



**TRANSFORMING  
THE VISIBLE:  
A CONTEMPLATIVE  
AMONG ACTIVISTS**

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## 1. The Active and the Contemplative Lives

*Our task is to stamp this provisional, perishing earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its being may rise again, 'invisibly' in us ... All the worlds of the universe are plunging into the invisible as into their next-deepest reality; some stars have an immediate waxing and waning in the infinite consciousness of the Angel,—others are dependent upon beings that slowly and laboriously transform them, in whose terrors and raptures they attain their next invisible realisation.<sup>1</sup>*

That is what I try to do in my life. I discovered that passage from Rilke, long ago, with a great feeling of recognition. He was a fellow-traveller, another of those wonderful writers who throughout the years helped me to understand and follow a path I didn't choose but could not leave.

I wouldn't have chosen it because I am by nature a planner and a do-er—an activist. I love work and achievement, and still have to struggle against the deep urge to do any suitable job which comes my way and to make improvements in the world. But rheumatic fever at thirteen left me with damaged heart and joints, and very limited activity; twenty years later manic-depressive illness became chronic and led to permanent unemployment. I had to comprehend my illness, and find my *internal* skills, and to do both from the very depth of my own being and within the infinite breadth of Being Itself. Thus I became, will-ye-nill-ye, a contemplative

But I am grateful to those who do what I can't. I admire and respect Friends who work so hard for the well-being of others in this world, in small ways or great, visibly or inconspicuously. I am not criticising their activity or their principles, but only arguing for awareness of the *spectrum* of religious life, and telling you some of the things I have found and learned about my part of that spectrum.

The circumstances of my life have prevented large external achievements, but fortunately my temperament and skills made

me apt for contemplation instead. For these reasons, my own passionate commitment is to plumb the depths and attempt the heights of contemplative awareness, and to express both in my totally inadequate actions. Although I bless those Friends who visibly labour for their fellow humans and against the ills and injustices of the *world*, I do ask them to remember that the spiritual energy of solitary contemplation is an integral part of the work in the *universe*.

I will expand upon being a contemplative shortly. For me, the root of it is my experience and recognition of spiritual energy as something that exists and works. It is not *separate* from physical energy, and emotional and political energy, but is *different* from them. Perhaps most Quakers experience this transcendent energy; perhaps it's just that my life has little in the way of material or physical resources, but it has given me time to practice attention to spiritual energy, and try to learn the use of it. I do believe that spiritual energy reaches others and is invisibly effective. For many years, I have tried to offer my prayer as a gift of that energy to other people so that their active or suffering lives may be inwardly fuller. I can't be sure if that is what really happens. I can *feel* how such a time of prayer eases my own soul, and brings a sense of having achieved something in the economy of the universe. But it's not possible to prove that by demonstrating a result. I do this work in faith, and because it is what I am able to do, and I don't know whether that is true spiritual obedience, or self-indulgent personal folly. I do it in faith.

### *Contemplation and Activity in Quakers*

Clearly, contemplation and activity are not exclusive. They are not in conflict, and they don't even need to be in tension. But they must be *balanced*. In each Friend, one of these qualities will usually be stronger than the other; and perhaps circumstances, abilities and vocation will make one of them *much*

stronger in a particular individual, but even so there must be a degree of balance, for a rounded Quaker life. In the corporate life of a Meeting, there will always be some Friends who are suited to activity and able to undertake it, and others who feel called to "wait and watch" most of the time, or who have to accept that their lives permit them only the smallest actions. When these different contributions are welcomed and used, the Meeting too will have a rounded Quaker life. Then, within the Society of Friends as a whole they can be balanced, as some of us emphasise one characteristic or the other, and all of us respect both.

In my experience, contemplative people are usually aware and appreciative of the visible fruits of the Spirit in their active brethren. But the latter are rather often puzzled, sometimes suspicious, and can even be critical of the Friend who is turned in another direction, towards spiritual energy and invisible influence. Isn't this ironic in our Society? Evelyn Underhill called Quakerism "that great experiment in corporate mysticism." Among the churches we stand out for our silent waiting upon the Spirit, and we surely recognise spiritual power. But on the whole, Friends go to Meeting for Worship in order to find the guidance, wisdom and strength with which to live out our testimonies in selfless active effort for the well-being of others. The Friend who returns home from Meeting with the intention of continuing that attentive waiting throughout many solitary hours in the week is ..... well ..... rather odd.

