

Transcript Quakers Today November 2022

Peterson Toscano 0:01

In this episode of Quakers Today we ask what is a fictional story that has inspired you or challenged your worldview. Writer Anne E.G. Nydam reads an excerpt from her short story, "The Conduits." Cai Quirk, a trans and genderqueer photographer focuses on the intersections of gender diversity and spirituality throughout history. Through a QuakerSpeak video they talk about the power of stories we can experience through words and images. We also look at new graphic novel about a radical, eccentric prophet against slavery.

I am Peterson Toscano. This is the very first episode of Quakers Today, a project of Friends Publishing Corporation. The first season of Quakers Today is sponsored by Quaker Voluntary Service.

Writer Anne EG Nydam believes art can open our hearts, and fantasy just might save the world. Anne is the author of the short story, "The Conduits."

Anne EG Nydam 1:08

The idea behind the story was very simple. This is a metaphor that I've actually sort of thought about for a long time and sort of found useful as a metaphor. And I thought, well, what if you really could actually physically see this? How would that change the way you could move through your life? I'm sure I'm not the first person to a thought of it. And you know, it's been around for a long time, but we don't I don't know. It's almost like we don't really believe in it. I mean, so I sort of thought, well, what if you really had absolute proof?

The first time Maggie saw the conduits she was nine years old; sitting in meeting for worship; bored by the stillness and the silence, as always; and idly counting the flowers printed on her mother's skirt. Vera Penny stood up.

"Dear Friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God," the old woman said, her thin hand making a gesture as if she were scattering a handful of birdseed.

Maggie blinked at the glowing ripple that spread through the air where Vera's fingers traced their arc. She stared as the conduits came into focus: glowing lines spreading from Vera's hands, face, and powder-blue cardigan toward everyone else in the meeting room.

"Who has seen the wind?" Vera went on, "Neither you nor I. But when the trees bow down their heads, the wind is passing by. So with the Divine. We know God is there not because we see God, but because we see the effects of Love moving through the world like wind."

Maggie looked down at her own chest and saw the light touching her. She felt an unexpected warmth as she realized that there were more lines: channels between her and her parents sitting beside her; her friend Sora across the room; and Mr. Price who

always asked what book she was reading—and really listened to the answer. The harder Maggie looked, the more lines she saw, until there were lines connecting each person with every other person: heart to heart to heart. Then she noticed John Barlow sitting on a bench by himself. He sat in a shadow, none of the threads of light quite reaching him, as if a hole were torn in the web.

Maggie's focus sharpened, and she saw not just glowing threads but streams of light flowing through clear conduits toward John. But just before the light reached the man, something hard and jagged blocked the flow, so that he seemed tense with cold in his walled-off hollow where the light couldn't reach. Maggie didn't know John well—he wasn't a friendly man—but seeing that darkness around him, her heart went out to him. In that moment, she saw the metaphor made real and palpable, as a pulse of stronger light surged out from her own heart along the conduit toward the lonely man. The pulse hit the obstruction, flared brighter, and then faded. But its strength had widened the channel just enough that a thinner thread of light could flow through, wavering the last few inches to connect John Barlow at last with the great glowing web all around him. Maggie watched his eyebrows rise in surprise, and then his shoulders lowered just a fraction and the set of his mouth relaxed.

After the rise of meeting, Maggie asked her mother what she'd seen. Her mother shook her head, puzzled.

“When Vera Penny spoke,” Maggie insisted.

Her mother agreed that she'd found Vera's message helpful, but clearly she had seen no magical glowing threads. So Maggie hoisted up her courage, marched over to Vera Penny and said, “I want to know how to do that. Please.”

“How to do what?”

“Make those lines, those tubes of light. I want to be able to make those tubes like you do.”

Vera smiled and cocked her head at Maggie. “Ahh, you see them, too? Those are the conduits. But I don't make them, you know. That's God. They're always there.”

“But I only see them when you. . . .” Maggie made a little gesture of her own, unable to explain. “That's magic. I want to be able to do that.”

Vera nodded. “Knowing they're there: that's faith. Feeling them, that's being centered in the Divine. To see them takes imagination, as well. And perhaps a little magic.”

“And making it so I can see them, too?”

“That's God again. I share what I'm given to share. And that's obedience.”

Maggie frowned. Obedience didn't sound nearly as appealing as magic. “But you did do something.”

