

QUAKER THOMAS KELLY

Life from the Center

The Message

Edited by Kathleen B. Wilson

The Life Story

By Kathleen B. Wilson

“Other seekers have gone before us, and many have left a legacy of their journeys. From these accounts of questions asked, of answers received, and of ways taken, we can find help as we listen for truth in our own hearts.”¹

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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 written by professor, campus Methodist minister, and dear 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.”²

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 Living Christ, the Power, the Eternal, Reality, the Other—experience of God working within. 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.³ 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. . . .⁴

It is as St. Augustine says:

He was within and we mistakenly sought Him without.⁵

EP pp. 65 & 68

THE MESSAGE OF THOMAS KELLY

[Introductory Words]

Quakers⁶ 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]⁷ 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.
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 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.
It is a life lived out
from an all-embracing center of motivation,
which in glad readiness
wills to do the will of the Father [of God],
so far as that can be discerned.
It is a life of integration, of peace,
of final coordination of all one's powers,
within a singleness of commitment.
It is . . . the discovery of the power
which comes from being "in the unity."
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 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

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.⁸
TD p.3

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.”
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

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.”
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.”
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

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 [or a mother].

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.”

EP pp. 90-91

(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, *Journal*, 1647]
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

II. Social Concern

The experience of Divine Presence wholly satisfies,
and there are a few who,
 like those on the Mount of Transfiguration,
 want to linger there forever
 and never return to the valleys of men,
 where there are demons to be cast out.
But there is more to the experience of God
 than that of being plucked out of the world.
The fuller experience, I am sure,
 is of a Love which sends us out into the world.
“As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you”
becomes, not an external,
 Biblically authorized command,
 but a living, burning experience.
For the experience of an inflooding, all-enfolding Love,
 which is at the center of Divine Presence,
is of a Love,
 which *embraces all creation*,
 not just our little, petty selves.

TD p. 80

We have tried to discover
 the grounds of social responsibility
 and social sensitivity of Friends.
It is not in mere humanitarianism.
It is not in mere pity.
It is not in mere obedience to Bible commands. . . .
The social concern of Friends
 is grounded in an experience—
 an experience of the Love of God. . . .
Social concern is the dynamic Life of God
 at work in the world,
 made special and emphatic and unique,
 particularized in each individual or group
 who is sensitive and tender
 in the leading-strings of love.
A concern is God-initiated,
 often surprising, always holy,
 for the Life of God is breaking through into the world.

TD pp. 84-85

It is a great message which is given to us
 —good news indeed—
 that the Light overcomes the darkness.
But to give the message
 we must also be the message! ⁹

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.
And in such suffering one sees,
 as if one's eyes were newly opened
 upon a blinding light,
 the very Life of the Eternal God
 EP pp. 13-14

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

For 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.
The effective limits of our world
 were the limits of its utility or importance for us.
We were the center.
All our enjoyment, of things and men [and women]
 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.
And we sigh, at last we are awake.
. . . now we must say it is given to us,
 to see the world's suffering, *throughout*,
 and bear it, Godlike, upon our shoulders,
 and suffer with all things and all [people],
 and rejoice with all things and all [people], . . .
 EP pp. 11-12

But 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

Take a young man or young woman
 in whom Christ is only dimly formed,
 but one in whom the seed of Christ is alive.
Put [them] into a distressed area,
 into a refugee camp, into a poverty region.
Let [them] go into the world's suffering,
 bearing this seed with [them]
 and in suffering it will *grow*,
and Christ will be more and more fully formed in [them]. . . .

This is one of the springs of hope—
the certainty that the seed of Christ is in us all
 (Quakers have also called it the inner light)
and the confidence that many of those
 who call themselves Christian
will enter suffering,
 bearing this seed with them,
 daring to let it germinate,
 daring to let it take them
 through personal risk and financial loss
 and economic insecurity,
 up the steep slopes
 of some obscure Calvary. . . .

