

SELECTIONS FROM

THE WRITINGS OF
RUFUS M. JONES

RUFUS M. JONES (1863-1948)

It is hard to see how there could be any serious disagreement that in the first half of the twentieth century the weightiest voice that interpreted Quakerism both in its history and in outlining its present and future course was that of Rufus M. Jones. The monumental task of editing and helping to write the six-volume history of the Religious Society of Friends; the large share that he had in founding and guiding the American Friends Service Committee; the quality of his own spiritual life; the stream of books and articles that came from his pen; the power of his ministry and his public service as an interpreter of the spiritual life in that generation, all undergird this assessment of the impact of his life and service. In addition, he taught philosophy at Haverford College for forty years and has left his stamp upon the college and its graduates.

The passages from his writings that have been selected here have been taken principally from Finding the Trail of Life; The Luminous Trail; the six important prefaces that he wrote for the volumes of the Quaker History Series; and his classic The Faith and Practice of the Quakers.

FINDING THE TRAIL OF LIFE

I AM CONVINCED by my own life and by wide observation of children that mystical experience is much more common than is usually supposed. Children are not so absorbed as we are with things and with problems. They are not so completely organized for dealing with the outside world as we older persons are. They do not live by cut-and-dried theories. They have more room for surprise and wonder. They are more sensitive to intimations, flashes, openings. The invisible impinges on their souls and they *feel* its reality as something quite natural. Wordsworth was no doubt a rare and unusual child, but many a boy, who was never to be a poet, has felt as he did. "I was often unable," he says, in the preface to his great "Ode," "to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality." The world within is just as real as the world without until events force us to become mainly occupied with the outside one.

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My roots for many generations were deep in Quaker subsoil. There were, however, some features connected with my arrival which might naturally discourage a newcomer. The house to which I came was most plainly furnished. It was many miles from any city; a cold, bleak winter was at its height—January 25th, 1863—and there seemed to be almost no conveniences for comfort and few preparations for what we usually call culture. But these matters troubled me not a bit. It never occurred to me that this was a world of inequalities and I had no prevision of the struggle by which one wins what he gets.

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The only real fact I can relate about these first hours is one which shows what the highest ambition of my family was and it will also illustrate a characteristic trait in the member of my family who did very much to shape my life in those years when I was plastic to the touch. As soon as I came into the arms of my Aunt Peace, my father's oldest sister who lived with us—one of God's saints—she had an "opening" such as often came to her, for she was gifted with prophetic vision, "This child," she said, "will one day bear the message of the Gospel to distant lands and to peoples across the sea." It was spoken solemnly and with a calm assurance as though she saw the little thing suddenly rising out of her lap to go. That prophecy may seem like a simple word but it expressed the highest ideal of that devoted woman, and her faith in the fulfillment never slackened, even when the growing boy showed signs of doing anything else rather than realizing that hope. If the neighbors, in the period of my youth, had been told of this prophecy it would, I am afraid, almost have shaken their faith in the forevision of this remarkable woman whom they all loved and whose insight they implicitly trusted.

While I was too young to have any religion of my own, I had come to a home where religion kept its fires always burning. We had very few "things," but we were rich in invisible wealth. I was not "christened" in a church, but I was sprinkled from morning till night with the dew of religion. We never ate a meal which did not begin with a hush of thanksgiving; we never began a day without "a family gathering" at which mother read a chapter of the Bible, after which there would follow a weighty silence. These silences, during which all the children of our family were hushed with a kind of awe, were very important features of my spiritual development. There was work inside and outside the house waiting to be done, and yet we sat there hushed and quiet, doing nothing. I very quickly discovered that something *real* was taking place. We were feeling our way down to that place from which living words come and very often they did come. Some one would bow and talk with God so simply and quietly that he never seemed far away. The words helped to explain the silence. We were now finding what we had been searching for. When I first began to think of God I did not think of him as very far off. At meeting some of the Friends who prayed shouted loud and strong when they called upon him, but at home he always heard easily and he seemed to be there with us in the living silence. My first steps in religion were thus *acted*. It was a religion which we *did* together.

