



This transcript is part of the Listening Project, a series of qualitative interviews that focus on healthy spiritual communities. What makes a strong, welcoming faith community? How are people finding spiritual nourishment in the Quaker world? There are no scripted questions for a listening session; however, there are a variety of themes that might show up.

The Listening Project is an ongoing endeavor by J.T. Dorr-Bremme and Johanna Jackson. We rely entirely on grants and personal donations to fund this work. To learn more, or to support creative conversations like this one, visit forwardinfaithfulness.org

Anna Weber-Loomis

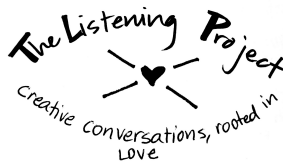
Millville Meeting
Lakota Community
Sweat Lodge

Sterling College

Age 18
Pronouns: she



Tags: rural living, expectations, grounding and safety, solitude, introversion, simplicity, building spiritual community, nurture, sweat lodge, inhibition, spiritual peers, Middle School Friends, embodiment, pain, bearing pain, mysticism, affirmation, grace, loneliness, connection, age mates, prayer, blessing, dogs.



JT and I met with **Anna Weber-Loomis** on an evening in December 2020. As we spoke, she spoke slowly and deliberately. Her natural love of quiet and space brought us often back to the Center.

I knew Anna through the Upper Susquehanna Quarter and our Fall Family Gathering. I will always be glad for her sensitive leadership inside of the teen program. You'll notice that in this interview that JT and I also share about our perspectives as well. Together, the three of us explore the purpose of loneliness. We remember times that we had mystical or surprising encounters – whether they were at sweat lodge or inside of a hazy, weird, hot summer day. There came a moment in the interview when Anna talked about a certain kind of emotional pain, and I felt it in my body.

As you read these words, imagine a few people moving through a discussion slowly, while time ticks on. That was the feeling of how we started. - Johanna Jackson



[We begin by explaining what we know of the Listening Project, which is very little at this point. We ask Anna if she'd like a starter question, or she wants to choose one of her own.]

@Anna

I think maybe a starter question.

@Johanna

Well, JT, you listed some good questions. What if we just choose one of those? Where do you find Spirit. . . How much of that is with the Quakers or outside of them?

@JT

That's a good place to start.

@Johanna

Okay.

@Anna

All right. Well, I think I find Spirit. . . more outdoors. . . and more often alone, but not always. But still in silence. Or, I guess – That's *more* where I find it, but I do find it with people and indoors, sometimes, too.

@Johanna

Mm-hmm.



@Anna
It's just –

[internet problems]

@Johanna
I'm going to turn my video off, because sometimes that helps the freezes. Okay. Anna, you froze for a little bit.

@Anna
I can check and make sure that no one else is on my house internet, and that might help. I'll go and check.

@Johanna
Okay. It's funny to see slow-motion-Anna blur.

[Anna walks off screen.]

@JT
Can you still see us okay?

@Johanna
Mm-hmm. Yeah.

[We wait for awhile, and then lose the connection and begin again.]

@Johanna
We're back. Well I'm getting a little disoriented, now, because your video and your voice *really* don't match together!

@Anna
Our house internet is kind of bad.

@Johanna
Yeah. Well, it would be kind of good by 2010 standards.

@Anna
Yeah!

@Johanna
So you were talking about being outside, and often being alone, but not – not every time, is how you find Spirit. And, I don't know if you want this question. But an idea that came to mind was, could you describe some things that happen in your mind or in your heart when



you're outside, and you're alone?

[pause]

@Anna

I guess, maybe a feeling of being safe and grounded. . . Yeah. (pause) I'm sure there's more, but I don't have more words for it right now.

@Johanna

Okay. Maybe we can just listen for another question to arise, then.

[pause]

@Johanna

I have a feeling that the next question is yours, but I don't know why.

@JT

That's because it is. How is your sense of Spirit different when other people are around?

