

## **Quakers in the Age of the Internet**

*A Keynote Address by Jon Watts*

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I want to talk today about this dramatic shift that is happening in our lifetimes. Talk about communications technology, that's the shift, but it's all of these things, right? It's climate. It's politics. It's how we're encountering each other across this technology.

I was a kid in the '90s, the 1990s for those keeping track. We had this fantastic, brand-new thing called dial-up internet. Here's what you could do. . . You're gonna be blown away by this. You could plug your computer into the telephone line, which was in the wall. And you could call in to something called a message board. And on that message board, you could write text to people that could read it on different continents. And telling your mom you need to use the phone.

We've come a long way. Since we're talking about Quakers and the internet today, communications technology, I'm going to start my talk by taking a selfie with you guys. Will you take a selfie with me?

Wonderful. You can't get more 21st Century than that. Thank you.

So, in 2009, ten years or so after we were blown away by dial-up internet, I posted a video to a brand-new internet platform that was called YouTube. Maybe you've heard of it. I was a singer-songwriter, so I had written a song about growing up Quaker. And as a singer-songwriter, I heard that in order to promote my music, I had to make a video and post it to this brand-new platform called YouTube.

So, I tried that a couple of times. I had a couple hundred views on my channel. I said, "Wow, there are hundreds of people somewhere in America watching me play music!" That was really cool.

So, I made this video about a Quaker meeting that turns into a dance party after I start giving this song as a message in meeting for worship. I stand up. I start singing the song, someone behind me stands up and starts playing a trumpet, someone else starts drumming, and it becomes this full-on dance party. So, I posted that to YouTube. I sent it out to my newsletter list, which was like a hundred people at the time. And then I went on a camping trip or something. I was like, well, you know, that would be great.

I got back a few days later and the video had 40,000 views. And there were comments under the video from people all over the world, Quakers in places I didn't even know that there were Quakers, who we're saying "I love this video." And some of them are saying, "I hate this video."

And some of them were saying, "I really agree with this guy." And other people were saying, "That guy's not a Quaker."

So, I had this light bulb moment. I realized in that moment in 2009 that we're living in a new era. And for the Religious Society of Friends, there are a lot of implications of that new era. One of them was this phenomenon that I was experiencing in the comments section, which is that we're encountering each other.

Quakers all over the world, across branches, across geographies, are encountering each other. We are finding out that we exist. That's a big change. We've been siloed for decades, for centuries. Since the first splits. What are the challenges of that? What are the opportunities?

I experienced this other kind of comment on that YouTube video in 2009, which was a bunch of people who were saying, "Oh, this Quakerism thing looks pretty cool. I've never heard of this before."

And I had to respond and say, "You know, not every Quaker meeting for worship turns into a dance party. But go to your local meeting, try it out, see what happens."

I grew up in a Quaker intentional community in rural Virginia, just outside of Richmond. My parents had just found Quakerism just before I was born. They both grew up Catholic in South Carolina. And they left Catholicism and left South Carolina, went to Virginia, and they attended a Quaker wedding. And they were hooked.

By the time I was born a couple of years later, they were fully Quaker. Then when someone in the meeting said, "I want to buy a piece of property and subdivide it just for folks from the Quaker meeting. Let's do an intentional community," my parents were all in. So, I grew up in this amazing environment where we had these six families, open-door policy. You know, I would wander around the property and go to Quaker meeting with whatever family went on a Sunday morning.

That was Baltimore Yearly Meeting. I grew up doing a lot of stuff like this, going to annual sessions, going to summer camp, going to young Friends. And my religious education in those programs was a a lot of experiential stuff. There was a lot of world religion and sitting in silence and learning about different groups.

When it came time to choose a college, I knew that I wanted to continue that experience. I wanted to continue having Quaker community. And so, I researched the colleges that were historically Quaker and looked for one that had a very specifically Quaker program.

That was Guilford College in North Carolina. And my first day at Guilford, when I signed up for the Quaker Leadership Scholars program there, we went on a field trip. We went on this field trip to an Evangelical Friend's church. It was my first time at an Evangelical Friend's church. There was a pastor, we all faced forward. There was a choir. There was a Christian flag and an American flag at the front of the room.

