



# SEEDS

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## Roots of Contemplation, Roots of Action: Quaker Contemplative Study

by Christine Betz Hall

I flung myself backwards on the bed, arms outstretched, exhausted. “God, what *IS* this?” I asked with baffled astonishment into an empty Honduran guest room. At the end of a year of volunteer service at an orphanage in the Central American mountains, after three or four good-bye parties, a wave of inner confusion had built to this peak. I’d heard hours of appreciation for my contributions to the life of the community, received countless hugs, and felt pleased yet surprised that my presence and skills had been so meaningful. But I couldn’t find words in my spiritual vocabulary to name what was happening to me. The answer came in a flash—an inward, bemused, welcoming, “This is Love.” I savored the sense of being enfolded and buoyed up in the love of God.

The gift of that day was present whether or not I asked my question. But I needed to ask, to seek to name, to open myself to listen deeply for a Divine reply. Yes, God is always reaching for us, but we’re not always prepared to recognize and respond. On my journey of faith, I’ve yearned for *words*, to help me notice and name the Life woven through the ordinary and the extraordinary moments of my days. It’s a holy longing that led me into graduate studies of scripture, spiritual direction/guidance, and back to the roots of my Quaker-Christian heritage. I discovered helpful companions in the Bible and Quaker history; they make it easier to understand and claim my personal experience and point my gifts outward again to serve the world’s need.

Study—reading, exploration of Quaker stories and “words about God” (or “theology”)—has become a central spiritual discipline for me. *Contemplative* study specifically differs in important ways from other approaches to religious education. I don’t read so much for information; I read for *formation*—to be shaped, and transformed by the Spirit “who loves me better than I know how to love myself.”<sup>1</sup> I explore from the inside out with our Guide. I ask where my life is answered in the truths I have read, and where I am invited to grow more faithful. Where my intellect and soul meet in service to the Holy One, I honor the great commandment, to love YHWH, “with all my heart, all my soul, and all my *mind*.” (Matthew 22:37). Contemplative study occurs in the intersection of personal experience, openhearted exploration of a text, and inward prayer.

Hear again the question I prayed aloud in Honduras: “God, what *IS* this?” Hear my curiosity, my ache to connect the dots. When I study, I question how my life echoes what others have known and expressed before. I trust that “Truth” isn’t limited to what I know, feel and sense within me, but rises in dialogue with people and ideas I encounter in reading and reflective discussion. I choose to be part of a spiritual conversa-



-tion that stretches back in time and across lines of Christian denominations. I trust that what Quakers call “continuing revelation” is manifest in the interaction between my experience and Christian heritage. So I heard God’s answer to my question, “What *IS* this?” alongside the cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1); I hear of Love that flows in an infinite ocean over the darkness as George Fox described; with Thomas Kelly, I “... know the Divine Concern tenderly enwrapping us and all things within His persuading love;”<sup>2</sup> and I know what it is to be made new (Ephesians 4:23).

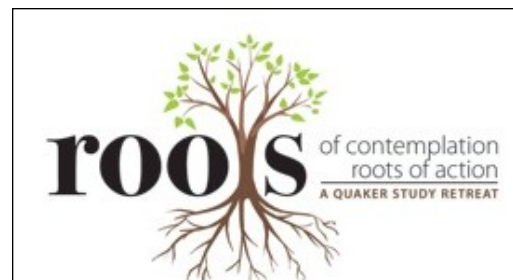
“Open-hearted exploration” means my curiosity with scripture and other devotional reading expects some pleasant surprises, and is patient enough to wait for clarity instead of pushing for answers. Curiosity carries me forward when I feel stuck. I hold my preconceptions about the material lightly. I *wonder* about things with a perspective bigger than my own: “What could this have meant to the writer, to early Christians, to the first Quakers, to me? What is the Spirit up to here?” Curiosity allows me to acknowledge paradoxes I encounter. I honor the importance of personal experience and larger tradition, subjective reaction and objective fact, and Christ-centered and Universalist interpretations of the Quaker heritage.

What can make studious work “contemplative” is the kind of inward listening familiar to Quakers in open or unprogrammed worship. When my own mental chatter stills, in receptive silence I wait on the Presence to make Itself known as It will. I wait on God, not for my benefit or for a self-improvement agenda, but for Divine whispers on God’s agenda. Richard Foster describes how the contemplative stream of the Christian tradition “...forces us beyond merely a cerebral religion. It insists on the insufficiency of intellectual formulation alone.”<sup>3</sup> Contemplation reflects our foundational devotion to God.

Since it is not the world’s way of “getting things done,” many people dismiss contemplative prayer as too passive, not engaged enough in the healing of suffering. Thomas Kelly answers my doubts with ringing Truth: “There is an experience of the Eternal breaking into time, which transforms all life into a miracle of faith and action. Unspeakable, profound, and full of glory as an inward experience, it is the root of concern for all creation, the true ground of social endeavor.”<sup>4</sup>

The Holy calls to me through study, through reading and through integrating the wisdom of our Christian and Quaker ancestors. I am given words for “What *IS* this?” moments, and courage to live into my gifts in service. Contemplative study may not be your primary spiritual practice, but all are invited to taste and see its power. If the Spirit speaks to your condition through my story, come explore with other faithful Friends on retreat March 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011. With Jon Kershner of Northwest Yearly Meeting, I welcome Quakers from Evangelical and Unprogrammed faith communities in the Pacific Northwest to the Shalom Prayer Center in Mount Angel, Oregon. The website offers full details:

<http://rootsretreat.braidedwaters.com>.



1 from contemplative François Fenelon, 1651-1715

2 Kelly, Thomas R., *A Testament of Devotion*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, pg.18

3 Foster, Richard J., *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*. [San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998, pg. 15

4 Kelly, op. cit, pg. 65



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