

## **The Quaker Tradition: Broken into Wholeness**

Keynote Address at 2015 Gathering of Friends General Conference at Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, North Carolina (July 9, 2015)

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### **I. Introduction and Overview**

Until the fall of 1974, I knew very little about Quakers. I was thirty-five years old and had served for five years as a community organizer in Washington, D.C. Burned out and in deep need of a sabbatical, my wife and I went to Pendle Hill as adult students, with our three children. We planned to stay for a year and then return to D.C. But the pull of Quaker faith and practice drew us onto the Pendle Hill staff and kept us there for another decade. I think this may qualify as the longest sabbatical on record!

It's hard for me to imagine what my life or work would be without the gifts I've received from the Quaker tradition. In the forty-one years since I arrived at Pendle Hill, Quaker faith and practice has transformed my life at every level—spiritual, personal, and professional. So I'm deeply grateful for this chance to speak to people who are among Quakerism's trust-holders, people who are helping to keep the Light alive.

When my friends at FGC asked me to give this talk, I was glad to learn that the theme for this Gathering was "Seeking Wholeness" in both our personal and communal lives. "Wholeness" is a vision that vexed and haunted me when I was young because I confused it with "perfection." But it's impossible to live very long and maintain any illusions about perfection! So I had to find another way to define "wholeness," and here's what experience has taught me:

“Wholeness does not mean perfection. It means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.”

Tonight I invite us to look at the Religious Society of Friends in that light—as a tradition that’s “broken whole.” I want to testify to all that Quakerism has given me, and celebrate all it has to offer to a world in deep need. Over the past few weeks, as I’ve told my Jewish, Catholic, Protestant and Muslim friends that I would be speaking at this Gathering, every one of them has said something like, “Please tell the Quakers how much we need them these days.”

I also want to grieve the fact that we seem to stumble over ourselves when it comes to connecting with the countless people who seek gifts of the Spirit that Quakers have in abundance. I’m talking about the multitudes who have spiritual longings but no spiritual home, who have walked away from—or never walked toward—forms of Christianity that depend on hierarchy and external authority, that put intermediaries between the individual and the Spirit, that offer answers to questions no one is asking, that are not socially or politically engaged in meaningful ways. At least 40% of Americans are unchurched, and the millennial generation includes many serious seekers who can’t find a spiritual community that supports their seeking.

Numbers don’t tell the whole story about anything, but the part of the story they tell about us can’t be ignored. Between 1972 and 2012, Quaker membership declined by almost 50%, with no replacements in sight. Today there are 72,000 Quakers in this country, roughly half the number there were in 1972. Statistics like these—along with the rising median age of meeting membership—have some sober observers suggesting that the Quaker community might end its run by the close of this century.

I know that Friends have been actively concerned about all this for decades. Some are trying to communicate Quakerism more effectively to the public—I'm glad, for example to see our growing use of social media. I'm also glad to see such promising renewal projects as FGC's Quaker Quest, the Spiritual Deepening Project that is now being piloted, along with QVS, and Quaker Voluntary Service, which is attracting and cultivating a new generation of Quaker leaders. We need new forms of outreach to new populations, and slowly but surely we are creating them.

The underlying key to our renewal, I believe, is not in reinventing or repackaging or rebranding ourselves. It's naming and claiming and sharing with others the spiritual treasures we've always possessed—treasures sometimes hidden from us by our familiarity with them, and too often hidden from others by our reluctance, even inability, to talk about them. We must not let our declining numbers diminish our sense of the spiritual gifts we have to share with a world in great need.

## **II. Five Elements of Transformation**

So tonight I want to speak personally about renewal on the basis of my own experience of those gifts—in particular the lived experience of eleven years at Pendle Hill. I'm going to talk about five elements of the Quaker tradition that have been transformative for me. I've chosen these five not only because I regard them as core Quaker assets, but because I have questions about how well we are preserving and passing them along to others. So after I've said a few things about each of the five elements, I'm going to pose a few queries for Friends to ponder individually and in monthly meetings.

