

Northwest Quarterly Meeting's All-Ages Annual Retreat
Friday – Sunday, September 11-13
Bethany Birches Camp, Plymouth, VT

Come join us for the weekend! There will be programs and activities, food, games, conversation, walks in the woods, singing around the fireplace, a short business meeting and meeting for worship Sunday morning. The weekend starts Friday with dinner and runs through Sunday lunch, and we welcome Friends of all ages to come for whatever length of time works for you - from joining us for just a meal through the entire weekend.

Please register no later than Tuesday, September 8th. To register online, click on the link below:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScBGXy_e9z2o6zF9Qx5yIevjmxtr9Lx1z0OKWBMnkX4QHxYSg/viewform?usp=dialog

2026 Fall Retreat Schedule (subject to change as details are finalized)

Friday, September 11

- 3:00 - 6:30 PM: Arrive & registration, unpack, settle in
- 6:30 – 7:30 PM: Dinner and clean-up
- 7:30 PM: singalong by the fire. Bring copies of *Rise Up Singing!* to use and share.

Saturday, September 12

- 8 AM: Breakfast and clean-up
- 9:30 – 11:00 AM: Program – *Possibility: What calls us into a Religious Society as a Quarterly Meeting? Where is the life? Where are the challenges?* (led by Roger Jasaitis, Quarter Clerk)
- 12:00 PM: Lunch and clean-up
- 1:30 – 3:00 PM: Fresh Exploration of Themes from Noah Bishop Merrill's Perkins Lecture. (led by Noah)
- 3:00 PM: Reading *Stone Soup* and community meal preparation
- 5:45 PM: Dinner and clean-up
- 7:00 PM: Evening activities including possible contra dance, music (bring your instruments), games, etc.

Sunday, September 13

- 8 AM: Breakfast & cleanup
- 9:15 – 10:15 AM: Business meeting
- 10:30 – 11:30 AM: Meeting for worship
- 12:00 PM: Lunch & clean-up
- 12:45 PM-ish until done: Clean-up chores, packing, and goodbyes.

We're hoping to offer Saturday's programs, and Sunday's business meeting and meeting for worship as hybrid. A Zoom link and final schedule for the weekend will be shared via the email listserve as we get closer to the retreat dates.

Programs: More details about the programs will be in the upcoming *Nor'Wester* newsletter. In the meantime, we invite you to read the text of Noah's Perkins Lecture (attached) or [watch the video of the lecture](#) on YouTube. Note: Noah's talk starts about 11 minutes into the video.

For the Sake of the Joy: Meetings, Pilgrimage, and the ReOlding of Quakerism

Noah Bishop Merrill

Good evening, Friends It's good to be together.

As I speak to you this evening, I am humbled and grateful, understanding that Friends both here in Richmond, Indiana and from meetings across the United States and beyond—including my father and stepmother, as well as Friends from my home meeting in the foothills of the Green Mountains in southeastern Vermont—have gathered to listen to this message, and to reflect together on how the Spirit might be speaking to each of us in our own context through this shared time.

I want to speak for a moment about the particular gift of being invited to offer this lecture, and to the season of prayer, reflection, and searching that an opportunity like this provokes. If you're like me, the busyness of many demands on our attention can distract us from setting aside time to reflect deeply on the wisdom which might be wrung from the warp and weft of our lives.

The invitation to be with you tonight offered such an opportunity, perhaps because I was vulnerable enough to receive it. It arrived during a season of grief following the sudden passing of my mother and the murder of my brother within the course of nine months. Yet within this season of grief was also an interweaving of unimagined joy, as my beloved Friend Honor and I were found clear to be married under the care of our home meeting, receiving a blessing beyond either of our expectations, through God's Grace.

Many of us know that these kinds of experiences—great losses and great joys alike—can and do change us, causing us to re-examine the uses of our time and energy, even our vocations, in this brief and blessed life we have been given.

Receiving this invitation during a time of doubt and darkness for us both, comingled with the candles of joy which, for incandescent moments, chased back the shadows, rekindled in me a spark of reassurance, a fragile trust that I might have something to offer that could be helpful to you who might share in this time, something that might be of use to us in our pilgrimage of faith as Friends. And that initial illumination, as I experienced and followed it, helped to bring me home once again to the calling to service that has come to be the through-line of my own wayward wandering life.

I mention this because I think it's easy to forget the gift it can be to invite one another into deeper reflection and sharing of what glimpses of insight and humble wisdom each of us has encountered in our lives. I am grateful for the encouragement and the

occasion for recommitment to service that the Friends who offered this invitation have given me, and I hope that this might also serve as an invitation to you to be watchful in your own lives and meetings for opportunities to remind others of the gifts you see in them, and of the responsibility those gifts bring: that they be exercised in building one another up.