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Almost nothing was *said* in the way of instructing me. We all joined together to listen for God and then one of us talked to him for the others. In these simple ways my religious disposition was being unconsciously formed and the roots of my faith in unseen realities were reaching down far below my crude and childish surface thinking. [18-22]

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One of the earliest home memories out of the dim period of "first years" is the return of my Aunt Peace—the aunt of the prophecy—from an extensive religious visit through the Quaker meetings of Ohio and Iowa. I was, of course, most impressed with the things she brought me. They were as wonderful to me as the dark-skinned natives, which Columbus carried back, were to the people who crowded about his returning ship. Iowa was farther off then than the Philippines are now. But the next impression was made by the marvelous stories of special providences and strange leadings which had been experienced on the journey. I listened as though one of the Argonauts was telling of his adventures in search of the Golden Fleece. Every place where there was a Quaker meetinghouse had its peculiar episode which I had told over and over to me. Every little boy whom she had seen and talked with in that far-flung world was described to me and called by name. This was the first event which made me realize that the world was so big. Before this, it seemed to me that it came to an end where the sky touched the hills. But now my aunt had been out beyond the place where the sky came down, and she had found the earth still going on out there! But after all, the most wonderful thing was the way in which God took care of her and told her what to do and to say in every place where she went. It seemed exactly like the things they read to me out of the life of Joseph and Samuel and David, and I supposed that everybody who was good had their lives cared for and guided in this wonderful way. I made up my mind to be good and to be one of the guided kind! [28-29]

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The thing which had the most to do, however, with my deliverance from fear was my childlike discovery that God was with me and that *I belonged to him*. I say "discovery," but it was a discovery slowly made and in the main gathered from the atmosphere of our home. God, as I have said, was as *real* to everybody in our family as was our

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house or our farm. I soon realized that Aunt Peace *knew* him and that grandmother had lived more than eighty years in intimate relation with him. I caught their simple faith and soon had one of my own. I gradually came to feel assured that whatever might be there in the dark of my bedroom, God anyhow was certainly there, stronger than everything else combined. I learned to whisper to him as soon as I got into bed—I never learned to pray kneeling by the bedside. I never saw anybody do that until I went away to boarding school. I “committed” everything to him. I told him that I couldn’t take care of myself and asked him to guard and keep the little boy who needed him. And then, I believed that he would do it. I knew that Aunt Peace never doubted and I tried to follow her plan of life. There were times in my childhood when the God I loved was more real than the things I feared and I am convinced that all children would be genuinely religious if they had someone to lead them rightly to God, to whom they belong. [38-39]

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Everybody at home, as well as many of our visitors, believed implicitly in immediate divine guidance. Those who went out from our meeting to do extended religious service—and there were many such visits undertaken—always seemed as directly selected for these momentous missions as were the prophets of an earlier time. As far back as I can remember, I can see Friends sitting talking with my grandmother of some “concern” which was heavy upon them, and the whole matter seemed as important as though they had been called by an earthly king to carry on the affairs of an empire. It was partly these cases of divine selection and the constant impression that God was using these persons whom I knew to be his messengers that made me so sure of the fact that we were his chosen people. At any rate I grew up with this idea firmly fixed, and the events which will be told in a later chapter deepened the feeling. [47-48]

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When I was ten came one of the crises of my life. It was a great misfortune, which turned out to be a blessing, as is usually the case, if one has eyes to see it. It was the injury to my foot which nearly cost me my leg and seriously threatened my life. Through all the pain and suffering I discovered what a mother’s love was. [60]

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For nine months I never took a step, and for the first week of my suffering, mother sat by me every night, and I felt her love sweep over me. As soon as I was through the racking pain, something had to be done to entertain me—to make the long hours pass, for everybody in our household was occupied with their own tasks. Grandmother, who was eighty-eight years old, had plenty of leisure, and so it was arranged for us to entertain each other. I decided to read the Bible through out loud to her. She could knit mechanically with flying needles, giving no more attention to her fingers than she did to the movement of the hands on the clock. [61]

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Before I began the New Testament I was well enough to go out, so that my reading stopped, and it was not until much later that I got deeply hold of that message which came from the Master. The Old Testament was the book of my boyhood. My heroes and heroines were there. It gave me my first poetry and my first history, and I got my growing ideas of God from it. The idea of choice, the fact that God chose a people and that he chose individuals for his missions, was rooted in my thought. [63]

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But greatly as I loved the Bible and devoutly as I believed in my first years that it was to be taken in literal fashion, I am thankful to say that I very early caught the faith and insight, which George Fox and other Quaker leaders had taught, that God is always revealing himself, and that truth is not something finished, but something unfolding as life goes forward. In spite of the fact that I lived in a backwoods community into which modern ideas had not penetrated and belonged to an intensely evangelical family, I nevertheless grew up with an attitude of breadth toward Scripture. I searched it, I loved it, I believed it, but I did not think that God stopped speaking to the human race when "the beloved disciple" finished his last book in the New Testament. The very fact that the spirit of God could impress his thought and will upon holy men of old and had done it made me feel confident that he could continue to do that, and consequently that more light and truth could break through men in our times and in those to come. I cannot be too thankful that that little group of believers who made the Bible my living book and who helped me to find and to love its treasures also had spiritual depth enough to give

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me the key to a larger freedom that enabled me in later years to keep the Bible still as my book, without at the same time preventing me from making use of all that science and history have revealed or can reveal of God's creative work and of his dealing with men. [65-66]

