



Friends World Committee  
for Consultation  
SECTION OF THE AMERICAS

Comité Mundial de Consulta  
de los Amigos  
SECCIÓN DE LAS AMÉRICAS

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## QUERIES

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

1. Have you ever heard a public message that you felt was meant for you personally?
2. When have you felt the nudging of the Spirit? How did you respond?
3. How do you feel about being a "do-gooder"?

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## ABOUT THE WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP

The Wider Quaker Fellowship is a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas. Through our mailings we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages, cultures and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

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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Wider Quaker Fellowship articles are also available on the web at [www.widerquakerfellowship.org](http://www.widerquakerfellowship.org)

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# To Do *Nothing*

TINA COFFIN



*The Wider Quaker Fellowship*  
*La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos*

## TO DO NOTHING

It is early Saturday morning in Philadelphia. I am sitting in front of an open window of my room at the Lucretia Mott House. The blessed sunlight forms peaceful patterns on the wooden floor. I watch a homeless man trying to find a private place in the bushes across the street.

I am here to attend a finance committee meeting at Friends Center next door, and after breakfast eight of us gather in its historic meeting room.

Around noon we decide to have lunch at the city market, six blocks away. It is in an old railway station whose inside is converted into an enormous street market with stalls and lunch counters. It is in the middle of downtown and takes up a whole city block.

Outside, sitting on the pavement are homeless people. A couple of yards from the entrance is a father with a child between his knees. He looks up and says, "This child is hungry." I stand still, look at them, and am reminded of my own childhood experiences with hunger. I want to give them some money but feel somewhat self-conscious about it. I am with seven other Friends, and no one seems to have heard the remark. Or perhaps they have, and they feel that giving money is not the way to handle the situation. There are so many homeless people around asking for food. I don't really want to draw attention to myself as a do-gooder (I think). So I follow them inside and do nothing.

But it bothers me. This father and child speak to my condition. I decide to excuse myself when we are eating and to bring the father five dollars. Ruth however takes me to a place that is hard to get in and out of. And since the two of us are not eating with the others, I cannot really leave her alone. "I will give the five dollars when we leave," I think. But we leave by another door, and by then the group has reassembled to go back to our committee work. Again, I do nothing. I feel uneasy about it, but not very much. An afternoon of budget discussions removes the incident from my mind.

Next day, Sunday, Vaughn and I decide to attend meeting at Race Street Meeting House, next door to Friends Center. I have never been there, and look forward to it. My home meeting is small. I hope ten times as many Friends will generate ten times greater blessing. But the Meeting for Worship is not so different from what I am used to.

There are a few messages. Then a young woman sitting in our pew stands up. Her message is short: "To do nothing may be the most violent thing you can do!" She then grabs her purse, slings it over her shoulder and walks out. "She is hurt," I think, "I should follow her." No, not me. This message is for the Friends of this meeting. Perhaps something has happened. One of them needs to go after her. Is someone

going?" Yes, someone goes. I am glad. I wonder what has happened between this woman and this meeting that she has to give such a message: "To do nothing may be the most violent thing you can do."

Then it hits me. This message is for me. The father and the hungry child come back to me. Who in the group of Friends that were there knew what it was to be a hungry child? I did. I had been a starving child in the Second World War, and someone had given me food. Of course, it was the Spirit who had nudged me—that's why I had wanted to give money. Nudged me and not the others. Why, oh why, had I not acted? I was called and had not obeyed. And now I am told that that was an act of violence. How could I have been bothered by the presence of others? This was my leading, not theirs. And I thought I was making progress in obeying the promptings of the Spirit.

I weep. The rest of that Meeting for Worship is difficult. I am glad when it is over.

We visitors introduce ourselves and are invited to sign the guest book. Vaughn and I walk to the refreshment room with a middle-aged black man, also a visitor, who pulls a picture of a child out of his pocket. "Is it yours?" I ask admiringly. "Yes," he says, "and we are hungry. Could you give us some food?" Vaughn and I both say, "We don't live here, we are from out-of-town, and don't have food." Then I hear myself talking. Not again!! How dumb can one be! I take my wallet out of my purse and give James ten dollars. He sees a twenty and says, "That twenty would really help us out." He looks kindly at me. And I think, "I never want to go through a half hour like the last one again, ever." I give him the twenty, then go to the restroom and laugh.

What a great sense of humor the Spirit has. Here I am weeping for a lost chance and another is immediately presented. "Let us see how honest those tears are," a teasing Spirit seems to say, "You wouldn't give a five, what about a twenty?"

The visitor is in the refreshment room eating cookies and chatting with people. When I leave I meet him outside on the sidewalk. I need to catch a train and he accompanies me a little way. Then we shake hands on the street corner, my Blessing and I.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tina Coffin, a member of Little Rock Friends Meeting in Arkansas, grew up in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. As a 9 year-old child she experienced the war-time famine that killed thousands of people in the western part of the Netherlands during the last year of WW II. She became acquainted with Friends when she worked as a teacher at an International Quaker school in the Netherlands. After marrying her American husband and moving to the United States, she, as well as her husband, joined the Friends Meeting in Nashville, TN.

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