

Most recently, returning to my sacred grove above Mocosa, I find no stump, only a patch of sawdust. Park Management has been through and erased every last trace of the one who used to be there, whose inner-chi I felt still pouring through my feet into me as I stood where it had stood for so long. All the beautiful stumps, the sad remains of the fallen destroyed beauty, have been ground away, their unique contours and speaking lines and colors erased.

My culture has erased its connection to its own human past. I do not know the stories of my own great grandparents. I do not know my heritage descending from 25 generations as other peoples do or did. My culture is deracinated; we have no connection to the deep and ongoing story of our human life on Earth, which once fed us, as the fallen trunk and roots feed the standing forest. Urban trees are increasingly separated; in their loneliness they become weak; management removes them.

Survival of the fittest means survival of the powerful, when it is not permitted to mean survival of those most co-operative and thus fit and meant to live in relationship with Earth. Nature is more powerful than man. This is indeed the great reset, but not some puny political chest-pounding arrogance. No, a wipeout of the ecological niche is underway. To know this and live in connection with Earth and Sun is to be aware, as Earth and Sun are aware through us, all things shall pass.

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Discernment During Lockdown: Beginning Ministry in Pandemic Times

Johanna Jackson and JT Dorr-Bremme

We are two Friends in our 30s and 40s. For several years, we've felt led toward some mutual faith-based work together. We knew that it included a call to healing and a commitment to spiritual friendship, but knew very little else. We spent time preparing inwardly for our call, moving where led, without knowing the end result.

When we lived in different states, we used to have long phone calls together. During these times, we would slip into worship-sharing or accompany one another through grief. One day, during such a phone call, JT asked: "What would happen if I held appointments with people I knew and I just listened?" His question shuttled us both into a season of discernment: we had been experimenting with different kinds of mutual projects, but this one seemed to take root. About two weeks later, COVID-19 arrived in New York City and Seattle. The nudge to listen felt more urgent and more timely. We knew that we had gifts to offer, but we needed to stabilize our own lives first amidst such grief.

In time, we both felt a consistent thread emerge. We wanted to spend time listening to younger Friends share about their spiritual journeys. Individually, we had each been keeping a list of people that we would like to interview someday. We combined lists. We realized that we were embarking on a kind of project, that we call the Listening Project now. Later on, we would define it as "creative conversations rooted in love."

In May of 2020, we met with a clearness committee. Wearing masks, sweaters, and fleece blankets, three of us bundled up against the wind. From 400 miles away, JT joined via Zoom. We were learning to shape our tools to fit new limitations.

We had been planning a road trip to visit a few of our mentors, but crossing state lines was out of the question in the pandemic. We needed new ways to ground the ministry and to discern. Danelle Laflower, a Friend and elder, sent us an email with a few queries to consider. She asked us: "What do you want to



do? How will you do it together?” Danelle offered encouragement as well as caution: “You know that I want you to follow your leadings, and that I believe you will be supported when you do,” she said. “But I also want to make sure you test your leadings and don’t outrun them – or the Spirit that guides you.”

These queries from Danelle gave us a new way to pause and consider. In forming our responses, we gained clarity as well as courage. Now, two and a half years later, we would like to share these early reflections. They offer a glimpse of the optimism and uncertainty we felt as we began. Here are some of our responses stemming from Danelle’s question: “Why do you, personally, want to do the interviews and the Listening Project?”

From Johanna: I want to find out what the next generation needs and wants when it comes to spiritual nurture. I think that many people are facing the kinds of barriers that I faced as a younger Friend, and I want to start listening to find out more about those themes.

I believe that Quakers have a beautiful gem to offer. There are times when we are so busy protecting the box that holds the gem, we can forget that other people might want to see it. I wonder about this. I think that in order to live into a strong Quaker future, we need to do a better job of inviting people in. That motivates me to do this work.

From JT: I want more connection in these social-distancing times, and I know that others do, too. This version of the Listening Project came from an earlier idea of offering listening sessions. The questions arose

from concerns that I think Johanna and I share, and I have heard a lot of other young Quakers voice, as well as some older ones. These concerns are for the future of Friends as a body and in the world, how we choose to manifest Quakerism with our choices, what we offer to each other and to those we serve.