@Anna

I would say that it's pretty similar, but... *stronger* when it's with other people. It just can be harder to find the group of people, or to "get there." I don't know. To find the group of people that enables getting there, or getting there in groups of people. Yeah.

@JT

Are there groups where you find that more consistently than others?

@Anna

I guess I've felt that, maybe, most consistently – I go to sweat lodge with my mom, sometimes, and that's a group where I've found that [spiritual depth] more than some. Yeah.

@JT

I'm finding that that answer doesn't surprise me, because I have already seen, in the few conversations we have had, and in planning others, that many of the people of faith that we're reaching out, people for whom faith is important in their life in some way or another, feel close to Spirit. . . We may have located them through Quaker acquaintances or networks, but that very many of them find their connection to Spirit elsewhere. Not necessarily in a Meetinghouse, in the traditional Meeting for Worship. And sometimes not even with Quakers at all. Just select groups. Yes. You're nodding, yes. Is this your experience as well?

[We are still speaking very slowly at this point.]



@Johanna
Mmm.

@Anna
Some, yeah.

[long pause]

@Johanna
Hmm. I want to ask a question. It's kind of narrow. So if it doesn't feel like it has enough breadth, we can just drop it. But I'll just ask it. What do the Quakers provide you, and what do they not?

@Anna
I would say that Quakers provide me with a community, and a community that I've had since I was born. So I guess, community and continuity *in* community, in a way that I haven't had other places, necessarily, as much. Yeah. So community and, like, support. Yeah. And acceptance.

[pause between words]

@Johanna:
This much quiet between questions is hard for me!

[Laughter from Anna, and then Johanna]

@Johanna
Would either or both of you like more quiet? Because I'm thinking of questions that haven't risen the whole way, but it kind of depends on what frame, or what mode, we want.

@Anna
I would say go ahead.

@Johanna
Okay. What makes your spiritual life really come alive? Like, when's a time that it was really alive?

@Anna
Probably when I was going to sweat lodge. But I do think that – I feel like – there was time, when I was – I haven't gone to Meeting a whole lot recently because I've been away at school. And the pandemic. But feel like. . . so it's sweat lodge, but then, before that, I feel like, when I was going to Meeting regularly, but not as much recently, so like, a few years ago.



@Johanna
Hmm.

@Anna
And I don't know if that has to do with there being more people at Meeting than there are now – especially people my age – or? Yeah.

@Johanna
Can I ask some questions about sweat lodge?

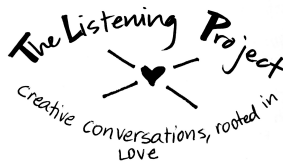
@Anna
Yeah.

Johanna
Okay. I've never been. What's it like to go to a sweat lodge? And the other thing that comes up is, 'How does it change your brain?' I don't know if it does, but people talk about it as if it alters something inside of you.

@Anna
So a sweat lodge, I mean, I'm sure there's differences within different traditions of what it looks like. But the one I've been in, it's – you go in, and it's really really dark, like no light coming in. And you're in there for awhile. It's really hot. [laughter] And there's singing and prayer. I guess it – is a little mind-altering in some way, but I don't know how to describe it. I think that just with the heat, and the darkness, you can kind of imagine anything. Or like – yeah. You feel like you're in a whole different space. Like not on this planet.

@Johanna
Cool! Sometimes I think extreme weather helps my brain jump a little bit, out of its usual container. There was a time – some summers are hotter than others, and I was working on the farm a few years ago during a drought and hot summer, so I think it was 2016. And I remember I was way out in the boonies of the farm, I was on the far edge, where – it's a little harder to work and stay sane, the further you go from the house in my opinion. Where there's toil, and heat, and the bathroom's kind of far away.

