

# LIFE FROM THE CENTER

## *The Message and Life of Quaker Thomas Kelly*

### **The Message**

*Edited by Kathleen B. Wilson*

### **The Life Story**

*By Kathleen B. Wilson*

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## INTRODUCTION

Many share a longing to know faith that is core, vital and true. Despite many important years in several churches, I found myself still searching. It was then that I discovered Thomas R. Kelly in a book by professor, Methodist minister, and family friend Dr. Ira G. Zepp. Introducing Thomas Kelly, Ira wrote: “In his all too brief a life (1893-1941), this brilliant Quaker taught us how to center our lives and discover the Light within.”<sup>1</sup>

In Kelly’s writing I find words that ring clear and true to my own experience. He writes of God, the Light, Love, Presence, the Power, the Living Christ, the Eternal, Reality, the Other—beyond word or image. He writes of the Inner Light, within me and within all people. He writes of God speaking, even now, to me and to all who listen in the silence. He writes of surrender to God and of the resulting simplification of life.

So profound are his books *A Testament of Devotion* (TD) and *The Eternal Promise* (EP), I am led to introduce them to others through selected passages. His words, including italics, are quoted exactly as he wrote (except as indicated by ellipses or brackets). The format, however, is converted from prose to free verse, consistent with the poetic nature of his devotional writing.<sup>2</sup> Selections from both books are organized together by topic and speak to me directly and personally of the Light Within and life lived from the Center.

Although the biographical details of his life are specific to him, the path taken by Thomas Kelly is not unlike that of other seekers of Truth. And on reading both his life story and the message, it is clear they cannot be separated. His story speaks to the authenticity of his words by confirming that when he refers to “I,” “we,” “us,” and “our” throughout his devotional writing, he expresses the message in the words of his own experience.

It is hoped readers will find this introduction helpful and that you will hear Thomas Kelly saying:

I want to speak, as simply, as tenderly, as clearly as I can.  
For God *can* be found. . . .<sup>3</sup>

It is as St. Augustine says:

He was within and we mistakenly sought Him without.

EP p. 68

KBW April 7, 2017

# THE MESSAGE OF THOMAS KELLY

## [Introductory Words]

Quakers<sup>4</sup> appeared in history at just such a time as this,  
when the experience of deep religion  
had grown thin. . . .  
[Their] purpose was not to form another sect  
and to justify it by a peculiar tenet.  
Friends came to dig down  
to the wellsprings of spiritual immediacy,  
holding that religion means  
that which you know,  
feel, experience within yourself. . . .  
Religion means living and walking with God;  
experiencing the power and triumph of knowing Him  
—in short,  
living in the sense of the imminence of God.  
EP p. 18

The paradox of true mysticism  
is  
that individual experience leads to social passion, . . .  
Love of God and love of neighbor  
are not two commandments,  
but one.  
It is the highest experience of the mystic,  
when the soul of man [or woman] is  
known to be one with God himself,  
that utility drops off  
and flutters away, useless, to earth,  
that worldshaking consciousness  
of [humankind] in need  
arises in one  
and [one] knows [oneself] to be the channel of Divine Life.<sup>5</sup>  
EP p. 3

True decidedness is not of doctrine,  
but of life orientation.  
It is a commitment of life,  
thoroughly, wholly,  
in every department and without reserve,  
to the Inner Guide.  
It is not a tense and reluctant decidedness,  
an hysterical assertiveness.  
It is a joyful and quiet  
displacement of life from its old center  
in the self,  
and a glad and irrevocable  
replacement of the whole of life  
in a new and divine Center.  
EP p. 4

To you who may not know vividly such a life  
I hesitantly,  
yet also boldly,  
offer a description, not an argument.  
For a description rests primarily upon experience  
while an argument from postulates. . . .  
Mystical religion is everywhere grounded  
in the experimental [experiential] base.  
But descriptions themselves  
are always fragmentary substitutes . . . .  
Therefore these words  
are not meant to be merely  
intellectual, static word-pictures;  
a burning urge  
toward completion in immediacy  
underlies them.  
May these words and this speaker step aside,  
having sowed their mission,  
and the Life and Light itself be your guide.  
EP p. 6

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## The Light Within

Deep within us all  
there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul,  
a holy place, a Divine Center,  
a speaking Voice,  
to which we may continuously return.  
Eternity is at our hearts,  
pressing upon our time-torn lives,  
warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny,  
calling us home unto Itself.  
Yielding to these persuasions,  
gladly committing ourselves in body and soul,  
utterly and completely,  
to the Light Within,  
is the beginning of true life.  
It is a dynamic center,  
a creative Life that presses to birth within us.<sup>6</sup>

You who read these words  
already know this inner Life and Light.  
For by this very Light within you, is your recognition given.  
In this humanistic age  
we suppose man is the initiator  
and God is the responder.  
But the Living Christ within us is the initiator  
and we are the responders.  
God the Lover, the accuser, the revealer of light and darkness  
presses within us.  
“Behold I stand at the door and knock.” [Rev. 3:20]  
And all our apparent initiative is already a response,  
a testimonial to His secret presence  
and working within us.  
The basic response of the soul to the Light  
is internal adoration and joy,  
thanksgiving and worship,  
self-surrender and listening.

TD p. 4

What is here urged  
are internal practices and habits of the mind.  
What is here urged  
are secret habits of unceasing orientation  
of the deeps of our being  
about the Inward Light,  
ways of conducting our inward life  
so that we are perpetually bowed in worship,  
while we are also very busy  
in the world of daily affairs.  
What is here urged  
are inward practices of the mind  
at the deepest levels,  
letting it swing like the needle,  
to the polestar of the soul.  
And like the needle,  
the Inward Light  
becomes the truest guide of life,  
showing us new and unsuspected defects  
in ourselves and our fellows,  
showing us new and unsuspected possibilities  
in the power and life of goodwill  
among men [and women].

But, more deeply,  
He who is within us urges,  
by secret persuasion,  
to such an amazing Inward Life with Him,  
so that, firmly cleaving to Him,  
we always look out upon all the world  
through the sheen of the Inward Light,  
and react toward [all people]  
spontaneously and joyously  
from this Inward Center.