This invitation, coming as it did, also reminded me once again of two of the most difficult lessons I believe we can learn as human beings: **There is no amount of grief that can make you unfit to be an instrument of God's love. And there is no Joy—if it is true Joy indeed—that cannot endure the presence of suffering and evil.** In my experience, abiding in these truths—even as in the eye of a hurricane—brings a gratitude beyond measure.

I don't know about you, but for me it is a fearful thing—and a challenging one—to be asked to offer a lecture on the broadly construed theme of “the future of Friends”. I have recently done a little looking into the messages Friends much more seasoned than I have offered on this theme.

Many of you listening may know better than I do that if I were to begin now in reciting *only the titles* of lectures and addresses with a similar focus given in the last 100 years (perhaps not counting those few I have given myself!)—I would likely not be finished listing them until our time together tonight had long passed. The same can be said for messages seeking to energize Friends to a renewal, to reclaim the fire of the early Friends, of Primitive Christianity Revived, to return to our roots, and from these embers to resuscitate a Quaker Movement that will meet this moment, and respond to the many needs that assail us daily in the wider world, both in this country and beyond.

This conversation about the future has also included countless propositions for the reinvention of Quakerism to respond to today's audiences, to adapt to a changed and changing world, to seek ways to revise Quakerism for the “young people” and “seekers” of our day by removing supposedly outdated understandings or uncomfortable aspects of religiosity, to open wide the doors of participation to an ever-widening set of beliefs and world-views—or, some argue, to focus the message of Quakerism on a particular set of strongly held politically progressive views. Other voices, almost in mirror image, call for jettisoning Friends' sometimes awkward or misunderstood distinctives to allow for a fuller participation in the wider movements of American evangelicalism. In this context, with such crosscurrents, polarization, and disparate voices, saying something new—much less, something new and useful—is a challenging task, indeed.

It is clear that there are many both within and beyond our meetings, yearning for a deeper spiritual grounding and hungry for something that can sustain them in these harrowing times.

I'm aware that many meetings across North America are seeing waves of new people coming through their doors, seeking connection. Even the renewed participation of many Friends in local ecumenical networks and the increased visibility of Friends in the public square create new opportunities—and crying needs—to articulate and model the life of faith in which newcomers might choose to participate, or which the wider world might be able to understand, even in part.

As I have held this opportunity in prayer, asking whether there might be anything of use that I could offer as part of this conversation, what has arisen in my heart is *nothing new*. Instead, I have been led to offer you a handful of tattered field notes from a journey of seeking to be faithful in company, a partial and patchy account of a pilgrimage in progress. I hope, with humility, to invite us to a way of seeing that might help us respond to the very real yearning that so many are experiencing, that can help us remember in some way the treasure that is already present and that has accompanied us since our beginnings. **I want to invite us to a ReOlding of Quakerism.**

By ReOlding, I mean remembering that the story didn't begin with us. ReOlding means understanding ourselves as part of a story, a story that we did not begin, a story still unfinished, a slow and humble story still in process about a pilgrimage of faithful people journeying together through time who have sought, in their own seasons and circumstances and sufferings, to respond to and make visible the inbreaking of Love, even now coming into the world. ReOlding our faith means living *now*, not in the past or the future. It means deepening our roots in and drawing nourishment from Friends living tradition, in this moment, in this world, as these people, where we are. ReOlding stakes our faith on a trust that, with help, we can grow into fuller life and fuller understanding; that we are participants in a process of continuing revelation, yes, but that any claim to continuing revelation both *presumes and requires* prior revelation. ReOlding is understanding our lives in the light of what has come before, allowing our way of living and our worldview to be shaped by the living stream of which we are a part, and then—through ReOlded Eyes—facing the tribulations and trials of the times we have been given.

And so tonight, I am offering *nothing new*.

Because I believe with all my heart that it is ultimately *not* a grand vision that will create the future of Quakerism. In reality, as it always has been, what we call “the future of

Quakerism” will come into being through the lives and testimony of each of us who have set out in some way on this journey of becoming Friends. The future of Quakerism will be settled and determined by the ways we allow ourselves to be met, guided, patterned, sustained and sent by the same Spirit—full of Grace and Power—that has accompanied us always.

Due to the sometimes meandering nature of my field notes, I think it might be useful now to offer you a summary of what I most hope to express this evening. It comes from one of the first people to be called “Friends” (or perhaps more likely, from a community of them), writing anonymously in what we now call the twelfth chapter of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, in the first years of the movement of the Holy Spirit that would give birth to the Society of Friends as one child among a diverse and ever-growing family in the Christian tradition. Here’s a paraphrased translation of this passage, seeking to amplify and make accessible these ancient words for our modern ears:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that clings so closely—that so easily distracts—and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, the founder and perfecter, **who for the sake of the joy that was set before him** endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and now abides at the inflection point, where everything comes together: the place of the homecoming in the Power and the Presence of God...”

