

MYS- TICAL EXPERIENCE

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The Bedrock of Quaker Faith

ROBERT ATCHLEY

Mystical experience is direct experience of God. Quaker silence is an invitation to experience that of God within ourselves, and indeed within the entire perceivable universe. George Fox felt that we should “walk cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in every person.” He also said, “Be staid in the principle of God in thee . . . that thou wilt find Him to be a God at hand.”

Rufus Jones (1863–1948) was arguably the foremost Quaker scholar, writer, and advocate of opening to mystical experience as a central practice among Friends. He built on foundations laid by Meister Eckhart, the anonymous author of *The*

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Cloud of Unknowing, William James, and many other Christian mystics—people who had had direct experiences of God and tried to describe them. Jones concluded that the founders of most great religions of the world got their spiritual understanding through mystical experience. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are filled with reports of direct experiences of God. Mystical experience “makes God sure to the person who has had the experience,” wrote Jones.

Jones cautioned against using the term “mysticism.” Each seeker of “God within” is confronted by a unique personal and cultural labyrinth that he or she must negotiate to directly experience God. Because each path is different, it is impossible “to make an ism out of” the journey to experience God. But perhaps we can agree that we seek direct experience of “the Divine Ground of All Being”—the term Christian theologian Paul Tillich used for the transcendent Holy Spirit.

Perhaps we can agree that we are all dancing around a divine Light that eludes naming. Jones also pointed out that we are seeking our own direct experiences of God, not “second-hand descriptions” of mystical experiences in books and scriptures. However beautiful and uplifting Eckhart’s descriptions of his direct experiences of God might be, we cannot have his experience. We can only have our own.

Most mystics report experiencing God as immanent: God is here and now—palpably present to be experienced. God is also experienced as transcendent. God is infinite and therefore beyond our ability to completely perceive or understand, or even denote. But for many mystics, God’s infinite awareness can be intuited and is a super-magnet that can draw us out of our conventional personal and culture-bound consciousness and into a non-personal awareness that allows us to see with “eyes unclouded by fear or longing.” This is the vantage of the sage mystics who have many years’ experience viewing the world from a non-personal viewpoint. Sages have many years of practice abiding in a field that transcends our earthly concerns, yet sages also experience compassion and love for those—including the sages themselves—who endure the suffering involved in living a human life.

Is mystical experience rare? Apparently it is not.

experience of God within. Being in nature, meditation, contemplative waiting, religious rituals, singing hymns, reading sacred texts, and service to others are but a few of the situations in which people find themselves in touch with God within.

Among Friends, mystical experiences during meeting for worship are common, but only a minority of these experiences leads to vocal ministry. Why? Many times the experience is not in the form of words, and putting it into words is daunting. Often, direct experience of God is ineffable. As Eckhart noted, “As one’s awareness approaches the wilderness of the Godhead, no one is home.” Tillich called the Supreme Being “the God beyond God,” meaning that there is a field of Being beyond our personified God—the God who resembles us and speaks to us in our language. Tillich called this transcendent God “the Divine Ground of All Being.” Hindus call it “the Great Sea of Being.” The enormity of the Ground of All Being is very awe-inspiring and humbling to experience, yet it is comforting to abide in this field of ultimate, limitless Being.

Is there a knowledge element to mystical experience? Jones suggested in his book *The Radiant Life* that we use our experience as a guide for answering this question for ourselves. If we begin with questioning if there is “an intelligent,



QUAKER SPIRITUAL PRACTICE INVOLVES MUCH CONTEMPLATIVE WAITING,

not waiting for something, but simply waiting. The region of my awareness where I have most often had direct experiences of God is deep, inner space. When I sit in meeting, I release into that space. After a time, I am able to release into abiding in the vastness of inner space, where I experience God. I feel God’s palpable presence. I feel God drawing my awareness to a non-personal, transcendent level.

According to Jones, mystical experience is widely available, if we are tuned in to it. He wrote that “many people have had this vital experience.” God is everywhere we look, if we know how to look. In my 30 years of research on spirituality and aging, I found that many types of situations can evoke an

creative, organizing center of consciousness [that] transcends itself and knows what is beyond itself” and if our experience gives us a definite yes to that question, then we know and understand in a way that is guided and informed by mystical experience of God.

Jones wrote: "Spiritual ministry, in this or any age, comes through a prepared person who has been learning how to catch the mind of spirit, and how to speak to the condition of the age." I wrote song lyrics that relate to this point: It takes practice to feel that deep connection as the havoc of this world goes on and on. Soul-centered life has a deep attraction that ever draws me back for more and more.

