

Report on NYYM Meeting for Discernment, Summer 2011

On Tuesday, July 19, 2011, during Summer Sessions, NYYM gathered in the Auditorium at Silver Bay for a Meeting for Discernment—a time of extended worship on a query set in advance. This summer's Meeting for Discernment examined how faithful life in the Spirit supports Friends' work of earthcare and other witness in the world. Friends were invited to reflect on specific times and ways that they had personally experienced their work in the world being undergirded, informed, and supported by God, by the flow of the universe, by Transforming Power, by the Inward Christ. Friends shared stories in response to the query: **How has your faith helped you to keep your spiritual grounding, hope, and optimism while living your witness in the world?** Rather than listening to these stories in isolation, those present were invited to listen and to discern what we could learn of the ways of God, as revealed through the experiences shared by these Friends.

Some 150 Friends participated in the morning session, and we were joined by Junior Yearly Meeting for the final quarter hour. After lunch, NYYM gathered for an hour of community worship. We listened to the memorial minute for Natia Gorgen, a Young Friend who had grown up in our yearly meeting community and who had died in a car accident last summer. The depth of love shown in the minute and in the worship that followed continued into the afternoon's Meeting for Discernment, when around 100 Friends continued to share stories in response to the query. Many Friends attended both sessions, some coming to Silver Bay just for this reason. Arising out of the profound and spacious silence, we heard moving testimonials of transformative openings and Spirit-led action.

The clerks felt held in worship by the presence of those serving the role of elders. We experienced a strong sense that we were not clerking the meeting alone; the body was participating in the clerking, and together, as a corporate body, we were being guided by love and by Spirit into humility and truth. Friends spoke and heard the words that were being called out from among us to prepare us for our work ahead. Friends offered many examples, through personal stories, of how their witness was grounded in their faith. Clearly, Friends' witness does not stand on its own apart from spiritual concerns. Rather, witness and spirituality are woven together, and the fortitude and persistence of a difficult witness often draws upon the strength of a deep spiritual reservoir.

The following pages include a report of the stories Friends shared in response to the query and some background about the process and structure of the day.

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Responses to the query: How has your faith helped you to keep your spiritual grounding, hope, and optimism while living your witness in the world?

Friends were invited to reflect on specific times and ways that they had personally experienced their work in the world being undergirded, informed, and supported by God, by the flow of the universe, by Transforming Power, by the Inward Christ. We found the responses to the query could be grouped in three broad streams.

On the following pages, we offer extracts from the stories that were shared, grouped under these three streams, which appear in bold. We hope these will communicate some of the spirit of what we experienced. [Note: The clerks and recorders may not always have heard correctly, noted fully, or understood clearly what was said. The clerks apologize in advance for any errors that

may appear in this report.]

Friends spoke of being transformed by awe of natural systems and places. For some, these experiences informed, undergirded, and supported specifically earthcare related witness. For some, these experiences led them to faithfully share their bounty and truths with others.