**(1) The first element was Pendle Hill's meeting for worship, which was held every morning.** But before I could experience the transformative power of unprogrammed worship, I had to question it, resist it, even doubt its validity. I don't think reactions of this sort are uncommon among the folks who visit us. But I think we often fail to recognize this kind of resistance, or help people with it—perhaps because we assume that others will instantly love the silence as much as we do.

I grew up in a Methodist church whose minister who was an intellectual leader in that denomination. I studied religion at Carleton College, Union Seminary, and the University of California at Berkeley, where I read Tillich, Barth, Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer and their kin. So I was ill-prepared for the vocal ministry I heard when I began attending the unprogrammed meeting at Pendle Hill. It wasn't that I disbelieved the core Quaker claim that everyone seeker has direct access to God. I just wondered about the source of some of the things I heard during my early experience of the unprogrammed meeting.

At one of the first meetings I attended, a bird was singing outside the open window. Suddenly, the Friend next to me rose, whistled for a while in a rough imitation of birdsong, and then spoke for several minutes about "the bird within," making extended references to nesting, hatching, feeding, and other matters of ornithological interest. It was—what is the Quakerly way to say this?—it was an idea that *would not have occurred to me*, certainly one I had never encountered during my theological studies. I began to wonder what strange planet I had landed on, and when I might catch the next spaceship back to earth!

I was a mouthy and headstrong thirty-five year old, so my vexation spilled over into conversations with some of Pendle Hill's elders. I told them that

the Quaker version of the spiritual journey seemed uninformed and undisciplined to me, one lending itself to narcissism squared and sanctified. The elders I talked with had the wisdom not to defend but to inquire—and the patience to hear me out as they asked questions to help me explore my feelings. Over time, I came to understand that, while my concerns had some merit, the problem was not in the Quaker form of worship nor in that whistling Friend. The true source of my distress lay within myself.

In the unprogrammed meeting for worship, the received faith I had depended on was coming apart around my ears. It was no longer getting propped up by professional preaching, and I was in free-fall. But as Friends helped me to understand what was going on inside of me, my free-fall was arrested, and I began to use the meeting as a context in which to reconstruct my faith on the basis of personal experience. Slowly, I came up with my own answers to that classic Quaker question, “What canst thou say?” from the ground of your own experience? For example, as a survivor of clinical depression that had taken me close to death’s doorstep, I eventually saw that I no longer needed to rely on anyone’s theology of resurrection: I had a direct experience of it.

This first element of my transformation at Pendle Hill gives rise to a couple of queries for your consideration. They have to do with our capacity to help people enter into the worship experience that’s central to the Quaker tradition—and pay attention to what is happening for people in that space:

- Are we creating safe space in the community for people to be open and vulnerable about how the journey is going for them? Do we have members who are on the alert and have the capacity to help people hold the struggles that come with the spiritual life? Who are they, and how can we support them in becoming strong spiritual friends and companions?

- How can we expand opportunities for worship beyond the once-a-week First Day meeting to give people chances to deepen their experience of Quaker worship—of that which we meet in the silence, in and beyond ourselves? Can we, for example, form small worship circles that meet weekly at times others than First Day? Or revive an old Quaker practice called “the opportunity” that I learned about from the late Bill Taber. “Let’s take an opportunity,” Bill would say when sitting with one or two other people—an impromptu moment to sit in the Presence for a while and emerged refreshed.

**(2) The second transformative element of my Pendle Hill experience involved members of the community who had a deep understanding of the Quaker tradition**—people who helped us hold standards that kept Quaker faith and practice from morphing into whatever we wanted it to be. The quickest example I can give relates to the nature and conduct of Clearness Committees, which I regard as an critical component of the Quakerism.

At the heart of the Clearness Committee is a radical commitment to and dependence upon that of God in every person. So the rules that govern a Clearness Committee forbid members from doing anything that vaguely resembles trying to fix, save, advise or correct the focus person who brings a question or concern. The whole idea of the Clearness Committee is to create safe space for that person to have a deepening conversation with that of God within him or her—and when members try to replace that voice of truth and wisdom with their own, the space quickly becomes unsafe.

And yet, I too often hear about meetings where the practice of Clearness Committees has fallen away from this norm. Friends use the Clearness Committee to tell the focus person what *they* believe he or she ought to do with the problem at hand, belying a lack of confidence in the reality and power of the Inner Teacher. Perhaps this is why I also hear about meetings where Clearness

Committees are not practiced or even known. As Gresham said, “Bad money drives out the good.”

