

# There is One Who Can Speak to My Condition—and Does

by Lloyd Lee Wilson

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Introduction by Brian Drayton



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## Introduction

Lloyd Lee Wilson is known to many of us personally through his work and travel in the ministry, and to many more through his writings. For many years a member of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative), he was invited to speak to the 2024 New England Yearly Meeting on some findings from the Quaker journey which began here half a century ago. This pamphlet presents the substance of his talk. What shall I say in introduction? Well, two questions to ask of any offering in the ministry are “Was thee faithful? Did thee yield?” This message is faithful.

Lloyd Lee is faithful in keeping as close as possible to his living experience, the encounter with the living Power whom he describes by its operations: the One who knows, the One who calls, the One who speaks, the One who loves. This functional naming is a gift to Friends who often struggle over how to talk about religion and spirituality, a reminder that (as Jesus says) God is the God of the living. Isaac Penington was once asked to name the Power that he found leading him to fulness of life. In reply, he wrote, “It were better for thee to learn his name by feeling his virtue and power in thy heart, than by rote,” and warned the seeker not to “set up the wise and stumbling part in thee” by quarreling about names before knowing the life in direct encounter.

Lloyd Lee is faithful also in the simplicity of his answer to the Yearly Meeting’s invitation. As he often does, he describes his spiritual journey in terms of apprenticeship—to his adoptive faith tradition, Quakerism, but more essentially to the One from which arises whatever is living, healing, liberating, and instructive in our

tradition. An apprentice learns the elements of the craft or art, as they see where and how their teacher does the work, works the craft. Beyond that, though, the apprentice is learning how they themselves must do and be, as they come to take responsibility for their own gifts and situation. I also have always thought of spiritual formation as apprenticeship. I find it is a welcoming, inviting way to speak about it, for while apprenticeship begins with the elements, the first baby steps, it never really ends. After all, the One who teaches, whose work we are learning, is Life inexhaustible, and flows through “endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful.”

Lloyd Lee’s message is faithful and “yielded,” moreover, in being concrete and practical about times, events, and choices in his life’s apprenticeship, which, like every apprenticeship, often presents tasks and challenges that seem at the edge of one’s capacity, or beyond. It is especially in these times that we learn how the speaking, calling One knows us, loves us, and enlarges our capacity. Our mistakes, our misunderstandings, our failures are transformed by the One who is at work. As Lloyd Lee writes, “in that conversation, everything belongs, everything is important, everything matters.”

He is faithful, also, in stepping back and talking about the general “method” that he perceives in the work of the One in his life, a “spirituality of subtraction.” Lloyd Lee has spoken often of the “apophatic way” by which Quaker practitioners learn to let go, over time, more and more of the things that interfere with their ability to hear the One speaking—in James Nayler’s words, to “weary out... whatever is of a nature contrary to itself.” This, too, is practical teaching, and an essential way of sensing where true leading is taking place.

But to my dear friend’s testimony I will add something that, as an orchardist, he knows full well: This subtractive, apophatic way (the *via negativa*) is in close—and necessary—union with the life of abundance, the cataphatic “*via positiva*.” As James Nayler wrote, “as the Spirit sees your wants, your love will spring and move in you ... which if you willingly serve in its smallest motion, it will increase, but if you quench it in its movings, and refuse to bring it forth, it will wither and dry in you, not being exercised. And it is the like of gentleness, meekness, patience, and all other virtues which are of a springing and spreading nature, where they are not quenched, but suffered to come forth to [the One’s] praise.” We prune, the

One prunes, that more fruit may be borne, in action, in insight, in service.

There was evidence that Lloyd Lee's faithfulness in this talk was a "watering ministry," received by some thirsty hearers, and encouraging some fresh springings of life there. I trust that in this written form it can encourage and instruct others in their apprenticeship to the One whom they are encountering in our tradition, in testimonies from other souls, and most important, inwardly at work in us, so that we more abundantly bear fruit, each according to our kind.

—Brian Drayton, Second Month 2025



## There is One Who Can Speak to My Condition—and Does

### One Great Truth

I have come back today to the starting point, where I stepped into the Quaker path, to bear witness to what I have learned on my journey.