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Among the many influences which went to form and determine my early life—and so in a measure my whole life—I should give a large place to the visits of itinerant Friends who came to us from far and near. It was a novel custom, this constant interchange of gifted ministers. Something like it apparently prevailed in the early Church, as *The Teaching of the Apostles* indicates, and some of the small religious sects at various periods have maintained an extensive intervisitation, but Friends in the first half of the nineteenth century had developed a form of itinerant ministry which was almost without parallel. It was an admirable method, especially for our rural neighborhoods. We were isolated, and without this contact with the great world we should have had a narrow ingrowing life, but through this splendid spiritual cross-fertilization, we had a chance to increase and improve the quality of our life and thought. The ends of the earth came to our humble door. We got into living contact with Quaker faith and thought in every land where "our religious Society," as we called it, had members. These visitors brought us fresh messages, but, what was not less important, they were themselves unique personalities and were full of incidents and traveler's lore, and thus they formed an excellent substitute for the books which we lacked. They spoke with a prestige and influence which home people seldom have and they brought a contribution into my life which I can hardly overestimate.

Our little local group also had its outgoing stream of itinerant ministry and I was almost as much interested in hearing the story of experiences related by our returning members as I was in listening to the strangers who came among us from afar. My great-uncle drove in his carriage at least twice from Maine to Ohio and Indiana on religious visits, visiting families and attending meetings as he went and living much of the time on his journey in his own carriage. My Aunt Peace made many journeys to remote regions in America and brought back vast stores of information and wisdom. Uncle Eli and Aunt Sybil, who in my youth were among the foremost living Quakers in gift and power of ministry, went back and forth like spiritual

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shuttles, now weaving their strands of truth into our lives and now again weaving in some far away spot of the earth. It was a very common and ordinary matter for New England Friends to drive to "the Provinces," especially to Nova Scotia, on religious visits, and, as soon as the railroads made travel easy and rapid, there was an almost unbroken stream of circulating ministry.

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I felt a certain awe because they always came with "a concern," which means that they had left their homes and had undertaken the long journey because they had received an unmistakable and irresistible call to go out and preach what was given them. This was no ordinary visit. Here was a man under our roof who had come because God sent him. I supposed that he had something inside which had told him to go and where to go.

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These itinerant ministers told us of life and work in far-off lands. They interested us with their narratives, and in our narrow life they performed somewhat the service of the wandering minstrel in the days of the old castles. They gave us new experiences, a touch of wider life and farther-reaching associations, and for me, at least, they made the connection with God more real. I got from them a clearer sense of what I might be.

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Very often in these meetings for worship, which held usually for nearly two hours, there were long periods of silence, for we never had singing to fill the gaps. I do not think anybody ever told me what the silence was for. It does not seem necessary to explain Quaker silence to children. They *feel* what it means. They do not know how to use very long periods of hush, but there is something in short, living, throbbing times of silence which *finds* the child's submerged life and stirs it to nobler living and holier aspiration. I doubt if there is any method of worship which works with a subtler power or which brings into operation in the interior life a more effective moral and spiritual culture. Sometimes a real spiritual wave would sweep over the meeting in these silent hushes, which made me feel very solemn and which carried me—careless boy though I was—down into something which was deeper than my own thoughts, and gave me a

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momentary sense of that Spirit who has been the life and light of men in all ages and in all lands. Nobody in this group had ever heard the word "mystical," and no one would have known what it meant if it had been applied to this form of worship, but in the best sense of the word this was a mystical religion, and all unconsciously I was being prepared to appreciate and at a later time to interpret the experience and the life of the mystics. [89-90]

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In our business meetings, by the world's method, all our business could have been transacted in twenty minutes. We often spent two hours at it, because every affair had to be soaked in a spiritual atmosphere until the dew of religion settled on it! Above in the "high seats" sat two men at a table fastened by hinges to the minister's rail. This table was swung up and held by a perpendicular stick beneath. On it lay the old record-book, a copy of the "discipline," and papers of all sorts. The "clerk," the main man of the two at the desk, was another of those marvelous beings who seemed to me to know everything by means of something unseen working inside him! How could he tell what "Friends" wanted done? —and yet he always knew. No votes were cast. Everybody said something in his own peculiar way. A moment of silence would come, and the clerk would rise and say, "It appears that it is the sense of the meeting" to do thus and so. Spontaneously from all parts of the house would come from variously-pitched voices—"I unite with that," "So do I," "That is my mind," "I should be easy to have it so." And so we passed to the next subject. [96-97]

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There were two transactions which were always exciting, and I used each time to live in hope that they would come off. One was "the declaration of intentions of marriage." When such an event occurred the man and woman came in and sat down together, facing the meeting in the completest possible hush. It was an ordeal which made the couple hesitate to rush into marriage until they felt pretty sure that the match was made in heaven. Solemnly they rose, and informed us that they purposed taking each other in marriage, and the parents announced their consent. The meeting "united" and permission was given "to proceed." The marriage itself came off at an even more solemn meeting, when the man and woman took each other

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"until death should separate." I remember one of these occasions, when the frightened groom took the bride "to be his husband," which made the meeting less solemn than usual.

