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SECTION OF THE AMERICAS  
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WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP

a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation,

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# Nourishing the Spiritual Life: Finding Companionship

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Excerpted from  
*Nourishing the Spiritual Life*  
Published 1995 by  
Quaker Home Service, London, England

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## About the Author

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## *Nourishing the Spiritual Life: Finding Companionship*

Even in the most rigorous silence and solitude, in the lives of cloistered religious, or hermits given over to the practice of interior prayer, the search for God's will is also the search for companionship. Certainly it is a search for the companionship of God, but it also seeks out those companions in the search whose struggles illuminate our own, whose discoveries give us the courage to persist, and whose witness clarifies and sustains our own. What is devotional reading if not a way to find and enter into conversation with a true companion in the search? What is reading liturgy, or singing psalms and hymns, if not another way to cherish our companions? 'There is a spiritual community binding together the living and the dead, the good, the brave, and the wise, of all ages,' says William Wordsworth. 'We would not be rejected from this community; and therefore do we hope.' Among the best ways we use solitude and silence is to invite into our company, and give our attention to, those other witnesses who enlarge the boundaries of possibility for us, who act as reality checks, confirmation and examples for us.

It is a great blessing to have such companions in our daily lives, especially if we can call them on the phone, see them in meeting, get together for meals, exchange baby-sitting with them. Best of all is to share family life and the raising of children with them. But we can also have a larger community of such companions, those we know only through the accounts of their lives or through the words they have left us.

I want to consider especially the nourishment that can come from two particular sources: the words of those with whom we agree, who seem to speak to our experiences, beliefs and opinions with great clarity; and the words of those with whom we disagree, who speak of other experiences and beliefs than ours, sometimes truly

alien experiences and beliefs, with such genuineness and clarity that we are grateful for their witness, even when it challenges our own.

I especially want to suggest that we impoverish ourselves spiritually when we close ourselves off too quickly from the witnesses with whom we disagree, or when, to appropriate their words for our own beliefs, we translate or transpose what they say into the words and ideas with which we are already comfortable. The pleasure of companionship with those whose words closely fit our own experiences hardly needs explanation, but it deserves at least some celebration. Each of us has known the wonder and delight of having our thoughts, hopes and experiences given back to us by another, perhaps someone of another time or place. In an instant our doubts and our loneliness are relieved. She knows what I am going through; he has also experienced what is happening to me. I am not all alone, nor am I crazy to believe as I do. There is at least one other voice which confirms my understanding of reality, and if I can trust that other voice, I will be able to trust my inner voice as well.

Such companionship is food and drink to our spiritual lives. But it also has its dangers. Being agreed with is not necessarily evidence that I am on the right track. My new acquaintances who persuade me that I am not crazy could also be crazy. If I depend only on the evidence of the like-minded, I may waste my spirit in self-justification, self-aggrandizement. I may also become stale, bored and boring in my spiritual life.

That is why the other kind of companionship is so valuable, the companionship of the sincere adversary, the opponent who operates faithfully from a different set of convictions, and whose life bears good fruit. What I have in mind is what happens when we discover that there is no way that we can make our different words mean the same

must be as a respectful seeker, not as a tourist sneering at what is unfamiliar. If I stand in my own doorway, I greet others, perhaps with some heart-sorrow that we must maintain some separations because our understanding, experience and integrity require that we stand where we are, but always with good will and gratitude for their witness.

The poet Robert Bly quotes a haiku by Basho:

The morning glory –  
Another thing  
that will never be my friend.

Commenting on the poem, Bly says that we feel separated when we first realize that the natural world may not need us, but then we feel a sense of joy to realize that each thing has its own integrity, independent of us. Not everything has to include us, in order to be valuable or to have its own integrity. I want to suggest that, for many of us, the first task when hearing words that do not agree with us, which express things which trouble us or which we think we have outgrown, is not to stop listening and not to substitute our own words, but to listen harder to what the other person is trying to say. We may find something whose worlds, in Robert Bly's words, 'is complete without us.' We stand in our own doorway and greet the other standing in hers. Something which speaks to our condition may not be saying what we want to hear. When we listen this way, to what is alien to us and may have no particular intention to include us, we may find spiritual companionship of the adversary and the critic. That may ultimately be more valuable to us than the isolation which comes from hearing only our own voices, or their echoes, again and again. □

formulation came. I do not make words my own simply by appropriating them from another and editing them to my own satisfaction. We seem to understand that instinctively with some material. Many of us find ourselves able to sing the original words of African-American spirituals, and perhaps some old Gospel hymns, without feeling compromised, even if some of the words do not express our own experience in the way we find comfortable. Perhaps we sing these songs as we find them because we know that, at that moment, we are honoring someone else's deepest spiritual experience, expressing our solidarity with those voices whose songs these are. Perhaps there are some songs and prayers which do not have to be reshaped or updated to fit our orthodoxy. Something about their integrity challenges us, makes them available to us as enlargements of our own language and imagery. Perhaps they show us that our language is thinner than it might be.