So there—that’s it! I hope you will now feel free to log out of the meeting, turn off your cameras, collect your things, and move on to whatever else you might want to do with your evenings.

Or, if you’re still with me: Let’s begin.

The Second Miracle

I want to speak with you about the Second Miracle.

Jesus wept. Having learned that his dear friend Lazarus has fallen ill and died, he has traveled with his disciples to the cave where Lazarus’ body has been laid. By this time, the man has been dead for four days.

And there, standing at the tomb, Jesus weeps. I believe there is something here, at the beginning of this story, something about the tenderness of Jesus’ heart, about the intimacy of this friendship, about the compassion God feels for each of us, seeing our

suffering, and mourning with us, accompanying us in the depth of our pain and struggles with the profound loss that is inextricable from our life as human beings in this world so full of pain and injustice. It says something about the nature of grief and grace that the story we are about to explore begins here. Everything that follows in this story—and perhaps, we may come to see, in ours—flows from a recognition that, whatever our condition, it is there that we can be met.

But the story doesn't end there—and neither does ours, since we're a part of this story, too. Jesus asks what is now a gathering crowd, including Lazarus' sisters, his beloved friends Martha and Mary, to roll away the stone that has been placed as a seal on the cave that has become Lazarus' tomb. Then, in a loud voice, Jesus calls to the dead man: "Lazarus—come out!" And indeed, according to the Gospel of John, this friend who has lain dead for days staggers slowly out of the cave, stumbling in a new flood of vitality, yet still bound tightly in grave wrappings, his face covered by a shroud. We can imagine, through the eyes of those who have passed down this story to us, what a sight he would have been. This man who had descended into death was now returned to life, through the compassion and the call of his Friend.

And then, something else happens. At first, it might be easy to overlook. It's certainly not as striking or dramatic as the first miracle, Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. And yet, I have come to believe that what happens next is just as significant, and can be just as instructive, if we read it as Friends and meetings seeking to be faithful today.

What happens next is this: Jesus turns to the people gathered, to the community surrounding Lazarus, and Mary, and Martha, and commands them: "Unbind Lazarus; let him go." And the community responds.

This, and what follows from it, is to me the "Second Miracle." The first miracle is clear. The power of the Spirit restores life to Lazarus' body. And yet: removing the tightly bound grave wrappings and the cloth covering his face—helping to free Lazarus— so that the gift of new life he has received can be expressed in all its fullness and beauty—this, Jesus says clearly, is the work of the community.

I don't believe it's a coincidence that these events, these two miracles, occur immediately before what follows them in the story as given to us by John. You see, immediately after these events the news of the raising and freeing of Lazarus reaches the religious leaders who have opposed Jesus. It is upon receiving this news, and not before, that they commit themselves to a dedicated effort to have Jesus arrested, tortured, and assassinated. This moment in the story after the re-enlivening and unbinding

is an inflection point in the whole story of the Gospel, according to John, where the corrupt religious leadership unite to end the threat they can now recognize.

So: what is so threatening about what has happened in this brief encounter? And why does it lead so directly to the decision of Jesus' enemies to seek a way to end his life?

Clearly, the evidence of new life returning to one who was lost was a powerful event. But Jesus' instructions to "unbind him, and let him go" seem to demonstrate an understanding that the experience of new life alone was insufficient to bring about the *fullness of life* into which Lazarus was invited by Christ. The renewal of life, the overpowering experience of enlivening, was—and is—the work of God. And yet, with the mutual encouragement, accompaniment, and reciprocal nurture of the community of faith, so much more becomes possible.

I have come to believe that this aspect of "unbinding one another" is at the heart of why our Friends meetings exist. Through our worship together, as we are nourished, strengthened, and challenged—often over the long arc of time—we are offered countless opportunities to try again to "unbind" one another from whatever may restrain the divine Life from becoming more and more expressed in our own living. The first miracle is the immediate work of the Spirit. We are given to each other so that the second miracle may unfold.

As we continue tonight, however we might otherwise relate to this text, I want to invite us to hold the story of Lazarus as a way of seeing our life together in our meetings. Always, there is the direct in-breaking of the Spirit, bringing new life, calling us out of death. And always, there is the challenge and the charge to the community, to draw near to one another, to grasp the entangling grave clothes, to help one another to find another breath of freedom to live in the Life and Power.