So I was kind of on the periphery, psychologically, of the farm, and I reached down to get something from the ground, and as I stood up, my eyes lifted up over the buckwheat patch. There was this cover crop that was about six feet tall; it was blue-green buckwheat. And as I looked over, suddenly, I saw this ancient *barn*, just kind of rise up behind the buckwheat. And I couldn't see anything else, and everything was HOT and searing. And my first thought was, 'It's 1850.' That was my first thought. Like, I just kind of forgot which century I was in! [laughter] And there was enough – there was enough weirdness, with the heat, and with not talking to anyone all day, and maybe with leaning down and lifting up and the head rush, that



my brain was ready to – *clonk* – to just switch to a different mode. [Head switches to the side like a gear shifting.]

And I think about that day, because it was precious. It wasn't *comfortable* to get there, but I have never come around a corner and thought I was in Rome or something, like it was just a little brain jump. And also I couldn't see modern buildings for a second because the buckwheat covered them. And it was so cool to be in this hazy, weird, hot place, and think a weird, hot thought – and then it – and then it was gone. And as soon as it was gone, I thought, 'Oh, I want to go back!' Yeah. Is that anything like sweat lodge?

@Anna

Maybe, in a very different way. If that makes any sense!

@Johanna

No! [laughter] But that's very generous of you. JT, you talked about how few people have listed a Meetinghouse as their spiritual core, or the place that they get inspired. I was wondering if you could say any more. . .? Yeah. If you could say any more.

@JT

One of the things I've heard here tonight and some of the things we've heard from others, I think, have reflected that the Quaker world, or body, gives community, and gives some contribution to seeking and approaching Spirit. But is lacking in some *thing*, or some set of things, that is needed for it to feel like it gives enough. Or, or, is – is still moving in all of the directions that I feel it *could*. Because I have sensed personally that we have a powerful *belief* in the faith that we can access the Divine, the Present Divine, immediately, and we can all do that together and it is reinforcing. That all seems really powerful to me. And I've participated in a sweat lodge only one time. But the sort of sensory deprivation part of it – where you're in the dark, and you're not moving, and there's sound and there's heat and that's kind of it – like, they give you some water every now and then – and it, like, it shuts off pieces of your brain that get in the way of spiritual experience. And, there was some chanting and some prayer – there was a man leading it, so there was stuff happening, too. You aren't just left to your own devices. Which might've been maddening, I don't know. It was certainly intense. And, I mean, I did feel physically altered by it.

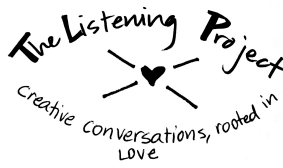
And the sort of, I don't know, religious ecstasy that some of the early Friends experienced is something that I don't hear about often–

@Johanna

Hmm.

@JT

–in my contemporaries or peers, except for the younger folks. They're often gathering pieces of Spirit from all different places, and all different people. So I'm interested in learning more



about that and observing that phenomenon happen. One of the things you mentioned was about having peers in your meeting. Peers don't have to necessarily be the same age, but it helps. How have you found people that you would consider peers? That is to say, how do you make connections with them – and also, how do you manifest that, and build community yourself, and find spiritual friendship and things like that?

@Anna

I kind of think I *haven't* much, really. When I was younger there were at least a couple of other people my age who attended meeting. More recently, they stopped coming, and I also went away to school. But I don't think I've really actively looked for peers much, really. Not spiritual peers, at least. Yeah.

[We pause, while we sit with that. There is a feeling rising.]

@Anna

And I think – I mean, I think some of that could be that, like – well some of it is that I haven't tried to make, or sometimes have had trouble making, connections with people my own age in general. And I think within the Quaker community, or within spiritual communities, I went to one or two Middle School Friends gatherings, something like that. And, everyone kind of already knew each other.

@Johanna

Mm-hmm.

@Anna

So it was a little hard for me to feel able to be part of those communities. Or – not – not able to be part, but – well, a little harder to connect to those communities than I might've otherwise found. So, I don't know.

@Johanna

[laughing] I think you do!

@Anna

But that was–

[indiscernible 30:04]

[the sound of breathing.]

