

West Scotland

Quaker News

August 2015

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The opinions expressed in this Newsletter are those of individuals. They do not necessarily represent the views of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

Honest to God

Shortly after my mother died I had the experience of her presence in the room with me. It was so powerful that, although she was invisible, I could almost see her face, radiating a serene aspect of wellbeing. It made me realise that, since I left her womb, we have never ceased to be one, despite our personal relations having been stormy at times.

Scientific discovery has revealed that all life and all matter has evolved from a single source. John Robinson, in his book *Honest to God*, comes to the conclusion that the One whom Jesus addresses in the gospel as 'Father' is this single source, the ground of our being. Jesus had no option but to obey the Inspiration, the Word, which came to Him from the Ground of Our Being. To do the Father's will was his meat and drink, he said, but the metaphors which he used had to be intelligible to those who heard him. His truth, which sets us free from the fear of death, is that our individual conceits are illusory part-truths, hiding the fact that each of us is a unique facet of one humanity, that we are in fact eternally one at the very deepest level of being. This is ultimate reality.

The author's vision is a very honest and practical one without reference to religion. I found the book readable and needing to be internalized in contemplation. It is potentially life-changing and I am certainly not quite the same person that I was before reading it. I believe that the world has never been more ready to accept this vision than it is now.

David Rees (*Lanark Meeting*)

Pithy Quotes

Man is born free, yet everywhere he is in chains. J.J. Rousseau, 1762

I sit on a man's back, choking him and making him carry me, and yet assure myself and others that I am very sorry for him and wish to ease his lot by all possible means – except by getting off his back. L.N. Tolstoy, 1886

From each according to his ability, to each according to his need. L. Blanc, 1851; K. Marx, 1875

From each according to their vulnerability, to each according to their greed. S. Bell, 2011

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Clerk's Letter

‘Mercy and truth are met together;
Righteousness and peace have kissed each other
Truth shall spring out of the earth;
And righteousness shall look down from heaven.’

We wish.

Someone once observed that God only has our hands to build a just and peaceful world. The quote from Psalm 85 comes from the minute Yearly Meeting, our annual assembly of Quakers in Britain, made in May 2015 about how we seek to live in the world. This minute follows below and will be before our 22nd August Area Meeting at Tarbert.

Yearly Meeting is considering over three years how we as Quakers act out our faith in the world. We contributed to the first year by sending our initial reflections as expressed in our minute 49/15 that also follows below. Now Yearly Meeting and its representative body Meeting for Sufferings, is asking us new questions. Yearly Meeting asked Meeting for Sufferings: ‘to take the work on social and economic injustice forward, co-ordinating the work of local and area meetings who might wish to become more deeply involved, and encouraging the deep spiritual and intellectual searching that could underpin a ‘true social order’ for our age.’

Do we wish to contribute to this? How do we build on the experience we have within West Scotland to act out our faith in world more fully as a Quaker community?

Friends can prepare for area meeting whether or not you can attend – any further personal or local meeting reflections can be sent to me on mjhharpden@btinternet.com or to 32 Riddrie Knowes, Glasgow G33 2QH.

Michael Hutchinson (*Glasgow Meeting*)

*Minute 36: Living out our faith in the world – are we ready to meet the challenge?
How are we led to live out our faith in a world where we see systemic injustice and increasing inequality?*

We have been reminded that God’s work is where our deep gladness meets the deep suffering in the world, as in Psalm 85:

*‘Mercy and truth are met together;
Righteousness and peace have kissed each other,
truth shall spring out of the earth;
And righteousness shall look down from heaven.’*

We are all activists and we are all worshippers. Our worship and action spring from the same spiritual source. The light not only illumines us but pushes us to seek change.

We recognise the problems in the world and the urgency of acting on them. Our current political

and (especially) economic systems only recognise and encourage part of the human condition, the selfish, competitive, greedy part. So much of what is good and beautiful and true in the world is being trashed. The model of power as domination needs to be challenged and replaced with a model of power as service to the community; in doing this, we need to live our testimony and hold firm to its source in faith.

