

# Finding a Quaker Charism at the Wild Goose Festival

By Viv Hawkins

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Section headings are from *Wild Geese: Selected Poems* by Mary Oliver.

Like lines and stanzas that spill from a prodigious poet, certain characteristics of Friends practices began to fit effortlessly together for me in 2011 at the first Wild Goose Festival held in Shakori Hills, North Carolina. There, “at the intersection of justice, spirituality, art, and music,” where people, most of whom identified as Christian, gathered to experience the Holy Spirit, I saw the gift that a particular practice, developed and expanded by Quakers, may be to the wider world.

## “You do not have to walk on your knees”

My awareness of the role of Quakers started to form during “Beer and Hymns,” an activity shared with several young adult Friends. It continued to grow during a movement workshop in which I helped an aging Walter Wink up from the ground. But it wasn’t until I heard the words of Phyllis Tickle, an energetic religious professor and author, that the pieces really began to flow together. She heralded the coming time as one in which the human race will be radically changed. Referring to mainstream religion, she emphasized the leap involved in completing the Trinity by embracing Spirit. Pointing to the change which coincided with Jesus’s life and the birth of Christianity and every 500-year period since, she spoke about the emerging church needing to powerfully reinvent itself now, to move more toward neo-monastic, missional, hyphenated, non-hierarchical, non-institutional, social justice focused faith communities. At the end of Tickle’s talk, an audience member moved to the microphone, introduced himself as a Friend, and asked, “Have Quakers been emerging for 300 years?” Tickle answered, “You betcha!” And we Friends and our practices continue to emerge.

The following day, Leo Brunnick, founder and chief executive of Patheos, an online destination for global dialogue about religion and spirituality, spoke of the logarithmic rate of technological change. He illustrated with a few examples: brain alpha waves are being used to move objects; human faces are being transplanted; aging is being ceased and reversed in mice; the genome project took two years to map the AIDS virus and, more recently, only 32 hours to map the SARS virus. This change will further accelerate like grains of rice multiplying in the law of exponential growth, where doubling 1 exceeds 1,000 by the eleventh turn, 1,000,000 by the twenty-first turn, and 1,000,000,000 by the thirty-first turn. Brunnick put this rate of change, with technology impacting medicine and other sciences, in the context of religion: “We need to ask, ‘What more will we take out of God’s hands?’”

It became apparent to me that our species will undergo heightened anxiety from this accelerating rate of change, and also from the economic and ecological challenges of rampant extinction and gross wealth disparities. Brunnick spoke about the way that groups tend to intensify and become exaggerated forms of themselves during times of rapid change; for example, fundamentalists can become more

fundamentalistic, atheists more atheistic. In such demanding conditions, it may become more challenging to find that which unifies us as Quakers.

Moral questions will become more complex when the conversation shifts, for instance, from whether gays and lesbians can marry to whether clones and cyborgs can be clergy or senators. To reach across the resulting divides, a widespread and deep level of spiritual grounding will become imperative. The population will need the extraordinary moral fortitude that is central to servant leadership. Robert K. Greenleaf, a Friend credited with coining the phrase “servant leadership,” said that the best test is to ask: “Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”

I would replace the word “autonomous” with the word “whole” in Greenleaf’s query. As challenges become more complex and demanding, the collective intelligence of groups will be more critical to our planet’s survival. Singular individuals in leadership roles may not suffice, as one person often does not have the needed breadth of wisdom or degree of trust which a group is better equipped to offer. But, perhaps, with new methods made possible by the open capacity of the Internet and cells of faithful groups who continually hold each other accountable to a higher good, the church can effectively unify, and humanity can become one and fully recognize its interdependence with all of creation.