Of course, slippages like this are not intentional. They occur because—in the absence of teachers who understand and can teach Quaker norms—meetings easily backslide into the default norms of our culture. We live in a culture that encourages us to fix, advise, correct and save each other because it does *not* believe in that of God in every person. In this culture we are regarded as empty vessels—that’s why we do so much religion and education as we do, filling all those empty vessels with someone else’s version of truth.

Every form of religion is at constant risk of reverting to cultural business as usual. But Quakerism is at special risk for two reasons: First, at its best, it is profoundly counter-cultural, and thus swims against a powerful nonstop current. Second, its open form of worship—and its belief in continuing revelation—can easily be mistaken for “anything goes.”

So I want to pose two queries for Friends’ consideration:

- Do we have people in our meetings who are well-grounded in Quaker faith and practice, people we can—and do—call on to review our practices, to remind us of the plumb lines of our tradition, to help us stay true to our own norms?
- If we lack such people, are we intentional about inviting well-grounded Friends to visit our meeting for a while, examine our practices with us, and remind us of the norms of our tradition?

**(3) The third transformative element of my decade-plus at Pendle Hill was coming to understand the paradox at the heart of the Quaker way: a commitment to community—and to discernment in community—is just as central to Quaker faith and practice as is the affirmation of every individual’s direct access to God’s guidance. At our best, we hold the paradox of radical**

reliance on the Inner Teacher *and* radical vulnerability to fearlessly sifting and winnowing in the “gathered community” whatever we individually believe to be true.

This critical paradox is frequently missed or misunderstood, both in and out of the Quaker community. It’s easy to mistake our emphasis on the Inner Teacher as a form of radical individualism: “One truth for you, another for me, and never mind the difference.” But that’s a distortion of the tradition—and if it were true, it would make us part of the problem, not part of the solution. We *must* mind the difference—we share this world, and our individual beliefs may well have consequences for others.

The Quaker paradox as I understand it goes like this: The best teacher we have is that of God within us, an Inner Teacher that has a voice we must listen for with care. But we have other voices inside us as well—voices of fear, ego, greed, envy, self-inflation and self-deprecation—voices that speak to all of us from time to time. So it is critical to test the truth of what we hear from within—test it in a community that will not give us “the answer” but will help us discern the validity of what we’re hearing and where it’s coming from.

At our best, we practice a rare form of community, one I had never experienced until I came to Pendle Hill. It’s most clearly seen by comparing it to two false forms of community that dominate our world, not least the world of religion. In one of those forms, the voice of the individual is suppressed by the voice of the group, which allows only the kind of speaking (and believing) that conform to the norms of the group. In the other form of false community, anyone can say anything he or she wishes to say—but no one is listening, no one is responding, and no one cares!

Quakers had the genius to invent a third form of community. In it, we can speak in whatever way we feel led *and* test our leadings in communal settings where others are doing the same. But that testing does not take the form of “I’m right and you’re wrong” arguments. Instead, we speak our own voice into the gathered group, laying it alongside the voices of others—as if we were laying down threads to be woven on a communal loom into a larger pattern of insight than any one of us could achieve alone. Eventually, what I call “a tapestry of truth” emerges—a tapestry which some threads have fallen away while others have come together with a power and beauty that moves us into action, individually and/or collectively.

This is how I understand the “gathered” or “covered” meeting for worship, as well as meeting for worship on the occasion of business. It’s a gathering in which our souls are joined in communion with the Spirit as well as each other, and are ultimately guided by the Spirit, *if* we remain open to it.

As I look back on this formative element of my Pendle Hill experience, here are a couple of queries that come to me:

- How well do our meetings for worship and for business hold the Quaker paradox, helping people winnow and sift whatever they’re hearing from within? How well are we helping each other live more deeply into the demands this paradox makes on us—such as learning to listening carefully, speak honestly, and practice patience and personal vulnerability?
- How often do we fall away from the Quaker paradox toward false community—creating a culture where certain kinds of speech are unwelcome, or where people speak but do not feel heard? For example, if ours is a predominantly Christ-centered meeting, do universalist Friends feel free to speak? If ours is a universalist meeting, do Christ-centered Friends feel free to speak?
- What are we doing to articulate the Quaker paradox to the larger public, to help outsiders understand the nature and the potentials of this rare form of community?

