

# Conscience, Service, and Resistance: A Quaker Path

Below is a detailed **briefing document** reviewing the main themes and most important ideas or facts from the provided sources.

## Briefing Document: Core Themes of Conscience, Service, and Resistance

This briefing synthesizes key themes from the provided documents, focusing on the intersection of individual conscience, spiritual conviction, social responsibility, and various forms of resistance. The sources highlight the experiences of Quakers and other individuals in navigating moral dilemmas, particularly concerning military conscription and societal injustice.

### I. The Primacy of Individual Conscience and Divine Will

A central and recurring theme across the sources is the profound importance placed on individual conscience and the discernment of God's will. This concept is foundational to Quakerism and informs decisions related to pacifism, draft resistance, and social action.

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**Inner Light and Divine Guidance:** Quakers believe "there is that of God in everyone, that everyone has the ability to communicate with that of God within them, and the responsibility to respond to that of God in others." This "Inner Light" is the guiding purpose in a Quaker's life, urging them "to discern and respond to the will of God." This discernment often happens through silent communal worship, where individuals "settle down together, searching in silence—each contributing to the spirit of the meeting as a whole." ("Volunteer Service Mission\_1457.pdf", "draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

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**Obedience to Conscience Over Law and Society:** The sources repeatedly emphasize the conviction that one must follow their inner moral compass, even when it conflicts with societal norms, parental expectations, or the law. Jeff Kisling's experience with the draft perfectly illustrates this: "I was very unhappy about registering but felt I must be very sure before I took a step against the law and society... Of course, the draft weighed heavily upon me until I made a decision." He later decided to turn in his draft cards, despite family distress, stating, "my beliefs have remained basically the same and the time has come to act accordingly." ("Volunteer Service Mission\_1457.pdf", "draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

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**The Struggle to Discern God's Will:** The process of discerning divine will is not presented as easy. Jeff Kisling reflects, "God's will is so difficult to discern among many influences—people, law, self (selfishness and pride)." Yet, even in uncertainty, comfort is found in the idea that "He still loves." ("draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

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**"Not as I will, but as thou wilt":** This biblical quote is highlighted as "the essence of Jesus' teaching—that God's will can be discerned and should be obeyed even at the cost of doubt and persecution." Quakers strive to live by this principle, seeking "personal contact with and guidance from God" by minimizing "distractions from 'this (secular) world'." ("Volunteer Service Mission\_1457.pdf", "draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

## II. Pacifism and Draft Resistance

The documents provide compelling narratives of conscientious objection and active resistance to war and conscription, deeply rooted in spiritual principles.

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**War as a Crime Against Humanity:** The "War Resisters League" enrollment pledge clearly states, "War is a crime against humanity. I therefore am determined not to support any kind of war, international or civil, and to strive for the removal of all causes of war." ("draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

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**Challenging Authority and Law:** Individuals like Jeff Kisling and John Griffith explicitly challenge the notion that laws must be obeyed simply because they exist, echoing Henry David Thoreau: "Is it not possible that an individual may be right and a government wrong? Are laws to be enforced simply because they are made? Or declared by any number of men to be good if they are not good?" ("draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

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**Civil Disobedience as Rebirth:** For some, civil disobedience is not merely a political act but a spiritual transformation. "There are times when civil disobedience is the only alternative when a man refuses to be corrupted. These may be the times when we are born again, when we lose life in order to find it." ("draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

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**The Cost of Conscience:** The personal consequences of draft resistance are severe, including social pressure, parental disapproval, legal repercussions, imprisonment, and

the loss of civil rights. John Griffith's father's courageous stand against a district attorney exemplifies the family support, while John's experiences in jail detail the physical hardships and mental fortitude required. Despite these challenges, John felt "peaceful and happy" and found "happiness many times before, but it is seldom that it touches so deeply in my soul as it did today. I actually felt like turning 'Holy Roller' and shouting in praise to God—in bonds yet freer than the free." ("draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

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**Solidarity and Support:** The importance of community support is highlighted. Jeff Kisling received "much tender, loving discussion and support" from his meeting. John Griffith found companionship and mutual aid among other prisoners, including conscientious objectors and Jehovah's Witnesses, and even offered service by fanning older inmates in extreme heat. His cellmates also defended him against accusations of cowardice. ("draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

### III. Service, Community, and Mutual Aid

Beyond resistance, the sources demonstrate a strong commitment to active service, community engagement, and the principles of mutual aid, often rooted in spiritual and ethical frameworks.

