

Membership: a Lifelong Journey

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Amawalk Meeting

I have a unique membership story among modern Friends.

My parents, Carolyn and Glenn Mallison, joined the Religious Society of Friends at Rochester Meeting in 1956 when I was two. They enrolled me as an associate member. I grew up proud of my Quaker family. I loved telling friends about awesome Quaker practices and principles. I went with my family to meeting for worship, quarterly meeting, Powell House programs and every yearly meeting at Silver Bay.

During college at SUNY Fredonia, I decided to declare I was a member of the Religious Society of Friends not because my parents brought me, but because I chose this. It was important to show commitment to my faith community, and express my sense of belonging. When Fredonia Meeting accepted my request for adult membership, I felt faithful to my religious life.

A few years later I was living in Ithaca and attending meeting regularly. Laura Gaeddert, wife of Fredonia Meeting's clerk, gently suggested I transfer my membership. Retaining membership at Fredonia out of loyalty was inappropriate; joining Ithaca Meeting was a way of being fully present and engaged in my current meeting. I requested transfer and was accepted. Laura was right that membership allowed me a greater sense of aliveness and responsibility.

After being married under the care of Ithaca Meeting in 1985, I moved with my husband, Bowen Alpern, to Westchester County, in Purchase Quarter. We quickly settled into a warm meeting. Unfortunately, serious tensions between us and the meeting arose over the years, without resolution. The final straw for the meeting was when I said I had let go of belief in God. Without discussion, I was removed from membership.

Disownment devastated me. The day after, I found myself scanning my skin for spots or some other anomaly. Because I surely couldn't be me if I were no longer a Quaker. For months I slept poorly, and had trouble concentrating by

day. I flinched each time someone brought up the subject, for fear they would disown me too.

Grateful that Friends don't practice shunning, I continued as actively as before, but now attending a different meeting in Purchase Quarter. Although modern U.S. Friends hardly distinguish between attenders and members, I felt stung every time I had to check the "attender" box. It didn't represent my commitment, passion, lived experience and identification with Friends.

After nine years I received a spiritual message that I belonged in membership. With enormous joy and relief, I joined Scarsdale Meeting. (I recounted this story in more detail in an essay published in *Godless for God's Sake: Nontheism in Contemporary Quakerism*, ed. Boulton.)

One of many lessons I drew from my experience was that it might be useful if Quakers had a clearness committee annually, or every three to five years, to review our membership status. It's easy to stagnate. Harsh as it was for me to be removed from membership, that period did give me profound opportunity to assess my relationship to Quakerism. Membership is a way of expressing our connection to the faith community. Friends and our meetings deserve regular review, to consider where the life is in our connection.