As a young adult I became an apprentice Quaker here in New England Yearly Meeting. I've continued in that apprenticeship wherever I've been for more than a half century. I'm still an apprentice, still just a beginner; the more I learn, the more I realize I have yet to learn. What can I say after this long spiritual apprenticeship?

I have learned a single great truth: **There is One who can speak to my condition, and does—immediately and perceptibly, with constant encouragement, infinite patience, and loving desire for my true welfare. In that conversation I've learned that everything belongs, everything is important, everything matters.**

Perhaps it would help if I explained that some, unpacked those two sentences just a little bit.

To be able to speak to my condition, it is necessary to *know* my condition: physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. How often I've felt unknown, that no one really knows what it is like to be me, to see things as I see them and to face my particular set of challenges and obstacles, in the ordinary things of life as well as at apparent decision points or crises. But this is the truth to which I've been led: there is One who does know me.

But to be able to speak to my condition, there must be *understanding* as well as knowledge. I have also learned that I am known

with understanding—the implications, strengths and vulnerabilities of each aspect of my being, of my condition, are understood deeply. The One who speaks is not repulsed by my condition, but seeks to share with me an unguarded relationship, to help and guide and comfort and heal me in ways beyond counting. This is unconditional love, amazing grace, infinite mercy, boundless compassion.

Knowledge of my condition with understanding makes *accompaniment, nurture, and guidance possible*. Only one who knows and understands me fully is best able to accompany me, to nurture and guide me as I encounter the many challenges, opportunities, temptations and obstacles that I face each day. This is the joy I have experienced: that there is One who knows me in such a way that it is possible to speak helpfully to my condition, and this One does in fact speak—nurtures, heals, supports, guides, and accompanies me constantly.

## Immediate

This relationship is immediate: it is without intermediary. *I have come to know the One through my own direct experience, inward and outward*. I was not persuaded by others, or convinced by a chain of *a priori* reasoning such as: There is a universe. If there is a universe there must be a Cause, and if there is a Cause it must know the universe it created, and if it knows all the universe it must know me completely, and so on. Reading sacred texts in the early days of my journey, both Christian and those of other faith traditions, left me largely unchanged. My story is more similar to that of the old Quaker farmer who looked into his heart one day and saw that Someone had been there.

My experience has been immediate in the sense of “in the moment” as well. An incident in 1979 will help illustrate both meanings. I’d been living and working in Charlottesville, Virginia, and was generally pretty happy. One day I happened to see a newspaper advertisement for a job in the mountains of southwest Virginia for a nonprofit housing provider called Project Home Repair, Inc. The job itself was attractive, but I told myself I could never work for a company with an undignified name like Project Home Repair. The next week there was another ad in the paper: it was for the same housing provider, but since their last ad they had changed their name to Virginia Mountain Housing. That got my attention. One thing led to another, and I ended up driving down to that end of the state for



an interview. The board of directors offered me the job, and I drove back home very unsure what to do.

I could stay in Charlottesville and continue as executive director of a nonprofit regional transportation provider that served the rural poor in the surrounding counties, providing affordable rides to and from work, to medical appointments and the like; or I could move to Blacksburg and be the executive director of a nonprofit regional housing provider that served the rural poor in the surrounding counties, providing safe, decent, and affordable housing. When I added them up, the pros and cons of each job seemed equal—I could not see which to choose.

On the way back over the mountains that night, I pulled into an overlook on the spur of the moment to try to think this through. Surprisingly, I quickly fell to my knees in prayer, asking for help: for clarity, for vision, for discernment—very unusual behavior for me at that time. What I got in response was completely unexpected: I heard a clear voice, saying simply, “If you can’t take *this* job, how are you going to be ready for the next job I have for you?”

I was not alone. There was One who was accompanying me, who knew and understood everything about me, knew why this decision seemed so difficult, and cared for my condition even though it seemed a choice between two equal goods, not between one good and one bad. I knew all this by direct experience with no intermediary, and I knew it in the moment that I needed to know. Furthermore, this One had a vision and an invitation for my future welfare—an invitation which evidently I was free either to accept or reject.