**(4) The fourth element of my transformation had to do with community as a lived experience of everyday life.** During my decade-plus at Pendle Hill, seventy people lived in closer proximity than anything I'd experienced outside of my own family. We worshipped together, ate meals together, studied, did physical work, made decisions together, and—in ways large and small—did our best to look after each other. It was also was a community of radical economic equality: while I was there, everyone made the same base salary, regardless of title, job description, or credentials.

Living that way for eleven years gave me gifts too numerous to count, so I'll name just a couple of them. The first one may surprise you, if you're imagining The Peaceable Kingdom! The gift was experiencing tension and conflict and learning how to make creative use of them.

When seventy people live in close proximity, it's inevitable that you sometimes end up in "close combat" with one or more of them! Un-Quakerly, I know, but it happens. As it says in Scripture, "Wherever two or three are gathered, sooner or later there will be a squabble!" I've been told that at the Last Supper, they argued over how to split the bill.

That's the kind of thing that led to the definition of community I came up with at the end of my first year at Pendle Hill: "Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives." Then, at the end of my second year, I came up with an addendum to that definition: "When that person moves away, someone else arises immediately to take his or her place."

Behind those half-jesting definitions are two things I learned from "life together." First, in the intimacy of a close-knit community, there is *always* someone on whom you can project problems and issues that, in fact, reside

within *you*. So when you meet the person you least want to live with, you are meeting yourself in a mirror—which gives you a great opportunity for self-knowledge, and for forgiveness of the other and yourself. In some ways, this is an insight at the heart of nonviolence, because understanding and resisting projections keeps us from making “enemies” everywhere we go. As Pogo famously said, “We have met the enemy, and it is us.”

The second thing I learned from this kind of “close combat” is that conflict does not signal the end of community. On the contrary, conflict is the doorway into deeper community. Sometimes people can work through it by themselves; sometimes they require third-party mediation; sometimes the resolution comes in ways that can only be called grace. Whatever it takes, community is deepened when we learn to live into the definition of community offered by Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche Communities, who says that community is “a continual act of forgiveness.”

As a faith community that has always been reluctant to engage in verbal proselytizing—a reluctance I’m inviting us to rethink—Quakers should never forget what Tertullian, a church historian of the second century, said about what drove the growth of the early church. He said that strangers looked in on those early churches and said, “See how they love one another.” Love with the power to draw others in is the kind of love we learn only by going through hard times together.

Here are a couple of queries for that come to me as I look back on this formative element of my experience at Pendle Hill:

- Beyond gathering for worship and business, what other forms of life together are available to our members and attenders? The wider

the variety of forms—from potluck suppers to work days to share social action—the deeper the experience of lived community.

- How open and honest are we about the tensions and conflicts that lie just beneath the surface whenever two or three are gathered? Or do we regard tension and conflict as so “un-Quakerly” that we try to wish it away by not naming and claiming it?
- How well do we teach the principle that conflict is not the end of community but a doorway into it? And how well do we support people who are trying to bring that principle into practice?

**(5) The fifth and final element of my transformation was the way people at Pendle Hill did their best to walk the talk when it came to the Quaker social testimonies**—which, as Howard Brinton named them early in Pendle Hill’s history, are simplicity, peace, integrity, community and equality.

Pendle Hill was founded as a living laboratory of these testimonies. Though it did not achieve perfect embodiment—which is always beyond our reach—it lived into these human possibilities as well as any community I know, and better than most. At the same time we had the predictable differences, tensions and conflicts over what the testimonies are meant to look like in practice—and, as I’ve already said, I learned much from the openness with which we held those differences.

For example, we struggled with the absence of certain forms of diversity, without which the equality testimony does not get fully tested. We had diversity in age, vocation, sexual orientation and theological convictions—all important—but when it came to race and social class, we mostly looked like peas in a pod. But we lived into the integrity testimony by having the courage to discuss this issue openly and regularly, rather than ignoring it and pretending all was well.