TD pp. 5-6

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## Seeking and Being Found

The Quaker discovery and message has always been  
that God still lives and moves,  
works and guides,  
in vivid immediacy,  
within the hearts of men [and women].  
For revelation is not static and complete, like a book,  
but dynamic and enlarging,  
as springing from a *Life* and Soul of all things.  
This Light and Life is in all men [and women],  
ready to sweep us into its floods,  
illumine us with its blinding,  
or with its gentle guiding radiance,  
send us tendered but strong  
into the world of need and pain and blindness.  
Surrender of self to that indwelling Life  
is entrance upon an astounding,  
an almost miraculous Life. . . .  
“Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” [Rev. 3:20]  
In the silence of your hearts  
hear Him knock.  
Outward teachers can only lead us to the threshold.  
But “God Himself has come to lead His people.” [George Fox]  
Such men and women must be raised up,  
heaven-led souls  
who are not “seekers” alone,  
but “finders,”  
finders who have been *found*  
by the Father of all the world’s prodigals.  
EP pp. 6-7

For there is a life beyond earnestness to be found.  
It is  
the life rooted and grounded in the Presence,  
the Life which has *been found* by the Almighty.  
Seek it, seek it.  
Yet it lies beyond seeking.  
It arises in *being found*.  
To have come only as far as religious determination  
is only to have stood in the vestibule.  
But our confidence in our shrewdness,  
in our education, in our talents,  
in some aspect or other of our self-assured self,  
is our own undoing.  
So earnestly busy  
with anxious, fevered efforts  
for the Kingdom of God have we been,  
that we failed to hear the knock upon the door,  
and to know that our chief task is  
to open that door  
and be entered by the Divine Life.  
EP pp. 9-10

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## Self-Surrender

There is an old, old story that the gateway to deep religion is self-surrender. Dr. Coomaraswamy, writing upon the art of India, says that all developed religions have as their center the experience of becoming unselfed.

... according to our

Christian conception of the unselfing in religion,  
to become unselfed

is to become truly integrated as a richer self.

The little, time-worn self about which we fretted—

how narrow its boundaries,

how unstable its base,

how strained its structure.

But the experience of discovering

that life is rooted and grounded

in the *actual*, active, loving Eternal One

is also to experience

our own personal life firm-textured and stable.

For we are no longer imprisoned

between birth and death,

between yesterday and tomorrow,

but Eternity is our home,

while our daily affairs

are coordinated in that supernal light.

Profound immersion in the Divine Love

is a shaking experience.

But it is not an unsettling experience;

one becomes at last truly settled,

a coordinated, integrated personality.

EP p. 10

Is religion subjective?

Nay, its soul is in objectivity,

in an Other

whose Life is our true life,

whose Love is our love,

whose Joy is our joy,

whose Peace is our peace,

whose burdens are our burdens,

whose Will is our will.

Self is emptied into God, and God in-fills it.

TD p. 31

(8)

To find this “indwelling Christ”

actively, dynamically working within us,

is to find the secret that Jesus wanted to give to [all people].

It isn't a matter of *believing* in the Inner Light,

it is a matter of *yielding* your lives to Him.

EP p. 68

I have found

that in the center of the religious life,

on our part,

is a continuous and quiet willing away of our lives,

a willing of all that we are

and all that comes to us,

into the heart and the will of God,

utter dedication of will,

utter surrender of oneself

into God's care,

as a child trustingly surrenders to a father.

Down beneath the fluctuating changes

of heavenly elation and hellish discouragement

we can carry on

a well-nigh continuous prayer life of *submission*,

“Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.”

[Luke 23:46] EP pp. 90-91

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(9)

## The Eternal Now and Social Concern

THERE IS AN EXPERIENCE OF THE ETERNAL  
breaking into time,  
which transforms all life  
into a miracle of faith and action.  
Unspeakable, profound, and full of glory  
as an inward experience,  
it is the root of concern for all creation,  
the true ground of social endeavor.  
This inward Life and the outward Concern  
are truly one whole,  
and, were it possible, ought to be described simultaneously.  
But linear sequence and succession of words  
is our inevitable lot and compels us to treat separately  
what is not separate: first, the Eternal Now . . .  
and second, . . . Social Concern.

TD p. 65

## I. The Eternal Now

. . . I am persuaded  
that in the Quaker experience of Divine Presence  
there is a serious retention of both time and the timeless,  
with the final value and significance  
located in the Eternal,  
who is the creative root of time itself.  
For "I saw also  
that there was an ocean of darkness and death,  
but an infinite ocean of light and love  
which flowed over the ocean of darkness." [George Fox]  
The possibility of this experience of Divine Presence,  
as a repeatedly realized and present fact,  
and its transforming  
and transfiguring effect upon all life—  
this is the central message of Friends.  
. . . we no longer live merely in time  
but we live also in the Eternal.  
The world of time is no longer the sole reality  
of which we are aware.  
A second Reality  
hovers, quickens, quivers, stirs, energizes us,  
breaks in upon us  
and in love embraces us,  
together with all things,  
within Himself.  
We live our lives at two levels simultaneously,  
the level of time and the level of the Timeless. . . .  
But, fluctuating in predominance though the two levels be,  
such a discovery of an Eternal Life and Love  
breaking in,  
nay, always there,  
but we were too preoccupied to notice it,  
makes life glorious and new.

TD pp. 67-68

Between the relinquished past and the untrodden future  
stands this holy Now,  
whose bulk has swelled to cosmic size,  
for within the Now  
is the dwelling place of God Himself.  
In the Now we are at home at last.  
The fretful winds of time  
are stilled,  
the nostalgic longings of this heaven-born earth-traveler  
come to rest.  
For the one-dimensional ribbon of time has loosed its hold.  
It has by no means disappeared.  
We live within time, within the one-dimensional ribbon.  
But every time-now is found to be  
a continuance of an Eternal Now,  
and in the Eternal Now receives a new evaluation.  
We have not merely rediscovered time;  
we have found in this holy immediacy of the Now  
the root and source of time itself.

