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ABOUT THE WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP

The Wider Quaker Fellowship program of Friends World Committee for Consultation is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages 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 even active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. The Fellowship does not charge a subscription fee, but depends on donations from its readers and other supporters to cover costs.

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Connected to the Vine

DEBORAH SAUNDERS

*From a talk given at the World
Gathering of Young Friends*

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This pamphlet is a shortened version of the talk Deborah presented at the World Gathering of Young Friends in Lancaster, England in August of 2005. We thank Rebecca Rawls for the work she did to transcribe and edit the text.

I just want you to love them. Sisters come up to me and whisper, "Deborah, I've got AIDS." I wrap them in my arms, I wipe away their tears, and I tell them they are loved.

As I got ready to come here, I had promised the sisters in Philadelphia that I would go to the prison and see them before I left. When I go to that prison, I get back pure love. So much was going on the day I left that I called the prison and said I couldn't come. I went upstairs and was looking things up on the computer, and Spirit said, "You made a promise." So I called the prison back and said "I'm on my way."

There's a glass wall at the prison, and as I walked up, the women could see me, and they started jumping up and down, saying, "She's here! She's here!" And I walked in and said, "I couldn't leave without coming and getting your energy."

They are praying for me right now. I had asked that they write some letters for me to help me continue my work with them. When I walked in they gave me 28 powerful letters they had written about the work I've been doing in the prison. They said, take your fruit. They are my fruit.

What is your fruit? If you are truly connected to the vine and you are the branches of the vine, you need to start producing fruit so that when the Gardener comes back, he will say, "Well done, my good and faithful servants."

Stand firm on what you are. You are Children of the Light. You are connected to the vine. And the vine is connected to God, so therefore, you are connected to God. Stand firm in that, brothers and sisters. Stand firm.

are following the teachings of Jesus but have not accepted him as your Lord and Savior or don't feel that is the path you have to take, stand on that. Stand firm in what you believe, but know what you believe. Find your center. Find that place where God can reach you.

Don't try to stand on your intellect alone, because there's an enemy of your soul that doesn't want you to do what you are being called to do. You must be rooted and grounded, listening, studying, and preparing yourself. We are in a war right now against principalities and demons that want to take your soul. This is nothing to play with. You have been called for a reason; you were called by God.

God is getting ready to gather a great people. When Jesus comes back, he is going to ask, "What did you do with the talents that I gave you?" And you can't say, "Well I wasn't sure. I was confused." You'd better get clear.

I'm old. I don't have the energy that I used to have. My time was in the 20th century. Your time is now. I'm the elder; I'm 54 years old. If I live another 50 years, I will praise God, but my time is winding down. Your time is now, and you have got to do it.

You don't have to be fearful. You are connected to that vine, and now it's time for you to begin to bear fruit. You've got to get still. You've got to go inward. You've got to let the pruning process take place. It's not going to be easy. It's going to take you out of your comfort zone. When you are called, you'd best go.

I'm ready to send you out. I have all the confidence in the world that it's your time, your season. Bear your fruit.

When I left that job, I spent three months in solitude with God, then God sent me into the prisons. I go in and love the unlovables, those that people have turned their backs on. God said,

I give honor to God tonight. I am so grateful to you, my younger brothers and sisters. I come to you as your elder. I come with the spirit of Elijah talking to my Elishas. In the Bible, Elijah went up on the mountain and listened to a still small voice. That voice was God. And that voice said to Elijah, "When you come off this mountain, you have to find Elisha, because Elisha is going to take your place." Elisha was a young man.

So Elijah went to Elisha and asked him, "What do you want from me?" And Elisha said, "Elijah, I want a double portion of what you have." You may not have asked, but I am getting ready to give you a double portion of what I have.

My pastor used to say, "Don't testify about your brother or your sister. Testify what you know." So I am going to take a few minutes to testify what I know.

My father was a black Hebrew. My mother was a Christian. I was raised by an aunt who was in the Episcopal Church. I thought God was someone with a white beard, and I loved to hear the prelude to worship through the big pipe organ. When I was a little older, I thought I knew it all, that I didn't need God. But God is in us, and when something is in you, you can't get rid of it. As God told the children of Israel, "Sometimes you may walk away from me, but I will never walk away from you. I've got you, and I'm holding on to you."

As I got older, I went into what they call fundamentalist churches: Bible-believing churches.