“Yes, but not to make them. What I did was believe in the love, imagine the love, and

center myself in the love. And if you saw the conduits, you can do all that, too, which is a blessing. It's hard enough to feel them, and most people never see them at all. You've been given a special gift, Maggie. Practice it. And come back and tell me how it goes."

Peterson Toscano 7:04

That was an excerpt of Anne EG Nydam's short story "The Conduits." Read the rest of the story in the November 2022 issue of Friends Journal. And you can hear Anne's complete reading of The Conduits by visiting [Quakers today.org](http://Quakers.today.org) Visit Nydamprints.com. To learn about Anee EG Nydams block prints and books. Nydam is spelt n y d a m,. Visit Nydamprints.com. You will find more short stories in the fiction issue of Friends Journal at Friendsjournal.org.

Coming up, photographer Cai Quirk tells us how stories and myths infused their visual art.

Cai Quirk 8:02

Stories have power to reach beyond our brain and into our emotions and our bodies, our souls our hearts. In that way, they can connect us in deeper ways to each other to ourselves to the earth.

My name is Cai Quirk. I use them theirs or am errs pronouns. And I currently live in Ithaca where I started going to Quaker meeting when I was five days old. My art is an expression of my faith. Some of it is what God is leading me to do to bring out in the world. And some of it is experiential pieces that bring me closer to the Divine and to Earth. I'm often led to a particular place to do a photo. Once I'm there, I set my equipment to the side and sit with the space. So the photograph is very much a collaboration between myself and and the earth and it feels like a co-creation with divine. One of the photos in the project is called Each Twilight. In it, I am reaching around a tree looking at this opening in the tree where there's light emanating out of it. That was what immediately called to me was this opening. As I was thinking about how I would create the titles for the images, which are each as if they're pulled out of the middle of a story, and it emerged into a myth that became part of the project as a whole. It became clear that these written stories in mythic form are meant to be a part as well.

The photos themselves are about gender mixed with spirituality and mythology and nature and storytelling, inviting new and nuanced ways of looking at gender. So it feels like Divine is very much pulling, pulling this to be out in the world and to have influence on how folks are looking at gender and opening the doors to wide our understandings. For me gender is very connected to being a Quaker. It's a similar kind of looking deep inside for one's own inner truth, and not necessarily following what society says. So this is the right way to do things.

Peterson Toscano 10:40

You can learn more about Cai Quirk at their website CaiQuirk.com. Cai is spelled CAI. Quirk is QUIRK. That site is caiquirkcom. Their book of photographs *Transcendence* is now available for pre-order. Cai was featured in the September arts issue of *Friends Journal*. You can also hear an extended interview with them on a brand new podcast, *The Deed. The Seed* is an excellent show hosted by Dwight Dunston. It's a project of the Pendle Hill Study Center. Learn more at Pendlehill.org.

You will find Cai Quirk's QuakerSpeak video and the QuakerSpeak channel on YouTube, or visit QuakerSpeak.com. The series is produced by Rebecca Hamilton Levy. New videos come out every other Thursday.

What do you do when you see a grave injustice in the world? What if your own friends or faith community are perpetrators of the injustice? What happens when you speak up and speak out? In the early 1700s a Quaker named Benjamin Lay found out when he railed against fellow Quakers who supported and benefited directly from slavery. Benjamin and his wife Sarah witnessed firsthand the atrocities against enslaved Africans who were kidnapped in Western Africa, and auctioned off as forced labour in Barbados. Later in Pennsylvania and New Jersey Lay resorted to extreme methods to convince Quakers to repent of slavery. Though he was only four feet tall, Benjamin lay used his voice writing, savings and even performance art to communicate with Quakers.

Marcus Rediker told the story in his 2017 book, *The Fearless Benjamin Lay, The Quaker Dwarf who Became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist*. And now there is the Graphic Novel, *Prophet Against Slavery*. It is authored by Rediker along with Paul Buhle. David Lester drew the dynamic and moving images.

For a *Friends Journal* review, Gwen Gosney Erickson wrote, "Rather than limiting the reader to a single illustration or angle, the artistry of this latest interpretation relays the entire story to show the many emotions and travails of an eighteenth-century Quaker prophet." On FriendsJournal.org you can read reviews of both books. There's also an interview with David Lester, the illustrator of the graphic novel.