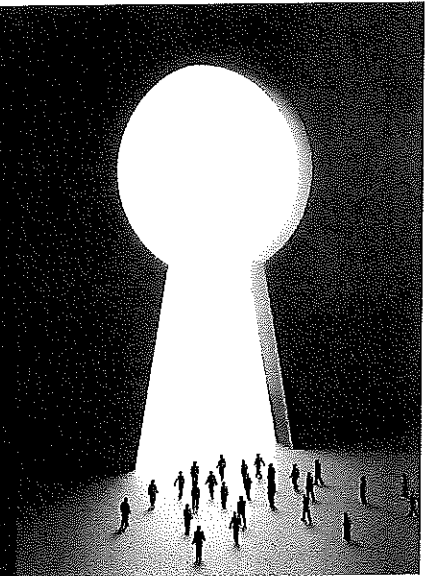
mind sometimes has stuff it is processing, and when that stuff arises, I release it. Over and over, I release. After a time, I am able to release into abiding in the vastness of inner space, where I experience God. I feel God's palpable presence. I feel God drawing my awareness to a non-personal, transcendent level.

In his *Discourse on Thinking*, Martin Heidegger distinguished two very different types of thinking:

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FROM ITS BEGINNINGS, QUAKER FAITH AND PRACTICE

has assumed that we are created with the capacity to influence our evolving experiential relationship with God. We are not passive, empty vessels hoping to be filled. We have to move toward God, be open to God, be willing to meet God, and be guided by our experiences of God.



We often need help in recognizing what we are seeing. Ken Wilber, in his book *Eye to Eye*, points out three main ways of knowing, or "eyes": the eye of the flesh—sensory knowing; the eye of the mind—our dualistic cognitive processes of acquiring language, ideas, and meaning; and the eye of contemplation—our holistic, integral capacity to abide in non-doing. Each of these eyes has its injunction (if you do this), illumination (you may see that), and method of confirmation (knowing you really saw that). For Quaker contemplative knowing, "waiting upon the Lord" is the injunction, direct experience of God (mystical experience) is the illumination, and discernment is the confirmation. When Friends agree that someone is a "weighty Quaker," the community's discernment is confirming the validity of that Friend's contemplative understanding.

Quaker spiritual practice involves much contemplative waiting, not waiting for something, but simply waiting. The region of my awareness where I have most often had direct experiences of God is deep, inner space. When I sit in meeting, I release into that space. Of course, my

calculative and contemplative. Calculative thinking is preoccupied with the surface of thinking and a thinking process aimed at dominating and manipulating situations and "re-presenting" or constructing experiences and stories. Contemplative thinking is deep thinking. It "contemplates the meaning that reigns in everything that is." Contemplative thinking requires that we develop the art of waiting. "Contemplative thought does not grasp the essence but rather releases into the essence." Contemplative waiting is a practice of remaining open to experiencing God.

Friends who have waited together for decades often reflect this openness. They are secure in their faith because they have met God countless times along the way. Some of these meetings were dramatic experiences, and some were ordinary. These Friends are confident of God's presence, even though this presence is revealed in different ways to different people. In my experience, the sages in our midst understand each other, often without much talk, because their mystical experiences over the years have been shared and are similar enough to be taken as roughly equivalent. There is not much vying or trying or hair-splitting

among sages; they have released into the Divine Ground of All Being, where they increasingly abide. This does not mean that they are detached from the world—far from it. It simply means that they are aware of the deeper backdrop, the Divine Ground of All Being, as they play their part in everyday life.

The transcendent knowing that comes with spiritual maturity does not mean turning one's back on prior stages of development. Wilber wrote that we "transcend and include." Our transcendent, non-personal consciousness includes a deeply reflected upon version of what came before in our personal evolution. In most cases, this "transcend and include" process is conducive to a forgiving and accepting stance toward the earlier self.

At the start of their conscious spiritual journeys toward God, people often have immature faith that needs nurture and protection in the form of study, structured practice, and supportive community. As they grow more comfortable with their direct experiences of God, study becomes a reward and stimulus for openness. Structure becomes more utilitarian and less a means of protection. Community centers in the One.

