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On Kneading Each Other

by Christine Betz Hall

The [Way of the Spirit](#) contemplative study program began with an extraordinary retreat in January ([report here](#)). This year-long retreat series offered through Good News Associates, empowers participants for Spirit-led service. January's diverse circle, including both Unprogrammed and Evangelical Friends, explored personal discernment in the Quaker and Christian

*"Therefore, dear Friends . . . consider one another, and provoke one another to love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of yourselves . . . and dwell in love and unity in the pure eternal Light; there is your fellowship, there is your cleansing and washing. Keep you all here faithful to your own measure."
—Margaret Fell¹*

heritage. April's module will examine our relationships to our faith communities, "Where we are shaped in order to become God's instruments in the world."² Immersed in preparatory readings, the dynamic action of that "shaping" got me thinking of making bread.

What if I picture a community of faith like bread dough rising in a big ceramic bowl? Imagine what happens both inside and outside the bowl: *In* the bowl of our church or meeting, we find a unique mix of ingredients—people, circumstances, needs. The interaction of the ingredients and gospel yeast (Matthew 13:33) grows a gooey sludge into something more than any element alone could ever be. Tending the dough requires patience, kneading, a punching down, and finally shap-

ing for the oven. *Outside* the bowl, the smell of dough rising entices the hungry and promises nourishment. Some would name God as the baker in this metaphor. Quakers know that the Life and Power of God works through all the parts and processes of creating and distributing loaves for a hungry world. It's the kneading that captures my imagination today, since our wider culture doesn't encourage us to "need each other" much. I've made enough bread to know that good kneading makes the best bread; it's the arduous work that slowly aligns grain fibers for maximum elasticity in relationship to each other.

After eight minutes or so of constant push and pull, the dough seems to relax and move more easily under my hands. Relationships in our faith communities also mix us, stretch and



shape us through struggles and conflict into something at the least edible and sometimes miraculous. We *need* each other so much more than I ever imagined.

I started out as an individualistic “me and God” seeker, and for twenty years have felt Quakers drawing me beyond self-imposed limitations, nurturing my gifts, and calling me to service. God has used others to help heal the flaws that plague me. Other faithful people counter the extremes of my self-limitations, inviting me out of despair or self-doubt, and tempering the places I still act as if “I ought to do it myself.” Most people say that messing with each others' lives like this is invasive. But I wonder if the paralyzed man complained at his friends' assistance when they lowered him through the roof over Jesus' head. “When Jesus saw *their* faith” (a group of people) he healed him (Mark 2:1-12). I hear a challenge to *let go* into vibrant, healthy *interdependence*, both for personal healing and the greater good of the reign of God. Through my own fear and doubt, with the support of our Quaker communities, my husband and I offered a Peace Tax Witness, served a volunteer year in Honduras, and now I'm starting the joyous work with *Way of the Spirit*. Rugged self-reliance has been my prison; the Good News is freedom in community!

"When we understand Meeting to be a covenant experience, everything is different . . . Meeting is not a place of shelter from the world so much as a place where we are shaped in order to become God's instrument in the world."
—Lloyd Lee Wilson,²

Beyond the warm fuzzies of welcome friendship and support, I am called to embrace conflicts and my mistakes in ways that stretch me. Meeting or church business, spiritual friendships, clearness and support committees provide the opportunities—the baking laboratory, or the “school of the Spirit.” Contemporary Quaker, Parker Palmer, bluntly states “our sins and our failures” are the “stuff of community. . . . In those difficult areas of our lives we confront the human condition, and we begin to learn compassion. . . .”³ My personal kneading has required humility—private soul searching and public apology.

I didn't choose or imagine I needed to be kneaded. Admitting my failings and forgiving others theirs usually frightens me. Often I'd rather avoid the awkwardness, the embarrassment, maybe even find another place to worship. It's decidedly counter-cultural to lovingly “stay at the table” through the struggle. Regardless, with the encouragement of the Inward Teacher, I have begged forgiveness for my errors. I've muddled through apologies. I have been transformed through the resolution of wrenching conflict, and seen the healing of relationships feed the soul of the community. This is no ordinary bread, but the Bread of Life.

How are you kneaded in your meeting or church?

Read a full description of the *Way of the Spirit* program in [SEEDS September 2011](#). This summer, I plan to visit annual sessions in the West to share more. Please consider attending *Way of the Spirit* in the 2013 retreat cycle.

Endnotes:

Margaret Fell, quoted in Patricia Loring's *Listening Spirituality Volume II: Corporate Spiritual Practices Among Friends* (S.I.: Openings Press, 2009), 47.

² Wilson, Lloyd Lee, *Essays on a Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*. (Burnsville, N.C.: Celo Valley Books, 1993), 71.

³ Parker Palmer. *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 31.



A 20 year member of the Religious Society of Friends in the unprogrammed tradition, Christine Betz Hall holds a Masters Degree in Transforming Spirituality from Seattle University's ecumenical School of Theology and Ministry. As an experienced spiritual director, educator and retreat leader, she is called to teach and nurture the spiritual lives of individuals, Quaker communities and the larger Society of Friends.

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