- One Friend spoke of finding her spiritual home while visiting Australia: from rainbows, from the land, and from encounters with the wisdom of the Aboriginal people. She also learned that her spiritual home wasn't tied to that physical place. Seeking a support community, she googled to find Quakers. A clearness committee in her local meeting helped her clarify a leading to work on climate change. She found a job that accommodates her physical abilities and that enables her to do work she loves. Her meeting supports her in many ways, and the earth led her to Quakers.
- One Friend spoke of hugging tress, and experiencing that the trees share their spirit with those who hug them. She has a simple vision of doing her small part to help replace the trees being chopped down: to walk and plant a few, walk and plant a few. Such dreams don't need a lot of energy.
- One Friend spoke lovingly of her garden as a "tyrant" that demands and gives a lot—demanding water, weeding. Built on rubble, it mediates between her and the tough neighborhood kids. Their questions about what "this compost is" have allowed her to see God in the weeds.
- One Friend spoke of the inspiration of his father, uncle, and grandfather, who all had prolific kitchen gardens, where they grew far more than they needed. They gave away willingly and gladly from the bounty of these gardens—and they were positive about what their kitchen-garden faith could do. They sang in the choir; they visited people; and they consoled people. They had the kind of faith that does not need belief systems written down, that simply needs to witness to the presence of "somebody, something more powerful than I am." He facilitated AVP for about nine years in a maximum-security facility. During that time, he witnessed change through Transforming Power. When told no paperwork had been submitted, he stayed faithful to his truth that it had. He had faith that the Transforming Power would reach the corrections officers, as it reached the other men in the facility. And it did. He found many times that when he stood close to the truth, the people surrounding him would know it and would be transformed. With his kitchen-garden kind of faith, he is irrationally optimistic.
- One Friend spoke of a time when she was 12, and the Quakers were called to help the Senecas fight a dam that was going to flood their reservation. Her parents took her to a meeting with the Onondaga clan mothers, who were the leaders. One told them, "It isn't just about land; it's about values, about how to live with one another, how to live with the earth. That is what we need to preserve." The way her mother and the Onondaga clan mothers included her in that conversation when she was 12 years old showed her how it is to be a true human being who utterly honors and accepts the life around us. "The child is not just a child; this is a person who is going to have a future, have a path. The Spirit is alive in everything, in everyone, and when we truly live that awareness, we are truly alive." Decades later, a news reporter approached her, annoyed because he'd been excluded from an important Onondaga ceremony. The explanation that came to her is fundamental to her faith: None of us is an observer; we are all participants. When we go as an observer, it is false. We are all participants. That is the only way to be, and if you can't be a participant, you're not welcome. If you understand what it really is to be there, to be a participant of the ceremony, there is always a welcome, there is always a place. The Onondaga had spoken with integrity when they said, "I'm sorry, but you're not a participant. You want to be an observer and that is not enough." That is Truth speaking. That is a witness. And the struggle she has, the calling she has, is how to bring difficult messages in a way that is compassionate, so that they are truly heard and so that the other person welcomes that transformation, that inclusion, that fullness of life, which is for all of us, if we are willing to be participants.

Friends spoke of using the "tools" of our Quaker practice (clearness committees, worship-sharing groups), of our testimonies as principles of our faith, of staying grounded in one's faith community, of the call to be faithful, and of our corporate ability to grow and change when we truly listen to one another.

- One Friend told how she had called for help from the Yearly Meeting, when she felt led to a terrifying witness. She found a support committee outside of her small home meeting, which would not have been able to cope. It was important that the people she was connecting with were solidly grounded themselves in Spirit. They met often by conference call, and stayed with her through the changing challenges of the witness.
- One Friend spoke of the international development work she does with women. For her, hope and optimism are easy: she sees her work help women live though childbirth and their children go to school. These are the important measures of a country's well-being, not the amount of money people earn in a day. Her faith offers her Quaker "tools": the testimony of community to stay grounded, to ask for clearness, elders, worship-sharing opportunities, our corporate business practices. She is mindful to seek a balance. Seeing the need to use these tools, to stay grounded in faith community, she also sees that if she spends too much time using the tools, she may not have time to do the work in the world.
- One Friend told how he was reminded of an often overlooked principle of our faith: humility. A week ago, in Nigeria, he interviewed a Nigerian man who worked for Chevron for 15 years in customer relations. He had helped put in hospitals, schools, bridges and wells, in places where Chevron works. When war came 10 years ago, the people destroyed those things—because they belonged to Chevron. Since then, he has been trying to work in a new way. He told the Friend, "Look, we're all sophisticated, educated, well-read; we all mean well and try to do good. We think we know what people want. We do not." We need to humbly ask what others want, and listen to what they say, not just to give them what we think they need.
- A Friend, who teaches young children in an inner-city school, knows that she is destined to have a 50% failure rate. Statistics say that 50% of the boys will go to jail; 50% of the girls will be mothers before the age of 18. Her faith is deep; it tells her what to do, and helps keep her from despair. She is clear that she has not been commanded to save the children or to be sure they are successful adults. She has been commanded to be truthful, to be peaceful, to use the talents that she has been given, and she is doing those things. If she had a 99% failure rate, she would still not despair. She has hope; her faith is her guide.
- One Friend spoke of his inner peace testimony. He constantly checks to see if he's being part of the problem or part of the solution. If he's doing what he can, and he's not being part of the problem, then he can be at peace with himself. When he is at peace with himself, he finds he can be more effective. Recently, in meeting for worship, he was surprised to hear a message about this being drawn out of his lips, and he later learned that it had spoken to the condition of an attender who was overwhelmed by personal troubles and hardship and at the same time yearning to help the world.
- One Friend reflected that in the past, there had been much turmoil in NYYM business sessions. The stillness in the room, the expectant waiting was evidence to this Friend of our ability to move forward. "We are honoring each other's souls today, when we reflect on these Spirit-led Friends bringing their witness to the Yearly Meeting."