### **“You only need to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves”**

At the time of the 2011 Wild Goose Festival, I was studying the effects of anxiety on individuals and systems in an attempt to countermand the related symptoms (or the condition itself). On a macro-level, I wanted to understand how larger groups can break through the apocalyptic tension felt in the world today. On a more personal level, I wanted to alleviate my own anxiety, the result of living without health insurance or other employee benefits on a gross salary of \$216 per week among people with greater wealth. One saving grace during that difficult time for me was belonging to a network of communities of spiritual accountability which held its members to faithfulness even in our fear. This arrangement let us combine our small slices of truth into a larger portion and allowed us to share spiritual and material resources.

As I received the messages of Tickle and Brunnick, as I sang hymns and drank beer, as I danced with and assisted in his dementia one of the most brilliant people I knew, I was convinced that spiritual accountability, a practice I had come to know through Friends, needed to be spread like wildfire within our religious society. It also needed to be carried outward to help heal our wounded world. It provides a way to raise up good by holding those who serve and lead accountable to the highest possible outcome. To me, this practice of spiritual accountability seemed to embody a Quaker *charism*, an extraordinary power given by the Holy for the good of the world.

Friends believe in the inner goodness of every person and in the fuller knowledge and experience of our shared goodness when we intentionally seek, share, and act together on behalf of a greater good. We recognize that gifts conferred upon a community are to be nurtured by the community in service to the world. We acknowledge that leadership can arise through any one of us. The combination of these

beliefs leads us to practice the power of the collective. These are the building blocks of collective intelligence. Might such a group process, which uses these practices in service to the Holy, be a Quaker charism?

Friend Parker Palmer, an author, educator, and activist, has shared the Quaker clearness process with the world through his writings and workshops. Many are well served by his work. Yet, clearness is just a first step in a leading. It is possible to hear a sacred call and be found clear to proceed and yet still forsake it because of the noise of our fears. We might abandon it for the promise of power, privilege, or the consumer culture that encircles us. A spiritual accountability process can offer a centripetal force to pull us back toward our sacred path.

### **“Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine”**

An on-going spiritual accountability group which both supports and challenges us can be a much more powerful force for long-term faithfulness than a brief clearness committee. Because it is a concerted and continuous commitment, each individual can come to intimately know his or her own and other members’ strengths and opportunities for growth. This level of commitment allows members to accompany one another in the field while offering ministry.

I call this kind of relationship “peer spiritual accountability,” and it has offered me and others fuller portions of truth at times when it was most needed. In addition, the practice of spiritual accountability has at times abated my anxiety and, at other times, actually acted as an antidote to the formation of anxiety. It surely was an important resource that furthered the ministry carried by the six members of a peer group which met monthly for about seven years.

We were a self-appointed group serving in various ministries. A structured and agreed-upon spiritual accountability process helped us midwife each other’s on-going calls and venture outside our comfort zones. Our main queries were: “What does faithfulness ask of Spirit?” and “How will we respond?” We took turns, rotating our focus on two members for each two-hour monthly session. These sessions opened with a period of worship and closed with a self-assessment of our attention to our guiding principles. Deep listening and attention to the presenter’s words, body language, changes in skin tone such as blushing or flushing, and the movement of the Spirit in the gathered group all guided our waiting worship. The attention prompted questions and occasional observations from those of us who were present to the presenter.

Our overall intent was to help the focus person find the way to the feet of the Inward Teacher, to confront the Source of Being, to directly encounter the Guide. As such, questions or observations were pointed in that direction rather than toward answering questions we might have or toward solving problems. Being inextricably committed, irrevocably vulnerable, and consummately loving were prerequisites for the experience offering its fullest gifts. In those sacred encounters, some of us took notes for the presenter and other group members to reference afterwards. Like a set of flip cards that create a movie when displayed in sequence, these notes showed the growth in the Spirit, as well as the places where we had yet to venture—individually and as a group.

Other groups appointed by our monthly meetings provide a different kind of accountability structure. As a member of Central Philadelphia (Pa.) Meeting, I've participated in a "spiritual accountability group" (SAG), with its primary functions being to assist in accountability:

1. between the ministry and the One who calls us to ministry
2. between the ministry and those served by it
3. between the minister and the faith community

I have tried to incorporate coaching components into this SAG process, so that we will hold one another accountable not only to Spirit but also to project progress (both the outcomes and the manner in which those outcomes are achieved).