Furthermore, living into the equality testimony does not begin with external markers of diversity. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve been

asked by a pastor to help his or her “homogeneous white congregation” become more diverse. I always answer, “No, I won’t do that.”

When they ask me why, I explain: “There’s no such thing as a homogenous white congregation. There’s only a bunch of white people pretending they have no differences among them, for fear that bringing them to the surface would blow the whole thing up. If you can’t deal with your own invisible internal differences, why on earth would someone with a visible difference want to join you? If you’re willing to work on *that* problem, I’ll be glad to work with you.”

What I especially treasure about this part of my Pendle Hill experience is the way we held our differences over the testimonies—and over larger questions of theology—without engaging in “political correctness” or verbal combat. Here’s a story that will illustrate what I mean. It involves Robin Harper, who was head of maintenance at Pendle Hill while I was there.

Robin is well-known among Friends as a conscientious war tax resister. This not only meant the possibility of prosecution and imprisonment—war tax resistance made very heavy demands on his life. Robin had to be employed by people who would agree not withhold any taxes, shrinking his job opportunities dramatically, and he could not own any real property that could be seized and turned into cash by the IRS.

I shared Robin’s abhorrence of war, but I could not imagine taking the risks and making the sacrifices he did. I was at that stage of moral development where I had very high ethical aspirations, and equally high levels of guilt about the way I continually fell short. It’s a formula for a good life, I tell you—aim high, hit low, and feel lousy about yourself the whole time!

So one day I went to Robin and told him of my admiration and my dilemma. "I believe what you believe," I said, "and I want to put my beliefs into action. But I just cannot bring myself to do what you do." Robin responded plainly, simply, and with great compassion. "Keep holding the belief," he said, "and follow wherever it may lead you. As time goes on, you will find your own way of resisting violence and promoting peace." That's Quakerism at its best, that's community at its best, that's teaching at its best, that's friendship at its best.

I know we have differences among us on theology and ethics, but we must hold them in ways that invite us to move forward together, not drive us apart. I hope there's no Quaker anywhere who believes that our declining membership is due to the fact that we haven't argued enough about our diverse theological convictions, trying to stake a claim of theological purity around which others will rally. Believe me, the people who are leaving organized religion are doing so partly because of all the silly theological food-fights about that which lies beyond all naming, fights that seem to leave people with little energy to demonstrate what their faith looks like when it is lived.

Here are some queries for that come to me as I look back on this formative element of my experience at Pendle Hill:

- Do we regularly lift up the Quaker social testimonies, and talk about the ways the Quaker community has lived into them historically?
- Do we discuss current affairs in the context of our social testimonies, and wait upon the Spirit for guidance around the ancient question, "How then shall we live?"

### **III. A Few Words About My Work**

I want to end by speaking briefly about the relation between my Quaker formation at Pendle Hill and my work in the world over the past forty years. In

many ways, the work I've done is a direct extension of my decade-plus at Pendle Hill, and of the impact of Quaker faith and practice on my life. I'm referring not only to my writing, but to a project I began back in the early nineties, which—with the help of many people—became a non-profit organization now called the Center for Courage & Renewal.

Thanks to its very able leadership—leaders younger and smarter than I—the Center's work has had quite a reach. We now have 240 facilitators around the U.S., as well as in Canada, England, Australia and South Korea. We offer various long-term retreat series for a wide variety of people, including K-12 teachers and school leaders, faculty and administrators in higher education, physicians and other health care professionals, clergy, philanthropists, non-profit leaders, attorneys and judges and others. More recently, we've been developing programs for citizens who want to help renew American democracy. Over the past fifteen years, some 80,000 people have been directly involved in our programs, and many times more than that have been touched by what those people brought back to their workplaces.

In many of our programs, a cohort of 20-25 participants travel together through a series of facilitated three-day retreats, spread across a period of twelve, eighteen or twenty-four months. This gives us time to have more than a mountain-top weekend experience, and then find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death by Monday afternoon. It gives us time to go deeply inward in the context of a community shaped by what I've called "the Quaker paradox"—a "community of solitudes," a way of "being alone together."