I was really confused. I thought, don't Quaker sit around in a circle and just be silent for an hour? That's what I've been doing my whole life. And it turns out that the Quaker Leadership Scholars Program was designed by this fellow named Max Carter. If you've met Max, he was a very visible character on campus – long white beard and straw hat. He comes from an Indiana Quaker Holiness background. And Max in part designed the Quaker Leadership Scholars' Program to do what the internet is now doing. To have Quakers from

different branches start to encounter each other and start to be in conversation with one another.

And for me, it was very challenging. It was very challenging to encounter other kinds of Quakers. I started to question my own identity as a Quaker. I definitely questioned their identities as Quakers. But part of my questioning was that I needed to take some time off. And this is something that a lot of young people can relate to. I grew up Quaker, but I wasn't sure if I was Quaker anymore.

And there was a really important time for me where I stepped away from the religion. And I didn't know. And when I came back to it, I came back hungry. What is this thing that I've been doing my whole life? Where do they come from? How did we get here?

I went and I asked Max Carter those questions. And if you've ever met Max Carter, he's been waiting his entire life for someone to ask him those questions. Max is full of stories. And he told me some of my favorite stories. And that was my senior year at Guildford College, when I came back. And he told me the stories of George Fox. And of Margaret Fell.

And then he told me some stories that I hadn't heard before. That really stuck with me. Some kind of dramatic stories. He told me the story of James Nayler. He was an early Quaker who's famous for doing this wild thing, of riding a donkey into the city of Bristol in a reenactment of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. And it was such a wild thing that in the seventeenth century people were so offended that Parliament met for a special session just to try this guy for blasphemy. I said, wow, what's that about? I don't know any Quakers today riding donkeys into the city of Bristol.

Max told me the story of Solomon Eccles, who has become one of my favorite early Quakers. Solomon Eccles was a baroque composer. At the time in the seventeenth century, if you were a musician, you participated in this baroque tradition, which was for the wealthy, with the frilly powdered wigs and the horses and carriages going off to the symphony.

Solomon Eccles went on a spiritual journey, and he realized that maybe this Quaker path was going to be his path. At the time, Quakers believed that if it's gonna be expressed through us, it needs to be expressed in the moment. You don't write it down. And we certainly don't participate in this frilly baroque tradition. So, Solomon Eccles decided to become a Quaker. He took all of his manuscripts and violins into a public square in London and burned them all. Righteous!

So as a musician, the only response that I could think of to that story was to write a song about it. And in fact, Max told me so many amazing stories that I wrote an entire album. In my senior year of college, I wrote these long songs about James Nayler, about Solomon Eccles, about George Fox. And these stories just really found their way into my heart.

These people in the seventeenth century, they were so – I don't know – silly, courageous, somewhere in between? They were so willing to put everything on the line for what they believed in. And what did they believe in? Sitting in silence for an hour. Or many hours.

So that was my perspective as a college student. I knew I wanted to know more. One of the stories that Max told me was about some early Quakers stripping off their clothes and running through the streets naked in the seventeenth century, which is a lot different than the streaking that I experienced at Gilbert College.

So that's the context for the "Dance Party Erupts at Quaker Meeting for Worship" video that I posted on YouTube. I was trying to reconcile the tradition that I grew in – Cuddle Puddles and Wink and FGCs and summer gatherings – with this radically confrontational tradition in the seventeenth century that I was hearing about. And these new kinds of Quakers that I was encountering through the Quaker Leadership Scholars Program.

One of the things that inspired me so much learning about the early Quakers was their commitment to throwing out the forms, throwing out the forms that they saw as empty. The things that we practice sometimes in religion that early Quakers were saying are actually getting in between us and God, are distracting us from having a powerful present spiritual experience. That's really worked on me.

Because as Quakers we think of our hour in meaningful worship on Sunday morning as formlessness. And we're really trying to put the spirit in charge. We're also human. And how long does it take for formlessness to become a form in and of itself?

That light bulb moment that I had in 2009, that people are discovering us through this new platform. Well, they weren't, they weren't discovering us. They were discovering me and my music. I felt that that was this incredible responsibility. All of these people were discovering Quakerism for the first time through this silly music video that I published.

So, I had this idea. What if every week I published the voice of a different Quaker on this platform and made this incredible library of conversations available – for both Quakers and for people around the world who are interested in Quakerism?