I myself have illness and unemployment as my excuse for doing it. I can claim that, since I'm forced to be inactive, I try at least to use my inactivity in a spiritually useful way. Without that excuse, perhaps I wouldn't have the courage to say, "Friends, I want to turn inward and to search in those spiritual energies for the work I can do." I think that many Friends would at best be puzzled, and I know that some would disapprove.

I was dismayed to hear a Friend say, "Our worship is only in our deeds." In those words he dismissed almost everything which has to be central to worship in *my* life. Unfortunately, too many 'active' Friends do recognise only 'socially useful' deeds, such as CND<sup>†</sup> and Trident Ploughshares, neighbourhood mediation or penal reform. The active life is easily observed by others, and can be judged by the visible results. But the commitment to care passionately about life, to plumb its "terrors and raptures," and to pour its innermost energy back into the universe—all within the invisible privacy of our own souls—that cannot be observed. That is not, in any external sense of the word, an activity.

Of course active Quakers also are responding to the Spirit in their lives, there is no question of it. I am only talking about a different sort of response; and only asking that it be recognised and if possible appreciated.

### *The Call to Contemplation*

Perhaps there are more contemplatives than there seem to be. Activity is more conspicuous than prayer. And in England at least, Friends do not easily speak about their inner lives, nor reveal their spiritual anguish and joys. This seems to be changing. The Quaker Retreat group of our Yearly Meeting caused unease and even some suspicion when it was founded some years ago, but it has clearly answered a real need. During the past couple of years, the response to Rex Ambler's Experiment with Light initiative at Yearly Meeting has been remarkable. Friends who respond to this are searching to strengthen their faith in a way which they believe was common among earliest Quakers. They submit their inner lives and their actions to the Light within, and share with each other the struggles and insights which arise from this practice. I think that such move-

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<sup>†</sup>The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament

ments are signs of a growing need for contemplation and for communication about things eternal, though the round of committees and reports and vigils seems to have more momentum, and is certainly more visible. However, contemplative Friends are responding to the Spirit differently. Who knows what a Friend is attempting and even sometimes invisibly achieving in those silent, solitary hours of contemplation?

Most Quakers are in part contemplatives, or they wouldn't have been drawn to Quakerism or wanted to become Friends. But for most it is only *part* of their lives, though it may indeed be the nourishing source, and the touchstone for action. What I am considering here is a tolerance towards, and if possible an attempt to understand, those Friends for whom contemplation is the larger part. For a few, it even becomes nearly all of their lives, either by force of circumstance, aptitude, or calling.

A person may indeed have an inner calling from the Spirit to follow the contemplative way, especially if it is expressed in one of the arts. But there are also a number of external reasons for following this path, at least for a while. A committed active Friend may need to take a quiet month in a country retreat in order to be open to the Spirit and see the next way forward, or someone may be drawn out of activity for a period by unemployment or a crisis which requires a change of life. There are others who face a more enduring contemplation because of illness or disability, and then there are special opportunities as one responds to the diminishment of old age.

### *'Keep Back to the Life'*

The wonderful early Quaker mystic, Isaac Pennington, ministered in 1678 to a Meeting which was about to decide upon action. He reminded Friends that it was one thing to sit waiting to feel the power of the Spirit, and to keep within the limits of that power while in Meeting for Worship. But he warned that it was much harder to submit oneself to the limits of the power once the activity had been started.

*Oh, therefore, watch narrowly and diligently against the forward part  
and keep back to the life,  
which though it rise more slowly, yet acts more surely and safely  
for God.*

*Oh, wait and watch to feel your keeper keeping you  
within the holy bounds and limits,  
within the pure fear,  
within the living sense, while ye are acting for your God;  
that ye may only be his instruments, and feel him acting in you.<sup>2</sup>*

In a world so obviously and desperately in need of peace-making, healing and feeding, it is difficult to stand up in public and say: "Watch narrowly against the forward [active] part; keep back to the life [within]." Penington didn't advise against the activity altogether, but he pleaded for the importance of waiting and discernment. Each Friend and each Meeting needs some degree of both.