The damage of the present systems, like the benefits, are not shared equally. We need to recognise how many of us benefit through the possessions we hold and the houses we live in, and to consider when we are part of the problem. In living out our faith in the world, we may be called to give up our privileges, but if we do so our voice and our lives will be all the more authentic and powerful. We can be at our most powerful when we are vulnerable.

The damaged and damaging structures of the world are not the only influence on our lives: there is also the power of faith and the leadings of the Spirit, which if followed will lead us, will push us, towards a better world. That, then, may be the first action we need to take: to be more faithful.

What are the changes which are needed to the systemic injustice and inequality that we see in society? We need to go deeper to find the roots of our social ills, and how we might uproot the powers that maintain them. We should rethink what needs to grow in this world and what does not. Can we transform the way the world is going and recognise that everyone and everything on the planet matters and can be thought of as a divine commonwealth, or kin-dom? Quakerism is all about putting our faith in a power which transforms us.

Many of us have spoken of the anger we feel about the current injustices of the world, and sometimes our hearts are heavy with all the things we cannot do. Anger can be a spur to action, but we need Light and guidance to use it wisely and sparingly. We already have a way of finding this wisdom in our corporate discipline and our testing in worship of leadings. Through these our righteous anger and passion can be transformed in order to tackle the root causes of injustice and inequality. Our action begins in worship, in seeking and reflecting before we act. Our practices of listening within and being open to what comes to us from without are rarer than we think, and are a precious gift that we should both use and share.

We are called to consider what we each can do and also make and build on connections in our communities and across the globe.

We are also called to be a community of Friends as a yearly meeting, pushed towards the important things we can only do together. We have a body of experience we can draw on and maintain. We are in this for the long haul.

As a yearly meeting we are restless to take corporate action to change the unequal, unjust world in which we live.

We ask Friends and meetings to engage with the evil of social and economic injustice which creates a world in which the wrong things are valued. To do this requires owning and upholding the work that is already being done by Friends and in our name; helping to fund that work as generously as possible; and becoming involved in however small a way. For ourselves we need to find some action however simple to do now.

We ask Meeting for Sufferings to take the work on social and economic injustice forward, co-ordinating the work of local and area meetings who might wish to become more deeply involved, and encouraging the deep spiritual and intellectual searching that could underpin a 'true social

order' for our age.

We ask Yearly Meeting Agenda Committee to align their work with that of Meeting for Sufferings and to keep this issue before the Yearly Meeting for further consideration over the next two years. Between Yearly Meetings we should all try to share our experience.

We ask our Recording Clerk and staff to make our concern about social and economic inequality known as widely as possible and in particular to challenge the incoming UK government to adopt policies which decrease inequality and value equally the contribution which all can make to developing a more just and sustainable society.

We must remember that what makes the real difference is not adding further to the words in the world but being and living out the new social order, testing our leadings together and trusting to our Quaker processes, 'opening ourselves to the Light to guide us in each small step'.

***Minute 49/15:** Yearly Meeting is to be held at Friends House, London from 1-4 May 2015. This year is the first of a new three-year arc on the theme 'living out our faith in the world'. One of the focuses this year is housing as a particular example of a tested concern in the areas of inequality and injustice. Challenged by the structural injustice we see all around us, can we draw inspiration from the work of Friends a century ago, recorded in *Quaker faith & practice* 23.16? How might we express now our spiritual insights that give rise to our testimony, impelling us to action in the world?*

We have considered the preparation questions from the Yearly Meeting Agenda Committee this afternoon:

- 1. How can we open ourselves fully to the pain of the world without despairing or turning away? Might allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to each other transform pain into compassion and kindle a passion to heal?*
- 2. How can meetings be places where individuals are both supported and challenged as they wrestle with the complex issues that face us?*
- 3. How are we committed to our Quaker values? How can we witness for a better social order? How can the testimonies of individuals bring more peace and economic justice?*
- 4. What can we do to help bring about justice and equality in the society in which we live?*

We have spent time in silent waiting in response to these questions. What has come to us is that there is so much we can see that is wrong in our society that it is difficult to feel any sense of being able to make a difference. Strength comes, though, by our being together in our Society of Friends, where the right words can be found to express the hurts and the actions required to bring change. Our insights base themselves on being able to listen deeply, respecting that of God in all. The way we treat our children so they have a discipline in life is an example of how we can show the alternatives to punishment based on forms of violence. In contrast we can be aware of the distortion that may arise from the way the media portrays and records events.