That's the idea that eventually became the Quaker Speak Project. I teamed up with *Friends Journal* in 2013. And for six years, I traveled around and spoke with different Quakers about their experiences, about their spiritual commitments, about this new time that we're living in.

Quaker Speak really changed my life, having these conversations with Friends. We are such a powerful people. When you are invited into that space, to speak from the Spirit, to speak out of the silence, to share our deepest invitations for the world around us.

There's one Quaker Speak video that I want to lift up, to tell you about it real quick. It's this conversation that I had with a Friend in New England named Jay O'Hara. Jay felt a leading a couple of years back. He lived on Cape Cod. And he's looking across, out in his backyard basically, at the largest coal burning power plant in New England. It's called a Brayton Point Power Plant. And he was watching these shipments of coal come in. Every day, tens of thousands of tons of coal were being burned in this power plant. And he prayed about it. And he talked to members of his meeting about it. And he knew that he had to do something.

After having a clearance committee with his meeting, what he came to was that he would take a tiny lobster boat out into the bay and park it in the path of those incoming shipments of coal. And then he dropped an anchor so heavy that he couldn't pull it back up himself. And then he flew a flag that said coal was stupid.

So, it took an entire team of Coast Guard folks an entire day to pull that anchor back up. And they slowed down the burning of coal by one day.

When I talked to Jay about that experience, he said, “You know, I didn't know what was gonna happen to me. I knew that there were gonna be some consequences. But you know, it didn't matter. I knew that the Spirit was calling me to do this thing. And the Spirit doesn't always share with us the results of our leadings.”

Jay and his partner took the lobster boat out and got arrested. And when the time came for them to be tried, the local district attorney called a press conference instead. And with cameras all around him, he said “Coal is stupid.” And he dropped the charges. It was the beginning of a series of protests at the Brayton Point Power Plant. Two years later, they shut their doors.

So that video on Quaker Speak is called, “Why I Blockaded 10,000 Tons of Coal With a Tiny Lobster Boat.” Very descriptive Quaker title.

Each of those videos has been viewed thousands of times by people all over the world. And the comment sections are robust. I do a lot of traveling like this nowadays, and wherever I go, inevitably someone comes up to me and says, “I was on a spiritual journey. I was seeking. And so, I googled it, and I found these videos. Now I'm being, whatever, the clerk of my meeting or whatever they roped me into.”

But this is the platform. This is the vernacular. This is the native communication technology of the next generation and the generation after that. They're out there and they're hungry and they all talk about the Jay O'Hara video. That example, our faithful courage, being the spark that started something without knowing where it was gonna go. Those are the kinds of stories that the next generation is deeply hungry for.

Because there's so much upheaval. There's so much confrontation that needs to happen to right the world. And there's so much that Quakers have to offer, stretching all the way back to the seventeenth century, about how to do that confrontation in a faithful community based loving way.

So, after six years of publishing a video every week, I decided to take a break. I passed that project on to a new director. But I encourage you to check out all of those videos at [quakerspeak.com](http://quakerspeak.com). And *Friends Journal* continues that great program. They just hired a new director.

Something that I found is so important, that I've learned from Quakerism in life and public ministry, is to honor both the seasons of being very public and doing big things, and the seasons of stepping back and reflecting and talking with Friends and talking with your meeting and having clearness committees.

So, I took a couple of years off. I hiked a big part of the Appalachian Trail. I realize that I wanted to go deeper with these two pieces that I've talked about so far – this spark in the early Quakers, this spark of courageous faithfulness, loving confrontation, knowledgeable risk – and this new era that we're in, when we have Facebook in our pockets.

One of the things that I've been learning is that when Quakerism began in the seventeenth century, they were experiencing a very chaotic time. Politically, culturally, there was a great deal of upheaval. And a great deal of not knowing what comes next. And at the same time, this British communication technology called the printing press was new.

I recently started a Quaker podcast called Thee Quaker Podcast, and I got to have a conversation with a Quaker historian, Kate Peters. She wrote a book on early Quakers and print culture. I'd been waiting to have this conversation for years, to have some place to publish it.