Some of us have also engaged in shorter term groups of peer accountability. One group used check-in telephone calls every few weeks; another worked as a team to create a six-month program on Spirit-led social action. Together, these interlocking groups formed a safety net; members knew they were being held both by Spirit and by a community of friends. These groups served us and others in unimaginable and often indescribable ways. They midwived plays, workshops, courses, plenary talks, articles and books, and service in urban schools, prisons, conference centers, on committees and boards, and amid families in need. They helped us, with Divine assistance, to co-create a better world.

### **“Whoever you are, no matter how lonely”**

The world yearns for greater connection. I often hear Friends expressing a need for spiritual accountability on the local meeting level. We held interest groups on releasing ministry at this year's Friends General Conference Gathering and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's annual sessions. We heard many participants speak of the need for love, respect, trust, vulnerability, honesty, witnessing others on the path, and a sense of safety. All of these relationship characteristics deepen and become more nuanced and intimate over time as we continuously devote ourselves to each others' faithfulness. They become reciprocal when we use a peer process for mutual spiritual accountability.

What is needed for greater spiritual accountability within and beyond the Religious Society of Friends? More of what has already begun. Trainings on peer spiritual accountability have been offered through the School of the Spirit's one-year Way of Ministry program, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's nine-month Spiritual Formation program, Philadelphia's Evergreen Worship Group training, and elsewhere. For instance, Engaging Spiritual Accountability introduced some folks to the concepts, and Practicing Spiritual Accountability was a three-month blended learning course (in-person and online) offered through Woolman Hill Quaker Retreat Center and Quaker Studies program of New England Yearly Meeting's Salem Quarter. The course introduced a peer spiritual accountability process, established small groups for practicing the process between sessions, and shared developmental assignments, related tools, and participants' experiences through an online classroom. So far, Quakers, Catholics, Wiccans, Mennonites, and Unitarians have benefited from these offerings.

## “The world offers itself to your imagination”

The peer spiritual accountability process which formed inside the “Quaker bubble” has most naturally popped outside of it. In a world starved for community and seeking alternatives to the dominant culture, we’re asked by the Spirit to spread the good news. The spiritual accountability process and the cells of community that are formed by it create a “plausibility structure” that opens people to another way of being: one that supports the individual and the collective yearning for the Divine and encourages us to shift from an economy of mammon—marked by a scarcity mentality and material greed—to an economy of manna—marked by an abundance mentality and the formation of beneficial relationships and community.

Spiritual accountability groups invite us to break down the false boundaries that separate us. They offer the opportunity to create alternative communities that challenge the dominant paradigm. They offer the opportunity to seek not only our highest personal selves, but also *sarvodaya*, which in Hindi means “the good of all.” Faced with the challenges of our time, we need to evolve individually and as a species as effectively and rapidly as we can. The peer spiritual accountability model offers the antidote to separateness and reaches toward true community, the Sacred Oneness, the Sh’ma that says, “The Lord our God is one God,” and helps us know: “It is GOOD!”

I agree with Tickle and Brunnick that the changes our world is experiencing will increase in complexity and frequency in the future and require us to be more resilient individuals, groups, and societies. I believe that these peer spiritual accountability groups offer a unique democratic promise as we live into a future full of change, fear, and risk of entrenchment and division. These groups assist the individuals within them to evolve in several ways: by allowing our fullest selves to be revealed, by learning from one another, and by sharing resources that otherwise might seem scarce.

Spiritual accountability prepares us in ways we have not previously known, guided by the Guide and our shared wisdom, to leverage our diversity for the highest good. What promise the world might know if we Friends commit to share this gift with the wider world, outside the Quaker bubble! Friends have a gift for which the world is begging. Here we are, God; send us.