So I want to ask this question again. Why were these events perceived as such a threat? As with the raising and unbinding of Lazarus, the fullness of Life and unshakeable joy- in the Power and Presence of the living God which is stirred in us through these encounters shake the foundations of the death-dealing powers that occupy and corrupt this world, and herald the birth of a new creation. It is this way of living together, and the deep Joy in which it is rooted, that was experienced as a mortal threat to the corrupt leaders of Jesus' day. It is equally threatening to those same forces in our own time. The more free we help each other to become in the life of the Spirit, and the more our liberated lives bear witness to the reality of God's Love, always seeking new strongholds in the world, the more the powers of deceit, confusion and violence lose their grasp.

Okay, so there's something deeply important about this unbinding, something that happens in the context of the community. But how, more particularly, does this happen in the life of Friends meetings, and *why do our local meetings matter?*

Rhythms of Common Life

In the course of my life, I have been blessed by many experiences of what I might call "mountaintop moments", whether as part of spiritual retreats, youth groups, global conferences, or in wider relationships beyond my local meeting. I am profoundly grateful for these opportunities for growth and connection, for the forging of lasting spiritual friendships, for learning and inspiration, that these opportunities afforded me.

And so for a long time, I believed that it was from these kinds of exciting gatherings and events that renewal would come. Local meetings by contrast can seem so slow, so quiet, so mundane. Sometimes in worship it can feel as if nothing is happening at all. But through ReOlded eyes, I have come to know that it is in these little cells where the Divine Life is most patiently, persistently, and powerfully at work, shepherding hearts and shaping souls in relationship: daily forming the future of Friends. Through ReOlded eyes, it becomes absolutely clear that our local meetings are the crucible, the inflection point of the Quaker movement, and that it is there—here—that we who seek to tend the unfolding of this adventure of becoming Friends must focus our sustained efforts and attention.

With this in mind, I hope to share something from my field notes that might offer a glimpse into how this unbinding happens, seen with ReOlded eyes. Reflecting on travel in the ministry across North America and beyond over more than two decades, and in the particularity of seeking to serve and nurture those who serve in the more than 60 monthly meetings and dozens of smaller groups that make up New England Yearly Meeting, I see aspects of what I have come to understand as five **rhythms of common life** that are integral to the thriving of Friends meetings.

These rhythms-of worship, exploration, service, guidance, and testimony—are threads through which the Spirit weaves the fabric of our faith, sculpts the pattern of our hearts, and teaches us to live in the fullness of life for which we were born. As we move in these rhythms of common life, we are journeying together on a shared pilgrimage in the Light.

The **first and formative rhythm** at the center of our life as meetings is a rhythm of Worship. Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, we share in a process of listening and yielding to the Spirit moving among us, and learn to receive and respond to the messages—both silent and spoken—that may arise in this time

together. In this process we are drawn together into what our tradition calls *covenant community*. As each of us learns, in the unfolding of time, to open our hearts to the Presence in our midst, we grow in tenderness and sensitivity to the promptings of Love and Truth that make a home within us. As this happens, we also grow in relationship and tenderness with those who share and have shared these benches with us. In this way, we become a covenant community.

Through Re-Olded eyes—if we persist in it—coming to meeting for worship becomes not an activity we fit into our already overburdened schedules when we can, but the anchor of our lives. A place of refreshment, of refuge, of testing, a pool of living water into which we can dive deeply, from which we can drink deeply and feel our thirsting spirits restored.

And so, the rhythm of worship is inextricably bound up with the formation—if we allow it—of a covenant community: that is, a sacred bond that is both Divine and human, an anchor point where we can come to discover our primary identity and belonging as children of God that is both always being offered and which must be accepted by each of us who choose to walk this path with one another in the Spirit. With this choice comes a commitment to be prepared to offer and receive both encouragement and challenge, both celebration and consolation, to meet each other where we are and to invite one another, when the time is right, to more.

We are called into an ever-deepening relationship with the Love at the Center of existence, an intimacy with the divine Reality that sustains our lives. This discovery can be felt in a moment; coming to know it more fully is the fruit of time.

Whatever additional beautiful ways we express our faith as a worshipping community—through dance, through song, through prepared messages or prayers—this common life of a covenant community is grown, nurtured, and tested through a regular rhythm of expectant waiting worship.

A **second rhythm** that sustains the life of a meeting is a rhythm of Exploration, where this covenanted community seeks regular opportunities to explore Friends' living tradition together, including both the writings and experience of Friends past and present, as well as the deeper roots of our life in the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures. In this rhythm we seek to reflect on and invite the guidance of our spiritual ancestors into our lives today. Here, through ReOlded eyes, we might ask: "How deep are my roots?" "How much have I explored, and how might I explore, the tradition of which we are the spiritual inheritors? What might I learn from the experience, writing, testimony, and traditions from which our life as contemporary Friends arises? How might we grow in our

shared spiritual understanding if we opened ourselves together to the wisdom offered through these sources?

