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The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows live in over 90 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. Wider Quaker Fellowship depends on the financial support of its readers to provide this service.

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Friends Center, 1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA
Tel: 215.241.7250
email: wqf@fwccamericas.org

The Witness of Conservative Friends William and Frances Taber

FRANCES & WILLIAM TABER



The Wider Quaker Fellowship
La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

William and Frances Taber have spoken and written out of their background in Conservative Quakerism. William P. Taber, Jr. (1927–2005) was a beloved minister among Friends. His work among Quakers included teaching in Friends schools and thirteen years on the staff of Pendle Hill, where he taught about the history, practice, and spirituality of Quakerism. His published work includes *Be Gentle, Be Plain, the History of Olney*; *The Eye of Faith, the History of Ohio Yearly Meeting*; “The Prophetic Stream” (PH Pamphlet #256); “Four Doors to Meeting for Worship” (PH Pamphlet # 306) “The Mind of Christ, Bill Taber on meeting for Business,” edited by Michael Birkel (PH Pamphlet #406), and several articles on Quaker subjects. He was also a valued spiritual counselor. He and Frances, sometimes together, sometimes separately, have spoken about or led retreats on various aspects of Quakerism, prayer, and the spiritual journey.

Frances Irene Taber, while she and Bill were at Pendle Hill, was a Resident Program student, served on the cooking team, and taught Quakerism with Bill. Fran initiated and for a number of years guided personal retreat opportunities at Pendle Hill. Out of this work came “Come Aside and Rest Awhile” (PH Pamphlet #335). For ten years Fran was a core teacher in the program On Being a Spiritual Nurturer in the School of the Spirit Ministry. She is also the author of “Finding the Taproot of Simplicity, A Movement Between Inner Knowledge and Outer Action” (PH Pamphlet #400). After retiring to their home at Barnesville, Ohio, Bill and Fran coordinated the work of Ohio Yearly Meeting’s new retreat center. After Bill Taber’s death, Fran married Richard Simon. They live near Olney Friends School at Barnesville and are active in Stillwater Monthly Meeting and Ohio Yearly Meeting.

Photo, cover, by Judith Inskeep

This essay was first presented as a talk to North Carolina Yearly Meeting Conservative in 2004.

QUERIES

Following are some queries about the text, which you may wish to use for reflection or study, individually or with others.

1. How have your early life experiences affected your spiritual life today?
 2. Bill Taber mentions that he had to learn many Quaker languages. What languages do you have to translate, for yourself or others?
 3. Which of the six practices of Conservative Friends, outlined by Fran Taber, do you recognize most clearly in the Quakers around you?
 4. What paradoxes do you believe in?
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by us today. To wait upon God—as in waiting worship—is to be profoundly attentive and available, always ready to respond to the Inward Motion or simply rest in the Divine Presence. Such waiting can take a long time as we allow the Inward Light to transform us inwardly. Such waiting can be instantaneous when in an eyeblink we can go to that Inward Place in the midst of conversation or trouble or in the midst of beauty. In a micro-second such waiting can give us clarity about what to say or do—or not to say or do!

The second word is Truth, spelled with a capital T. The word Truth was much used by early Friends and by earlier generations of Conservative Friends. Truth could mean God, or the will of God, or the whole meaning of the gospel, or Christ the Light, the Life. Truth was something to be in, to be lived in. To be in the Truth was to be in touch with the Light and to live according to its guidance. To be in the Truth was to be in living communion not only with the Light but also with all those who are guided by the Light. So Friends could know one another as being in the Truth not so much by their words of doctrine as by the way they were willing to suffer—and by the way they stood, and breathed. They could feel one another in the depths of the heart.

And the last word is the Stream! When we are in this listening or waiting state we are often brought into the Stream, that Stream of reality which has always existed from the beginning of time. In that Stream time is in some sense irrelevant, in another sense is important. All who have ever known this life are in some mysterious way in that Stream even now, or so it feels to me. When we enter worship or a meeting for worship for business, when we are in the right place inwardly, we step into the Stream, a slightly different state of consciousness. Many of us have known what it feels like. It's as real as stepping into a stream of water, although it's very hard to describe.

THE WITNESS OF CONSERVATIVE FRIENDS WILLIAM AND FRANCES TABER

Both of us grew up among Conservative Friends—Bill in Ohio Yearly Meeting, Fran in Iowa Conservative and in Ohio. We recognize that each person who is identified with Conservative Friends has a unique take on who we are as a group, shaped by individual experience.