@Johanna

Well, I want to share something about what was happened in my body while you spoke, Anna. Because what I'm noticing is that sometimes when we worship with people, I will feel stuff in my body that's, uh, registered by whatever's said or the feeling of it. I don't know what it is, yet. But, even before you started speaking, when JT asked about peers, and



turned it to you to reply, I felt kind of tighter-smaller. I felt both of them. But it wasn't a protective feeling, it was constrictive. And, um –

@Anna
Mm-hmm.

@Johanna
–And I noticed your voice got smaller and I felt a – a *pain* that couldn't – it was like something was trapped in there that couldn't get out. And that stayed for awhile. And then, when you talked about how sometimes it's hard to meet people your age, it was like the pain went like this: *Pfffew!* [Hands shoot up in the air to show the pain leaving out.] I don't know if it was that big. But there was a little bit of an opening, or an expanding, that I felt.

@Anna
Yeah.

@Johanna
I'm wondering – well, oh. Hold on. Maybe I'll check that with the Spirit first.

[longer pause]

@Johanna
I'd like to say something kind to that part that felt the pain, and I'm wondering if I can say something to you, Anna. [looks to Anna]

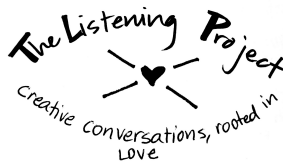
[Anna nods]

@Johanna
Okay. I don't know what it is, yet.

@Anna
Okay.

[pause]

@Johanna
Mmm. [small laughter] Okay. There are some things coming in. From what I know of you through Crystal Lake, Anna, you have some things that make you different than your peers. And all of them I find really beautiful. I think about those corduroy skirts that you've made, or the way that you wear overalls and you look so *yourself* in them. And I think about – I forget what the younger child was, I think it was [Friend's name], but I think about how well you tend to and *reach* to the youngest kids, who would love to be around you all the time if they could! [laughter]



And from what I felt on the inside of that pain, to be different, I'm guessing that it hurts sometimes. But it's also just such a grace that – there's a grace that moves *through* you that I find really really beautiful. [pause] I think there's a little bit more but I don't know what it is, yet.

[pause]

@Johanna

I don't know what it's like to be you when you're outside of Crystal Lake, and I don't usually see you when you're not there! [laughing] – or when you're at your kitchen table! –

[Anna and Johanna last met at her kitchen table. Anna laughs.]

@Johanna [laughing]

– but I'm kind of feeling like there's just this feeling, behind my shoulder, that's like 'Tell her I go wherever she goes.' Or, 'Tell her there's some kind of welcome, there's some kind of . . . extra bonus' that's available to you when you go places where you're a little different. And, I don't know quite what the words are, but that's the feeling of it. Yeah. So. Thanks for –

@Anna

I would say that – yeah. Thanks for all the – [laughter]. I would say that, yeah. I feel like I've been kind of lonely, a lot. But, going away to college, there are so many wonderful people, who I get along with, and, like, spend lots of time with, for the first time in – awhile, who I really enjoy. So. That are my own age. There are plenty of people that I have good connections with who are older than me, but sometimes, it's nice to have people your own age. [laughter]

@Johanna

Yes! I can't agree more. I think JT and I can both attest to that.

@Anna

Yeah.

@Johanna

That's good.

@Anna

So.

@Johanna

When do you go back to college. Is it covid-dependent, or... ?



@Anna
Not 'til February 14th!

@Johanna
Oh my gosh! Does it feel like a lifetime?

@Anna
Yeah!

@Johanna
[laughter]

@Anna
Yeah. But I might go back north earlier than that!

[Anna shares about the two people she knew most at school. She was considering driving back north to see them before the semester resumed.]

@Johanna
Maybe join their bubble for two weeks?

@Anna
Right.

@Johanna
Yeah. That's good. That sounds really good.

[Anna told about hopes coming up for in-person school again in February. And she talked about her cousin, who would be visiting nearby, while on an outdoor program. Anna hopes to run into her cousin in New England, when they may cross paths.]

@Anna
. . . So I don't know what it's going to be like with COVID. Right? But, I would think it is not unlikely for me to see her while I'm at Sterling and she's at her outdoor program!