In some of our meetings, this rhythm of exploration happens formally, through some kind of dedicated class or program. But the essence of this rhythm is the recognition that *we are not the first* to have sought to open our hearts to the living Spirit, not the first to have wrestled with the tension between God's invitation and the invitation of a culture of distraction and confusion. We are not the first to have sought the deeper wells of wisdom, the greater meaning for our lives, the place where grief and gratitude can take counsel, we're not the first to have despaired at the failures of leadership, and the capacity for human evil.

Exploration of our living tradition can happen in a spiritual friendship between two people who meet for tea or take a walk together, or through a regular practice of retreat, carried out over years among a small and sometimes-changing collection of Friends within the meeting. It can happen through a summer book group, where those interested in exploring a particular topic make a short commitment to gather, reflect, and learn together. It can happen through sharing our spiritual journeys, through open and reflective Bible study informed by the insights of early Friends and of fellow travellers whose provocative perspectives might help us to deepen our sense of the profound and vast waters of tradition and interpretation in which we swim. It can happen through personal reading of the journals of Friends from generations before, and how that exploration might find form in vocal ministry, or in a moment of humble counsel over coffee after the rise of meeting.

How we engage with tradition matters. The theological historian and teacher Jaroslav Pelikan, whose work I first discovered through just such a "rhythm of exploration" with my good friend Wess Daniels, makes a helpful and (for me) memorable distinction, a powerful contrast between "traditionalism" and "tradition." "Traditionalism", Pelikan suggests, is the dead faith of the living. "Tradition", in contrast, is the "living faith of the dead." It is this understanding of tradition as the living faith of those who have come before us, present and dynamic and available in our own times, that I believe is essential to our common life as Friends, and why this rhythm of exploration is so important.

Like any living tradition, ours is multi-vocal; we will assuredly find within our shared tradition aspects which give words to our deepest experiences and responses to our persistent questions, just as we will no doubt encounter voices, perspectives, practices, and understandings that are obstacles to us, which we cannot hear or see as true, which we may need—even if only for this time—to strenuously reject. That is the nature of life

in a covenant community which practices a rhythm of exploration of this kind. Like anything worthwhile, it can be challenging. But it is also vital.

I can't ignore that tonight those of us in Richmond are gathering just steps from the former study of D. Elton Trueblood, a founder of Earlham School of Religion and one of the Friends whose service most shaped the Religious Society of Friends in the twentieth century and beyond. A consistent focus of his teaching was that if we as Friends come to view the traditions in which we are rooted as simply "roots from which we have grown" rather than "roots that sustain us, from which we draw present nourishment", we would quickly, in a generation or two, become like "cut flowers": beautiful for a moment, but in some ultimate sense, already dead.

We who have ears to hear, let us hear.

However this rhythm happens, the ongoing nurture of the covenant relationship between each participant in the meeting through the exploration of our living tradition nurtures the meeting as a whole.

A **third** rhythm which we can discover as essential in the life of a healthy meeting is a rhythm of Service, where we take responsibility both for calling forth the diverse spiritual gifts and capacities of those who are covenanted with us, and for faithfully stewarding and sharing the gifts, resources, and capacities we carry for the building up of the whole community.

Foundational to earlier generations of Friends' understandings, and of many today, is the trust, drawing from the writings and experience of the early Church, that spiritual gifts are given by God through each member of the whole body of the meeting for the building up of the covenant community, and to help us to be channels of love, mercy, and justice in this world we share.

Central to the Re-Olding of service is the affirmation that it is our responsibility, as part of a covenant community, not simply to keep watch for the gifts, whether nascent or more fully flowering, in every one, but to *joyfully call them out*—perhaps Lazarus-style—and then, to do all we can to remove barriers so that they might be given their fullest expression.

This nurture and encouragement of the exercise of gifts is not about elevating anyone over anyone else, or about someone gaining a special status or privilege. It is about trusting, from a foundation of gratitude, that God's abundance is poured out among us, and that every gift, every capacity, every resource of our lives can be turned into the

channel of universal Love, if we choose it, with the help of the covenant community. No act of service is insignificant. The forms they take are myriad, but at their heart they all spring from the same source, and the same intention: to help make visible, in practical, embodied terms, a community that is a sign, a foretaste, an outpost, even a rampart—of the Reign of Heaven, here, now, and yet still coming into the world in fullness—both to those in the meeting, and any whose lives might be touched through relationship.

It can happen at a bedside in a critical care unit, or in the work of keeping the meetinghouse warm, or giving a ride to a traveling minister, or helping another Friend find release from financial entanglements by helping them make a plan to pay off their debt. It can happen when we pray for an angry, wayward and suffering teenager, or hold the meeting for worship in the Light of God's Love, or clerk the meeting's discernment. It can happen when we sit together in the presence of a profound inexplicable loss beyond words. It can happen in doing the dishes after a potluck, or delivering food so someone won't have to miss a meal tonight. It can happen as Friends not as vulnerable as some accompany an immigrant neighbor, or as Friends among us from recent immigrant backgrounds as well as those who were born here nurture the web of resilience within and beyond our Quaker communities, bringing us all to live more fully as one People in the Spirit, regardless of nationality or status.