Friends spoke of the source of their faith—life-changing experiences of the Divine; gratitude and prayer; reading the Bible; the importance of Meeting for Worship; being carried by the flow of the universe—and of how these affected their lives and work in the world

- One Friend spoke of knowing love and faithfulness, in knowing that her feet are planted in the life of the Holy Spirit. For her, Hope is a holy gift, and with it comes the requirement that she be a person of hope. As an ARCH visitor, even when she has been unfocused at the beginning of a meeting with another person, she has found that after an hour of listening, she has felt the blessing of love flowing through her. All else follows from that love.
- One Friend spoke of a way she recently discovered to stay spiritually grounded—the practice of gratitude. It is now her first intention on waking and also throughout the day. It

- makes a difference to help her get through things that are difficult.
- One Friend shared that years ago, when struggling to survive, the Power of the Lord took his hand and brought him step by step to be with Quakers, to be in the world. Now, when he gets overwhelmed by his work, he reminds himself, or others remind him, to wait to be led. Power and wisdom are given, not just individually, but to us together. In the complicated mess of a Quaker institution where he works, imperfect people provide help to others to do the work they are led to do in the world. The key is to wait and respond. “There is a Power that leads us all home, and it is within us.” Another Friend added: “Home...is a place that is safe for us, where we are loved, where we go out and to which we return. This is home.”
- One Friend shared that reading the Bible had helped her from getting unduly upset by an incident earlier that morning. The Bible has taught her to have more patience, to not act foolishly, and to know what is important and what is not.
- At the close of the morning session, a Friend shared the Serenity Prayer, with an extra verse: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Grant me patience with changes, appreciation for all I have, tolerance for others with different struggles, strength to get up one day at a time.
- One Friend carried a message from Noel Palmer, whom she visits regularly. Noel was not well enough to be with us. Essentially: In your relationship with God, first you must know who you are and then you will know what God wants you to do, and then you will do much good in the world. This he knew experientially.
- One Friend spoke of finding she has a strange and unexpected gift of ministry—to sit with and hold her own and others’ sorrow, in love and hope. Her witness is in recognizing that sorrow and hope aren’t opposed and are not exclusive. To keep herself in touch with the stream of mysteriousness from whence this gift came, she tries to worship deeply and often. Even a moment of very deep worship can carry her a long way out into the world again. Aware she may die from Alzheimer’s, as several of her relatives have, she shared a story of a time she was sitting in worship at home, and reached out and touched her cat and felt his participation in the worship. She realized then that, although the cat can’t talk, he definitely has a relationship with God. And if she loses her ability to speak and think, she knows she will have a relationship with God. She might even lose all conscious thought, and “become a vegetable.” Yet she is sure that trees have a relationship with God. So even if she is a vegetable, she expects it will be like being a tree in relationship to God. That thought has calmed her fears and given her the faith to go on and be whatever she is meant to be.
- A Friend who identifies as being nontheist expressed her appreciation of the language of the query. As a Quaker, she is deeply grateful and respectful of the language and concepts that center on God but is personally more comfortable with wordings such as “the flow of the universe.” She recounted an experience to illustrate what this expression means to her. This Friend typically plans workshops well in advance, with clear lists, agendas, and schedules. When she offered an interest group on the spur of the moment, she felt really nervous and unprepared. Her only resource was to listen really hard when people introduced themselves. From this, a question arose in her mind. It seemed smart, so she asked it, and people responded. Then another question arose, and that’s how it went for the full time. She felt she had stepped into a stream that was flowing with a strong current, and all she had to do was relax and drift along with the stream. They had a marvelous time together.