Fran Speaks:

I was especially aware of this when reading *Growing Up Plain*, by Wilmer Cooper. This is the story of a cousin of mine whose experience growing up in another branch of the same family, at the tail end of my mother's generation, was noticeably different from my own.

I need to guard against regarding my own experience as normative—a natural impulse we all have. A distinctive characteristic of mine, however, is its intensity. I grew up more completely immersed in the Conservative Quaker culture than most of my contemporaries. I lived in three neighborhoods in two yearly meetings—in Whittier Meeting in Iowa, and in Stillwater and Middleton Meetings in Ohio. I attended three Friends primary schools—those one-room schools once maintained by many monthly meetings. I was also home schooled for two years before that term was invented. My four high school years were spent at Olney Friends School, Ohio Yearly Meeting's boarding school, and I had one year at each of two Quaker colleges. I was guided by parents who were 100% in earnest about living out their faith. So I was as deeply immersed in and consequently formed by Quaker culture, particularly Conservative Quaker culture, as anyone of my age. I do have in this experience a tool for looking at what the witness of Conservative Friends has been, once I developed the psychological distance to look at it.

A few glimpses into the culture of my childhood: Sitting by

mother in the white frame meetinghouse in Whittier, Iowa, I recall looking up at the ministers' gallery and hearing my Grandmother Smith speak with a sweetness still remembered by a great niece as well as her grandchildren. I was aware of my parents wrestling with questions of discernment, about a move the family might make or what to do about schooling for my brother and myself. I listened both to their words and to their silences. I experienced mother's early efforts to train me in discernment. I was aware of my father's wrestling with his response to Selective Service in World War II. I lived immersed in community as my natural habitat. I experienced the care and support of members of the meeting community and the meeting neighborhood for each other regardless of emphases and degrees of commitment in their living out of their faith and practice. These experiences and many others gave me a sense of who we were as a people once I began to look at them closely enough and also with sufficient perspective.

Bill's voice:

Like Fran, I was taken to meeting as a baby—so I always went to meeting as a child and grew accustomed to sitting in silence. Even though my family was not so conservative as Fran's, I grew up bilingual, using the plain language –thee and thine— with family and fellow Quakers, but knowing how to switch immediately to the regular language when with my playmates who were not Friends. My grandmother still wore a Quaker bonnet when I was a boy and several of my great aunts and uncles in other meetings also wore the plain clothing. Later when I was nine and ten my family moved to Barnesville where we were just a five-minute walk from the one-room Quaker school and the meetinghouse. So during that year I was immersed in the Conservative Quaker community there, though I still had some playmates who were not Quakers.

When I was ten, my family moved to Pittsburgh where we became involved in a new meeting which eventually joined the

won't be anyone left to explain to! Those Conservative Friends meetings who are too non-verbal tend to die out, just as those who were too strict or too rigid also tended to die out. So we recognize that our Christianity is not only non-verbal but also supra-verbal. That is, whatever words we use are never fully adequate to describe this Reality. So, we recognize that our Christianity is more than verbal; it has to do with the way we hold our body, breathe, and interact with each other. Some have noted that we feel more about what's around us. I remember a man who married into the meeting, and remarked with some puzzlement about how some of the family seemed to know things that he didn't know unless somebody said it. So perhaps we have a non-verbal capacity that builds up because of the inward listening.

Our witness is also to the multiple meanings of the word “wait”—a word used Those of us who grew up in an old Conservative meeting probably recognize the non-verbal element in our spiritual formation. We learned Quakerism by osmosis, just by being with Friends who were in touch with and responsive to this Reality. It was as if we could learn in silence with no words or few words being spoken. A recent phone conversation with Deborah Fisch shows this. She joined in her early 20's the Paullina Conservative Friends meeting, then a vigorous rural meeting in northwest Iowa. When she would ask about spiritual things, and the reasons behind various practices, she would be told, “Well, you have time to watch and listen and wait; eventually you will understand.” And she usually did. Then she commented, and I agree, that we don't have that kind of time any more, since the average meeting attender moves every few years. So our witness as 21st century Conservative Friends is, I believe, to be willing to speak about our precious inward and corporate experience; to be willing even if our experience is not perfect.