TD pp. 71-72

An invariable element in the experience of Now  
is that of unspeakable and exquisite joy,  
peace, serene release.  
A new song is put into our mouths.  
No old song ever has caught the glory  
and the gladness of this Now;  
no former Now can be drawn upon  
to give perfect voice to this Now.  
The well-springs of Life are bubbling up anew each moment.  
When the angel is troubling the waters,  
it is no time to stand on the bank  
and recite past wonders.

[continued]

But the main point  
is not that a *new song* is put into our mouths;  
the point is that a new song is *put into* our mouths.  
We sing, yet not we,  
but the Eternal sings in us. . . .  
It is the joy and peace and serenity  
which is in the Divine Life itself,  
and we are given to share in that joy  
which is eternally within all Nows.  
The song is *put into* our mouths,  
for the Singer of all songs is singing within us.  
It is not we that sing;  
it is the Eternal Song of the Other,  
who sings in us,  
who sings unto us,  
and through us into the world.

TD pp. 73-74

In the Eternal Now all [persons] become seen in a new way.  
We enfold them in our love,  
and we and they are enfolded together  
within the great Love of God  
as we know it in Christ. . . .

They aren't  
just masses of struggling beings,  
furthering or thwarting our ambitions,  
or, in far larger numbers,  
utterly alien to and insulated from us.  
We become identified with them  
and suffer when they suffer  
and rejoice when they rejoice.

TD p. 74





## Suffering and Springs of Hope

To you I speak with much hesitation about suffering.  
For I am only in middle years,  
    and for me life has not been hard.  
But there is an introduction to suffering  
    which comes with the birth pains of Love.  
And in such suffering one finds for the first time  
    how deep and profound  
    is the nature and meaning of life.

EP pp. 13-14

... the Inner Light illumines not only God  
    but the world.  
Its discovery within ourselves does not insulate us,  
    together with the Eternal, in solitary ecstasy,  
    away from the poverties of earth;  
it opens our eyes to the old world and  
    shows it to us in a new way.  
Formerly the world spread itself out before us,  
    focused about ourselves.  
We were the center.  
All our enjoyment, of things and [people]  
    was for us,  
    to exploit, to rearrange,  
    to clamber over, to conquer.  
The effective limits of our world  
    were the limits of its utility or importance for us. . . .  
But in the Eternal Presence,  
the world spreads itself out,  
    not as our little world,  
    but as the world of God.

EP pp. 11-12

... with the great unselfing,  
    the center of concern for suffering  
    is shifted *outside* ourselves  
    and distributed with breadth unbounded among all,  
    friends and so-called enemies.  
For a few agonized moments  
    we may seem to be given to stand  
    *within* the heart of the World-Father  
    and feel the infinite sufferings of love  
    toward all the Father's children.

EP p. 13

The heart is stretched through suffering, and enlarged.  
But O the agony of this enlarging of the heart,  
    that one may be prepared  
    to enter into the anguish of others!  
Yet the way of holy obedience  
    leads out from the heart of God  
    and extends through the Valley of the Shadow.

TD p. 43

Through the inner revelation of the living Christ  
there has begun to dawn in us  
something of the communion  
    between Love and Suffering and Burden-bearing. . . .  
In Him one sees these things grasped and embodied  
    and lived out in time so amazingly  
    that we stand in reverence and awe.  
And although we understand Him in part,  
    through the Living Christ,  
    yet we do not understand all.  
For the communion  
    of Love and Suffering... and victory on the Cross  
contains the secret  
    which leads back  
    into the very nature of God Himself.

EP pp. 14-15



## Worship and Fellowship

In the practice of group worship on the basis of silence  
come special times

when the electric hush  
and solemnity and depth of power  
steals over the worshipers.

A blanket of divine covering comes over the room,  
a stillness that can be felt is over all,  
and the worshipers are gathered  
into a unity and synthesis of life  
which is amazing indeed.

EP p. 43

For mystical times are capable of all gradings and shadings,  
from sublime heights  
to very mild moments of lift  
and very faint glimpses of glory.

In the gathered meeting the sense is present  
that a new Life and Power has entered our midst.

And we know  
not only that we stand erect in the holy Presence,  
but also that others sitting with us  
are experiencing the same exaltation  
and access of power.

We may not know these our neighbors  
in any outwardly intimate sense,  
but we now know them, as it were,  
from within,  
and they know us in the same way,  
as souls now alive in the same areas  
and as blended into the body of Christ,  
which is His church.

[continued]

Again and again  
this community of life and guidance  
from the Presence in the midst  
is made clear  
by the way the spoken words  
uttered in the meeting  
join on to one another  
and to our inward thoughts. . . .

We are in communication with one another  
because we are being communicated to,  
and through,  
by the Divine Presence.

EP pp. 45-46

This unity with our fellow worshipers,  
such that we are “written in one another’s hearts,”  
is in one sense created  
and instituted in the hour of worship.

But in a deeper sense  
it is *discovered* in that hour  
that we *are* together in one body . . . .

And in a fashion  
the vividness of our unity fades,  
is transient,  
grows weaker after the rise [end] of the meeting.

But the fact *disclosed* in the meeting,  
namely, that we *are* one body, hid with Christ in God,  
remains,  
secure from the ebb and flow of *feelings* and *emotion*.

Recall the counsel of George Fox,  
“But all Friends,  
mind that which is eternal,  
which gathers your hearts together up to the Lord,  
and lets you see  
that ye are written in one another’s heart . . . .”

EP p. 48

And as individual mystics  
 who are led deep into the heart of devotion  
     learn to be weaned away  
         from reliance upon special vision,  
     learn not to clamor perpetually for the heights  
     but to walk in shadows and valleys, dry places,  
         for months and years together,  
 so must group worshipers  
     learn that worship is fully valid  
         when there are no thrills,  
         no special sense of covering,  
         but chiefly valleys and dry places. . . .  
 I am persuaded that a deeper sifting of religion  
     leads us down to the will,  
         steadfastly oriented toward the will of God.  
 In that steadiness of will  
     one walks serene and unperturbed,  
 praying only "Thy will be done,"  
     confident that we are in His hands  
     and He educates us in ways that we do not expect,  
 but by means of dryness as well as by means of glory,  
 we walk  
     in gratitude if His sun shines upon us,  
     and in serenity if He leads us in valleys and dry places.