The personal place where we come from as individuals is strengthened by the network of faith in our Quaker community. That place is one where we are able to take action towards mending the world, where it is in our gift, but also upholding those who are in need and those who can give of their time and activity in response.

Increasing economic inequality seems to be a measure of the dependent difficulties in society, so our commitment to lessening inequality and to sustainability is key to help the quiet processes and small circles we can use to effect underlying change. We affirm what we have already found

and recorded as a Religious Society, including that of supporting tested concern. We can only succeed in this if we are faithful to our discipline. Then we can act like leaven, not only in our own Society but the wider society all around us.

Crianlarich: West/North Scotland Gathering March 2015



Friends from various Local Meetings in West and North Scotland gathered for their annual Spring weekend on Friday 20th and stayed until Sunday 22nd March. This year was different from the previous three in a number of respects: the venue was Crainlarich Youth Hostel instead of Inverary, we chose to have Woodbrooke on the Road leading the Saturday sessions and we had a children's programme.

The organisers had decided to take a leap of faith and book the larger hostel of Crainlarich in the hope that more folk would attend. This was justified, as 23 adults and 9 children and young people gathered for, in one of the participant's words, a weekend of "company, contributions, goodwill, laughs, quiet understanding and general fun and fellowship."

The weather on the Saturday was exceptional, with sun all day and light winds. During breaks folk wandered through the surrounding community woodland to look-out points where they could see the strath below, and the peak of Ben More still with snow in its corries. Maud Grainger of Woodbrooke on the Road led sessions on the theme of Walk it like we Talk it. We explored our understandings of testimony, Quaker witness, our corporate expression of testimony and how we can derive spiritual nourishment.

Epilogues were held both on Friday and Saturday, and on Sunday an all-age Meeting for Worship was held which involved decorating a tree with hand-drawn leaves.

The Woodbrooke on the Road sessions and children's programme were made possible thanks to the Barbara Organ legacy.

The weekend was so popular that Crainlarich hostel has been booked for 18-20 March 2016. The organisers will be in touch with this year's participants in late summer/ early autumn. In the mean time all those attending will be spreading the word to others in their Meetings to encourage additional folk at next year's gathering.

Ed Tyler (*Argyll & Islay Meeting*)

June Area Meeting by Telephone

This was a fairly routine AM, which was completed in less than 90 minutes. There were about 30 participants including one visitor from the south but, sadly, no one from our two island meetings.

One theme was looking for people to attend various courses. Financial support is available for this. There may be a course for elders or people who might in the future serve as elders. If you are interested in this please let Michael Hutchinson know. If you would like a Woodbrooke-on-the-Road or other course to be held here, please let your elder or overseer know. There are a number of conferences to be held in the next nine months. For details, please see the minutes, and if you are interested contact a member of the Nominations Committee: Gisela Creed & Mary Alice Mansell (for Glasgow, Milngavie and Mull & Iona), Robin Davis (Dunblane and Lanark), John Lethbridge and Helen Macdonald (Dumfries, Castle Douglas and Wigtown), Gill Read (Ayrshire and Arran), Jane Mitchell (Argyll and Islay & Jura).

We heard that the archivist has deposited various documents with the National Records. They include some historic records about former Quaker burial grounds, one as old as 1675.

There were some extraneous noises; some heavy breathing and some coughs and muttering, and occasionally the Clerk and others found it difficult to hear. I want to stress though that these were not major difficulties.