I want to make it very clear that contemplation is not something ethereal and 'spiritualised.' It isn't, as we say in English, 'airy-fairy.' It is the invisible aspect of *this* life, on earth, with others. It is one of the ways of connecting. Many Friends dislike what they call "separating off the spiritual life like that." I don't *separate* the spiritual and the physical/material aspects of life; but I claim that they *are* different in their qualities and effect. One is the heart and soul, one is the body and action, two aspects of one living, two dimensions of one life – two reaches of the one spectrum. Life is always a spectrum, and we move back and forth along it, trying always to be aware of the whole spread of it.

## **2 Being a Contemplative**

### *What a Contemplative Undertakes*

More than once, the American Quaker Rufus Jones defined mystic experience as an "immediate awareness of relation with God ... religion in its most acute, intense and living stage."<sup>3</sup> A person may of course have mystic experiences with-



out then being impelled to a discipline and a whole way of life which centres itself upon the Reality revealed in the experience. The person who, by choice or chance, becomes 'a mystic,' 'a contemplative,' is one who finds it necessary to stay at that farther reach of the religious spectrum for as long as possible, as often as possible, and as deeply. In her fine book on Mysticism, Evelyn Underhill says that "the mystic must learn so to concentrate all his faculties, his very self, upon the invisible and intangible, that all visible things are forgot: to bring it so sharply into focus that everything else is blurred."<sup>4</sup>

I know what she means, and that is a traditional contemplative way, though my own viewpoint is somewhat different. Being only half mystic, and the other half artist, I long to concentrate all my faculties upon the divine Reality *within* all the visible world, so that I see both, in true proportion. Like Isaac Penington, I believe that "the shadow is a true shadow [in its place], as the substance is a true substance."<sup>5</sup> Like Rilke, I want to affirm the beauty and value of things and creatures, as an essential part of giving myself to the universe of Reality which enfolds the visible life and stretches beyond it. This boundless and glorious ocean of the Spirit is where I have my home—and I know that I am only a minnow in it. But minnows too have their place in the ecology of the universe.

There is an old Jewish mystical idea that God is so completely everywhere that he has to hold his breath in order to make room for the creation. Think of it. Our bodies are God-holding-His-breath! Do it. Feel it. God holds his breath—and our bodies expand into existence. The universe, the world, expands into existence.

How big we are, then, we humans, and how important our activities are. But think, imagine now, try to sense it—that stupendous breath of God, vast beyond measure or comprehension, which sustains us and our whole universe ...

In radiant, humble moments of contemplation we also know how tiny we are, and it is a joyful realisation. His breath

is around, under, upholding, all. His breath, His love, is everywhere that our bodies and the world are not; and—here is the wonderful understanding that encourages activists and contemplatives alike—if we dedicate our bodies, and dedicate the world, to God, we open spaces in actual life so that His breath fills *them* also.

A contemplative is one who gives time and thought and discipline to this mystical practice of discerning the shimmering edge between the immense and the tiny, and of dedicating the human to the divine. He or she is someone who sets out to contemplate, to look at, the Light, the Seed, Truth, God, and then to draw spiritual energy from the yearning, human heart-of-the-soul and to send it flowing on into the greater universe of Love.

Rilke knew that we are both small and great. He asked why we *have* to be human, why we long for Destiny even though we shun it, and then gave his answer:

Because being here is much, and because all this that's here, so fleeting, seems to require us and strangely concerns us. Us the most fleeting of all. Just once, everything, only for once. Once and no more. And we, too, once. And never again. But this having been once, though only once, having been once on earth—can it ever be cancelled?<sup>6</sup>

I hope that it cannot be cancelled, even in an obscure and inactive life. I hope that as I look for, long for, gaze upon, and submit to, the ceaseless energy of God within my own restricted 'here,' I too connect this fleeting life with that eternal Love and Light. Within our brief physical lives there is an energy which is not fleeting, which underlies and sustains all our brevity, and to *which we can contribute* in prayer and contemplation. "Us the most fleeting of all." The phrase makes my heart ache with the truth and reality of it. To *be* on earth, to live our being on earth so intensely and fully that even the *soul* of that living can be offered to God—that is my own longing and task.