EP p. 55

The final grounds of holy Fellowship are in God.  
 Lives immersed and drowned in God are drowned in love,  
     and know one another in Him,  
     and know one another in love.  
 God is the medium, the matrix, the focus, the solvent; . . .  
 Such lives have a common meeting point . . . .  
 They go back into a single Center  
     where they are at home  
         with Him and with one another.  
 It is as if every soul had a final base,  
     and that final base of every soul  
         is one single Holy Ground, shared in by all.  
 Persons in the Fellowship are related  
     to one another through Him,  
     as all mountains go down into the same earth.

TD p. 56

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## Listening

We don't begin religion;  
     *God begins it, knocking within,*  
     in faint promptings,  
     in inward appeals  
         in the silences of our hearts. . . .  
 For the listening to the eternal  
     involves a silence within us,  
     a relaxed receptivity,  
     a listening and an expectancy  
         directed to a still small voice within.  
 Periods of quiet and meditation . . .  
     should be a part of normal living  
     for all who would go down  
         into central silences  
         which are to be found in the Heart of God.  
 And then steals in, again and again,  
     a heavenly warmth,  
     a sweet assurance, an invigorative solidity,  
     a constructive integration of the will,  
     a burning love for God,  
     a falling of the scales from the eyes,  
         so that one sees the world anew,  
         simply, directly,  
         as if through the eyes of the God of Love.  
 I have no interest in silence as a *form*.  
 But I know that devotion and dedication arise  
     in the deep communing of the heart,  
     in dwelling with a Silence  
         in the center of our being.  
 In periods of relaxed listening and expectancy  
     the silence within us seems to merge  
         with a creative silence within the heart of God  
     and we hear Eternity's whispers,  
     and we become miracles of Eternity  
         breaking into Time.  
     Live a *listening life*.  
 Order your outward life  
     so that nothing drowns out the listening.

EP p. 88

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Much of our acceptance of multitudes of obligations  
is due to our inability to say No. . . .  
But when we say Yes or No to calls  
on the basis of inner guidance  
and whispered promptings of encouragement  
from the Center of our life,  
or on the basis of a lack of any inward “rising”  
of that Life  
to encourage us in the call,  
we have no reason to give, except one—  
the will of God as we discern it.  
Then we have begun to live in guidance.  
TD pp. 99-100

**THE LIFE STORY  
OF  
THOMAS KELLY**

Life from the Center  
is a life of unhurried peace and power.  
It is simple. It is serene.  
It is amazing. It is triumphant. It is radiant.  
It takes no time,  
but it occupies all our time.  
And it makes our life programs new and overcoming.  
We need not get frantic.  
He is at the helm.  
And when our little day is done  
we lie down quietly in peace,  
for all is well.  
TD p. 100

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## HIS EARLY YEARS

Thomas Raymond Kelly was born in 1893 on a farm near Chillicothe, Ohio. His father Carlton died when he was just four, but he, his mother Madora, sister, and grandmother Kelly continued to live there with extended family nearby until he was ten. There his formative years were spent in a family religious atmosphere that had been a long time in the making.

At the beginning of the 1800s a Protestant revival movement known as the “Second Great Awakening” had spread across the country, including the area where Kelly’s ancestors settled. It reenergized various Protestant churches, greatly increased membership, and brought about new denominations and sects, including a schismatic Presbyterian group known as New Lights. Although descendants of Quakers, his grandfather Thomas William Kelly and members of the Kelly family became New Lights, steeped in the experience of revival and conversion.<sup>8</sup>

In 1868, 25 years before Thomas Kelly was born, Quaker evangelists also came to the area, reaching out in visitation and revivals to isolated Friends, descendants of Friends, and non-Friends alike.<sup>9</sup> The Kellys soon became members and pillars of the new Londonderry Friends Meeting. Thomas Kelly’s grandfather, who was already a Christian evangelist, became a member and “was recorded as a ‘minister’ and designated as pastor.”<sup>10</sup> Uncles and an aunt served the meeting as treasurer, elder, and clerk. His father Carlton served as Sunday school superintendent, assistant clerk, and clerk briefly before he died; and his mother served as clerk after that.<sup>11</sup>

Kelly’s son Richard later wrote of his father’s childhood: “His first experiences of public worship were not in the silence of a traditional Quaker meeting, but in the singing, preaching, teaching, praying of a holiness Quaker church.”<sup>12</sup> He further wrote that the impact of New Light Kellys and Revivalist Friends would not be found “in the philosophical content of [Thomas Kelly’s adult] message. But it is still seen, full blown, in his personality, in the emotional content of his message, in the old time evangelical phrases, and the rhythm of the language.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1903 Madora Kelly moved her children to Wilmington, Ohio so they could attend high school. She was determined that they would be educated and successful, and to that end she completed a business course and took a job to support her family. She had to be away a great deal, and it made home life difficult. Nevertheless, Thomas Kelly “recalled his life in Wilmington as so happy, compared to the early [lonely] days on the farm, that he felt his real life had begun there.”<sup>14</sup> A fun-loving youth, he played baseball and tennis with passion, greatly enjoyed playing practical jokes, and showed a “sense of humor . . . [that] remained a prominent feature of his personality in the following years.”<sup>15</sup>

At the same time he worked hard and was highly focused on academic excellence and achievement. He became skilled as a sheet metal worker, working part-time to support his education, and graduated from Wilmington College, a Quaker institution, in 1913 with a degree in chemistry.

After the move to Wilmington, Thomas Kelly became immersed in the Orthodox Quakerism of his mother’s family. Her brother had been clerk of Wilmington Yearly Meeting; she had attended Wilmington College, founded by Quaker evangelists; and the meeting and college “became the focus of the Kellys’ religious and cultural life.”<sup>16</sup> During college Kelly became actively involved with the student Young Men’s Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.) and Young Friends Movement. Then after graduating, he spent two summers working with Young Friends in Ohio and Indiana, traveling on his motorcycle Jenny.