Jane Mitchell (*Argyll Meeting*)



Review: Learning to Walk in the Dark by Barbara Brown Taylor

In Barbara Brown Taylor's latest book [*Canterbury Press, 2014*], she encourages us to look at the God of the Darkness and to embrace our fears. One story she tells particularly struck me as meaningful to Quakers: Jacques Lusseyran(1) was blinded as a boy, yet his parents would not send him to the Blind School, would not encourage him to be a victim. They told him “always tell us when you discover something new” and so Lusseyran started to tell of his experiences.

He discovered his world was not all dark. His new world showed him many colours but these were within. Barbara writes – ‘the light outside of him moved inside to show him things he might never have found any other way’. Lusseyran wrote “I had completely lost the sight of my eyes; I could not see the light of the world any more. Yet the light was still there. Its source was not obliterated. I felt it gushing forth every moment and brimming over; I felt it wanted to spread out over the world. I had only to receive it. It was unavoidably there. It was all there, and I found again its movements and shades, that is, its colours, which I had loved so passionately a few weeks before. This was something entirely new, you understand, all the more so since it contradicted everything that those who have eyes believe. The source of light is not in the outer world. We believe that it is only because of a common delusion. The light dwells where life also dwells: within ourselves.”

Barbara thought he was speaking metaphorically but it soon became clear that this was an experience of light that had nothing to do with his eyes. With practice, he learned to tell trees apart by the sound of their shadows. He could tell how tall or wide a wall was by the pressure it exerted on his body. More specifically he spoke of trees having “their own specific levels of sound ... the tone of a plane tree is entered like a room. It indicates a certain order in space, zones of tension, and zones of free passage.” He convinced Barbara that she was the one handicapped.

Lusseyran wrote that “The problem with seeing the regular way is that sight naturally prefers outer appearances. It attends to the surface of things, which makes it an essentially superficial sense. We let our eyes skid over trees, furniture, traffic, faces, too often mistaking sight for perception – which is easy to do, when our eyes work so well to help us orientate ourselves in space”. [*This was a revelation to me too, Margaret*] While the eyes glide quickly over things the fingers feel a table more intimately. It seems it all comes down to how we pay attention to things. “Since becoming blind, I have paid more attention to a thousand things,” Lusseyran wrote. One of his greatest discoveries was how the light he saw changed with his inner condition. When he was sad or afraid, the light decreased at once. Sometimes it went out all together, leaving him deeply and totally blind. When he was joyful and attentive, it returned as strong as ever. He learned very quickly that the best way to see the inner light and remain in its presence was to love.

When he was sent to Buchanwald in 1944 he continued to learn of the light. Hatred not only darkened his world, it made it smaller and he bumped into things. But when he brought himself back and started to pay attention again, Barbara writes 'the space both inside and outside of him opened up so he found his way and moved with ease again. The most valuable thing he learned was that no one could turn out the light inside him without his consent. Even when he lost track of it for a while, he knew where he could find it again.'

(1: Lusseyran, 2006. *J. Against the pollution of the I*, Morning Light Press)

It gives you a lot to think about!

Margaret Roy (*Lanark Meeting*)

(Extracts taken with kind permission of Canterbury Press)

Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*)

*Pink spires and purple bell-towers
grow in profusion, side by side,
in clumps along roadside verges
and on bracken-covered hillsides,
growing like cities. Economic immigrants
arrive, lured by tintinnabulation
of the bells. From the bottom
of the spires to the top most carillon,
these ring out a welcome, and the bees
zoom in, stepping inside for a drink.*

Norman Bisset



Worship - Past & Present Images

Stone Circle Arran ca 1500 BCE (*BGB*)



Glasgow Meeting House (asterix) July 2015



Non-theistic Quakers

Non-theism, what is it and how does it relate to Quakerism? After probably too enthusiastically reporting about the Non-Theist Network conference I had attended in March this year, the editors asked me to write a paragraph for this newsletter. What a difficult task but I am going to try! Non-Theism is a wide concept, almost as wide as theism! What is needed is open debate so that we can get better at sharing our feelings, doubts and beliefs. So to help this dialogue along, I have put together some information and questions.