These acts of service reveal our hearts and knit us together; they are practical, tangible, touchable signs of the work of the Spirit through and among us. The life of the covenant community is sustained and renewed by this rhythm of service.

Through a **fourth rhythm**—a rhythm of Guidance— we seek—or seek to return to—the intimate and liberating instruction and counsel of the Spirit, the will of God however imperfectly we may be able to name it for ourselves and for our covenant communities—a Way that in some sense wants to be known by us. Both through personal discernment as well as through communal practice, it is essential to the life of a Friends meeting to cultivate openness, receptivity, and responsiveness to God's guidance, and to clear away whatever distractions or obstacles may stand in the way.

I take it as a basic understanding of the Religious Society of Friends that each of us can be intimately led and guided by the Spirit—the same Spirit that was, before the world was. And that, however imperfectly, we have come to discover that we can communally experience this guidance for our life together as a covenant community.

In acknowledging this to be true, it can be tempting to place the emphasis almost exclusively on the message we might receive, the decision we might make, or the outcome we think it points to. Essential to our practice of discernment however is the

cultivation of a listening heart and the loosening of the binds that might prevent us from hearing clearly, both individually and as covenant community. Through the rhythm of Guidance we come to know the will and way of God that becomes imprinted on our hearts. As we listen and live this Way, we can unbind each other's attention from the distractions of the world and help each other more and more to orient our hearts to the work of the Spirit around us and among us.

Foundational to this understanding is a rootedness in gratitude—for the breath in our lungs, for the rising of the sun on a new day and the first flowers of Spring, for the opportunity to gather in fellowship as Friends, for the quiet joy that meets us as we discover the place of unity with God, and witness the fruits of the Spirit being born among us.

Discernment, then, is not simply a *decisionmaking* process, but rather a process of having our hearts prepared to be the recipients and bearers of the Love and Compassion that come through studying with a Teacher whose heart seeks to be made known among us. If we allow it, this rhythm of Guidance reshapes our own hearts. On this long and winding path, we might someday—often with surprise and wonder—come to discover that we suddenly experience the world in a new way, perhaps with a fuller measure of acceptance, humility, patience, or loving humor. Long-held hurts might gently fall away. We are coming to see ourselves and others with the gaze of a Shepherd whose gentle direction we are learning to heed. This can happen slowly, as little by little we find ourselves more free from the resentment and anger that may be plaguing us. It can happen in a moment, when in the midst of rising rage or condemnation we are swept with compassion or forgiveness, overcome with a humble empathy that displaces prideful insistence.

Through ReOlded Eyes, we come to understand discernment as an unfolding in which the Reign of Heaven comes more alive in us, offering the opportunity to turn toward every decision, every crisis, every aspect of our living with greater attention to the Voice we have come to know. And from this place, the next step becomes clear.

When we consider the rhythm of guidance we might also speak about “a leading” or “a call” to take up a particular piece of work. While this sometimes may involve a concrete project or action we are to take, responding to a leading in a fuller sense can be understood as less about a fixed outcome and more about learning to be led. It takes time and regular practice to learn to hear the Shepherd's voice. It is the work of a lifetime to humbly seek to distinguish that Voice from the many others that demand our attention.

Generations of Friends have placed great emphasis on the importance of being watchful about where we place our attention, even and especially in the small things. Because it is where we place our attention that will shape how we live. As Jesus reminded his disciples, “It is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”

The more we find time and ways to listen for the Voice of the Spirit in our lives, the more finely tuned the ear of our heart becomes so that we may hear more easily and respond more readily—and reflexively—when we are called.

An orientation of Re-Olding reminds us that this has been a key concern of Friends since our early days. James Nayler warns: *For you will find many plants besides the tree of life, all of which seek to be fed and strengthened in the mind and in the affections.*

Another way of saying this might also be that the more we fill our lives with other voices, the more we give our time and attention to things that distract us, or that call us toward grievance rather than gratitude, toward an orientation that places our self-centered desires above the needs of others, the further we are drawn away from the capacity to hear the voice of Truth calling us home. This is why a communal practice of Guidance is essential in the life of our meetings.

A **fifth rhythm of common life** that is vital for a meeting to thrive is a rhythm of Testimony, where we support one another, again and again, as we each—and all—seek to carry the treasure and the implications of our faith into the whole of our lives, partnering with the Spirit in the redeeming of Creation, bearing the witness of joy and new life, as the community of Lazarus did, in the face of an often discordant and deadening culture.