It was during an additional year at the Quaker Haverford College in Pennsylvania that the seeds of change in both his academic and religious lives were planted. At Haverford he was introduced by Rufus Jones to mysticism and a Quakerism different than he had known in the Midwest and also to philosophy, a field that appeared to be a means of bringing together his interests in religion and science.<sup>17</sup>

## WHICH PATH TO TAKE?

After the year at Haverford, Thomas Kelly taught English and science at a Quaker preparatory school in Ontario, Canada and there became involved with Quakers who supported a mission to Japan. Becoming committed to missionary service, he entered Hartford Theological Seminary (Connecticut) in 1916 and absorbed himself in Hebrew and New Testament studies. That same year he met his future wife Lael Macy, daughter of the minister of a nearby Congregational church.

Following the U.S. declaration of war on Germany, Kelly interrupted his seminary work to go to England, explaining that he wanted to go and bring “something of the spirit of Christ to other people.”<sup>18</sup> He was assigned by the Y.M.C.A. to the canteen service and later to work with German prisoners of war. After six months, however, he and others were relieved of their duties as a result of the military’s extreme hostility toward pacifism. He returned home and to seminary.

During that period he mulled seriously over whether he should go into religious or academic work. Shortly after entering seminary he had described his thinking in a letter to his mother:

I sometimes wonder if I do wrong in opposing my nature continually, as I do in planning to go into religious work that is dependent upon the social brilliancy of a man’s personality for some of its success. At times I feel it is *the* thing, and at others, that I might become more restless in such work, because technical study and teaching are so admired. I realize that direct personal work is the highest form of work, and always will feel that way, but I sometimes wonder if I don’t do it simply because it is the greatest, and not because I am best fitted for it. I think I can make a success of such work, and am not selfish in wanting to gratify my natural tendency toward the intellectual stuff. Sometimes, some days, I feel sure of one view, and in a few days the preference is reversed.<sup>19</sup>

Later, writing Lael Macy from England, he referred to “a feeling that is getting stronger and stronger. It is the desire to get into a college. . . . a big ‘ache’ for me, for I want so badly to do it.”<sup>20</sup>

Amazingly, a few months later Kelly received a letter from the president of Wilmington College, asking if he would be interested in teaching philosophy and Bible. After completing the Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1919 and marrying Lael Macy that May, he took the position. His mother was delighted to have him return to Wilmington, but he found the small town atmosphere very limiting after his experiences of the previous five years. His desire to teach, however, was confirmed, and he became focused on obtaining the doctorate needed for an academic career.

## THE PATH TAKEN

In the fall of 1921 Thomas Kelly returned to Hartford Theological Seminary to begin work on a Ph.D. in philosophy. At the same time he served as pastor of an interdenominational church in order to support his wife and himself. His dissertation concerned the work of a German physician turned philosopher and was titled *The Place of Value Judgments in the Philosophy of Hermann Lotze*.

After receiving his doctoral degree, he and Lael went to Germany for over a year to close the American Friends Service Committee’s Child Feeding Program at the end of its physical relief effort following World War I. During that time he was also involved in peace work and in the founding of an independent German Yearly Meeting. As he later wrote:

I found there in Germany a *new* Quaker movement. Men in it were squarely facing essentials in a way I never had. They were inquiring regarding the essence of religion and coming to conclusions far more daring than I had ever dreamed for myself. . . . I had little to give, but much to learn. . . .

But it was after leaving Germany and getting a perspective upon it that I found within myself that Quakerism is essentially a mystical fellowship, which

[continued]



transcends the ordinary barriers of religious organizations. The meaning of the universal presence of the Inner Light, the Logos, in every man, the essential Christ in all people, glowed out suddenly. I saw that something of the God-life and God-character . . . was planted in every man, not artificially, but at the very core of his being, his ideal potential self. . . . I suddenly felt a great nearness to people of *all* religions who ‘lifted hands in prayer.’<sup>21</sup>

When they returned in 1925, Kelly began teaching at Earlham College, a Quaker institution in Richmond, Indiana. Initially, he was happy with life there; they built a house; and he enjoyed the teaching as well as the students. However, as time continued, his views related to his deep experience with German Friends, his understanding of the Inner Light, and his love of scholarship in search of truth caused him to feel estranged and frustrated with the Quakerism of the Midwest.<sup>22</sup> Dissatisfied, he eventually began thinking of other options while during that same period also experiencing the joy of the birth of their daughter Lois in 1928.

In 1930 Kelly took a leave of absence to work on a Ph.D. at Harvard. He would later write to the chairman of its philosophy department: “My desire above all else is to be a genuine scholar in philosophy, not merely in intention, but achievement, and I have looked upon the Harvard Ph.D. as indicating the close of a satisfactory apprenticeship.”<sup>23</sup>

After two gratifying years studying at Harvard and teaching at nearby Wellesley College, Thomas Kelly returned to Earlham to teach while working on his dissertation. He maintained an exhausting schedule, returning from classes to work on the dissertation and spending his summers in libraries. As a consequence, existing health problems were exacerbated: he suffered from headaches; fatigue; extreme, incapacitating hay fever; and a serious attack of kidney stones. He also experienced a return of “‘woozy spells,’ as Lael Kelly termed them. These were times when his mind would nearly blank, and he would lose his coordination and strength.”<sup>24</sup> The “spells” had resulted in an initial failure of oral examinations for the Ph.D. from Hartford Seminary before he received the doctoral degree.

After Kelly suffered a severe nervous breakdown in late 1934, he managed to miss only a few classes and to complete and submit his Harvard dissertation. It was accepted and approved and was titled *Explanation and Reality in the Philosophy of Emile Meyerson*. The dissertation examined whether reality can be wholly explained and identified. Kelly found that because reality is ever *expanding* through time while explanation is ever *contracting*—aimed at elimination of time and difference—there can be no convergence; and he concluded, “Reality is that which cannot be, yet is.”<sup>25</sup> Later “Reality” would be prominent in his devotional writing and particularly in the essay *The Eternal Now* and the pamphlet *Reality of the Spiritual World*.