I didn't even own a Bible; I had to buy one when I was in my early 20s. I began to read the Bible and to learn how to "rightly

divide” it in this church. I remember a preacher preaching on a verse from I Corinthians, Chapter 13. The verse was “As for prophecies, they shall cease, and as for tongues they shall cease.” And when I heard that, I stopped, because I knew I had a Southern Baptist grandmother who spoke in tongues as the Spirit gave her utterance. I knew she loved the Lord with all of her heart, soul, mind, and strength. But this man said any one who speaks in tongues in this day is of the Devil. I knew that my grandmother loved God, and I knew she spoke in tongues. So I learned that sometimes people can take a text, and they may interpret it a little differently.

Shortly after that, the Spirit moved me on to a Pentecostal church. That was my first experience in an all-Black church. They danced, they shouted, they spoke in tongues, and they told me I needed the Holy Ghost. I tarried for the Holy Ghost. Some of you probably don’t know what that means. I got on my knees and I cried out until I began to speak in an unknown tongue. I called my father that day, and I said, “Daddy, I’ve got it. I’ve got the power!” I stayed in that church for seven years. I loved it. It was a community church. My daughter grew up in that church.

Then one day I heard that still small voice, and it said, Deborah, it’s time for you to move on. And I said, where do I go? And a friend, an African-American brother who was studying the Tao, said, “Deborah, with the kind of spirit you have, I think you would enjoy going to a Quaker meeting.” And I said, “A Quaker Meeting. What is a Quaker Meeting?”

I looked up Quakers in the dictionary, because I had never heard about Quakers. The dictionary said another name was the Religious Society of Friends. Then I looked in the phone book. I worked in Philadelphia at the time, and I saw that the Quakers had

sometimes God will break you down and tell you you’ve got to be pruned. Maybe you haven’t been pruned yet, but I have. I was working on a job not too long ago, and I heard that in maybe six months, it would be time for me to go. It was time for me to move on, but I didn’t want to leave. Finally something happened so I had to move, and I got mad at God. For three months, I didn’t answer the telephone or go out of the house. God was pruning me. He was putting fertilizer on my soul. God was doing something within me because God had new work for me.

You see, our main purpose as branches is to bear fruit. And God said, “It’s time for you to bear some fruit.” And out of that stillness, God called me to my soul’s purpose. Some of us have not yet found out our soul’s purpose, the reason why we are here. Sometimes we’ve got to get still to understand what our soul’s purpose is.

Martin Luther King Jr. began to lead black people in the greatest non-violent movement in the U.S when he was a young man in his 20s. But check this out: God sent him a gay black Quaker man to teach him about a peaceful, non-violent movement. When they bombed Martin’s house, the brothers came with their rifles, and Martin cocked his gun, too. But Bayard Rustin said, “Now it’s time to learn about the real movement God is calling you to.” The American Friends Service Committee sent Martin and his wife to India to learn about nonviolence from a Hindu, Gandhi.

You see, the Gardener can use anyone He wants to. The Gardener can use a Muslim, a Hindu, or a Quaker. So watch how you judge people.

I want you to know who you are. If you are a Friend who knows Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then stand firm on that. But if you know God, and you hear that still small voice within you, and you

like you do. You let people rock you. Nobody can rock me, because I know who I am. You get upset when somebody says something that you don't like. If you really know who you are, you can stand up to anybody. If someone says something that's offensive to me, I bow to the God in them. I'm not going to get mad, because I know who I am.

Now that kind of belief doesn't just fall down on you like manna from heaven. To really know that you are a Child of the Light, you have to work at it. You have to read the holy texts. You need to fast. You need to pray. You need to get still. You may want to go out and liberate and save the world, but you are not going to be able to do it on your own. You are not going to do it with intellectual or physical strength; you can only do it spiritually. And if you are not taking time to nurture yourself spiritually, you will not be able to do the work that God is calling you to do. You must be grounded.

The Bible is the Christian's roadmap, the holy text. I read the Bible faithfully every day. There are other books that I read, as well. The man I fell in love with is a Muslim, so I also read the Koran. I read the teachings of the Tao and the teachings of Buddha. I read holy texts, but for me the Bible is first and foremost because of the way I was brought up.

God, this Divine Force, this Spirit, is so powerful. And it wants to work in us just like it worked in the early Friends. We have work to do. This is your time, your season. This 21st century is yours. This is your holy pilgrimage. We are people that are gathered. God wants to use you in a way that you have never been used before. All you've got to do is believe who you are.