I took the job with Virginia Mountain Housing and moved to southwest Virginia. A little over two years later, I became General Secretary of Friends General Conference. Looking back, I realize that had I stayed in my old job and surroundings, I would not have been ready for FGC, and they would never have hired me.

### **Perceptible**

This conversation is perceptible. One meaning for perceptible is to indicate something clear, straightforward, plain, or ponderable. I can understand what is being spoken. The One who speaks is *speaking for my welfare in ways that are fully intelligible to me*—even when I resist listening to or understanding what is being spoken. This accompaniment, nurture, and guidance are not secret, arcane,

or difficult to understand. This is the presence of One who wants to be understood clearly and who wants to hear from me in return. The One who knows me is revealing: self-revealing, truth-revealing, guidance-revealing.

When I first bumped into Quakers, I was drowning in a personal crisis concerning the Viet Nam war. I was a newly commissioned Air Force officer with an even newer belief that the war was wrong, and a deep resentment that Christianity had not taught me that before I got into such a mess. Quakers threw me a lifesaving ring in the form of the peace testimony, which I desperately embraced. Luckily for me the ring came with a rope attached, by which Friends began to draw me slowly toward the encounter at the center of our faith tradition.

When I first began to worship among Friends all I wanted was that in the silence of Quaker worship I might be able to detect the impersonal flow of the universe, as one might, by sitting still and observing, detect the ebb and flow of a tidal basin, however slow. It would then be possible, I hoped, to avoid moving counter to that flow. The stillness of silent worship was my goal. What I have encountered, against all expectations and to some extent contrary to my initial desires, is a perceptible presence in the silence. It feels like a *conversation with a very wise and loving mentor*. I am conversing with something very like the Creator and Sustainer of all that is. I did not expect this, or hope for it, or even believe it could be a reality, but now I know it to be true.

I am not saying that this conversation always takes place with words. Sometimes it has. Just as often the dialogue is wordless emotion (joy or love associated with one possibility, and sadness or pain with another), or simply a pull in one direction, whether felt as physical, mental, or emotional. At least twice, I've felt the dialogue as a series of wordless urges to turn left or right while driving, with no explanation. Following these urges led me to an unexpected destination—but just the right place to be, at the right time to be there.

This relationship, this One who speaks, calls forth three responses in me.

### **Pay Attention**

My first response is simply to pay attention. There is One who can speak to my condition—and does. **My response is to make it the highest authority in my life** and to do everything possible to

keep myself open to that guidance at all times—able to hear it and willing to obey it. It has become, finally, irresponsible for me not to give my full attention to the One for guidance.

Surrounded by the busyness and the noise and distractions of our contemporary world, the first step of my response is a *spirituality of subtraction*. I ask myself of each habit, each activity, each part of my life, “Does this help me hear the One and free me to follow that guidance, or not?” If the answer is no, as it has often been, then that thing, however near and dear, must be subtracted. That sounds harsh and difficult, but remember: the Quaker understanding of a lifetime conversion of manners is that one doesn’t have to accomplish everything in one fell swoop—in fact cannot accomplish it all at once. I try to find that one thing that most needs to go, and subtract it. The next day I begin looking for the next thing; when I can see that clearly, I work to subtract that.

As this subtraction continues, it becomes more and more possible to hear the Voice that speaks, and then more possible to listen to what I hear. Some things that I have always thought were important, even necessary, are now exposed as not so important; some become irrelevant or are now seen as actual distractions from the true work. Other possibilities that I’ve never considered now loom large in my awareness as tasks that call out for me to make them my own. As I spend more time and energy in them, I experience greater and more authentic joy and wholeness.

For me, *the spirituality of subtraction is the foundation of Quaker simplicity*: to order my life so that I have the space and freedom to hear, listen, and respond willingly to the One who speaks to my condition. It goes by different names at different times and places: the *via negativa*, apophatic spirituality, single-pointed awareness, and others. Always the great goal is to make room for the One who speaks.

This ongoing conversation involves a great deal of effort and perseverance. The work is certainly, to paraphrase Bill Taber, “to do everything the One asks and nothing else.” That turns out to be not a trivial assignment, as I instinctively shrink from the one and cling to the other—just the wrong way around.