I learned a couple of things from the conversation with Kate. One thing that was really interesting to me was that these early Quakers in the seventeenth century were quite young. There were 17 and 18 and 20. And the fact that the printing press was a relatively new technology, or at least that everyone suddenly had access to it, there was like freedom of printing after the civil war happened, meant that their parents didn't get it.

They had grown up with it. They were natives to this kind of communication technology and they were off to the races. But they were the first generation to be able to do that. Another big piece that I took away from my conversation with Kate Peters was that the fundamental question that many Quakers were asking in their writings of these pamphlets that were flying up and down the countryside as thick as moths was: What is the nature of authority?

If they were writing about a judge, they would say, "Where do you get your authority from? And is that legitimate?" If they were writing about another priest or another pastor, they said, "Where are you getting your spiritual authority? Is that legitimate?"

And that might seem kind of cliché nowadays. We talk about questioning authority, but for me, that's profound and fundamental to our society and so relevant today.

When I was doing this video series, I would go and interview people working for different Quaker organizations. And I remember a Quaker lobbyist at FCNL who said "When I go into the political office and talk about a piece of legislation, sometimes I feel intimidated. That person has a lot of power in the world. A lot of authority. And me, I'm just a little Quaker, you know, walking into the office of a powerful political person." And she said, "Then we'll remember where the authority comes from. It comes from the spirit. And then we're having a conversation of equals. And I'm able to be heard in a different way."

Another that Kate Peter shared with me, that I'm going to lift up for you, is this idea that Quakers' writings, their pamphleteering, was an extension of their preaching. And that faithfulness that they experienced on Sunday morning, that calling to stand up and speak in from the room and to speak as faithfully as they could, also led them to write and publish.

Well, I don't know about you, but this gets me fired up. I know a lot of us feel overwhelmed about all changes that are happening in our lifetimes. About how the world is changing, about how religious communities are changing, about how communications technology is changing. And sometimes it feels like the sky is falling. Like the thing that we're so comfortable with and so used to is disintegrating before our eyes.

I'd like to suggest something. There's a tremendous opportunity for Friends right now. With our voices, in the way that we know how to use them inspired by the Spirit, grounded in silence, faithfully courageous. Our voices are deeply needed in the world right now. We have this massive opportunity to be faithful.

And I'm not saying that everyone in this room should suddenly take up an internet ministry. As Quakers we know that we're a body. That each of us is given our measure of light. Our job is to be as faithful to that measure of light as we can. I know for my part, that viral video in 2009 is still working on me. The fact that we're in a new era, the skills that I've developed in communications, and the sparks that I'm seeing in the next generation, and the platforms that are native to them.

For my generation, it was Facebook. And then all our parents joined Facebook, and we all went to Instagram. And now all our kids are on TikTok, and Instagram is for old people. Someday Tik Tok will be for old people, and there will be a new thing. But I'm excited about all of it. We can show up for that. As Friends, we know how to show up for that.

But we can wait. And in the waiting, we can feel led. And when you feel led, you can encourage this. You light a spark.

So, I had this idea for a 21st century Quaker media organization that is solely focused on these questions of what does Quakerism look like in the 21st century? How do we respond to these new changes and communication technology advancements?

I've been traveling around the country for the past couple of years, having listening sessions with Quakers about what that would look like. I'm really excited to say that we just launched that project. These first four podcast episodes are now up on our website and on YouTube, and I have hired a very talented podcast producer whose name is Georgia – and she lives in Mississippi, to make it more confusing.

But Georgia came with me to her first unprogrammed Quaker meeting for worship on her third week on the job. She flew up to Philadelphia, and I took her for worship, and I set it all up in the car on the way there. I was like, "It might be just an hour of silence. Like, be ready. There's not gonna be anything programmed or anything planned." And she was like, "Okay, I'm ready"

And then as it turned out, I was totally wrong. My meeting was doing an experiment where they were having a little bit of programming at the beginning of worship. They were having people write short essays about what Quakerism means to them and what it means to be in meeting for worship. They were so powerful that you could do an entire podcast episode just out of these essays.

So that's the last thing I'm going to share with you today. Thank you so much for being present with me on this journey. It's been really wonderful to share with you.

If you'd like to stay updated about this project that I've been launching and where we go from here, find us at [theequaker.org](http://theequaker.org).

Thanks so much.