## Questions of the Grail

By Viv Hawkins

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A series of stories dating to medieval times revolve around a wounded monarch, the Fisher King, who keeps guard over a holy grail. His injury keeps him from tending to the kingdom, and over time it grows into a wasteland. Knights from far and wide travel to his Grail Castle to heal him. Finally a common-born knight named Parsifal comes to the Fisher King at Grail Castle. In the stories, Parsifal can only heal the king if he asks the correct question; Parsifal, afraid, initially does not ask any.

Depending on the version of the tale, the right question differs. In one version, the question is “Who does the grail serve?” In another story, “Who serves the grail?” And in a third, “What do you need?”

Jesus uses a grail as a chalice during the Last Supper when he celebrates communion with the Apostles in his last meal before his crucifixion. The ceremony is a way to remember their connection with each other and with the Father. Earlier in his life, he had turned water into wine at the wedding. In his last Passover, wine becomes lifeblood, as the bread (symbolizing the body) is blessed, broken, given, and received—the conditions needed for communion with the Divine.

For more than a decade, I have practiced a peer group model of spiritual accountability that feels to me like a sort of sacrament. Like the grail, the group is a vessel of the sacred in each gathered member and the group as a whole. That communion which holds Spirit—within, between, and beyond us—helps peer group members become more healthy and whole in service to a wounded world.

Each time we meet, our group of four people seeking to be faithful focuses on a slice of the relationship one of us has with the Divine. For a little less than an hour, we sequentially hold the person in prayer; listen deeply as she shares what is present for her; and ask questions that might help her find healing, wholeness, or greater connection to the Holy. The spiritual nurture we share incarnates a message recently offered in extended worship: “When many believers surrender together, they are nourished.” That is truly a blessing. Yet there is more: not only are we nourished, but we can be nourishing. And we are both, as over the months and years, we co-create, with divine assistance, the sacred container.

I’ve been the Fisher King and seen myself and others move toward wholeness. At those times, I’m nourished and nourishing only when I’ve asked the three grail questions and honored the four conditions of communion. I’ll illustrate this with excerpts from a recent peer group session.

### **Who does the grail or peer group serve?**

The answer is each other and God.

Coming together to share our stories of seeking to be faithful—sometimes succeeding and sometimes falling short of what we hope to be or do—we have intimate glimpses into our humanity and our holiness. We offer opportunities to be authentic with others in ways that many people yearn for. We become vulnerable together and lovingly touch tender places and mystery. As at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, water is turned into wine, and life is more festive. Similarly, God is served by people who are focused on faithfulness, on witnessing to the Spirit among us, and on praying and acting to heal our yet-coming world.

During one session, I brought to a peer group my leading to write about spiritual nurture. I revealed my lack of clarity on the leading, but explained that I felt invited into an intimate kind of disclosure. Beyond that, I could not see.

### **Who serves the grail or peer group?**

Again, the answer is each other and God.

Each person comes prepared to sit in the Presence with one another. One person guides the group in utilizing the process. Another is the focus person, bringing some portion of his or her life with God to offer as communion: sharing for 15 minutes while others listen without interrupting. Then together for 35 minutes, we explore through evocative questions, active reflection, and silent or spoken prayer. All of us listen for and extend the invitation that draws the focus person closer to the foot of the Inward Teacher.

In advance of a peer group session, I sifted through several topics that I could write about. I sought one that held particular import for the ministry I carry in fostering faithfulness, one that was fresh and significant in the moment, and that felt unanswered. We opened with a period of centering worship to bless the time and to connect with the Holy One. I described my belief that we will co-create heaven when we each follow God's call. I went on to explain my regard for this peer group process as a vessel for faithfulness and my hope to share it meaningfully with others. I then moved on to talk about writing. About 25 minutes into the 35-minute exploration time, Lola referred to me as "prophetic." I became quiet and still. Ivette asked, "What is your heart telling you? Not your head, what is your heart telling you?" I groped for the answer, aided by the Holy within each of us and the collective group.

### **What do you need?**

Here, the answer becomes more complicated. Each peer group member's answer may differ from one session to another, and may include several answers. At times, a person's needs are even paradoxical.