The Non-Theism Quaker Network's aim is to provide a forum and supportive framework for Friends who regard religion as a human creation. We want to ensure that our Religious Society of Friends in Britain is an inclusive rather than an exclusive Society. We seek to explore theological and spiritual diversity and their practical implications, in respectful acceptance of different views, experiences, and journeys. Below I have chosen a couple of excerpts from a talk by Paul Bates, which he gave to Friends in Belfast Meeting House in November 2013, because I like the way he clearly describes Non-Theism and its relationship to Quaker principles.

“Nontheism differs from theism in asserting that the visible world is the only real world that we will ever experience and that ‘God’ is a mythical projection or personification of our own desires to construct value, meaning and dignity in our life here on earth. There is no pre-defined code of ethics ‘out there’ which we are obliged to live by – the only ethics we have are those principles of conduct which we humans have devised for ourselves over thousands of years of human history. There are no absolute rules for how human society should be organized or how we should conduct ourselves as individuals. The cosmos does not reveal to us any pre-defined blueprint for how life should be conducted here on earth. We seek to say ‘yes’ to life by constructing meaning for ourselves as individuals and as societies through our work, in our relationships and by facing suffering with courage and resolve. It is in these ways that we all may contribute to the creation of value and meaning in our own time and place”.

"Nontheism and Quaker principles? I think that nontheism fits very well with Quaker principles. What many people fear about loss of belief in a supernatural God is that all value and meaning will collapse and we will all spiral downwards into the despair of nihilism. What I have come to see is that it is we humans who are responsible for the creation of all meaning and value in life and we no longer need to rely on metaphysical beliefs about a supernatural God to do this work for us. From this nontheist perspective the Quaker values of peace, equality, simplicity and integrity continue as before. More than that, the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth also stand and his parables about love, tolerance, forgiveness and peace are as powerful and meaningful today as they were when they were first uttered. The only difference between the theist Friend and the nontheist Friend is that the nontheist no longer has a focus on any world to come and sees the focus of life entirely in terms of a creative and compassionate response to life as we live it here and now.”

In the network we have found that there are some frequently asked questions, they are listed on the web under www.nontheist-quakers.org.uk with a variety of answers

which you might find interesting:

What does a nontheist do in Meeting for Worship?

What does spirituality mean for a nontheist Quaker?

Isn't the term 'NON-theism' negative?

Aren't you trying to turn the Religious Society of Friends into a secular humanitarian Society?

Why have you formed your own network? Isn't that being divisive?

I am looking forward to your responses.

Gisela Creed (*Glasgow Meeting*)

Thursday in Black

Attending the Episcopal General Synod representing Scotland General Meeting, I was not surprised to find the women priests in black with white dog collars. However, on the second day they all seemed to sprout forth into flowery blouses! Being nosy I commented and heard about Thursday in Black, a project supported by the World Council of Churches, when men and women can dress in black bringing attention to gender violence. This met my concern that war today is seldom about big bombs and empires wrestling each other but is more intimate and face to face, and a large part involves the sexual abuse of women. However, the project is more broad based than that. I was also impressed that the impetus lay in the war-torn countries themselves, not in the rich comfortable countries of the 'West'. Here is part of what the web site says:

'Gender based violence is a universal and global issue that harms men, women and children in their most private spheres. We often feel helpless and hopeless in the face of so much pain and injustice ---

However, we can all be involved in a simple but powerful campaign to address gender violence. Every Thursday. People around the world wear black as a symbol of strength and courage, representing our solidarity with victims and survivors of violence, and calling for a world without rape and violence ---

Thursdays in Black encourages everyone, men and women, to wear black every Thursday. This can be a campaign T-shirt, other black clothing or simply a campaign badge as a sign of their support ---'

You will find more information on thursdayinblack.co.za/about-tib.

Margaret Roy (*Lanark Meeting*)

From the Editors: *As some of our readers may know, Bryan had a nasty accident in early Spring and was unable to edit the Newsletter. However, Margaret gallantly, and very efficiently, took over the editorial duties for the last two issues of WSQN - so many thanks to her! We are now operating as joint editors, so future contributions for the Newsletter can be sent to either Bryan Bowes or Margaret Roy.*