Our witness is also to the multiple meanings of the word “wait”—a word used dozens of times by George Fox and still used

others to be one of our identifying characteristics, but I believe the characteristics I have spoken about are more central to the identity of Conservative Friends. Outward practices such as plain dress are significant as a faithful outgrowth of listening and discerning. We need to look at the root of these practices to find the equivalent place of faithfulness for ourselves. And what is the root of the practice? It is most simply making room for God in one's life. Before Friends used the word 'plain' to describe their dress, they said they were getting rid of superfluities, discarding the unnecessary to make room for the essential. As we continue to do that we will be led to the outward practices that are required of us now if we are to live faithful to God's call in our lives.

Bill on our witness for today:

So what is our witness for today? I have noted a few things. Our witness is to a Reality so vast that we can never comprehend it or describe it, yet we know we need to talk about this Reality and its effect on us and on our behavior in the world. In broadest terms we call this Reality God.

Our witness is that when we are truly ourselves we are profoundly attentive to this Reality, sometimes moment by moment, and obedient to what this Reality asks us to be or to do or not to be or not to do.

Our witness has been — and is — that this Reality, however vast and incomprehensible, can be very personal and loving as our teacher and guide. Early Friends and Conservative Friends have described this sustaining, energizing and teaching presence as the light of the living Christ, sometimes as the Inward Light, the Guide, the Inward Monitor, and many other terms.

Our witness has been to a non-verbal or supra-verbal Christianity. Some Conservative Friends have become too non-verbal! We do need to explain things to our children and inquirers. If we wait three generations before things are fully explained there

Friends General Conference. So from the age of ten I had one foot in the Conservative world and one foot in the liberal world. However, I always kept my membership in Stillwater Meeting at Barnesville and somehow always recognized Barnesville as my spiritual home. My four high school years at Olney Friends School continued my assimilation of a Conservative culture and worldview. After Olney, as I moved out into the wider Quaker world which included pastoral Friends and many varieties of unprogramed Friends, I found I had to learn many different Quaker languages. So, particularly when I taught at Pendle Hill in the 1980's and 1990's, I thought of myself as a translator, always trying to communicate the reality of the experience which Conservative Friends were still trying to conserve, but also to keep alive and growing.

Fran again:

My thinking about conservative Quakerism and its relationship to the rest of Quakerism may have begun with reading Clarkson's *Quakerism* when in my twenties. Thomas Clarkson was not a Quaker; he was a friend of the Friends who became well acquainted with British Quakers because of his anti-slavery activism at the turn of the 19th century. He was so familiar with Friends that he wrote a *Portraiture of Quakerism* describing Friends as he knew them in their attitudes, their spirit and their intentions as lived out in their culture and their everyday lives. Reading this portrait of British Quakerism around 1800, in Ohio in the 1950's, I recognized in it the flavor of the Quakerism I had grown up with in Iowa and Ohio in the 1930's and 1940's. This led me to think of that Quakerism as a window back in time, to help understand the reality of what Friends had tried to be in what is sometimes referred to as the classic period of Quakerism. Besides, my copy of Clarkson's *Quakerism* had once been a text at Westtown School, so I knew that the Philadelphia Friends among whom my mother

had grown up had regarded it as a model! So, when we talk about the contribution of Conservative Friends, we are also trying to talk about the witness of Quakerism in a classic sense; we are trying to get at something we consider essential to Quakerism. And our unique witness is not unique after all, except that we have hung on to certain characteristics, certain practices, long enough to be able to share them now, with you.

This brings me to the word “paradox.” In our various attempts to interpret Quakerism, Bill and I each arrived at one way or another of describing one of its key elements as the holding together of paradoxical understandings of truth. In this view, the various separations in Quakerism can be seen as resulting from one or another group of Friends emphasizing one side of a paradox at the expense of the other. Howard Brinton (director of Pendle Hill in its early years), in his drawing of the Quaker family tree, placed Conservative Friends in the center. That position reflected what this group of Friends meant to do—to hold onto their deeply felt experience of the Inward Light and its guidance in their lives and also their equally deeply held understanding of the historical ground of that experience in the life, teaching, death and on-going spiritual life of Jesus Christ as incarnation of the Divine life on earth.