The second spring of hope is this:
We simple, humble [people] can bear the seed of hope.
No religious dictator will save the world;
no giant figure of heroic size
 will stalk across the stage of history today,
 as a new Messiah.
But in simple, humble, imperfect [persons]
 like you and me
 wells up the spring of hope.
We have this treasure of the seed
 in the earthen vessels—
 very earthen vessels.
 EP pp. 22-23

Yield yourselves to the growth of the seed within you,
 in these our days of suffering.
Sow yourselves into the furrows of the world's pain,
 and hope will grow and rise high.
Be not overcome by the imposing forces of evil and of might.
 Be of good cheer, says Jesus,
 I have overcome the world.
But
 there is no hope if Calvary is only an external Calvary.
Within you must the living Christ be formed,
 until you are led within yourselves
 to die wholly that you may wholly live.
Then will Christ again walk the ways of the world's sorrows.
In Him alone,
 and in you so far as Christ is formed in you,
 is the hope of the world.

EP pp. 23-24

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

The Simplification of Life

Strained by the very mad pace of our daily outer burdens,
we are further strained by an inward uneasiness,
because we have hints
 that there is a way of life vastly richer and deeper
 than all this hurried existence,
 a life of unhurried serenity and peace and power.
If only we could slip over into that Center!
If only we could find the Silence
 which is the source of sound!

TD p. 92

Life is meant to be lived from a Center,
 a divine Center. . . .
There is a divine Abyss within us all,
 a holy Infinite Center, a Heart,
 a Life who speaks
 in us and through us to the world.
We have all heard this holy Whisper at times.
At times we have followed the Whisper, and
 amazing equilibrium of life,
 amazing effectiveness of living set in.

TD p. 93

I find that a life of little whispered words of adoration,
 of praise, of prayer, of worship
 can be breathed all through the day.
One can have a very busy day, outwardly speaking,
 and yet be steadily in the holy Presence.
We do need a half-hour or an hour
 of quiet reading and relaxation.
But I find that one can carry
 the recreating silences within oneself,
 well-nigh all the time. . . .
Religion isn't something to be added to our other duties,
 and thus make our lives yet more complex.
The life with God is the center of life,
 and all else is remodelled and integrated by it.

TD p. 97

Now out from such a holy Center
 come the commissions of life.
Our fellowship with God issues in world-concern.
We cannot keep the love of God to ourselves.
 It spills over.
 It quickens us.
 It makes us see the world's needs anew.
We love people and
we grieve to see them blind
 when they might be seeing,
 asleep with all the world's comforts
 when they ought to be awake
 and living sacrificially,
 accepting the world's goods as their right
 when they really hold them
 only in temporary trust.
It is
because from this holy Center
 we relove people,
 relove our neighbors as ourselves,
 that we are bestirred
 to be means of their awakening.

TD p. 98

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.
[God] is at the helm.
And when our little day is done
we lie down quietly in peace,
for all is well.
TD p. 100

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. His formative years there were spent in a religious family atmosphere, such that he would later remember playing “minister” as a boy.

In the early 1800s there was a Protestant revivalist movement sweeping across Indiana, Kentucky, and southern Ohio where the Kelly ancestors settled. Outbreaks of tremendous religious enthusiasm occurred for two years during weeklong camp meeting revivals in Cane Ridge, Kentucky. Coming daily would be 10,000 to 20,000 people—Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and those from smaller and new sects. They saw themselves as “New Lights” and “sought to recreate the original spirit and lives of the first Christians or ‘Disciples.’ The Bible, not doctrine or church structure, was their principal guide.”¹⁰ About 1855 Thomas R. Kelly’s grandfather Thomas William Kelly became a preacher and New Light evangelist.

In 1868 Quaker evangelist John Henry Douglas was led to that area “to visit and hold meetings among friends who lived in places remote from any meetings.”¹¹ “The New Lights and Revivalist Friends shared much. . . . Salvation was available to all that acknowledged sin and looked to God’s grace.”¹² Many of the extended Kelly family became Quakers and with neighbors founded the Londonderry Monthly Meeting. Thomas William Kelly became a Quaker at the age of 44 and was recorded a month later as a minister and designated as pastor. Thomas R. Kelly’s 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 then his mother Madora served as clerk for six years.

Richard Kelly 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.”¹³ Going forward he further wrote, “The intellectual, scholarly

[Thomas Kelly] is still present, carefully shaping words and phrases, referring to ancient mystics, relating the experience of the Light Within to the great philosophers of the East and West. But the fervor of the evangelists of his youth comes hammering through, insisting that religious experience be dramatic, be specific, be tangible, be real, be felt.”¹⁴

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 which 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.”¹⁵

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.”¹⁶ 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 in 1913 graduated with a degree in chemistry from Wilmington College, founded by Quakers in 1870.