God almighty is the gardener. God is fertilizing your soul, and

a headquarters at 15th and Cherry Streets, so I walked down there one day at lunch time, bought a book on Quakerism, and began to read it. And the book spoke to me.

About two weeks later, I went to my first Quaker Meeting. It's a small Meeting, and that Sunday there were only three people there. I sat in the silence, and I knew this is where I was supposed to be.

Most Quakers in the U.S. are European-Americans, and I used to ask God: "Why am I here?" And God answered me and said, "It's time for you to get still and know that I am God." Sometimes you've got to get still. It's all right to sing and dance and shout; it's all right to preach; but sometimes God wants to speak to us directly. And in that silence, God began to speak to me in a way that I had never heard before. I had heard sermons and messages, but when that still, small voice begins to speak to you, you know that it's God's voice you are hearing. It's one thing to hear about what someone else thinks, but it's another thing for God to talk to you and tell you directly. You can't run away from that.

I loved being a Pentecostal. But I believe the Spirit needed to pull me away because when I was a Pentecostal, I became very judgmental. I believed that if you are not saved, sanctified, Holy Ghost-purified, baptized, and speaking as the Spirit gives you utterance, you're going to Hell. I told my aunt one day that she was nothing, that she didn't know Jesus and she didn't know God. The tears began to roll down her face. This was the woman who took me to Sunday School, who nurtured my spirit, who gave me my foundation, and I was judging her. I didn't go to my best friend's wedding because I didn't think she was saved the way I was.

So God had to pull me away and show me what I had become. God had to get me still enough that I could hear and listen, and

he began to strip me. I read one day, “Judge not that you be not judged, for the same judgment you judge others God is going to give you.” Sometimes we look at people and we say, “Well she’s not doing this, or he’s doing that.” But God says, “What skeletons are in your closet? Do you want me to open the door on you?” Then we back off.

I wasn’t sure what to expect in a Quaker meeting. I had read about it, and I felt so comfortable, but I still wasn’t clear on what Quakers believed. At the end of the Meeting, one of the Friends shook my hand and gave me a pamphlet. I had been studying the book of John, and one scripture stood out for me about the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well. Now the Jews had no dealings with the Samaritans. So when Jesus said to his disciples, “I’ve got to go to Samaria,” his disciples said, “What’s wrong with you? You know we don’t deal with those folks.” Jesus said, “You all go get some lunch, do what you have to do, and I’ll meet you back here in half an hour.”

And a woman came to the well. We know the kind of woman she was because of the time she came. She couldn’t draw water with the rest of the women of the village. But Jesus met her there, and they got into a conversation, and right away she got defensive because she knew by his dress that he was a Jew. She said, “You know, the Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. We and our ancestors worship here at Jacob’s Well. You say we should worship in Jerusalem.”

And Jesus said to her, “They that worship God—whether they do it at the well or in Jerusalem—they that worship God will worship in Spirit and in Truth.” In Spirit and in Truth. That Quaker shook my hand and handed me a pamphlet with that passage on the

back of it. When I saw that, I knew that I was where I was supposed to be.

I sat in the silence for three or four weeks before anybody spoke. I can remember the first message I heard in Quaker meeting; it was that Jesus was a radical and a revolutionary. Can you imagine how radical it was to be able to say to somebody, “I am the Son of God?” People couldn’t even look on God. There were only certain prophets that had an audience with God, and even they didn’t see God. Moses said, “Let me see you,” and God said, “You can’t see me. You might see me back in the shadow, but you can’t look at me.” And now God is saying, “This is my beloved Son.” My gosh, how radical! I guess they did want to kill him, somebody running around saying he is the Son of God.

A message came to my spirit a couple of weeks ago, but I said, I don’t know if I can speak that. I wrestled with God on this one. But Jesus said, “Speak your Truth. Testify to what you know.”

What I’m going to say is radical, too. I, too, am a Daughter of God. Jesus said that if I abide in the vine, and if the vine is the Son and I’m a branch, then I must be the same as the vine.

Now I can back that up. Read John 17. In that chapter Jesus says: “Make them one, Father, even as you and I are one.” So it must be that I’m a Daughter of God, in the same power. Jesus said, “Even greater works will you do.”

Nowadays, we don’t believe that we are Children of God. We don’t believe, as early Friends did, that we are Sons and Daughters of the Light. That’s why George Bush is in office, because we don’t believe who we are. If we believed who we are, we would make some radical changes, just as the early Friends did.

Do you believe that you are a Child of the Light? You don’t act