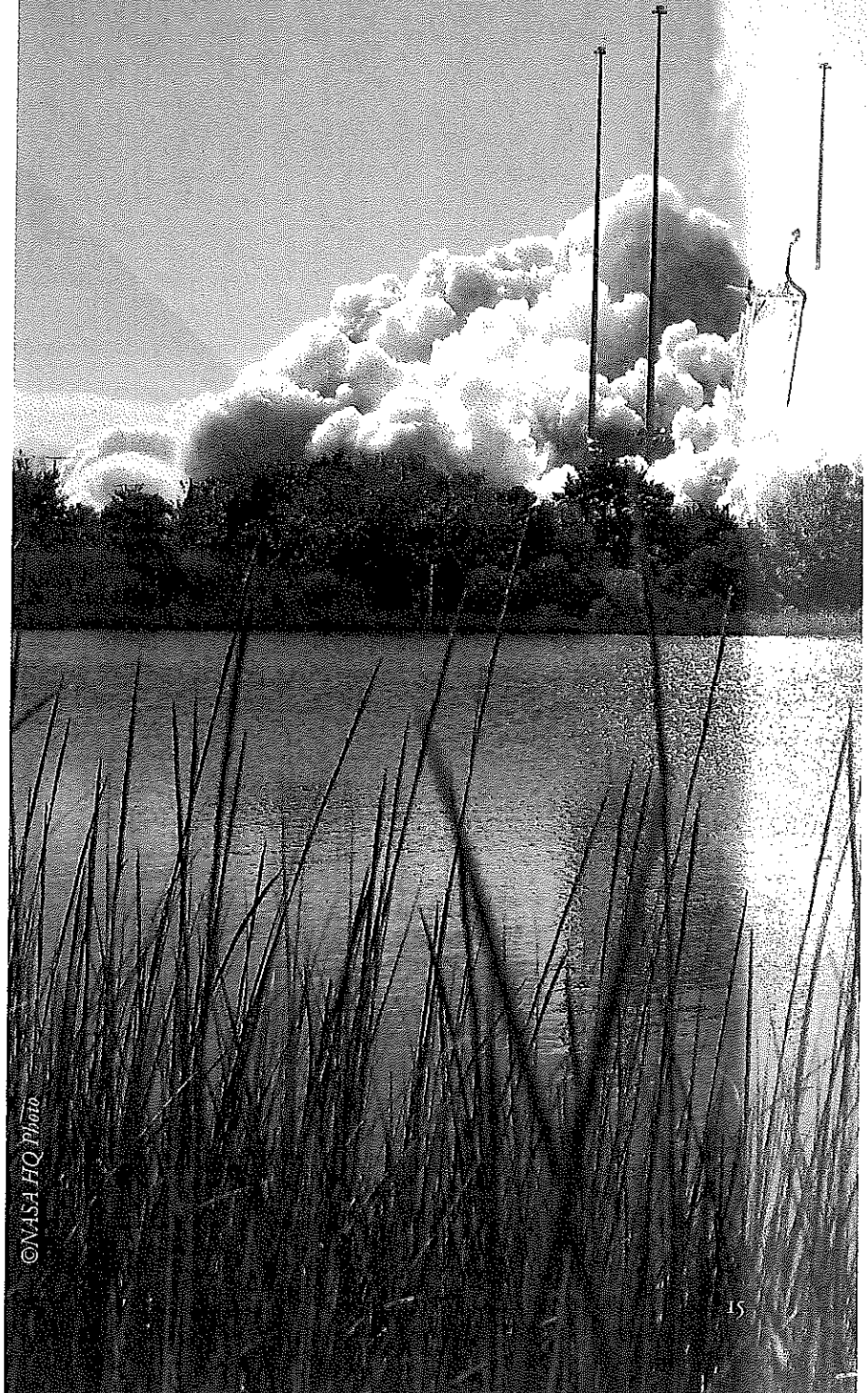
From its beginnings, Quaker faith and practice has assumed that we are created with the capacity to influence our evolving experiential relationship with God. We are not passive, empty vessels hoping to be filled. We have to move toward God, be open to God, be willing to meet God, and be guided by our experiences of God. For me, this has been a recurring feedback loop. I act from the non-personal, loving vantage that comes from connection with the Great Sea of Being. I observe the results of this enlightened action, which have always been vastly superior to the results of actions taken from a purely personal vantage. I am affirmed in my connection with God and that connection's influence on my capacity to see things more clearly than I could from a limited personal viewpoint. All this takes place with awareness of the Ground of All Being in the background.

Trusting this process required practicing it over and over. The proof is in the pudding. Of course, all my words are merely "fingers pointing at the moon." They are not the moon. You have to see the moon for yourself. □

Wallops Island Celestial Meeting

Wallops Island morning launch,
like a gathered meeting, seated in quiet expectation,
light appears in a flash, before the powerful sound.

*George Eastburn
Glenside, Pa.*



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