Certainly there are times when we must reshape a text from the past, as the only way to make it our own, but perhaps we do that more quickly than we need to, eliminating pronouns or images which differ from our preferred ones before we have found out what they have to say to us. Each text has its own horizon, and we learn most from reading when we let our own horizon line be compared with the horizon line of another, perhaps to find a new horizon line which best incorporates both.

Martin Buber speaks of humans trying to communicate with one another from different faith-perspectives in a lovely image: I stand in the doorway of my faith and greet others standing in the doorways of their faiths. The image reminds us that there is a space in between, which marks our separations but is also public space where all are free to meet and address one another. I may not presume to stand in the doorway of another's faith; I must wait for an invitation to enter. If I enter, it

thing, without violating one another's integrity, yet in our separateness we share goodwill toward one another, a trust that we are each right to go our different ways. Such encounters with difference confirm each of us, at the same time confirming that we live in a world where profound differences are significant.

Anyone middle aged or older in this society will recall how, when we were young, many people of good will were trying to improve what was then called race relations by a strategy of minimizing or ignoring racial differences between people. Because the larger society used racial differences invidiously, as the justification for oppression, one would hear sensitive people say, in reaction, 'I never notice what race another person is,' or, 'I forgot to notice whether she was black or white.' Parents would try to train themselves and their children to ignore or suppress awareness of racial differences. In those days, when segregation in housing, public accommodations, restaurants, recreational facilities and the like was common everywhere, the foundation-stone of those working for integration was to ignore or forget our racial or ethnic differences, except for the occasional ethnically-balanced banquet or evening of folk-dances from around the world. Let us treat those differences as trivial surface qualities, such sensitive people said, and look beneath the surface, where we are all essentially alike.

When, some years later, Black Consciousness became a powerful liberating force in this society, we had to face that what such forgetting of differences had meant was that some white folks had, truly out of the goodness, though not the wisdom, of their hearts, pretended that their black acquaintances were honorary whites. Denying that the differences between people were important meant denying that our individual identities were important. But what is on the surface is also part of

what is in the depth of our being, and it too deserves to be celebrated.

The first and most difficult step toward finding spiritual companionship with the other is to acknowledge the otherness with respect. Can an observant Conservative Jew and a devout Evangelical Christian become spiritual companions to one another? What they have which is most valuable to one another, their deepest commitments, is also what would separate them most completely. The Conservative Jew awaits the Messiah and lives according to the laws which God had ordained. That is his part in preparing for the Messiah. The Christian is absolutely convinced that the Messiah has come, in the person of Jesus Christ, and lives her life in the fullest devotion to that conviction. She believes that her part in preparing for the future is to live a life freed from all the laws her Jewish companion tries to follow scrupulously.

If we assume that the only way two such people can be spiritual companions is if they agree to avoid all acknowledgement of their differences, or find some level of abstraction which makes the differences look small, we trivialize the lives of both, for their actions and motives, the very textures of their lives, are created by what they believe. And much of what each believes will be simply untranslatable and inassimilable into the other's language.

Think how much more difficult, even tormented, a process it has become in our time to find true spiritual companionship, the companionship of equals, between women and men. How much see-sawing back and forth we must do, from treating each other as symbol, to knowing each other as individual, to knowing each other simultaneously as individual and symbol, this man and all men, this woman and all women. How many knots we must untie from our pasts, from all the bad encounters we have had with the other, represented now as either man or

woman. But think, as well, how much more rewarding that companionship can be, when we each have had to see the world through the other's perspective and treat it with respect. How rewarding it is to work at such a companionship, knowing it as a mutual, reciprocal process.

For many of us, the experience of finding spiritual companionship among people profoundly different from us is a joyful one. The greater the difference, the more careful we are to treat our companions with respect. What is far harder, for many of us, is listening respectfully to, and finding the spark of truth in, those who are in our immediate family. If one is a religious liberal, which is easier to imagine finding companionship with – the Buddhist or the evangelical Christian? The unbeliever, or the fundamentalist Christian? If one is an evangelical Quaker, how easy is it to listen respectfully to the liberal Quaker who says she believes in 'that of God in everyone'? We have deep respect for the images and practices of Native American spirituality. We have deep respect for the languages in which Hinduism or Buddhism express their commitments. But for our fellow Quakers of a different tradition or perhaps for people who speak in traditional Christian language, who needs to listen? Who needs to leave their words in their traditional form? Those are just my idiot cousins talking.

Someone has propounded the riddle: Why are Quakers such poor singers? The answer is, because they are always reading ahead to see if they agree with the words. Like most jokes, that has only a part of the truth in it. And of course there are good reasons to want the words we sing, particularly in worship, to have as much integrity as the words we say. But there are at least two integrities to consider here: my integrity, as I sing or speak the words of another, and the integrity of that other, another person, another tradition, out of which the