And here is where I want to especially emphasize a particular gift that an attention to ReOlding might offer us. I believe that more than ever, we need to re-examine what we mean by “testimony”, and how our understanding of this term shapes our living.

I want to invite you to close your eyes for a moment as we settle into a brief period of stillness, and turn your attention to a person who has been a mentor, guide, or example to you in your walk of faith. Whose example, explicit or otherwise, offered you a pattern in some sense for how you hope to live today? Whose character, being, presence illustrates for you what it means to lead a faithful life, as part of a covenant community on pilgrimage in the Friends tradition?

Someone once asked me who I would say my mentor was. I will always remember the startled silence I fell into, finding myself at a loss for words. Why was this such a difficult

question to answer? Did I believe, from some deep wound of loneliness, that I had no one in my life I could claim in that way? And then, with a rush of tears, I realized: The question was difficult to answer, not because I had not been blessed by a mentor, but because I have been blessed with so many. These include not least a substantial number of you who are in this room, or listening online from your own home places. And I feel the presence of many others, no longer with us in body, hovering 'round us as we open our hearts to remember. So great a cloud of witnesses.

This, Friends, is what we might glimpse through ReOlding of our understanding of Testimony. I remember how powerful it was for me, and yet also how ringingly natural, when I first learned that the term “memorial minute”—that kind of spiritual obituary that many meetings write to remember and celebrate the life of a Friend after their passing—was relatively new in some Friends communities. The older term for this practice and the text that results, still in use among some of us, is “A testimony to the Grace of God as witnessed in the life of [this Friend].” And here, to me, is the place where the meaning of testimony turns.

ReOlding our understanding of testimony invites us to consider every aspect of our lives as bearing witness—as giving evidence—not to an abstract set of principles, but to the reality of the Love of God, at work in the world, through the vehicle of our changed and changing lives.

I want to invite you to think back to the faces of those Friends you brought to mind a few moments ago. Can you see, amidst whatever other qualities come to mind, the presence of their joy?

I have felt led several times over the years to open my eyes during a meeting for worship in my home meeting, and, with a tender gaze, to look around the room at those gathered. Through the years, through life together as covenant community, I have been given glimpses into the wounds, the pain, the grief, the triumphs, the struggles, the catastrophic heartbreak, the redemption, and the profound resilience that abides in the hearts of these particular Friends with whom I share in worship, and who have walked with me in the wildernesses of my own life. Sharing life together on this path of faith has changed us, and our lives bear witness to this humble and grace-filled Truth—even when all we have to give is a “cold and a broken hallelujah.” “By my works, the apostle James writes, I will show you my faith.” By our living, we make visible what is truly at the Center of our lives.

There is no perfection here; the story isn't finished. There is plenty of messiness and ugliness and woundedness and stumbling.

But through all this, the testimony that is the life of our meetings can and does bear witness that the steps of our feet are turning toward a way of being and becoming more alive in wonder, more free to love, more resilient, more forgiving, more grounded in joy. This testimony isn't just for us—it is a testimony to the whole world, to all of our siblings of all faiths and none, all with whom we share this wonder-filled, suffering, resplendent Creation. Perhaps as we seek to be in relationship with our neighbors, welcoming their gifts as well, the wider communities in which our meetings are rooted might grow in love, in tolerance, in resilience, in common care. And perhaps, for some we meet, the witness of our common life just might be received as a welcome and open invitation to join us on the journey.

In the rhythm of testimony, we learn to support one another as we seek to carry the promptings, implications, and fruits of our faith into the whole of our lives. This is not limited to public activism, or to political advocacy, or to public preaching, or to grand acts of courage. Testimony is the way that our repatterned hearts make palpably present the character of the Friend we are coming to know. It is the daily willingness to be instruments of a humble, world-changing power, sowing perennial seeds of a deeper and more resilient hope, an enduring and steadfast joy, wherever we may come. This is the rhythm of Testimony.

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So: five rhythms of common life, always in process in the covenant communities of a Friends meeting on pilgrimage, revealed with ReOlded Eyes. Five ways that the bound-up Lazarus among us—both thee and me—can be set free to more fully express the pattern of Divine Love in our world.

I have borne witness to the unbinding of Lazarus many times over the years through an unfolding journey of ministry under the care of my home meeting in Vermont. For two decades my service in ministry has been under the care of our local meeting, held in various forms by a group of Friends appointed by the meeting to exercise oversight and to assist in the stewardship of the responsibility the meeting has recognized in me.