For love of God and that of God in everyone, active Friends work to save others from suffering and injustice. Their caring hearts and hands are put at the service of all who are within reach of their acts. But my own way is to contemplate all those nameless ones who aren't within reach of caring hands, and who fall. It seems to me that a contemplative, enduring some known or unknown personal pain alone, can use that pain to uphold nameless sufferers who have no other witness. In that intensity of compassion, contemplative Friends can help to transform that visible, embodied agony into the invisible pain of God, and offer it back to its source in Love. Or a contemplative Friend swept by the beauty of the natural world can drink it in with such blessing and gratitude that its inmost heart is transformed into God's invisibility. Rilke knew this well:

"Earth, is it not just this that you want : to arise  
invisibly in us? Is not your dream  
to be one day invisible? Earth! Invisible!  
What is your urgent command, if not transformation?  
Earth, you darling, I will!"<sup>7</sup>

And the Welsh contemplative and poet Gerard Manley Hopkins said it too: "There lives the dearest freshness/deep down things."<sup>8</sup> To love things and creatures, with passion, for the sake of the dearest freshness deep within them, and to hold that freshness while they change and die—for they are temporal—and to make one's own passionate soul a channel for their freshness flowing back to God ... *that* is to make a difference to the economy of the spiritual universe. That is to transform what we see and touch, and lose, into the invisible, enduring, undying energy of God. Rilke said, "These things that live on departure/understand when you praise them."<sup>9</sup>

### *It May Become a Darksome Ascent*

Another very important quotation from my fellow-traveller, Rilke, is a phrase from *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*: "A strange, darksome ascent to a remote and deserted part of

heaven."<sup>10</sup> Some people are not just contemplative, but are 'dark contemplatives.' Some of us have scars so hard and harsh that a part of us will never function normally; some have deeply hidden wounds that every day seep blood, and thin pus like tears. These afflictions are—they must be—part of our path to God. By accepting them as we travel, sometimes even by using them as our means of travel, we redeem them. We bless and pity them, and leave them behind. We transform them from our own all too tangible pain into the invisible and embracing pain of God, and love of God. And just sometimes, we may be able to reveal them to someone else, as evidence that grace was active even here. Rilke thought so:

That a man who had felt himself, through the grinding pressure of those years, cloven to his foundations ... that such a man should experience the grace of being able to perceive how, in still more secret depths, beneath his torn-open cleft, the continuity of his work and his mind was being restored ... How many who, for one reason or another, believe they have been torn asunder, might not draw from this example of continuability a peculiar consolation.<sup>11</sup>

There will be very few dark pilgrims like this among you, only now and then is there someone who lives in "the fields of flowering Sadness" among "the pasturing herds of Grief."<sup>12</sup> Usually they will not be obvious. They will hide their pain or endure it, because it is not acceptable in our activist, achieving modern society. People suspect and dislike this aspect or stage of contemplation; they think that it is self-centred and morbid. On the whole, Friends—at least in Britain—have only recently begun to acknowledge their own and each other's hurts. But if you are watchful, accepting and loving, you may recognise such a Friend among you, and with some caring words may lighten a great stretch of that traveller's dark or stony ascent.

We all remember and uphold the mediators, medical staff, and aid workers throughout the world, and respect the risks

which such people take, in their concern for others. But truly there is danger on all the planes of existence. The committed life of faith, whether active or contemplative, will always cost "not less than everything," in the great phrase from *Little Gidding*.<sup>13</sup> And we cannot tell ahead of time what "everything" may turn out to be.