@Johanna
That would be so neat! That would be so good. [laughter]

@Anna
Yeah.

@Johanna
Yeah. Even if it's outside, apart, waving through the snow. It would still be so good.



@Anna

Well, and I also might be doing a skiing course at the same time as she is skiing through Sterling's campus, with Croque.

@Johanna

Yeah. Okay.

@Anna

So that makes it seem like the likelihood might be even higher!

Johanna:

[laughter] Wow, that's cool. Huh, look at that. I just had a quick thought that was like, *I'll lift that up in prayer.* And Spirit said back, *Nope – none of that. More like – Pfoom!* [hands go up in the air like a rocket.] That was the feeling of it, like; 'Chuck that up in prayer up just once! That's all it takes!' There was no effort expended. It was just like *Pfing!* Lift it up once and it stayed up there!

[laughter]

@Johanna

Cool. That's cool.

@Anna

Yeah.

[Pause]

@Johanna

Well, I don't know if this is the case for both of you, but I feel like we just both landed on our purpose, and are kind of coming to the end of it. I don't know if that's what you feel... I'm happy to stay longer if you want. I feel complete, though.

[pause]

@JT

I want to say just a couple of words more that came to me when we were quiet a moment ago. *Keep seeking Spirit, and being yourself, and your companions will find you.*

@Johanna

Huh.

@JT



It sounds kind of pat, but –

@Johanna

It does! [laughing]

@JT

That was the message, basically.

@Johanna

[joking] Can we ask Spirit to make it more eloquent?

[Anna laughing too]

@JT

[smiling] Let's do that next time.

[Then we fall into a thoughtful pause together. It goes on for some time. Someone lets out a sniff of laughter.]

@JT

Thank you, Friends.

@Anna

Thank *you*, guys.

@Johanna

Yes. This is good. It feels really good to meet. I've got some words coming up. I don't know if they were more eloquent or not. [pause, speaking slowly] They were: *Remember that loneliness leads you where you need to go... because it tugs on your heart, with a persistent string... like a dog, yanking on a leash.*

[laughter, all]

@Johanna

There we go! [laughing again]

@JT

[smiling] Very good.

@Johanna

I guess any message from Spirit is made better by a puppy!

[all laughing]



@Anna

Isn't almost anything made better by a puppy??

@Johanna

Oh. . . except for the inside of my bedroom, I don't want a puppy there. But almost anything else!

@JT

Oh. Oh!

@Johanna

JT – JT, do you want a puppy right now?

@JT

Yes! [laughter]

@Johanna

Cool. Thanks, Anna. Thanks JT.

@JT

Thanks Johanna.

@Anna

Thanks both of you.

@Johanna

Let us know if you want to reach out in any way.

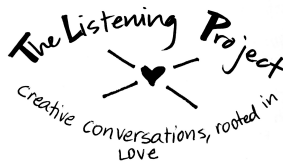
@Anna

All right.

[We close with a moment of silence, and then say goodbye]

Thanks for reading. We offer this transcript for free, in the hopes that the ideas presented will help to build a diverse, inter-generational faith community. Sharing a person's story in a faithful way, however, requires more than 15 hours of work per transcript. Please consider donating to the Listening Project. A donation of any amount encourages us as we continue to do this work. For more information, visit forwardinfaithfulness.org/donate

Thank you!



Discussion Questions

- 1.** *How does solitude help you find Spirit, Oneness, or God? What is your connection to solitude? What do you gain from being alone, and when, if ever, do you resist it?*
- 2.** *What is one thing you would like to tell someone like Anna, after reading more about her spiritual journey?*
- 3.** *What do you think about the idea that loneliness leads us to where we need to go? How does that fit with your experience? What do you learn or receive from times of loneliness?*
- 4.** *JT shares his view that a sweat lodge can turn off some of our inhibition, and open us up to new spiritual experiences. When is a time that you had a spiritual experience that surprised you?*