Process and structure

Clerks: In the morning session, Janet Hough (Chappaqua, outgoing clerk of the steering committee for Meetings for Discernment) served as clerk, and for the afternoon session, Jeff Hitchcock (Rahway & Plainfield, incoming clerk of the steering committee) served as clerk. The clerks were accompanied on the facing chairs by Anne Pomeroy (New Paltz) and Roger Dreisbach-Williams (Rahway & Plainfield), serving as elders and assistants.

Recorders: To report on Friends' responses to the query, the steering committee used the notes taken by four Friends who were invited to serve as recorders. For the morning: Deb Wood (Purchase) and Robin Alpern (Scarsdale). For the afternoon: Spee Braun (Old Chatham) and Elizabeth Gordon (Binghamton).

Participants: Friends from the full geographic range of the Yearly Meeting were present to listen and to speak. We heard stories from new, fresh voices and old, familiar ones; from individuals who are deeply embedded in service to their monthly meetings, individuals who are serving on Yearly Meeting committees, and individuals who are new to Friends. Interestingly, this summer we heard from far more women (14) than men (5), a reversal of last summer (15 men and 9 women).

Elders: The Meeting for Discernment was grounded by the presence of Friends who were invited on behalf of the Steering Committee to take part and hold the meeting in its worship, serving the function of elders. Because Friends in NYYM are still growing into an understanding of what the ministry of eldership means for us in the 21st century, we offer here some background about how those serving in this way worked together. Friends from around NYYM were invited, spanning a range of regions and ages, some who were appointed by their monthly meetings to the Meetings for Discernment and some not under such appointment. Around 40 Friends answered the invitation and agreed to take on an eldering role for one or both of the sessions of the Meeting for Discernment. On Sunday night, the first evening at Silver Bay, the elders, members of the Steering Committee, and the Meeting for Discernment clerks met as one body in an open meeting to discuss plans for the Tuesday Meeting for Discernment. Plans were shared, questions asked and answered, and Friends were satisfied with the anticipated process. At the Meeting for Discernment on Tuesday, the elders held the meeting in worship as planned. It is the steering committee's sense that their presence was key to setting the tone and fostering the spirit of worship that carried and grew throughout the day.

Tuesday evening reflections: On Tuesday evening, concurrently with interest groups, some 45 Friends gathered to review and discuss the morning and afternoon sessions of the Meeting for Discernment, in a meeting that was open to all. Friends who had served as elders, holding the body in prayer and in the Light, were given opportunity to speak first. Many spoke of how it felt to hold the meeting. They expressed their sense that the meeting reached a deep and centered place; that the body was gathered throughout; that we were building up to something that hasn't surfaced yet; that the whole Yearly Meeting is working toward understanding our spiritual work with respect to earthcare; and that we are on a plateau halfway up a mountain.

This report: This report was written jointly by the two clerks of the day's Meeting for Discernment, who are also the outgoing and incoming clerk of the Steering Committee for Meetings for Discernment.

—Janet Hough (Chappaqua) and Jeff Hitchcock (Rahway & Plainfield)