### *The Darkness was Part of Early Quakerism*

Quakerism itself has known this mystic darkness. In his recent book, *The Covenant Crucified*, the American Quaker Douglas Gwyn describes how Friends were exalted, in their first decade, by the mysticism of the Lamb's war, and by their belief in the transformation of society through the covenant of light, with all the social transformations which would be involved in that. But as Quakers moved into admitting the failure of their revolution, while still holding their ground with patience and courage, they entered a new and painful and unwelcome understanding of the 'spirituality of desolation.'<sup>14</sup>

I would like to suggest that some individuals whose active or reforming lives are ended, or were always slight, are serving *that* vision. Active Friends continue the covenant of light, in their efforts to relieve the outward desolation of people in the world, and contemplative Friends support and uphold those efforts by a painful obedience to the limitations upon their own active lives and by the dedication of their hearts and passionate souls to the Light itself.

I cannot believe that the great changes, the *metanoia*, of humankind will come only through political and practical changes. Like the early Quakers in Britain, and like most of us still, I believe that the new Christ will also rise in the hearts and souls of individuals. I take hope from the argument of critical mass—that when there are enough individuals, enough small collectives, enough scattered initiatives, then suddenly the

weight will move to the other side of the fulcrum, and the direction of the peoples of the earth will slowly swing. The belief which supports my own small and unseen effort is that the spiritual energy of contemplatives contributes to that critical mass.

Gwyn also said that "a deep symbiosis between inward experience and outward behaviour was essential to the prophetic witness, even to the survival of the movement."<sup>15</sup> The limited nature of some people's outward lives, and the invisibility of their vital inner ones, may cause others to interpret a separation between inward and outward, or even to suspect an actual dualism. But if the link is there, if the person feels and lives the embodiment of the spirit, however falteringly and unimpressively, then the symbiosis exists. The contribution may be largely inner, but it is real.

### *A Viewpoint from the Dark Path*

My experience as a contemplative leads me to distinguish all the time between the actual and the real. My arm, here, is actual; this paper I touch is actual; my body is actual and so is yours. But *I myself* am more than actual, I am real, and so are you. We are more than actual bodies, atoms, molecules, cells, electrical and chemical impulses. We are personalities—and souls. We partake of Reality. (With a capital 'R'—which in English makes a word very significant indeed.)

God is the most Real. Entirely within the actuality of my arm, utterly beyond it, and completely enfolding it, is the Reality which is God. And I hunger for that deepest Reality. Now and then in a year I find myself within that vibrant, shimmering penumbra where my actuality is briefly suffused with the pure Reality of the Light, and all the faithful waiting in actual hours and days, in actual disability and discouragement, bears its fruit in the grace-filled timelessness of Reality.

What does it mean, to be a contemplative in such a universe of Reality? It means that our service is inward. Active Friends are mainly outward. For the sake of the Light in their worship and their hearts, and which they see in their suffering fellow beings, they struggle with the stubborn twisted *actualities* of the world. In contrast, contemplatives discipline themselves to open their deepest souls and shadows to the Light of God's Reality so that it may flow, mysteriously and more fully, through them and into the actual world. They believe that in this way they will make the actuality of the world more flexible, more permeable, and open to the changes which others are actually trying to bring about.

How can we—who are just humans, who are worshippers, and Quakers—how can we do such an amazing thing? We can because everything flows; flow is the nature of life. Capital flows between markets, goods between makers and users, help between the one who gives service and the one in need, news between people, sap between root and leaf. Life flows, both actual life and the deep reality of life. And, most deeply and really, the spiritual energy of the universe flows. God's sustaining Love and Grace flow always, through all actuality, and beyond anything we can conceive. I believe that we humans share and we support that flow of creative energy.

But there are huge numbers of people who are too hurt, famished, or fearful to turn and open themselves to the Spirit. So I, as a contemplative, a faulty, stubborn contemplative, I do what I can to help the flow of God's Love through the universe and the world. Perhaps it happens when I watch the television news. I watch an old lady crossing the Albanian border; she falls, and loses her cane. Her pain is visible. An active Quaker aid worker would actually be there, would pick her up, support her actual physical effort. I can't be an aid worker, because my own body is unreliable. But I can *contemplate* her pain—just view it on the screen—her visible pain, and I can hold it in the Light. I can offer it to be transformed into the invisible flow of

the Spirit's Grace. And then, perhaps, some day another old lady will be less frightened, less in pain when she crosses a border in wartime. She won't even know that the compassionate and sharing love of a human being gave itself to the utter Compassion of the Spirit and now is flowing to her. *I* won't know if that is what I did. I have no evidence. But I believe, and I have the time and I'm in the place, so I commit myself to transforming the visible and letting it go through and beyond me into the universal Spirit—and perhaps now and then I succeed.