Friends today may describe themselves as Christian or Christ-centered in faith, or as having their faith grounded in a belief that every person has access to a Light within. We understand that for Friends up through the early 19th century, both were essential to their faith. For them belief and experience were two sides of the same reality. Later Quakers have tended to separate into parties, one emphasizing one aspect of the dynamic reality of the spiritual life, one another. What Conservative Friends intended to do was to hold on to both. Sometimes they held on so tightly that they became rigid. But we see Conservative Friends as witnessing to the need to hold the two ends of a paradox in living, dynamic relationship to each other, if our faith is to be a living, growing one.

who have been shaped by the 20th century’s individualistic assumptions about who we are and what our goals are as persons. The assumptions are different; it takes work. My exploration of my own formation in Quaker community led to my identifying for myself some characteristics of what I’m calling ‘corporate being’. There is a feeling of belonging that persists despite differences in the meeting. This can include a disinclination to leave the meeting community looking for greener spiritual pastures. It also involves deference to corporate wisdom that comes out of an understanding that God guides us through the corporate discernment of the group as well as through personal experience of the Inward Light. We believe that personal guidance needs to be checked with the faith community.

6. Recognition of spiritual gifts in the context of unprogrammed worship: In Ohio Yearly Meeting we recognize and record gifts in the vocal ministry. We appoint elders and overseers, attempting to do this with an awareness of the spiritual gifts of members. We feel this recognition is important as a way of nurturing and encouraging spiritual growth, spiritual faithfulness and spiritual leadership in the meeting. It is important to those who are recognized, that their gifts may have the support necessary to help them mature. It is important to the meeting, that it have the benefit of spiritual gifts that have had a ripening. We understand that the spiritual gift of an individual belongs not to the person but to the meeting, and is intended for its benefit.

The thing that people are likely to ask about first when inquiring about Conservative Friends, I have deliberately left until last. Very recently when we were visited by a young Friend from the U.K., she wondered whether there is a continuing tradition of plain dress among Conservative Friends. Plain dress seems to

with words, a concern for truthfulness and accuracy in speech that goes far beyond avoiding the double standard of honesty implied in the practice of taking legal oaths. Coupled with this and a part of it was an awareness that however carefully we choose our words, they can never contain the whole Truth. They cannot contain our whole understanding of that in which we place our faith. It is this understanding of the ultimate inadequacy of words that underlies our avoidance of the use of creeds, rather than a disagreement with the idea of making a clear confession of Christian faith. It is rather an understanding that any one formulation of faith can never contain the whole truth, and so may not be imposed as the norm.

5. Corporate being: This aspect of who we are requires some explanation. It can be very much a part of who one is without one's being aware of it. It has much to do with how a well-functioning meeting acts as one, as a body. Friends used to refer to the meeting as 'the body'. Like much in Quakerism, this quality has only begun to be articulated in recent years. I first began to think about it consciously during Bill's and my years at Pendle Hill, when I was in my fifties. When I was speaking with Sandra Cronk and she was talking about the corporate nature of Friends, I couldn't understand what she was talking about! Sonnie simply remarked, "Oh you don't know how much you've been marked by it!" This comment resulted in a challenge to me to explore my own formative experience. Only after doing that did I begin to get a sense of what Sonnie meant. I discovered some characteristics of this corporate way of being, which simply means recognition that one is part of a body that is larger than one's individual self. It means understanding the meeting community as an organism that is responsive to God as a whole, rather than as a collection of individuals. This understanding is difficult for persons

Bill on the historical context of Conservative Quakerism:

It seemed to me that in order to understand who we are today it would be useful to go back and look a little bit at our history. The great divide within American Quaker history was in 1827 and 1828 when most American yearly meetings divided into Hicksite and Orthodox branches, all except North Carolina and most of New England. These two yearly meetings recognized themselves as part of the Orthodox stream, but they had not separated. Once American Quakers had begun to separate in 1827, it was as if they had lost their balance wheel. For example, there was a gradual and sometimes rapid development of evangelical theology in many places in the Orthodox yearly meetings. Then when the New England Quaker, John Wilbur, was disowned for criticizing the evangelical writings and preaching of a brilliant British Quaker, Joseph John Gurney, it caused another separation. So the Wilburite New England yearly meeting was formed in 1845. In the meantime the Hicksite yearly meetings were moving toward a more and more liberal theology.

The next big Wilburite-Gurneyite separation (we now use the word Gurneyite for those who were on the other side of the Wilburites in the Orthodox yearly meetings) was in Ohio in 1854. After this the Wilburites remained isolated from the rest of Quakerism and often from each other for a generation. A substantial part of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting also remained strongly Wilburite throughout the 19th century.

Meanwhile most Gurneyite or Orthodox Friends in America became more evangelical and in many places were influenced by the revival movement. Increasingly many Gurneyite Friends became less patient with what they thought was old-fashioned Quakerism and were experimenting with the beginnings of programmed meetings.