In 1935 Kelly accepted a position at the University of Hawaii where he was able to pursue his longtime interest in Chinese and Indian thought. As later described by professor T. Canby Jones, “he was strongly attracted to the oriental tradition where philosophy is always engaged in seeking enlightenment, in finding the life-giving connection between our finite souls and the soul of the universe and putting it into practice.”<sup>26</sup>

Along with teaching, that year also included the birth of son Richard, involvement in the revival of a Friends Meeting, persistent sinus problems that resulted in surgery, and an unexpected but long-desired offer of a position at the prestigious Haverford College. The family of four left Hawaii in 1936.

## EXPERIENCE OF PRESENCE AND THE LAST YEARS

At last Thomas Kelly saw his life working out as he had hoped. He enjoyed living in Haverford and teaching courses such as traditional ones in philosophy and Quaker history and thought, as well as one in Eastern philosophy that he introduced. At the same time he prepared to take the final step toward the highly valued doctorate. In the fall of 1937 he returned to Harvard for the oral examinations. During that questioning, however, he suffered another “woozy” spell, and his mind blanked. He was told “[h]is performance was so entirely unsatisfactory . . . that he would never be permitted to come up for the degree again.”<sup>27</sup>

It was devastating, and he sank into such dark despair that his wife “feared he might take his own life. . . .”<sup>28</sup> He had failed to attain the authentication he sought as a “genuine scholar” and at the cost of enormous debt, deteriorated health, years of work and struggle, and continuous strain on his family.

There is no exact explanation of what happened in the last months of 1937, but according to his colleague Douglas Steere, others heard in his messages new authenticity—that of personal experience, beyond knowledge.<sup>29</sup> T. Canby Jones, then a student of Thomas Kelly, remembered: “The ‘fire’ of the Holy Spirit illuminated his life. Friends could see it in his eyes, we could hear it in his gales of laughter, we witnessed that ‘joy of the Lord’ had become ‘his strength.’”<sup>30</sup> While in Germany during the summer of 1938, Kelly wrote of it to his wife:

This summer has *opened up* what was already opening up before, a new sense of unreserved dedication of oneself to a life of childlike dedication to God. . . . What I want to say . . . seems to grow out of an *internal influence*, which is so overwhelming that I can only recognize it as God working within me. Last winter you know I was much shaken by the experience of Presence—something that I did not seek, but that *sought* me. It was that which underlay the lecture on the Eternal Now. . . . this is the real root. And the work here [with German Friends] this summer, or, *in the midst* of the work here this summer, has come an increased sense of *being laid hold on* by a Power, a gentle, loving, but awful Power. And it makes one *know* the reality of God at work in the world. And it takes away the old self-seeking, self-centered self, from which selfishness I have laid heavy burdens on you, dear one.<sup>31</sup>

During that summer of 1938, Thomas Kelly had gone on behalf of American Friends to visit the German Yearly Meeting, learn of the horrifying situation in Nazi Germany, and share love and fellowship. He wrote of many people in letters to his wife as in one from Nürnberg, August 31:

I have met some *giant* souls, . . . and one *can't* be the same again. One thing I have learned, or feel, so overwhelmingly keenly, is the real pain of suffering *with* people. Sometimes it is suffering of a physical,

[continued]

financial kind; sometimes of a spiritual kind, . . . baffled, no outlet, no hope, no point to life . . . *no chance to help others bear the burdens of life* . . . .<sup>32</sup>

It was a difficult transition from the suffering and the deep inner fellowship he knew in Germany back to the comfort of Haverford. Still feeling the impact of that intense experience, he returned to teaching, writing, giving lectures, conducting workshops, working with the American Friends Service Committee, and greatly enjoying increased time with family.

This was the period during which most of his devotional writing was done. Describing his father’s work, Richard Kelly wrote: “When he speaks, for example, of the ‘Eternal breaking into time,’ he is referring to his own experience. . . . *A Testament of Devotion* is implicitly autobiographical.”<sup>33</sup> Thomas Kelly himself had written: “God experienced is a vast surprise. . . . a vast, soul-shaking surprise. God’s peace, God’s power—the old words flame with meaning, or are discarded as trite, and one gropes for new, more glorious ways of communicating the reality.”<sup>34</sup>

On January 17, 1941, less than three years after returning from Germany, he began the day exclaiming to his wife, “Today will be the greatest day of my life.”<sup>35</sup> Later that day he wrote the religious books editor of Harper Publishers to tell him how glad he was for the possibility of making several of his lectures into a small devotional book. He concluded, yes, in the next two weeks he could come to New York and discuss it at any time available. That evening while drying dishes, Thomas Kelly died suddenly after a massive heart attack.

## THROUGH HIM INTO THE WORLD

The message that came through Thomas Kelly was expressed in the words of his experience. He shared them in essays, speaking presentations, articles for Quaker publications, and other writings. Some were published separately, but originally they had not been intended to be books. Only after his death were they put together by family and friends as *A Testament of Devotion* and *The Eternal Promise*. Except for two articles that totaled four pages, all the works were written in the period after his spiritual renewal near the end of 1937.

*A Testament of Devotion* (100 pages by Thomas Kelly) includes five essays and “A Biographical Memoir” of Kelly by Haverford professor Douglas Steere.<sup>36</sup> It was published just a few months after his death in 1941 and, according to Steere, without the cutting or revision Kelly likely would have done.<sup>37</sup> TD is the book by which Thomas Kelly is best known and has repeatedly been recognized as a spiritual classic, a message that is core, whole, and powerful.<sup>38</sup>

*The Eternal Promise* (97 pages by Thomas Kelly) was edited by Richard M. Kelly and published in 1966. The essential companion to *A Testament of Devotion*, it both completes the message expressed by Thomas Kelly and expands our understanding of his thinking and of the person he was. Constituting nearly all his remaining devotional writing, *The Eternal Promise* includes fifteen varied essays, articles and reflections.

*Reality of the Spiritual World* (39 pages) originated as a series of four addresses Kelly made during the winter of 1940-41 at Pendle Hill, a Quaker center for study and contemplation. After he died, Lael Kelly gave those manuscripts to Pendle Hill where they were put into pamphlet form and published in 1942.