Herein lies a problem. Although I am convinced the guidance and direction of this inward conversation is fully reliable, I also know that I am more eager to accept and follow some directions

than others, to the extent of persuading myself sometimes that I did not hear what has been clearly said. How can I protect against convincing myself that I am hearing something entirely different from what is actually being expressed?

I have learned the importance of the help of others in this discernment. To understand the One and its implications fully, *my practice must include a balance of both individual listening/responding and corporate listening/responding in the context of a committed community*. When we listen together, we detect the nuances and subtle accents of the voice of guidance, and see the requirements of the path of response more clearly and unequivocally than when we rely on our own discernment alone. When we respond together, our commitment and clarity are magnified; our actions become a greater witness to all who observe.

### **Everything Belongs, Everything is Important, Everything Matters**

The ongoing dialogue with the One who speaks teaches that I am not simply an individual, but an inseparable part of the entire human community, connected in vital ways to every other person on earth. Even more, I am an inseparable part of the entire creation; my welfare and that of all creation are connected and mutually reinforcing. We are a single organism that is made up of everything we comprehend in all of creation—every human, every animal and every plant, even those things we usually think of as not alive or as never having been alive. The One who speaks yearns for a communal shalom—a mutual dance among all the parts of creation, a universe where all parts coexist in harmony, where the welfare of any one part is derived from the welfare of all parts of creation.

Every part of creation belongs here. Every person, every rain forest, every apparently lifeless salt lake, every wren serenading at breakfast time, every mosquito at dusk or groundhog burrowing its home under our meeting house. As Randy Woodley says, humans are the only folks who know how to keep everything balanced, how to maintain Eloheh (Ay-luh-hay) and who have the ability to do so. That is our calling.

This has been a shock to me. Like many of us, I grew up thinking that I was at the center of my story. The important story was concerned with my welfare and my security; the needs and desires of other folks were important only as they affected me. Most of the desirable stuff in life was ruled by an economics of scarcity: there

was only so much available, and more for other folks meant less for me. I could assure enough for my own needs and wants only by keeping it from others. Competition ruled. It was only natural that I thought and acted this way, given where and when I was born and have lived.

The problem with this perspective is that it is not true. The experiences which have spurred a new understanding in me have been sometimes hard, sometimes joyful, sometimes sorrowful, and occasionally life-threatening. (Feeling the anesthetic take hold at the beginning of my brain surgery, when I did not expect to survive the operation, is an example of the latter.) They have changed my world. I see now that we humans are immersed in a series of overlapping communities. If we do not behave in ways that nurture and support the health of all of those communities we shall not long survive.

Friends have spoken of their testimony of community but have largely meant a rather small group of identifiable individuals with whom they share values, lifestyles, and often a rather limited geography. We are in truth all part of the one community of humans and we must behave in ways that support all humans. We are intimately and integrally connected to all parts of creation. *Our testimony should be the community of every part of creation with every other part.* The One who speaks yearns for that to be so and is continually offering guidance and encouragement to enable us to move in that direction.

One implication of this interconnectedness of all things is that everything we do matters; everything belongs. The change we yearn to see and live into and become will not be brought about solely by new policies “at the top,” although that will certainly be a part of it. It will not be ushered in solely by forcing the worst polluters, or racists, or economic oppressors, or other bad guys and gals to stop their wrongdoing, although that will certainly be a part of it. If all of creation is as interconnected as we’re now realizing it is, then every part of it needs transformation. That means that in addition to these highly visible, “big ticket” improvements, that small part of creation each of us occupies in our ordinary, daily life also needs transformation.

*Everything we do matters—how we live in each moment makes a difference, no matter where we are or what we are doing. Everything counts. How we do anything is how we do everything—and*

everything must be transformed in order to live into the vision of shalom. Everything we do either helps or hinders the great effort to establish the harmony of deep shalom throughout creation—there are no unimportant acts, no trivial encounters.

### **Change is Possible—and Necessary**

Things have got to change mightily if this great shalom is to be realized. The chasm between what is and what needs to be is huge. The good news is that I know from my own experience that the great change we need is possible.