Our goal in these retreats is to create safe space in what we call a "Circle of Trust," safe space for people to listen to their inner teacher, to "rejoin soul and

role,” to bring their identity and integrity more fully into their lives and work. When people who are familiar with Pendle Hill ask me to describe my work, I say very simply, “The Center for Courage & Renewal is Pendle Hill on the road,” in honor of the place and tradition from which I learned all of this. The attractiveness of our programs, which are rooted in Quaker principles and practices, has persuaded me that Quakerism itself still speaks to people’s condition.

There’s one feature of our programs, and of my experience at Pendle Hill, that I want to lift up in closing. It’s another element of transformation, one in which Quakerism is not lacking, but perhaps one we need to lift up to counter the image some have of us as an excessively somber and sober people. I’m talking about joy and laughter.

I can’t imagine being on a spiritual journey without laughing at myself and at the way we get our wires crossed in life. And I can’t imagine taking that journey without people who can laugh together. Without it, we are likely to get ourselves into deep oatmeal. Laughter is the leaven of life, the corrective to the spiritual gravitas that makes a bread of life so heavy it gives us a bellyache. Laughter is the practice that allows angels to fly because, as Chesterton said, they take themselves lightly.

I love what Joseph Campbell says about “the rapture of being alive,” a rapture that comes in many forms, but often manifests itself in joy and laughter:

People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think that what we are seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That’s what it’s finally all about...

So, a final set of queries for Friends to consider:

- Are we sharing with people the joy and vitality of a life lived in vulnerable listening to each other and the Spirit?
- Are we sharing the joy and vitality of a life lived in honest speaking about our fears, our hopes, our faith?
- Are we sharing the joy and vitality of feeling at home in our own skins and at home in our wondrously diverse world—the joy and vitality of learning to be fully present in service to the world?

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### **Postscript**

Two days before I delivered this talk, I heard a story from Quaker history that I'd never heard before. Though it was not in my original text for the talk, I loved it so much that I told it before I began speaking from my text, so I want to share it here:

In 1845, Quakers in Northern Ireland founded Bessbrook, an experiment in utopian community. In this model village, there was to be no drinking, no cursing, no gambling, and thus no need for police. In 1879, George Bernard Shaw visited Bessbrook to see how things were going.

At the end of his visit, a reporter asked him what he thought of a community in which there was no cursing or drinking. "From the looks on their faces," said Shaw, "it would appear that they could use some of both." He also reported that he had seen a swan on a Bessbrook pond "looking for a place to drown itself."

It's a story that tests our ability as Quakers to be "angelic" in the way Chesterton suggests!

### Parker J. Palmer Bio Sketch

Parker J. Palmer is a writer, speaker and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change. He is the founder and Senior Partner of the Center for Courage & Renewal, which oversees long-term retreat programs for people in the serving professions, including teachers, administrators, physicians, clergy, non-profit leaders and philanthropists.

Palmer holds a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, as well as thirteen honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press, and major grants from the Danforth Foundation and the Lilly Endowment.

He is the author of nine books, including several best-selling and award-winning titles: *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, *The Courage to Teach*, *A Hidden Wholeness*, *Let Your Life Speak*, *The Active Life*, *To Know As We Are Known*, *The Company of Strangers*, *The Promise of Paradox*, and *The Heart of Higher Education*.

In 1998, the Leadership Project, a national survey of 10,000 educators, named Dr. Palmer one of the thirty “most influential senior leaders” in higher education and one of the ten key “agenda-setters” of the past decade.

Since 2002, the Accrediting Commission for Graduate Medical Education has given annual Parker J. Palmer “Courage to Teach” and “Courage to Lead” Awards to directors of exemplary medical residency programs.

In 2005, *Living the Questions: Essays Inspired by the Work and Life of Parker J. Palmer*, was published.

In 2010, Palmer was given the William Rainey Harper Award whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, Marshall McLuhan, and Paolo Freire.

In 2011, the Utne Reader named him one of 25 Visionaries on its annual list of “People Who are Changing the World.”

A member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker) via the Berea (KY) Friends Meeting, Dr. Palmer lives with his wife, Sharon Palmer, in Madison, Wisconsin.