Writing that pamphlet out of both his faith and extensive academic experience, Kelly began: “How can we be sure that God is real, and not just a creation of our wishes? . . . We are such creatures as demand to build upon the Truth.”<sup>39</sup> After examining various pragmatic arguments for the reality of God as well as their fallacies, Kelly wrote:

“And this is the ground of religion.  
It rests upon a trust and a faith  
    that for the religious [person]  
    have become his [or her] deepest certainty,  
    the certainty of faith, not the certainty of logic.  
The certainties of faith call out our whole selves  
    in wholehearted and unreserved dedication.  
The certainties of logic  
    leave our wills untouched and [unsurrendered].<sup>40</sup>  
Be not disturbed by the intellectual criticism  
    of subjectivity and of mystic experience  
        which I have given.<sup>41</sup>

“I am persuaded that God is greater than logic,  
    although not contrary to logic,  
and our mere inability to catch Him  
    in the little net of our human reason  
    is no proof of His non-existence,  
but only of our need  
that our little reason shall be supplemented  
    by His tender visitations,  
and that He may lead and guide us to the end of the road  
    in ways superior to any that our intellects can plan.  
This is the blindness of trust,  
    which walks with Him,  
    unafraid, into the dark.”<sup>42</sup>

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Richard Macy Kelly, Thomas Kelly’s son, is very gratefully recognized both as the editor of *The Eternal Promise* and as the primary source of the biographical information provided here. His work is critical to our understanding: the message needs the life story, and the story needs the message.

*Thomas Kelly, A Biography* was written by Richard M. Kelly who was not quite five years old when his father died. As a young adult he began reading old letters and papers his mother had saved and, as he described, “became seriously interested in constructing a complete picture of Thomas Kelly in my own mind.”<sup>43</sup> The resulting biography was published in 1966 and includes both important background information and excerpts from many letters written by Thomas Kelly.

“New Lights and Inner Light” is a major paper he presented in 1993 at Wilmington College upon the one-hundredth anniversary of his father’s birth. There he discussed the Kelly family’s revivalist New Light and holiness Quaker heritage, important information that was discovered only after *A Biography* was written. Following more research, he wrote the pamphlet *Three Ravens and Two Widows: A Perspective on Controversy Among Friends*. It addresses another subject but also provides more family history and stories from the lives of his mother Lael Macy Kelly and grandmother Madora Kersey Kelly Linton; empathetic perspective on different strands of Quakerism; and additional insight into Thomas Kelly’s background and life experience.<sup>44</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *Prayer as Ballast, Rudder, and Sail* (New Windsor, Maryland: One Tree Productions, 2003), p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Guy Aiken, "Then and the Eternal Now: Thomas Kelly In and Beyond Historical Context," *Canadian Quaker History Journal* Vol.74 (2009).

Aiken wrote: "History and biography mold Kelly's devotional writing. Yet Kelly's smoldering experience of Presence evinces from him remarkable literary expressions that, like poetry, may burn through the mold of time and place and seep into the soul of anyone with ears to hear." (p. 43)

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Kelly, *The Eternal Promise: A Sequel to A Testament of Devotion*. Edited by Richard Kelly (New York: Harper & Row, 1966. Richmond, Indiana: Second Friends United Press edition, 1988), p. 65. Subsequent references will be cited with EP and the page number(s).

This 1988 Second Friends United Press edition includes two important selections that were not in earlier editions.

<sup>4</sup> "Quakers" is a commonly used name for Friends, members of the Religious Society of Friends. It is a faith community that emerged in England with leadership from George Fox during the 1600s, a time of exceptional religious upheaval and ferment.

<sup>5</sup> Often but not always, Kelly used "man," "men," or "he" to represent all persons, as was done in his time. Today he would have written it differently. In this document inclusive language is used with brackets except where "men" or "man" is used as expressed in the Bible to represent all mortal humans in contrast to God.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1941), 1996 edition, p. 3. Subsequent references will be cited with TD and the page number(s).

*A Testament of Devotion* (124 pages) was originally published in 1941 in hardcover and with a biography of Kelly at the beginning of the book. However, the paperback 1996 TD edition (126 pages), referenced throughout *Life from the Center*, has the biography at the end of the book. Therefore, the pagination differs in the two books although the text is exactly the same.

*Please be aware* there is also a second hardcover edition (1992) of TD (*only 86 pages*) from which 50% of the words were removed, including 40% of the TD selections used here. However, it is *not* indicated on the book's title page that it is abridged. Although no longer in print, it is still sold on the internet. NOTE: When purchasing TD on line, it is advisable to buy it in paperback to ensure it is complete. Many of the hardback copies sold on the internet are the abridged version but are often presented in ways that seem to indicate—incorrectly—they are the original, complete 1941 edition. When buying a hard cover edition on line, examine the provided description carefully.

<sup>7</sup> Richard M. Kelly, *Thomas Kelly: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 125. Later these words were also published in *The Eternal Promise*, Second Friends United Press edition, page 97.

*Thomas Kelly: A Biography* includes numerous quotes from many of Kelly's letters, now archived in the Quaker & Special Collections, Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania. They are part of the Thomas R. Kelly Papers, a collection that includes correspondence (1915-1941), studies, sermons, photographs, materials for *The Eternal Promise* and *A Testament of Devotion*, etc.

<sup>8</sup> Richard M. Kelly, "New Lights and Inner Light," *Quaker Religious Thought* Vol. 85 (1995), p. 49.

<sup>9</sup> "New Light and Inner Light," pp. 43 and 50.

<sup>10</sup> *Three Ravens and Two Widows: A Perspective on Controversy Among Friends* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Pamphlet #401, 2009), p.19.

<sup>11</sup> "New Lights and Inner Light," p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> "New Lights and Inner Light," pp. 44-45.

<sup>13</sup> "New Lights and Inner Light," p. 53.

<sup>14</sup> "New Lights and Inner Light," p. 44.

<sup>15</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> "New Lights and Inner Light," p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 34. From a letter written to Lael Macy just before sailing to Europe in June 1917.

<sup>19</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 28. From a letter dated Nov. 24, 1916.

<sup>20</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, pp. 54-55. From a letter written in 1928 to Harold H. Peterson, a Quaker and American Y.M.C.A. Secretary in Lahore, India.

<sup>22</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, pp. 57-60.