I've been in pretty poor condition at many times in my life, in difficult or painful situations, and too often I have put others in difficult and painful situations. I've been in some bad spots, and I've learned that we are not stuck in those spots or situations. The One has been a constant companion, offering not shame, rebuke and punishment but healing, encouragement, and a clear way to move toward wholeness and shalom for me and the people I have impacted. If I have been willing to listen attentively and to surrender to the guidance I have been given, the result has always been one of healing and reconciliation.

What I'm saying is that personal change is an integral part of my relationship with the One who speaks. I am constantly being offered opportunities to change some part of my life, some part of myself, and whenever I seize one of these opportunities I end up with the joy of knowing I'm a step closer to being in right relationship with everyone else and with all of creation. *Individual change and transformation are possible. They are necessary* for the health of Creation. My willingness to change, my transformation, allows Eloheh (Ay-luh-hay) to flow through all Creation.

There has been no single, wholesale conversion moment in my life; my transformation has been an incremental process continuing over many years. I expect to be engaged in this work daily for the rest of my life, subtracting what I realize is interfering with my ability to hear, listen, and obey, and replacing that interference with whatever the One instructs. As that process continues, I will see new invitations to change; and as I seize those opportunities, the shalom of all Creation, and my own deepest joy, will increase.

This experience of changing a little bit at a time over an extended period is consistent with the Quaker "*conversion of manners*." The process of becoming a Friend has three parts: conviction,

convincement, and conversion of manners. First comes the conviction that one's present spiritual path, whatever it has been, is no longer adequate or acceptable.

Second, and sometimes separated from the first by the passage of considerable time, is the conviction that one is called to the Quaker path in particular. After that begins the third phase, which is converting one's manners—the totality of a person's thoughts, emotions and behaviors—to be in accord with what I'm calling this afternoon the One who speaks. In my life, the teaching and the change has continued over many decades, as many Friends of earlier generations have described their own experience.

At first, I was not very good at listening, didn't trust what I heard when I did hear it, and was pretty unwilling to make myself vulnerable by changing any part of my life. Now that I'm old and hard of hearing, I remember those days being like my wife Susan in more recent times, waving to get my attention and then speaking very clearly, slowly, and loudly to make sure I understand her message. Even then, she says, I can be, well, stubborn. In my spiritual conversations, my hearing has gotten better, not worse, over the years, and I've learned the vocabulary and idioms being used. Decades of positive experiences have deepened my trust, so I am more likely to hear clearly and respond willingly than when I first began.

### **I've Failed—What Now?**

Even so, the results are mixed. Sure, sometimes I hear and follow promptly, and the apparent results are just what we might hope for. Other times I don't hear or simply don't listen, and therefore don't do—with predictable results. Sometimes I do exactly what I think I'm supposed to and it blows up spectacularly. Whatever happens, the One who speaks understands. Completely. Every time. Is not interested in punishing me for my failures, but is always ready with a new possibility. "OK, that didn't work out. So now the thing to try is this. Here's a new invitation, based on thy new circumstances, thy new condition."

I'm a great baseball fan. A hitter who only fails seven out of ten times over the course of a career will probably end up in the Hall of Fame. The One who speaks to my condition isn't counting my successes or failures at all. The important thing is that I keep trying, keep coming up to bat, holding on to successes when they happen and shrugging off the disappointment of failures to try again. And



each time, I learn a little bit more about what is needed and how to accomplish that.

We won't get this all right the first time, or the second, or the two hundredth. But we can and will change for the better; we will make progress over time. It is the conversion of manners. Listen to the One who speaks. Try to do the next thing. Keep trying. Our aim is not unbroken success, but consistent faithfulness.

In fact, we learn far more from those times we try something and it doesn't work out the way we hoped or expected than from when we took a step and it turned out exactly the way we thought it would. When we're having to be most careful about discerning who we hear in the silence or what they are trying to tell us is exactly when we can learn the most—whether we get it right or wrong. Some good thing will result from any effort we make to follow the guidance of the One—even if it is simply that we learn how to do better next time.

## **Conclusion**

**There is One who can speak to my condition, and does—immediately and perceptibly, with constant encouragement, infinite patience, and loving desire for my true welfare. In that conversation I've learned that everything belongs, everything is important, everything matters.** That is my testimony to Truth, springing from a lifetime spent being an apprentice Quaker, doing my best to pay attention.

Thank you all for listening.



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