first moving in the visit. . . . And then as I believed I had under a sense of duty come thus far, I was now earnest in spirit beseeching the Lord to show me what I ought to do.”<sup>8</sup> This deep wrestling with himself in the Presence of God apparently lasts most of the night until finally he comes to a state of peacefulness. Even then he does not see this as the result of his own discernment but rather as the gift of the mercy of God, who, seeing the conflicts of his soul, he says, “was pleased to give quietness.”<sup>9</sup>

Woolman’s process is one of constant inward attention and

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6 *Ibid.* p. 133.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

9 *Ibid.*

prayer. He is not weighing his options, sorting through pros and cons; he is not acting on principles, however righteous. He is attending to his inward stirrings, bringing them before God, waiting, listening, trusting. This he does over and over, staying in his restlessness until the gift of peace is given. There is profound humility in this willingness to question every assumption, and in his willingness to turn back should he be given new direction. He seems to be testing his leading practically every step of the way. There is a radical, moment-by-moment-faithfulness of the journey.

I take many lessons from these passages, but certainly foremost among them is the lesson that discerning, testing, and following a leading does not set one on an unalterable course, but is rather a process that must be constantly renewed. Our restlessness must be attended to, brought again and again to an inward engagement where we seek to deepen our listening, where we bring all of our motivations, however subtle, to a searching of the Light. In Woolman's words, we must bring ourselves "to a state of perfect resignation,"<sup>10</sup> a phrase which I interpret to mean perfect willingness to follow regardless of ego's concerns.

No doubt there are constants in God's leading toward justice, toward the Beloved Community, toward peace. It wouldn't have occurred to Woolman to question God's moving his heart to respond to the condition of the native people; it's the particulars of his response that he brings again and again to prayer, and especially the condition of his own heart before God. It is as if Woolman is teaching us that *prayer is as much about who we become as what we do, which is to say that God is as concerned about the inner world as the outer, for it is not only our outward service that matters, but also the quality of presence we bring to it.* Woolman's prayer is about more than seeking confirmation of a leading; it is about transformation. The power of the story of his journey to Wyalusing

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

is not so much in what he did as in who he was when he arrived—a minister, seasoned, tender, rendered in heart and spirit.

When he comes to his destination, Woolman once again searches inwardly. Sitting on a log in the middle of the woods, he finds that he has come to a state of perfect stillness and is able to rejoice in a sense of God's presence and love. I find hope in this image of Woolman resting in the woods. How often I have had to admit that I am lost or stuck, perhaps because of having taken a wrong turn some distance back, or perhaps simply because I have neglected to keep myself in an attitude of inward listening, and have lost all confidence in the rightness of my direction. In these times, I desperately need to return to the still center where if I am faithful, and if I am willing to surrender my own notions back into the wisdom of God, not only will my outward way once again become clear, but my inward condition will be seasoned in patience, humility, love, generosity, forgiveness, and other needed fruits of the spirit. I will not only be given my leadings, I will be made more fit to carry them out.

The way of transformation, therefore, is a path of constant return to the alchemy of prayer, to that crucible of ongoing, deep inner work of falling again and again into the mystery of God's Love, where I am laid open and then given the comfort of mercy, where I am then invited to even deeper unsettling of those structures that dominate my inner world, only to be guided to new ways of being. When I fall into the Love of *this* God, I fall into transformation, a creative embrace that shapes me again and again into the being God created me to be and intends for me to grow into.

To deliver ourselves into the hands of a transforming God is to be confronted with the realization that we have rested our identities in containers that are too small for us. I am a straight, white, male, North American, Christian, Quaker, educated, privileged in so many ways, and how tempting it is to rest in the false securities

that those privileges offer me. I need God's restlessness within to expose the false gods I have invented to justify my privilege. Given how soul-numbing my own internal justifiers can be, I need my longing for Truth, for the God whom those in the higher churches call "The Very God," the One whom Meister Eckhart cried out to when he prayed to "the God beyond god."<sup>11</sup>

So I return again and again to my log in the woods and offer myself to the Transforming Presence, for the One who calls me, who is beyond naming or knowing, nevertheless knows me and names me. And when I listen for that One uttering my name, what I hear is not Dan, not North American, not straight, white, male, not even Christian or Quaker. I am all those things, and yet they are all very poor places to rest an identity, much less any security or meaning. None of them offers any safe harbor for anchorage. Identity, a sense of one's own being, the Core Self, falls as deeply into mystery as God. I can truly know who I am only by being known by the One who calls my name, who longs for me with a deeper longing than my own. This One does not call me in the same way that we call each other, by name. Rather, the One who calls me knows me by my *condition*. Sometimes my name is "Beloved"; sometimes I am called "O You who wastes my Love." Sometimes I am called "Lost"; sometimes "Found." Sometimes the One who calls me reaches me with names like "How much longer will you live in exile?"

Because his longing to know God was deep, Woolman grew in compassion. Because his compassion became deep, he grew in courage to walk into the unknown. Because he acted on this courage, he confronted injustices within his own community, as well as within the larger world. At one point, he wrote in his journal, "To attempt to do the Lord's work in our own way ... does

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11 Raymond Blakney. *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*. NY: Harper and Row, 1941, p. 231.

not reach the bottom of the disorder.”<sup>12</sup> The lesson I take from this is that our disorder is as much inward as outward and we come into the fullness of obedience when we allow God to shape who we are as much as what we do.

### **What is happening in our communities?**

Why does this matter? Isn't there some danger in spending too much energy on personal transformation when there is so much work to be done? If who shows up for the job is as critical as the work itself, what does that tell us? What was Woolman getting at with this phrase, “does not reach the bottom of the disorder?”