<sup>23</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 68. From a letter to Professor Woods, Nov. 30, 1932.

<sup>24</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas R. Kelly, *Explanation and Reality in the Philosophy of Emile Meyerson* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1937), pp. 1-2 and 123.

<sup>26</sup> T. Canby Jones, *Thomas R. Kelly As I Remember Him* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Pamphlet #284, 1988), pp. 27-28.

<sup>27</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 90.

<sup>28</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 91.

<sup>29</sup> *A Testament of Devotion*, pp. 118-119.

<sup>30</sup> *Thomas R. Kelly As I Remember Him*, p. 31.

Canby Jones was a member of the student worship-sharing group that had met at Kelly's Haverford home for over two years, and he remembered Thomas Kelly in that pamphlet as his "beloved teacher and spiritual guide." (p. 4) He would go on to become professor emeritus of religion and philosophy at Wilmington College, author, Quaker theologian, and peacemaker.

A note by K. B. Wilson: Although I did not know him in November 2012, I sent Canby a draft of "The Message" portion of *Life from the Center*. He quickly responded: "I am just thrilled with the selections you have made and beg you to keep it up. Any additional help I can be, I joyfully offer! Your choices of selections are all just right on! With Love and Encouragement . . ." Before he became sick, we shared for six months, what he called, "our TRK type correspondence," and I was blessed to meet him shortly before he died in February 2014 at age 92. He was a radiant soul who still called Thomas Kelly his "dear mentor and spiritual guide."

<sup>31</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 102. From a letter dated Aug. 16, 1938.

<sup>32</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 105.

<sup>33</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 93.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas R. Kelly, *Reality of the Spiritual World* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Pamphlet # 21, 1942), p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*: p. 122. Words recounted by Lael Kelly and quoted by her son Richard Kelly.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Kelly noted in *The Eternal Promise* on page xvi that it was Douglas Steere who had compiled *A Testament of Devotion*.

<sup>37</sup> *A Testament of Devotion*, p. 126.

<sup>38</sup> In mid-January 1941 Kelly wrote a letter to his brother-in-law Robert C. Whitehead, close friend and Congregationalist minister, telling him of Harpers' interest in publishing a small book of his essays. Continuing, he shared that he had just spent a week writing what came to be sections of "The Light Within," the first chapter of *A Testament of Devotion*. He explained that he wanted it to be a devotional book of practice, not theory—or, as he wrote, that was his intention. See *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p. 122 or the entire letter to Bob Whitehead, dated Jan. 16, 1941, in the Thomas R. Kelly Papers, Quaker & Special Collections, Haverford College, Haverford, Pennsylvania.

<sup>39</sup> *Reality of the Spiritual World*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>40</sup> "Unsundered" replaces the word "unenslaved." Coming from the Greek Biblical text, the word "doulos" translates in English as "slave" but also as "servant." Some versions of the Bible use one translation and some the other; "servant" is used in the King James Version and "slave" in the Revised Standard. Here and a few other places in Kelly's devotional writing, he saw "enslavement to God" in the same way as did Paul in Romans 6:15-23, "a slave of God" being the supreme opposite of "a slave of sin."

Today, however, using the word "slave," as in "slave of God," is jarring and inconsistent with the modern understanding of its meaning. We understand a person who is enslaved to be the property of and dominated by another *wholly against* his or her will. That meaning diverts the reader from Kelly's message of *wholly, freely and willingly* yielding oneself to God.

"Surrender" is a word Kelly used often in reference to utter submission of one's will and oneself to God. "Unenslaved" is replaced here by "unsundered" in deference to Kelly who himself wrote that words are symbols and that over time symbols are no longer useful in representing reality. See *The Eternal Promise*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>41</sup> In *Reality of the Spiritual World* Thomas Kelly's analytical thinking is clearly evident. In that pamphlet he wrote:

When a good Catholic like Joan of Arc has a mystical opening, she reports that St. Catherine is speaking to her. . . . It is well-nigh impossible to get experience in the raw. Whatever it is in the raw, it is instantly caught up into a scheme of interpretation already in the mind of the experienter. . . . The vast cultural background in which each of us is immersed sets a broad pattern of expectation and furnishes the material for interpretation, . . . A Quaker immersed in Quaker literature, Quaker silence, Quaker service, will reflect these things in his reports of his inner experience. (pp.19-20)

Especially in *Reality of the Spiritual World* but also in his two devotional books, Kelly recognizes a place for logic and writes of the religious mind embracing the whole of a person. The upper level of the mind manages daily affairs, thinking, communicating, seeing, and computing, while at the deepest levels those affairs are brought into the Light so that they may be seen and responded to in love and faith. See TD, pp. 9-11.

<sup>42</sup> *Reality of the Spiritual World*, p.15.

<sup>43</sup> *Thomas Kelly: A Biography*, p.10.

<sup>44</sup> In *Three Ravens and Two Widows: A Perspective on Controversy among Friends* Richard Kelly adds particulars and personal stories regarding the different sides of his family.

Madora's Kersey side was a longtime Orthodox Quaker family that came from Pennsylvania, went south, and moved on to the farmland of Ohio and away from slavery. The history of her husband Carlton Kelly's Scotch Irish family includes R. Kelly's great, great, great, great grandfather's disownment from a West Jersey Friends meeting after he had attended a public meeting regarding the approaching War of Independence. Later, it was the descendants of one of his daughters who would be drawn to the New Lights and then holiness Quakers.

On his mother's Congregationalist Macy side of the family, R. Kelly discovered deep Quaker roots on Nantucket Island that went back to the early 1700s. Three generations before Lael's birth, however, the Macys lost formal connection with Quakers, due to the self-destruction of the Nantucket Friends Meeting that resulted from the discord of the 1827-1828 Separation. They became members of the Congregationalist church while continuing serious commitment to peace and social concern: Lael's grandfather worked in New York City immigrant tenements and in the early settlement house movement; her brother and brother-in-law were World War I conscientious objectors; and her father and brother-in-law, both ordained ministers, took conscientious stands on fair treatment of immigrants and on the violence of World War II, respectively, actions that contributed to losses of their pastorates. See pp.12, 16-17, and 22-23.

