

The Stewardship Testimony: A Quaker View of Our Spiritual Relationship to the Natural World

Given that Quakers practice a non-doctrinal, non-creedal form of faith, it can be challenging to define the spiritual underpinnings of what we often call our Stewardship Testimony. As Baltimore Yearly Meeting, our regional associative body, states in their introduction to 2022's Annual Session, "If more-organized faiths are well-tended gardens, then Quakerism is a meadow full of wildflowers: A riotously diverse but tightly interwoven ecosystem that is unified by its desire to turn towards the Spirit." Each human bloom, whether plain or dazzling, can spread the seeds of their ministry across the ground and change our appearance, refreshing and enriching us to continue on into the future." Thus, within our riotous meadow a certain structuring is discernable, grown from these seeds of our faith: these structures consist of themes, aspirations and beliefs held in common by a great many Quakers. Among them are a handful of commonly held (though not universal or required) statements of personal faith that guide us toward a corporate unity of action. Among these is the Stewardship Testimony, that focuses on the importance of caring for the Earth: valuing and respecting all of Creation; using only our fair share of the Earth's resources; and working to protect the planet.

In the absence of creeds and dogma, Quakerism is, at its heart, an experiential religion. Early Quaker Isaac Pennington described the experience of Friends worship like this: "Give over thine own willing, give over thine own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything, and sink down to the seed which God sows in thine heart and let that be in thee, and grow in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee, and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves that and owns that." For Pennington, sinking down into that Divine seed is an act of surrender, an opening to the will of the Creator that allows us to escape the narrow confines of our individual, self-centered concerns. The goal of Quaker worship is not only to connect us to the Divine, but to connect us with one another in corporate worship and to the whole of Creation. Thus, it is no surprise that when we come together in worship, we become more sensitive to the interconnectedness of humanity, the earth, and the Eternal.

The practice of Quaker worship is outwardly straightforward. Friends gather to sit in meditative silence with one another, listening expectantly for a message from the Spirit, sometimes called the Inner Teacher or Inner Light. There is no order of service, no sermon, no spoken prayers or hymns. If a Friend feels that they have received a message from the Divine and that it is appropriate to share it with the Meeting as a whole, they stand and speak, as plainly and concisely as possible, before sitting and resuming the silence.

Of course, in our dynamic, living world, there is no such thing as complete silence. When Quakers cease speaking and still themselves, what is experienced is less silence and more a heightened awareness of the sounds and sensations often drowned out in the normal course of our lives: birds calling, wind rushing, leaves rustling, the buzzing of insects, our own breath and the breath of others, the creaking of the wooden joints of the meeting house. Our minds can more easily process the fluctuations of temperature, the heat of the summer sun streaming through a window or the cold of a winter's morning. We enter into the sacred practice of noticing, and this noticing awakens us to the vibrant ecosystem which surrounds us. This is a holy practice. As poet Mary Oliver writes, "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, which is what I have been doing all day."

As Lisa Gould, a member of Westerly Monthly Meeting in Rhode Island, reminds us, "On a very basic physical level, each of us is a community of organisms, with a normal flora of bacteria, mites, roundworms, and other organisms... This idea makes some people uncomfortable—we like to think we are quite independent entities, with distinct boundaries: Us and Them." However, as many religious traditions show us, the Us and Them binary is fundamentally an

The Stewardship Testimony: A Quaker View of Our Spiritual Relationship to the Natural World

illusion and ultimately destructive. One of the most cherished maxims of Quakerism—founder George Fox’s observation that “there is that of God in every[one]”—points to the truth of our interconnectedness, and the Quaker stewardship testimony draws on that affirmation of interdependence, extending it beyond the human community to the whole of the physical world. Influential Quaker Elias Hicks put it this way: “The fullness of the godhead dwelt in every blade of grass.”

While Quakers have never developed an official statement of belief, our experience of the Spirit has led us to name a set of principles, or testimonies, that help guide our action in the world, helping us to live our faith in concrete, meaningful ways. Perhaps the most famous testimony associated with Quakers is the testimony of Simplicity. When many think of Quakers historically, they may think of practices such as wearing plain clothing or worshiping in unadorned meeting houses. Even the peculiar use of “thee” and “thou” in Quaker speech, which seems anything but simple to the modern ear, was originally known as Plain Speech since, in the 17th century, the pronoun “you” was reserved for those of high status. However, the Quaker Simplicity testimony runs deeper than these outward signs. It calls us to focus on the things of true importance, allowing everything else to fall away. It contributes to our Stewardship testimony by reminding us that many of the practices that are so destructive to the Earth are indulgent luxuries we can live without. It calls us to see our place in the ecosystem in appropriate perspective, encouraging us to use only the resources necessary for us to thrive and to care that the plants, animals, waterways, soil, and atmosphere with which we share the Earth thrive alongside us.

Indeed, each of the historic Quaker testimonies (simplicity, peace, community, integrity, and equality) contributes to the Stewardship testimony and to our care for the earth. The Peace testimony awakens us to the unjust and disparate negative impact of climate change and pollution on vulnerable populations, calling us toward climate justice. The Integrity testimony reminds us that our professed love for the whole of Creation must be lived out in acts of advocacy, nurture, and responsible decision making. And the testimonies of Community and Equality call us to acknowledge our interdependence and see it as a gift, knowing that we cannot fully thrive without supporting the flourishing of all.

18th Century Friend John Woolman, better known for his advocacy for the abolition of slavery in America, wrote the following in his journal: “As the mind was moved by an inward principle to love God as an invisible, incomprehensible Being, by the same principle it was moved to love him in all his manifestations in the visible world. That as by his breath the flame of life was kindled in all animal and sensible creatures, to say we love God as unseen and at the same time to exercise cruelty toward the least creature moving by his life or by life derived from him was a contradiction in itself.”

Through practices of silence, listening, noticing, and paying attention, and guided by testimonies derived from those experiences, Quakers have sought right relationship with the natural world for 350 years. Through our responsible stewardship of the Earth’s resources, we experience a deeper connection to the Divine and to one another. Though each Quaker, led by their own experience of worship and particular theological understanding, is called to engage nature in their own unique way, by joining together with other Friends and friends of other faiths to appreciate, protect, and advocate for our shared environment, we experience the joy that allows us to better know our world, our neighbors, and ourselves.