Closing

Thank you for joining me for this very first episode of Quakers Today. If you like what you heard today, tell a friend and share Quakers Today on your favorite social media platform! The show is written and produced by me, Peterson Toscano. Music on today's show comes from Epidemic Sound. Special thanks to my guests Anne EG Nydam and Cai Quirk. Many thanks to listeners who already left voicemails (which you will hear after the closing.) Visit QuakersToday.org to see our show notes and a full transcript of this episode. Season One of Quakers Today is sponsored by Quaker Voluntary Service. I am just getting to know you as a listener. Maybe you are a young adult between 21-30 years old. Perhaps you are looking for community and purpose driven work. Or you know of a young adult who is on that quest. QVS is a year-long Fellowship for young adults. Fellows work at nonprofits while building community and

exploring Quakerism. Visit quakervoluntaryservice.org or find QVS on Instagram @quakervoluntaryservice.

Feel free to send comments, questions, and requests for our new show. Email podcast@friendsjournal.org.

Post-Show Voicemails

Peterson Toscano

I hope you enjoyed our very first episode of Quakers Today. This episode began with a question: "What is a fictional story that has inspired you or challenged your world view?" In a moment you will hear responses some of you left on the Quakers Today voicemail line. But first let me share the question for next month's episode: According to Oxford Languages the word Redemption has two meanings. First is the action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil. I know of this definition from the churches I attended earlier in life. The second one states that redemption is the action of regaining or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment, or clearing a debt. Once when my car was towed in New York City, I paid a hefty fine. On the payment receipt in big letters they stamped the words Redeemed.

I have a question for you: Today in the 21st Century, what does redemption mean to you? I'd love to hear and share what you have to say. Leave a voice memo with your name and the town where you live. The number to call is 317-QUAKERS, that's 317-782-5377. 317 Quakers. +1 if calling from outside the USA. You can also send an email. I have these contact details in our show notes over at QuakersToday.org

And now we hear your answers to the question. "What is a fictional story that has inspired you or challenged your worldview?"

Wendy Cooler 17:12

Hello, Peterson. This is Wendy Cooler, and I am calling from Greenbelt, Maryland. I am a member of Sandy Spring monthly meeting. So I feel that Quakers actually can learn a lot from the movie in Encanto. I've learned a lot. So much so that I delivered a keynote on the topic of Southeastern yearly meeting last year at Easter with my friend Melinda Weiner Bradley.

Here we have a family with magical gifts who have become their magical gifts. People are more than their gifts. And yet the one person who apparently has no gift is the one who can see that the magic that has bestowed all of this upon them is fading. Only after heroes clash in which the last prophet is taken out of hiding in the walls of the home and the magic dies. Is the family really able to embrace one another for who they are and join in real solidarity with the community around them who are allowed for the first time to help the family Madrigals?

I cried every time I watched this film last year. I so resonated with Bruno, the goofy uncle living in exile, but exile inside the walls of the house, trying to tape the cracks

back together and ultimately failing. I often feel like I'm a goob though trying my best. While the end of Quakerism is accepted by some deemed taboo by others. What is there after the magical gifts? Something far, far better for Bruno and for everyone in the family. They have authenticity, togetherness, forgiveness, boldness, and solidarity.

Rob 18:58

My name is Rob. I live in London and Patrick Gales book *Notes From an Exhibition* inspired me to go to Penzance in the Southwest of England.

Sarah 19:11

Hi, this is Sarah calling from Point Pleasant. Something that has really inspired me and brought me deeper into the Quaker faith is actually a poem by EE Cummings. I think you got for most of this amazing. I first was introduced to it in a Photography as Contemplative Practice workshop at FTC gathering led by Peter West Nutting. And it's just the rhythm of it and the movement of the poem really speaks to how I approach art and my own spirituality. I thought I would just read it.

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now

Jonah 20:39

Hi, this is Jonah from New Hampshire responding to the query about a fictional story that has inspired you or challenged your worldview. I grew up a fan of Tolkien and *Lord of the Rings*. And so at some point, I found my way to *Beowulf*. And for me the definitive translation was Seamus Heaney, sort of grand rolling poetry that evokes failed in Rohan and all the things that I loved about Tolkien. So the spirit things in days gone by and the kings who ruled them and then recently a new translation came out

and I read it and it is not the evocative heroic but it is wonderful. It is absolutely wonderful. The new translation by Maria Dahvana Headley that opens “Bro, do we even know how to speak of King?” and later says of Hrothgar? We all know a boy can't daddy until his daddy's dead.” And I love about this poem that my love of Tolkien and epic fantasy and sort of grand old heroes off in the myth became and led me to this love of “Bro do we know how to speak of kings?” and bringing that you know 1000 year poems from Old English history into today?

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>