The other interesting event was the liberation of ministers for religious service "in other parts." If the minister were a woman Friend, as often happened in our meeting, she came in with "a companion." They walked up the aisle and sat down with bowed heads. Slowly the bonnet strings were untied, the bonnet handed to the companion, and the ministering woman rose to say that for a long time the Lord had been calling her to a service in a distant Yearly Meeting; that she had put it off, not feeling that she could undertake so important a work, but that her mind could not get any peace; and now she had come to ask Friends to release her for this service. One after another the Friends would "concur in this concern," and the blessing of the Lord would be invoked upon the messenger who was going forth.

Some of these occasions were of a heavenly sort, and the voices of strong men choked in tears as a beloved brother or sister was equipped and set free. From this little meeting heralds went out to almost every part of the world, and the act of liberation was something never to be forgotten, and only to be surpassed by the deep rejoicing which stirred the same company when the journey was over and "the minutes were returned." [98-100]

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The turning point, though by no means the attainment, came for me in a very simple incident—of blessed memory. I had gone a step further than usual, and had done something which grieved everybody at home, and I expected a severe punishment, which was administered with extreme infrequency in our home. To my surprise my mother took me by the hand and led me to my room; then she solemnly kneeled down by me, and offered a prayer which reached the very inmost soul of me, and reached also the real Helper. No holy of holies would ever have seemed to the pious Jew more awful with the presence of God than that chamber seemed to me. It was one thing to hear prayer in the meetinghouse, or in the assembled family, but quite another thing to hear my own case laid before God in words which made me see just what I was, and no less clearly what I ought to be, and what with his help I might be. I learned that day what a mother was for! And though I was still far from won, I was at least

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where I could more distinctly feel the thread between my soul and the Father, quiver and draw me. [109-110]

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I think that my Uncle Eli more than anybody else helped me to realize—not by what he said, but by what he did—that this goodness of character which I was after is not something miraculous that drops into a soul out of the skies, but is rather something which is formed within as one faithfully does his set tasks, and goes to work with an enthusiastic passion to help make other people good. I saw him growing white and bent with the advance of years, but no touch of age in the slightest degree weakened his efforts to make our neighborhood better. He preached the Gospel on the first day of the week, and the next day worked at a scheme for building up a town library. One day he was trying to do something to destroy the saloon and advance the cause of temperance, and the next he would be raising money to endow an educational institution. Now he would be busy organizing a local missionary society and the next day he might be advocating a better system of taxation for the town. If he drove by he might be on his way to the station to start off for an extended religious visit, or he might be going down the road to visit a sick neighbour. In all his work for the betterment of man at home and abroad, I never saw him discouraged or in doubt about the final issue. He was always full of hope and courage, and radiantly happy to be able to work at human problems.

But the thing which impressed me most, as a thoughtful boy, was that in all this perplexing and wearying work, he was becoming more and more like my ideal of a saint. His face was sunny; his smile was always ready to break out. We were all happier when he came, and he himself seemed to have a kind of inward peace which was very much like what I supposed the heavenly beings had. It had been his preaching which had so influenced my very early life; but it was much more his victorious life, which spoke with an unanswerable power like that of a sunset or the starry sky, that influenced me now in this critical time. I felt that the way to become good was to go to work in the power of God to help make others good, and to help solve the problems of those among whom we live.

I got a further impression of this truth from an event which came at first as a calamity. I went out one morning in early winter to feed our cattle and horses in the barn, and found to my horror that a

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fearful storm in the night had blown the barn down with almost everything we possessed in it. It was such a wreck as I had never seen. I can remember now the way I felt as I ran through the neighbourhood to call the men together to see if we could save anything. The news went fast, and before the day was over men from near and far gathered in our yard. They were all hard-working people like ourselves, with little wealth beyond their own strong hands. But before they separated they had decided to go to work at once and replace what the storm had destroyed. The entire neighbourhood went to work, and a new structure rose where the ruin had been.

It was a simple deed, which perhaps many towns could parallel, but it affected me in a strange way. I saw, as I had not seen before, that the religion of these men was not merely an affair of the meeting-house; not merely a way to get to heaven. It was something which made them thoughtful of others and ready to sacrifice for others. I saw how it worked itself out in practical deeds of kindness and righteousness. During those days that I worked in the cold of a Maine winter, among those men with their rough clothes and hard hands, I was helping build more than a barn; I was forming a wider view of the religion which such men as these were living by. [120-123]