After the move to Wilmington, Kelly became immersed in the Orthodox Quakerism of his mother’s family. She had attended Wilmington College, and her brother had been clerk of Wilmington Yearly Meeting. The meeting and college “became the focus of the Kellys’ religious and cultural life.”¹⁷ During college Kelly became actively involved with the student Young Men’s Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.) and then after graduating, he worked with the Young Friends Movement during two summers in Ohio and Indiana.

The following academic year Kelly received the annual scholarship for an additional year at Haverford College in Pennsylvania. With that, the seeds of change were planted in both his academic and religious lives. At Haverford he was introduced by Rufus Jones to mysticism and a Quakerism different than he had known in the Midwest. He was also introduced to philosophy, a field that appeared to be a means of bringing together his interests in religion and science.¹⁸

WHICH PATH TO TAKE?

After the year at Haverford, 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) 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.

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.¹⁹

Following the U.S. declaration of war on Germany, Kelly interrupted his seminary work in June 1917 to go to England, explaining that he wanted "to bring, in any tiny way possible, the spirit of Jesus. . . something of the spirit of Christ to other people."²⁰ After training in London, he was assigned to canteen service and briefly to making inspections of German prison camps, while regretting little time for "Christian work." After six months, he and others were relieved of duties as a result of the military's extreme hostility toward pacifists. In late December he returned home and went back to seminary.

While in England, Kelly had written to Lael "of a feeling 'that is getting stronger and stronger. It is the desire to get into

a college and will require a great deal of money. . . . So that's all a dream and only a big 'ache' for me, for I want so badly to do it.'"²¹

However, it was just three months after returning that Kelly received a letter from the president of Wilmington College, asking if he would be interested in teaching philosophy and Bible. He did take the position—but a year later—after he had completed the Bachelor of Divinity degree he had started and after he and Lael Macy were married in May 1919. Kelly's mother was delighted to have them living in 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 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 [and women] 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 [person], 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 [and woman], not artificially, but at the very core of their being, his [or her] ideal potential self. . . . I suddenly felt a great nearness to people of *all* religions who “lifted hands in prayer.”²²

When he returned in 1925, Kelly began teaching at Earlham College, a Quaker institution in Richmond, Indiana. He was happy with life there; they built a house; and he enjoyed the teaching as well as the students. Then as time went by, 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 frustrated. “In scholarship, as well as in religious life, he would accept nothing but the ultimate in himself and others.”²³ And he began thinking of other options. During that difficult period, he and his wife were also blessed in 1928 with the birth of their daughter Lois.

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.”²⁴

After two gratifying years studying at Harvard and teaching at nearby Wellesley College, 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, 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.”²⁵ 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 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. He concluded, “Reality is that which cannot be, yet is.”²⁶ 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.”²⁷

Along with teaching, 1936 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. That year the family of four left for Haverford, Pennsylvania.

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 his defense, 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.”²⁸

It was devastating, and he sank into such dark despair that his wife “feared the blow might literally be fatal.”²⁹ 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 was no explanation, but colleague Douglas Steere wrote that Kelly’s writing and spoken messages to others “seemed to be expounding less as one possessed of ‘*knowledge about*’ and more as one who had had unmistakable ‘*acquaintance with*.’”³⁰ 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.’”³¹ While in Germany in 1938, Kelly wrote of it to his wife Lael:

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.³²

During that summer of 1938, Kelly had gone on behalf of the American Friends Service Committee 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 Lael, 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

[continued]

with people. Sometimes it is suffering of a physical, 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*. . . .³³

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 when he did most of his devotional writing. 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.”³⁴ In late 1940 Thomas Kelly had written: “God experienced is a vast surprise. . . . God’s guidance experienced is 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.”³⁵

On January 17, 1941, less than three years after returning from Germany, Thomas Kelly began the day exclaiming to his wife, “Today will be the greatest day of my life.”³⁶ Later that day he responded to the religious books editor of Harper Publishers, telling him how glad he was for the possibility of making several of his lectures into a small devotional book. Kelly confirmed, yes, in the next two weeks he could come to New York and discuss the book. 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 lectures, 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 in those two books were written in the period after his spiritual renewal near the end of 1937.