I say responsibility, because that is my understanding of what it has meant to be recognized as carrying a particular gift of ministry in speech, writing, and presence: a charge from the community that has seen the life of the Spirit arising in me, calling me out of the cave of brokenness, again and again, and who in the unbinding of my heart and the unraveling of my grave clothes, has helped me to be a sometimes encourager for others. **I can testify tonight to two miracles, then:** To the infinite grace and

presence and re-enlivening power of God. And to the sacred participation of a particular collection of people, woven together in Spirit and shared living, in whose hands my grave clothes became part of a tapestry of resilience and joy.

And so we come to Joy.

We can hear its echoes in the Book of Job, when the Voice of the Eternal speaks from out of the Whirlwind to describe the first moments of Creation: "when the morning stars all sang together, and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy..." We can perhaps recognize that joy as the same that came to certain shepherds in the frozen night of First Century Palestine under foreign occupation and local corrupt misrule. It is the same joy that was born of the community in the unbinding of Lazarus—and the joy of those in later years who gave us this story—which so threatened the foundations of empty religion and empire that what followed from it bent the arc of history.

It is the same joy that embraces us in the testimony of James Nayler: tried for horrid blasphemy; tortured, branded; beaten and robbed by brigands, left for dead; yet still proclaiming with humble beauty the character of the Spirit in whose power he was set free. It is the same joy on the lips of Mary Dyer, as she was led to the gallows on Boston Common for preaching freedom in the Life and Power, proclaiming in that darkest hour the deepest joy she had ever felt, that "no eye could see, no ear could hear, no tongue could speak, no heart could understand." It is the joy that made its unassailable home in the heart of the Dutch-Jewish mystic Etty Hillesum, as she chose—though she could have avoided it—to accompany her neighbors and family to the Auschwitz death camp, to bear the witness of what she knew as "the thinking heart of God" among them, knowing that Love is stronger than death.

It is the same Joy described by Elise Boulding, the 20th Century Friends minister and peace advocate, who in 1956 offered this witness:

For the real difference between happiness and joy is that one is grounded in this world, the other in eternity. Happiness cannot encompass suffering and evil. Joy can. Happiness depends on the present. Joy leaps into the future and triumphantly creates a new present out of it. It is a fruit of the spirit, a gift of God — no [one] can own it... Joy is the ultimate liberation of the human spirit. It enables [us] to travel to the very gates of heaven and to the depths of hell, and never cease rejoicing.

It is this same joy, and the unshakable power of it—which we can discover together in the common life of our meetings—that mourns with God's beloveds held even now in the misery of detention camps; with the sick, the suffering, and the lonely; which cradles

children made orphans by the blasphemy of war waged in the name of the Prince of Peace. It is the joy that rekindles the fires of hope and animates the heart yearning, willing and laboring for justice and wholeness in these times. It is the Joy that is set before us also, now and forevermore. It is the Joy that overcomes the world.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that clings so closely—that so easily distracts—and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, the founder and perfecter, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and now abides at the inflection point—where everything comes together—the place of the homecoming in the Power and Presence of God.”

An Invitation, for after the lecture

Someone once jokingly suggested to me that if they were to assign me a “life verse” from Scripture, it would be the one from near the end of the Gospel of John where Jesus says to his disciples, “I have so much more to say to you...” And I do. I had hoped to explore with you the potential implications of this practice of seeing with ReOlded Eyes for other dimensions of our common life as Friends.

I’d have loved to explore further how, with ReOlded Eyes, we might approach the challenges of nurturing servant leadership in our meetings, or spiritual authority, or our relationship with the seasonality and the longer view of time, perhaps through our participation in quarterly and yearly meetings. Or how a ReOlding of our perspective might help us reveal and perhaps turn toward an emphasis on function over form in Friends organizations. Or how a perception of ReOlding might help us more fully restore a responsibility and rootedness in place, a more whole relationship between humanity and all with whom we share this miraculous, generous, suffering Creation.

I was excited to share with you about the spring migration of salamanders in the vernal pools in the hills where I live, and about the autumnal pilgrimage of thousands of raptors through the forested river valleys and ridges of my home. About seasoning firewood, and making honey. About the parable of the swallows, and what it might have to teach us about our spiritual journey together.

But I won’t—not tonight. Because we are finite creatures in finite time, and more would be distracting. So—perhaps even better—I must leave that to an unfolding conversation of which I hope this evening might be just an early invitation. So if you are willing, I want to send you out with some homework. The full and imperfect text of this address will be available to each of you who registered to attend, or anyone who emails the Quaker Leadership Center to ask for a copy.

My invitation to you is that you—and we—become (and receive through the Spirit) the “so much more to so say” that I was yearning for. This evening, or in the coming weeks and months, I invite you to find someone (hopefully with their permission) with whom to share your reflections, questions, or wonderings about anything you heard or felt tonight—ideally with someone who is a part of your local community of faith. Once you have shared—if they are willing—ask them to share with you, too. And see where the conversation might go from there.