Thomas Hamm notes in a recent article in "Quaker History" that many Gurneyite leaders at this time were no longer convinced

of the value of early Quaker writings—of Fox, Barclay, Penn and others. He points out that the Wilburites and the Conservatives continued to read and value these early Quaker writings almost alone among the various Quaker groups at that time. As an example, Wilmer Cooper (who grew up in Ohio Yearly Meeting Conservative) writes in his autobiography *Growing Up Plain* that his mother treasured and read the writings of Barclay and Fox. Friends in Philadelphia even made the writings of early Friends available in the fourteen-volume Friends Library.

By 1877 the form and spirit of most orthodox Quakerism had changed so much that a second series of separations, now called “conservative” had begun. From 1877 to 1879 Conservative yearly meetings separated in Iowa, Indiana, Canada and Kansas. When all of these conservative groups and the earlier Wilburite groups began to communicate and send annual epistles back and forth, they believed that they were the true remnant of the original Society of Friends still preserving the ancient practices and spirit of early Quakerism. Among them were gifted ministers of the old Quaker style who often had leadings to travel and preach in various parts of the Conservative Quaker world. Like generations of ministers before them, they also held “opportunities” (short meetings for worship) in homes wherever they were. Thus a child growing up in that culture might hear sermons preached in accents from different parts of the county, and might even experience the impressive presence of such a preacher in his own home. Because most meetings had at least a one-room school, Conservative teachers could find work from Canada to Fairhope, Alabama or from a small meeting in California to New England. And there were boarding schools in Kansas, Iowa, Ohio and Westtown PA where high schoolers could make acquaintances for a lifetime and sometimes find their future mates.

The final one in the series of Conservative separations was in North Carolina Yearly Meeting in 1904. But even as North

the product of a habitual listening for discernment. It may create in the personality flexibility, responsiveness, and an ability to keep on learning. Then there are the feeling qualities, understood not as emotion, but as reaching for a sense of the underlying truth of a situation—those qualities that tend to produce sympathetic, empathetic personality. A person who thus waits quietly to be shown the truth also tends to become a gentle person. When this is linked with the recognition of spiritual equality between men and women which has been characteristic of Friends from the 17th century, it can lead to a community characterized by strong women and gentle men, something that was noted by Bill in his history of Ohio Yearly Meeting.

I’m fond of an example of this in my own grandparents. My mother’s father was a particularly beloved recorded minister. He was the recognized spiritual leader of the family. It was his sense of duty that led the family to move from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting to Ohio early in the 20th century. However, in my father’s family it was his mother, a recorded minister, who was the recognized spiritual leader, and it was her sense of leading that caused her family to move to Colorado for an extended sojourn early in the 20th century.

As a demonstration of the continuing recognition of the spiritual leadership of women among Conservatives as compared to other branches of Friends, it was noted by attenders at a national conference in 1970 that among the Conservatives there were equal numbers of men and women; among Friends General Conference attenders there were a few more men; among Friends United Meeting Friends there were more men, and among the evangelicals the great preponderance of leadership was from men.

4. Fourth among defining tendencies, Friends have had a care

a life lived around an intention to listen in and throughout one's daily work. Friends often engaged in occupations that made this easier. Agriculture, homemaking and crafts did not engage the mind so constantly as to preclude recollection and prayer. Reminders toward this listening also become part of the rhythm of the day; silent prayer before meals, family worship, traditionally in the form of Bible reading followed by a period of silence, and sometimes periods of personal retirement for silence before God, spiritual reading or journal writing. This habit of listening, cultivated as the atmosphere of one's life, became the ground for discernment.

2. Discernment, the second practice I want to note, was not only for major decisions but quite consciously a practice in the little activities of everyday life. As I read the courtship letters of my parents, written in 1925-1926; I realized that discernment was their theme from beginning to end. Not only were they discerning the future of their lives, but along the way they were reflecting on their discernment of all the decisions on that path. Discernment became the climate in which I grew up. We did not use that word, but it was so pervasive that when I attended the Shalem Institute program in Spiritual Guidance and we came to the topic of discernment, it felt as if I was being given a guided tour of my own home town. I knew what they were talking about, even though the terms used were not those of my childhood. The habit of discernment cultivated certain qualities in a person that became common characteristics among Friends.
3. Among the attributes of personhood that became common (although not universal) is teachability. This was a characteristic noted by a teacher at Olney Friends School in the 1950's and 60's as a pronounced quality in the students who had grown up in Ohio Yearly Meeting. I think of this as

Carolina was joining this Conservative fellowship, the forces of the 20th century were already beginning to change us. Shortly after mid-20th century only three Conservative yearly meetings remained: North Carolina, Iowa and Ohio. The others had been either laid down or reunited with the other branches of Friends in their areas. Rural meetings declined or disappeared. Most Friends elementary schools were also gone by mid century. Iowa's Scattergood and Ohio's Olney boarding schools now welcomed students from a variety of backgrounds, though they still had a distinct Conservative flavor.