I am fascinated with this question and I suspect that the answer has something to do with the fact that we are called to work that far exceeds our capacity to carry it out. I'm often asked in workshops how it is possible to love or forgive those we find hardest to love or forgive. And I can only say that it is not possible, that I have nothing within my own resources that equips me for the kind of loving and forgiving that the world needs. I am reasonably good at loving my family and friends, people who are usually pretty nice to me. But I am appalled at the hardness of my heart when it comes to people who treat me badly. I see how easily I can harbor resentment, how prone I am to judgment and blame. When it comes to those who commit atrocities, to politicians who violate my sense of justice and support policies that offend basic human rights, I am tempted to either rage or despair. The world needs something far beyond my capacity or my understanding of what is contained in the word “love.” I get glimpses of what that love might look like in the life and teaching of Jesus; I hear its passion and power in the speeches of Martin Luther King; I see its humility and discipline in Gandhi, its tenderness and compassion in Mother Teresa. What I learn from them, as well as from many

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12 *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, p. 112.

others who are not so well known, is that our disorder lies in our very assumption that we are capable of loving one another without help, that it is somehow within our own capacity to forgive, that our wisdom is our own creation, that we even know what God's work might be, let alone that we are able to do it. Jesus must have his Gethsemane, King his kitchen table prayer in the middle of the night, Gandhi his realization that he is his own worst enemy, and Mother Teresa her long dark night of the soul. In order finally to reach the bottom of my disorder, I too must lay the barrenness of my heart before God. It is my desire to love crashing into my incapacity to love that drives me to prayer. Love and forgiveness fall into depths beyond my reach; I have no choice but to rely on Grace to create these things in me. In fact, I believe that it is in the wisdom of God to command us to things that we cannot do precisely because our very attempt to love our neighbor drives us into God's arms.

We share a tradition that calls us to community. Quakerism is a form of religious practice that requires a profound integration of the inward and outward dimensions of our lives. We do our worshipping in community, our discernment in clearness committees, and our business by seeking a unity that hears all voices. We offer one another pastoral care, we gather for Friendly Eights or other small groups, as well as for potlucks, weddings and memorial services. We are not a collection of individuals but a Society of Friends. We are a community where relationships matter, and where skillfulness in relating is critical. We hold one another to high relational standards because we know that who we are with one another cannot be separate from who we are with others in the world. Yet, it is as often the broken and difficult Quaker next to us who causes us as much trouble as the politician we oppose. We must learn to speak as plainly to each other as we do to them. We must learn to be as forbearing with them as we are with each other. So often we reserve the tough love for them and the forgiving love

for ourselves; but we are also in need of tough love and they are in need of forgiveness. Community is the place where we learn the art of loving in all its dimensions, where we practice, fail, pray, forgive, and try again. Community is a place with impossible demands that drive us to prayer, where we find the grace to face our brokenness and to grow into wholeness together. Quaker meetings are perfect places to learn about the inward/outward work of creating peace with justice, for the world is as much in us as we are in the world.

There is a theology that is implicit in this emphasis on community: It is that God is always working at the relationships more than the tasks. Whereas our world is more often mechanical, utilitarian, a world in which we measure our worth by what we produce, in a relational world the work is always first about who we are with each other, and then it's about what we accomplish together. In a task world, we tend to labor in isolation and measure our faithfulness in terms of visible results. In a relational world, a communal world, the art of loving is the first order of business, and the tasks grow from that soil. Many good works, done without love, fail to reach the bottom of the disorder, but we must *never underestimate what God can do with a single act of love.*

So it is not only the case that we must transform our faith into practice; it is also that we must transform our practice into faith, for faith without practice is a seed without ground to grow in, and practice without faith is a cut flower. It is not that prayer yields a clear map, a theology, a spiritual program, or a political agenda; these things will always belong to the realm of uncertainty. It is rather that prayer draws us ever deeper into intimacy with the Divine. Beliefs and actions do rise, of course, but the presence of God is known in them not primarily because of their content but because of the love and truth that is felt in and through them. Clearness is not the absence of doubt; it is the presence of Spirit. Prayer does not illumine the Mystery; it deepens it. We come to clearness by returning to our log in the woods and laying open

our souls before God, and by waiting for the One who can give quietness.

Our Quaker practice of deep inward listening will call some of us first to the love of neighbor. The path then often consists in becoming overwhelmed with the enormity of that call, an encounter with our own deep inadequacies and a discovery of our great need for God to teach us the ways of peace, indeed to do the loving within us and through us. For others, the call will be first to the love of God, and then the path consists in an encounter with the Divine Disturber of our souls who will give us no peace until we conform our outward lives to the Inward Witness. The activist in me hears the Voice of God saying, “If you want to love them, love Me.” The mystic in me hears God saying, “If you want to love Me, love them.”

Wherever we start on this path, we come to unity in what Jesus called the two great commandments: that we must love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. We come home to God when we come home to our neighbor. We come home to our neighbor when we come home to God.

“If you love them, love Me.”

“If you love Me, love them.”

I think I will spend the rest of my life trying to live into those words.



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## Q U E R I E S

Following are some queries about the text, which you may wish to use for reflection or study, individually or with others.

1. Have you ever felt you were lost in “too much light, too many words, too much knowing and certainty”?
  2. In your own life, are there “swords” that you have given up already? Are there things or activities you think you ought to give up?
  3. Do you struggle more with activism or with mysticism?
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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.

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