### *A Contemplative's Contribution*

I'm not claiming that contemplatives have any greater or better spiritual lives than active Friends. But the emphasis of the latter is upon *redeeming* and *serving* the visible. They do this for more than material reasons, but it is indeed the material world with which and upon which they do their work. But the contemplative emphasis is on *transforming* the visible, concentrating on the invisible which is within it—honouring, nurturing, and sacrificing for the invisible spirit while never repudiating the glorious material life.

Gerard Manley Hopkins said: "Give beauty back to God, [who is] beauty's self and beauty's giver," so that it will not "vanish away."<sup>16</sup> That was *his* version of "transforming the visible"—and what we each can do, in our times of inactivity, of illness or age, is to find our own way of transforming. And then to tell people what we found, and how we found it, and why, so that they may be encouraged, and need not fear the seeming deprivation that will come to them when their own valuable active work is done.

Perhaps a test of any vocation—whether to activity or to contemplation—is that it will be the costliest demand in one's life. What is it in this period of your life that stretches you humanly to the greatest limit, and what is it that opens you



most nakedly to God? That is the thing which you should do, when you have freedom of choice; and if circumstances remove the choice so that you *must* be inactive, the question to ask is: "If I use this enforced inactivity to attempt contemplation, will it ask from me not less than everything? Do I see in it the possibility of sacrificial service, deepened humanity, and a soul more open to God?"

The effort and sacrifice of active Friends is often easy to observe; the cost to contemplatives will usually be hidden. A Friend may seem sad or tired some day, or to have inexplicably lost an inner sparkle. That is all that shows, and they will rarely talk about their experience. This is partly because it is hard to put into words—the listener has to be encouraging before they can make the attempt. However, too often it is because they have learned that their descriptions are met with puzzlement, impatience, bland disinterest, or that final put-down, "there is no difference between the sacred and the secular."

### **3 Becoming a Contemplative**

#### *Opportunities for Contemplation*

Many Quakers, probably most, have a contemplative side to their natures. Everyone has enforced times of illness or disability which can be used for learning and practice, and everyone grows older and becomes slower. *Quaker Faith & Practice* says: "Those of you who are kept by age or sickness from more active work, who are living retired lives, may in your very separation have the opportunity of liberating power for others. Your prayers and thoughts go out further than you think, and as you wait in patience and in communion with God, you may be made ministers of peace and healing and be kept young in soul."<sup>17</sup>

Valuing your own contemplative period doesn't always mean doing very different things from usual. But it does mean doing things in a different way. If you must be inactive, then you can *dedicate* that inactive time, and draw near to the Light, and be aware of your own soul in the Light, during that time. If you are burdened with much pain, you can use your acceptance of it to affirm the solidarity of all who suffer. I like the image of 'solidarity,' of being alongside, shoulder to shoulder with others, in the same trouble or endeavour. One can feel and demonstrate solidarity even from within weakness and trouble. Solidarity with those who are troubled and limited in many ways is a practice of taking their too-visible suffering and accepting it alongside one's own faltering humanity, of transforming both into the invisible dimension of our minds and spirits, and then returning it to the Creator, redeemed.

### *Age as the Special Opportunity*

Age is a particularly suitable time for laying down outer responsibilities and welcoming the opportunity (for some people it is even an obligation) to take up this inner task. I myself have been as active as I could manage, but slowly I have decided to lay down one service after another. I have moved from middle age to the edge of elderly; I am looking into the time when almost all my hours will be contemplative. I hope that those who have seen me doing spreadsheets and presenting budgets and analysing property costs will still be able to recognise my contribution when it becomes actually invisible. I hope that those among you who face the same change can look for the same recognition from your Meetings.