Just giving space for anyone’s words to be heard can be a holy act. I have been told, and I am acting as if, I have a gift for listening. Indeed, a F/friend told me that I was a good listener last night. If this is a gift of mine, I will try to offer it.

Again, it is personally helpful for me to know that my experiences may be shared by others, but having queries may spark conversation that will help to evoke a sense of some portion of the Body of Friends. I suspect we will find that there are many commonalities between us, even through what may appear to be some obvious differences. With grace, perhaps the answers will come together into a product that is representative in some way and can be presented to others with a sense that it holds truth.

I hope this work will help build lasting connections between people. I hope some of those connections will be personal to me and/or carry through to the work that I feel may be my long-term calling.

On that note, I am glad to have a shared project with Johanna that sparks life in us both, is somewhat public facing, and in which we work as a unit and are seen to work that way. We have felt certain there would be shared work in our relationship, but we didn’t know what, and nothing had clearly presented itself.

We are now finding some experimental versions. Part of my spiritual journey is linked with hers, and part of my growth is my individual work to be a part of our relationship. We seem to have a sort of reciprocal loop, and part of being more “myself” right now is being a little more with her. Doing some sort of ministry or service with (or for) others is something I have waited a long time to feel like I was ready to do. Johanna being with me is some of what has made this moment what it is. Now, I will have a strong Friend with me while I challenge myself in this way, and while we practice working together. There will be learning and growth in many directions, probably with that same reciprocity appearing.

I would like others to see us working together for many reasons. Working together is part of who I am right now. Going forward, I think we will better understand the ministry we are led to do once we begin it. We will have our work reflected back to us. We may find our path more clearly with the support, guidance, and feedback of a wider group. Perhaps others with a similar experience of shared ministry will come into our lives as a result. We may meet those who have already experienced a mutual calling or those who may have yet to. Finally, if we are doing this work in the Light, then Friends will know.

From Johanna: I agree with what JT said. The list at the end opens up another question that we are exploring: “Why do we want to be seen working together?” There’s something about visibility here, but I don’t quite know what it is. I think that we are stepping into a very visible role. For some reason, we need to do that together.

I want to work with JT partly because I want to help reclaim the Quaker tradition of traveling and working in pairs. This is a communal labor: we are holding a concern and growing with it. It feels like my gifts come out more often when I work with JT. I think that he’s right when he says that the community can help us see what the work is as we begin to do it.

New challenges will probably arrive as we do this work. I don’t know what they are, at this point. That’s probably a good thing! It lets me start with some energy! I am fine with learning about them as we go.

Finding community oversight is important to me. One of our early steps has been to find people who can join us for discernment, in the short-term and later on. I am aware that oversight comes with some restrictions. There may be times that I need to wait; there may be some slow labor coming up. However, I think that this kind of pace also brings a degree of safety, which is something that I need.

I want to work with JT because it feels right and safe. It’s like putting on a seat belt: the process is safe with him. In starting this work, I feel a great deal of “up” energy. We are beginning something that has long been developing. It has to do with motion, dedication, passion, and change.

We are taking our first few steps. In the process, we are stumbling around with new footing beneath us. We’re beginning to get our bearings. And that feels right; that feels good. That is how I want to walk.

A few months after writing this reflection, JT Dorr-Bremme and Johanna Jackson began working publicly among Friends. Their ministry, Forward in Faithfulness, promotes inward transformation and collective renewal. Their vision is for Quakers to become creative, relevant, and thriving in the next 30 years. JT and Johanna work with other emerging collectives and ministers. These include the Three Rivers Worship Group and Quaker Aspen, an offshoot of Quakers and Business.

JT Dorr-Bremme and Johanna Jackson live in State College, Pennsylvania. To read more about Forward in Faithfulness, visit <forwardinfaithfulness.org>. You can also view their QuakerSpeak video, “Envisioning a Strong Future for Quakerism.”