Throughout the 20th century Conservative Friends who had been well educated in Friends schools took jobs in cities and universities but often kept their membership in the meetings back home and retained a sense of that identity. Meanwhile, in the meetings back home the use of plain dress became less and less common, surviving only in more subtle ways as "simplicity."

The wars of the 20th century found most Conservative Friends faithful to the peace testimony. Through WWII, of all Quaker groups, Conservative Friends had the highest percentage of young men to take a conscientious objector position. During this century we gave up our isolation from other Friends, joining in the work of American Friends Service Committee, Friends Committee on National Legislation, Friends World Committee for Consultation and other Quaker groups.

By mid-century occasional people from other Friends groups were drawn to visit our meetings and yearly meetings because they experienced a depth of authentic Quakerism here which they missed elsewhere. One of these Friends urged us to have a gathering of all Conservative Friends at Barnesville, Ohio. This was held in 1965, attended by representatives from North Carolina, Iowa, Ohio, and (the recently laid down) Western Yearly Meeting in Indiana. Then came a concern from Friends in North Carolina that the Conservative yearly meetings needed to get together in

order to strengthen each other and our understanding of who we are. Such a meeting was held at Middleton, Ohio in 1969. Ohio Yearly Meeting set up a committee to foster intervisitation. As a result, gatherings of “Conservative Friends and Those of Like Mind” have been held about every two years since. These gatherings and the Conservative yearly meetings have continued to attract a number of Quakers from other places who feel drawn to Conservative Friends. A few of these Friends have adopted forms of plain clothing and a small number have joined our meetings.

Today our three yearly meetings are very different from what they were 100 years ago. Then, the majority of us were farmers or small town merchants or craftspersons. Today there are few farmers among us, though some of us still prefer to live in the country. Our rural meetings are small or almost extinct. In Iowa and North Carolina there are new urban meetings with members who did not grow up as Conservative Friends. Some lively new members have also joined Ohio Yearly Meeting, reviving or adding strength to existing meetings and adding a new meeting.

On the surface, most of us Conservatives today dress, talk and behave very much like the world around us. Yet, in some degree at least, we continue to witness by an alertness and attentiveness to the Inward Guide. We can often recognize one another by the subtle simplicity of our clothing and the way we organize our time, our homes and our interactions with the world.

Fran on some defining cultural tendencies and practices of Conservative Friends:

While working on my notes for this essay I was reminded of our living room at home. If you were familiar with the home Bill and I made together, you would understand implicitly that for us history is not something to be discarded. It is something to be dusted off, repaired, refinished, reupholstered, turned to a new use. Our living room does not contain one piece of furniture we bought

new. It contains pieces from Bill’s family, from mine, things bought at auctions, from second-hand stores, from neighbors, brought together around one new rug to make a place of welcome and comfort for our friends and ourselves. We have tried to do the same thing with Quaker history. So if you ask us to talk about the witness of Conservative Friends, don’t expect a museum piece. What we want to do is to bring a few pieces, start dusting them off and reflect on what they suggest to us about how we live our lives as Friends now. We also invite you to refurbish them for your own use.

We as Conservative Friends often define ourselves as Christian unprogrammed Friends. That is correct, but it is not enough. Bill likes to say “Quaker Christianity is different.” So how is it different? It is not interchangeable with any of the other churches in town. There are things that distinguish us, when we are authentic to our roots. We might think first of our testimony on peace or our understanding of baptism and communion as being spiritual experiences rather than outward rites. These define us, but there are other things descriptive of who Conservative Friends have been as a people.

There are several characteristics that I find integral to who we are. I would like to describe under six headings some cultural tendencies and practices that define Conservative Friends for me. After that I want to talk about the relationship of outward practice to its spiritual root.

1. The first defining tendency and practice, and the root out of which the rest grow, is what I like to call the “culture of listening.” This is a term that Sandra Cronk and Kathryn Damiano used in the School of the Spirit to describe Quaker culture as it was developed in the 18th century and continued among Conservative Friends. It refers to a life that is deliberately designed and shaped to make possible, to encourage, a continual inward listening to God’s nudges,