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**Volunteer Service Mission (VSM):** VSM is presented as a practical manifestation of spiritual commitment and a means of fostering personal and social growth. Its objectives include: "1. To provide the reconciling, caring presence of the Church in mission 2. To express in tangible ways, one's personal commitment to Christ 3. To provide a means of furthering personal and social growth 4. To solve problems together while living in community 5. To acquire relational skills with those of different cultures and different opinions 6. To express gratitude to God in service for the endless privileges he has given." ("Volunteer Service Mission\_1457.pdf", "draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

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**"Released Friend" Concept:** VSM embodies the concept of a "released Friend" who, with spiritual support from their meeting, dedicates themselves to a "deep concern." Volunteers live in the communities they serve, find employment, pool their wages, and eventually, some are "released from regular employment to devote all their time to their particular concern." ("Volunteer Service Mission\_1457.pdf", "draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

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**Engaging with Community Needs:** The VSM model involves becoming "familiar with the neighbors, neighborhood, and the community's problems," and working to address "the spiritual and material needs in our social order." Jeff Kisling's work with neighborhood kids, including photography projects, exemplifies this direct engagement. ("draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

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**Mutual Aid as Spiritual Epistemology:** The Doukhobors, or "spirit wrestlers," offer another example of mutual aid intertwined with spiritual belief. They believe "God did not dwell in the church, but in each human being" and "wrestle with and for the Spirit of God against those things that are evil." Their "spiritually intuitive internal voice" and "pacifism to the point of vegetarianism" highlight how "mutual aid is a part of their spiritual tacit knowledge and becomes a unique part of their epistemology." ("spirit-and-mutual-aid-quakers-and-the-doukhobors\_678ff246.pdf", "spirit-justice-mutual-aid-healing-and-survival\_679242f6.pdf")

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**Against Hierarchies of Power:** The "Police State and Why We Must Resist" document implicitly critiques societal hierarchies where "Men are over women, parents over children, capitalist over laborers, teachers over students, the educated over the poorly educated, the wealthy over the common people, the famous over others, certain racial groups over other racial groups, American born versus foreign born, the privileged on top, and the rugged individual over the community." This critique aligns with the mutual aid philosophy of shared responsibility and leveling power imbalances. ("mutual-aid-in-the-midwest\_678ff1f0.pdf")

#### IV. Interconnectedness and Environmental Stewardship

The sources also touch upon a broader sense of interconnectedness, extending to the environment and future generations.

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**Mother Earth and Environmental Concern:** The "Foundational Stories" document highlights a "profound vision of clouds of pollution blocking the view of my beloved mountains," leading to a lifelong commitment to "Protecting Mother Earth" by refusing to own a personal automobile. This illustrates how personal experiences can drive deep environmental activism. ("foundational-stories\_656c9303.pdf")

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**LANDBACK and Indigenous Rights:** The concept of "LANDBACK," defined as "the reclamation of everything stolen from the original Peoples," introduces the critical issue of indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice. The document calls for respecting the "United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)" and "tribal rights to free, prior and informed consent (FPIC)," and challenges the "profligate use of fossil fuels" as "theft of land." ("landback\_67b874c2.pdf")

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**Responsibility to Future Generations:** The urgency of environmental action is underscored by the statement, "We are reaching the point of no return. If the water is ruined, there will be a ripple effect. On farming, cattle, food, etc.. This is happening now." This calls for current generations to "stand up for my children and future generations." ("landback\_67b874c2.pdf")

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**Global Awareness and Unity:** The message from "Journey September 2017" exhorts: "The whole world is watching. So whatcha gonna do? Gonna show love? Are you gonna be smart? You gonna think before you act? Take care of each other? Your gonna show 'em what family does." This reflects a call for global consciousness and compassionate action. ("Journey September 2017\_70.pdf")

## V. The Power of Story and Personal Growth

Finally, the documents emphasize the transformative power of personal narratives and the continuous journey of self-discovery and growth.

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**"All That We Are Is Story":** Richard Wagamese's quote, "All that we are is story," resonates deeply, suggesting that life is a continuous creation of personal narrative. Sharing these stories allows for deeper understanding and kinship, leading to world change "one story at a time." ("draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

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**Personal Evolution through Struggle:** The experiences detailed, particularly those of Jeff Kisling and John Griffith, are presented as pivotal to personal growth. Jeff notes, "I now have a lot to think about, a lot of experiences to evaluate, confidence in myself now that I have been on my own, and a better idea of what I want to do with my life." John Griffith reflects on how prison, despite its hardships, offered "perspectives I had never realized before; it was a real and highly valuable experience for me." ("Volunteer Service Mission\_1457.pdf",

"draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf", "young-quaker-men-facing-war-and-conscription\_67617d9a.pdf")

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**The Journey of Faith and Action:** The decision to join VSM is described as "an outward manifestation of an inner change," representing a transition from "struggling with the questions 'who am I?' and 'what is my relationship to God and my fellow man?'" to translating beliefs into action. ("draft-resistance-and-vsm\_67617d85.pdf")

In conclusion, these sources collectively paint a rich picture of individuals driven by deep spiritual conviction to confront societal injustices, particularly war and conscription, while simultaneously committing to active service and building communities based on principles of love, mutual aid, and respect for all life and the Earth. The narratives underscore the courage required to live authentically according to one's conscience and the transformative power of such a commitment.