A Testament of Devotion includes five essays (100 pages by Thomas Kelly) and “A Biographical Memoir” of Kelly by Haverford professor Douglas Steere.³⁷ 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. TD is the book by which Kelly is best known and has repeatedly been recognized as a spiritual classic, a message that is core, whole, and powerful.³⁸

The Eternal Promise (97 pages by Thomas Kelly) was compiled and edited by Richard M. Kelly and published in 1966. The truly essential companion to *A Testament of Devotion*, it both expands and completes the message expressed by Thomas Kelly. 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 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.”³⁹ 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].
Be not disturbed by the intellectual criticism
of subjectivity and of mystic experience
which I have given.”
[continue]

“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.”⁴⁰
“. . . humbly walking in the presence and guidance
and will of God.”⁴¹

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Richard ‘Dick’ M. Kelly (1936-2019), Thomas R. Kelly’s son, is gratefully recognized as both editor of *The Eternal Promise* and provider of that essential remaining spiritual writing.

Beyond that, Dick wrote *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, as a young man becoming “seriously interested in constructing a complete picture of Thomas Kelly in [his] own mind.”⁴² In it he provided vital biographical information and long letters his father had sent to family and friends, sharing personal experience and his awareness of God working within and through him. Dick’s work is crucial to our understanding: the message needs the life story, and the life story needs the message.

“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 and information discovered after the *Biography* was written. Following more research, Dick wrote in 2009 the pamphlet *Three Ravens and Two Widows: A Perspective on Controversy Among Friends*, providing family history back to the 1700’s.⁴³

Also, Dick wrote in the *Biography*: “It would be remiss not to mention Eugene Exman, recently [1965] retired editor of the Religious Books Department of Harper & Row. Not only has he demonstrated an unusual interest in this project, but he has been a true friend of the Kelly family for twenty-five years.”⁴⁴

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ENDNOTES

¹ *Faith and Practice, The Book of Discipline of the New York Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*, “SEEKING THE SPIRIT . . . In Devotional Reading,” p. 18. Download or purchase through nyym.org.

² Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *Prayer as Ballast, Rudder, and Sail* (New Windsor, Maryland: One Tree Productions, 2003), p. 86.

Incredibly, I found in my Friends meeting library the book *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, and it was inscribed: “To Mary and Ira Zepp, 5/1/66, Richard M. Kelly” [Thomas Kelly’s son]. Both men lived in Westminster, Maryland at that time! —KBW

³ Guy Aiken, “Then and the Eternal Now: Thomas Kelly In and Beyond Historical Context” (Canadian Quaker History Journal, Vol.74, 2009). Accessible on the internet.

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.

⁴ Thomas Kelly, *The Eternal Promise: A Sequel to A Testament of Devotion*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966, and Richmond, Indiana: Second Friends United Press edition, 1988), p. 65. Edited by Richard Kelly. “EP” refers to *The Eternal Promise* in citations.

⁵ *The Eternal Promise*, p. 68.

⁶ “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 1600’s, a time of exceptional religious upheaval and ferment.

⁷ 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 “man” or “men” is used as expressed in the Bible to represent all mortal humans in contrast to God.

⁸ Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), p. 3. “TD” refers to *A Testament of Devotion* in citations.

⁹ Richard M. Kelly, *Thomas Kelly, A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 125. This quote was published in *The Eternal Promise*, Second Friends United Press, 1988 edition, page 97.

Thomas Kelly, A Biography includes numerous quotes from many of Kelly’s letters, now archived in the Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections. 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.

¹⁰ Richard M. Kelly, “New Lights and Inner Light” (Quaker Religious Thought, Vol. 85, Article 6, 1995), p. 49. Accessible on the internet.

¹¹ Richard Macy Kelly, *Three Ravens and Two Widows: A Perspective on Controversy Among Friends* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Pamphlet #401, 2009), p.17.

¹² “New Lights and Inner Light,” p. 52.

¹³ “New Lights and Inner Light,” pp. 44-45.

¹⁴ “New Lights and Inner Light,” p. 54.

¹⁵ “New Lights and Inner Light,” p. 44.

¹⁶ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 23.

¹⁷ “New Lights and Inner Light,” p. 52.

¹⁸ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 25.

¹⁹ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 28. A letter by Kelly, Nov. 24, 1916.

²⁰ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 33-34. From a letter Kelly wrote to Lael Macy just before sailing to Europe in June 1917.