I was talking to a Friend about losing the satisfaction of active achievement, and she said, "We often hear praise of those who remain active and expansive into their latest years. But it probably isn't suitable—certainly it isn't suitable for all people—to keep on expanding, in skills, tasks, and activities,

right to the end of life. At least for some people, it is right to *round-off* the shape of life, to draw it together and complete it. It is right to move out of active expansiveness and into a period of refining and purifying.<sup>18</sup> Just afterwards, it was a pleasure to read this from an elderly, once very active, Friend:

At 70 I intended to step back from all commitments. It took a little longer [than that], but for the past two years my life as an elderly Quaker has moved in this pattern: Two days a week, I try not to use the car, shop or telephone; the time is given to meditative painting, gardening or just sitting still. As Friends know, this is no easy option and often involves pain and struggle. Fixed points are Meeting on Sunday, one afternoon a week meditating with a small group in [a] 'Quiet Garden .' One day a month, retreat with a larger group from very different backgrounds ... Having learned to say 'No,' I can usually achieve this [schedule], and can relish the solitude I did not have (nor would have wished for) in my busy years ... Belatedly and inadequately, I see that the only goal for me is to become a channel for love, energy and light ... Of course there are dark days, failing physical energies impose restrictions - the dance may be slower; but it is more in tune with eternal rhythms. I have been blest with a full and happy life, but to my surprise this is in some ways the best time ...<sup>19</sup>

### *Recognising and Helping New Contemplatives*

We could all help to open this contemplative area, to make its light shine more clearly, if we were more willing to talk to each other—now and then, gropingly, diffidently, but personally—about our experience of the spiritual centre of our faith. Those Friends who feel reticent about their contemplative path could be assured that other Friends want to know, and be encouraged to describe it. Their contribution could be explored in the Meeting, and ways could be found to welcome it.

Someone who is enforcedly contemplative, perhaps through illness or age, could be recognised and supported by

the Meeting. Perhaps elders and personal friends have known that this individual has an interest or leaning towards contemplation, or that he or she now perceives the possibility growing within the negative situation.

- ▶ The Meeting could arrange small groups for Meeting for Worship, with worship-sharing afterwards to explore the situation and opportunities for the Friend forced into inaction.
- ▶ The Meeting could send a formal request to this Friend asking him or her to uphold the Meeting, perhaps for some particular purpose, or to uphold some particular people. This would serve as a recognition of what the Friend can contribute from the new situation.
- ▶ An elder who understands this emphasis could serve as a mentor and support while the contemplative Friend develops the inward life (in your scattered Meetings this could be done by phone, or perhaps even e-mail).
- ▶ There could be a support group (perhaps on the lines of the Experiment with Light groups which Rex Ambler has started in Britain Yearly Meeting) to share the contemplative exploration.
- ▶ There could be Quiet Days, retreats, and the study of mystics (both Quaker and others) to enlarge the general awareness of this strand of our faith.<sup>20</sup>

I believe that we as Quakers, and that our Meetings and the Religious Society of Friends, will all be richer if we make these moves. So I will end by asking some of you: In your dedicated, compassionate, active lives, recall now and then that there is this other way to serve God, and to serve humankind also. Then, to those of you who are or are becoming contemplatives, by choice or by force of circumstances, I want to say: Be glad. Be glad, for God is the sweetest of all the good tastes. Within the bitter rind or the rough husk you will find a wholesome fruit.

In the Ninth Elegy, after Rilke has affirmed the value of "us, the most fleeting of all" and made his vow of transforming the visible, he describes the gift which the Spirit pours out sometimes:

Beyond all names I am yours, and have been for ages ...  
Look, I am living. On what? Neither childhood or future  
are growing less ... Supernumerous existence  
wells up in my heart.<sup>21</sup>

## END NOTES AND REFERENCES

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## **About the Author**

Dori Veness is a Canadian who lives in England, and has been a Friend since 1986. Ironically, she is active in the support and teaching of Quaker treasurers who have to wrestle with charity accountancy law, and was editor of the Britain Yearly Meeting *Treasurers Handbook*. But the greater part of her life is solitary and thoughtful. For many years she has led retreats and small groups for spiritual seekers. In the early '90s, she published a book about forgiveness, intended for 'wounded pilgrims;' has just completed a collection of 'poems of passionate contemplation;' and is working on an exploratory volume about being a 'Reluctant Mystic.'

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