I responded to Ivette's question about my heart, "There is an invisibility cloak around my heart." Ivette encouraged me, "Stay with that." Accepting her invitation, I sat quiet and uneasily curious, searching within, connecting to that feeling of a cloaked heart, asking myself and God what I needed to uncloak it. After a time, Lola observed, "An invisibility cloak? Sort of the opposite of writing and publishing in a journal; that is not invisible." We left space for God. Nancy inquired, "What is the cloak a symbol of?" I answered, "It is not a symbol of anything. It's hiding the heart. So, at times, when I have felt prophetic, it has been the rebuke of the prophet that I've felt. But rebuking is only half of the work of the prophet; the other half is opening the way for alignment with the Divine."

I continued, "Last year, I participated in a workshop on contemplative photography. We were to notice something and then to be with it for 20 minutes before even using the camera. If I were to use the time well this weekend, 90 percent of it would be used for inviting God to be present. If anything came from it, in any shape or form, that would be the fruit, not the primary focus. How do I remove the cloak to stand in God's presence and hear what is offered?" Other members confirmed the trueness of my revelation.

### **The Four Conditions: Blessed, Broken, Given, Received**

According to the tales, Parsifal only needed to ask the question in order for healing to occur. On his first meeting with the Fisher King, he is afraid to ask. Perhaps by the time he has the courage and/or faith to do so, he has matured and is able to fulfill four conditions: to be blessed, broken, given, and received. All four conditions must be satisfied together for healing to occur.

The peer group, for me, is one manifestation of community joining with God. Until we bless it with our commitment to God and to one another, it contains ordinary wine. But when it is blessed, it takes on a covenantal quality, a celebration of life. Slowly, with each secret part a focus person reveals, with each loving question a member asks, with each prayer we offer up, the blessing is evidence of our mutual accountability with the Divine, and blessings multiply. Over time, we come to better know ourselves, each other, and Spirit's movement in our own and others' lives.

Often in a peer group, what I share feels or is broken. Despite my deep respect for the members of the peer group, my trust in its process, and my faith in God, I'm shy about sharing parts of myself that I wish were more healthy, happy, or holy than they are. Without Ivette's question, I may not have stopped to attend to my heart even in worship or journaling. How often have I seen myself in other people, in areas which were previously hidden and now revealed. Because they had courage or faith in disclosing them, I rejoiced that I am not alone. That, in itself, is a blessing. By acknowledging my heart's "invisibility cloak," I come to accept that part of myself, and am shown that even that part can be loved by others—and, with grace, by myself. When others help me know I am wearing it, I can uncloak.

Giving ourselves as fully as we can to God and to the peer group, and giving each other the space and time to be our fullest selves, without judging, are some of the greatest gifts I know.

We participate in many graces: receiving each person as she is, without needing her to be any different from whom she is; receiving God's grace as it flows to us, even when we may not perceive it; receiving from our companions in this journey the gifts they offer. Without these miracles, water remains water and wine remains wine. But with them, together they create both the grail and the communion that we become.

In the end, the time I had imagined available for writing was swallowed up by another project, and seven weeks passed. The day before I wrote these words, I worshiped for three hours with 11 other Friends. We were blessed, broken, given, and received. One part of me floated in limitlessness, and grace offered me a skeleton of concepts for the article I had felt led to write. I came home and put the bones together, then infused it with the flesh-and-blood and breath of the peer group session. This writing is blessed, broken, and given to you with prayers that it may be received, serve, and meet a need.

Viv Hawkins co-founded Releasing Ministry Alliance and studies, practices, and teaches about spiritual accountability. She invites folks to [releasingministry.org](http://releasingministry.org) and the Facebook group Friends Spiritual Accountability. She loves Lola Georg, her partner, and carries a ministry to foster faithfulness with a minute from Central Philadelphia (Pa.) Meeting, endorsed by Philadelphia Quarterly and Yearly Meetings.