²¹ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 39.

²² *Kelly, A Biography*, pp. 54-55. From a letter Kelly wrote in 1928 to Harold Peterson, A Quaker and American Y.M.C.A. Secretary in Lahore, India.

²³ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 60.

²⁴ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 68.

²⁵ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 69.

²⁶ Thomas R. Kelly, *Explanation and Reality in the Philosophy of Emile Meyerson* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1937), pp. 1-2 and 123. Public Domain.

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

²⁸ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 90.

²⁹ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 91.

³⁰ *A Testament of Devotion*, p. 119.

³¹ *Thomas . Kelly, As I Remember Him*, p. 31.

T. Canby Jones was a member of the student worship-sharing group that 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.

Although I did not know Canby Jones in November 2012, on the internet I sent him a draft of "The Message" portion of *Quaker Thomas Kelly, 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 the age of 92. He was a radiant soul who still called Thomas Kelly his "mentor and spiritual guide." —KBW

³² *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 102. From a letter Thomas Kelly wrote, dated Aug. 16, 1938.

³³ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 105.

³⁴ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p. 93.

³⁵ Thomas R. Kelly, *Reality of the Spiritual World* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Pamphlet # 21, 1942), p. 21.

³⁶ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography* p. 122. Thomas Kelly's words recounted by Lael Kelly and shared with her son Richard Kelly.

³⁷ Richard Kelly noted in *The Eternal Promise* on page xvi that it was Douglas Steere who had compiled *A Testament of Devotion*.

³⁸ On January 16, 1941 Thomas 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. He shared that he had just spent a week writing "The Light Within," the first chapter of *A Testament of Devotion*.

Kelly explained that he wanted the book to be "a little book of devotional practice—just how one tries to proceed as one orients one's life wholly about the Inner Light; how one carries on interior prayer; how one reacts to the outer world in the light of the Light within, etc. It is a book of practice, not of theory, or aims to be." That entire quote is from Kelly's letter to 'Bob' Whitehead, archived in the Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections. The quote was also published in part in *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, p.122.

³⁹ *Reality of the Spiritual World*, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁰ *Reality of the Spiritual World*, p. 15.

⁴¹ *A Testament of Devotion*, p. 94.

⁴² *A Testament of Devotion*, p. 10.

⁴³ In *Three Ravens and Two Widows: A Perspective on Controversy Among Friends*, Thomas Kelly's son Richard offers particulars and stories regarding the different sides of their family. Thomas Kelly's mother Madora Kersey was part of a longtime Orthodox Quaker family that came to Pennsylvania during the time of William Penn and later moved to Ohio.

Thomas Kelly's great, great, great grandfather John Wilkins was disowned from Evesham Friends Meeting ("West Jersey") after he attended a public town meeting regarding the War of Independence. Later, his daughter Hannah and family moved to Ross County, Ohio, as did William and Dorcas Kelly, coming in 1803 from Virginia. Their son John Kelly and Hannah's daughter Harriet were married, and their son Thomas William Kelly would become a New Light evangelist minister and later a Quaker minister of the Gospel. His son Carlton became a fully involved Quaker in 1887 and in 1893 the father of Thomas Raymond Kelly.

The Macy ancestors of Kelly's wife Lael Macy were members of Nantucket Monthly Meeting from the early 1700's until the Hicksite-Orthodox Separation in 1827-1828. They became members of the Congregationalist church, while continuing active commitment to peace and social concern and two of them becoming conscientious objectors in World War I. See pp. 12, 16-17, and 22-23.

⁴⁴ *Thomas Kelly, A Biography*, pp. 14-15.

Regarding other acknowledgments, on the internet in 2012 I found Dick Kelly in Maine. We corresponded, and four years later I learned he had moved to Baltimore, Maryland, four miles from where I lived! A few days later we had lunch together, talking about *Life from the Center*. Dick then promptly asked, "How can I help?" and I explained I wanted to get it on the internet. He immediately offered that his son John works with computers, and the three of us and spouses soon enjoyed a memorable dinner, bringing together our new friendship. —KBW

With clear understanding and insight, commitment, and spending much time, John M. Kelly published *QUAKER THOMAS KELLY, Life from the Center* through quakerthomaskelly.org. The message that came through Thomas Kelly has been passed on through his remarkable loving family and his friends, colleagues, and many others going forward.

