

## Marrying the Meeting

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Chatham-Summit Meeting

I always told myself that if anything happened to my husband, I'd go back to meeting. This was kind of odd, because I attended meeting faithfully for the first 7 years of our marriage, with his full support, even though he was not himself a churchgoer. But then we moved to Chatham, and somehow I never transferred my allegiance to the new meeting, even though it was less than a mile from our new house.

It was partly because of the effort required to become acquainted with a whole new bunch of people; and partly because our new neighborhood provided such interesting things to do outdoors on weekends; and partly because the Vietnam War was winding down. But I always knew that if I needed it, I'd find a spiritual home at Friends meeting.

Twenty years after our move my husband died, and two weeks later, still shaky, I went to that meetinghouse less than a mile away. Over the next seven years I did indeed find a home there, and people who helped me form my new identity and life. I served on committees, attended business meetings, and was very much a part of the wider Quaker fellowship. But I didn't feel moved to become a member.

It began to bother me more and more that I didn't feel any sort of a call, and I journaled, prayed, and discussed my lack endlessly. Slowly, the whole tangle unraveled.

Part of it was guilt; that I had spent 20 years not going to meeting, even though I knew that was where I belonged. And part of it was loyalty to my husband. I became aware that I would never have become a member if he had still been alive; it was too much of a step away from him and from our marriage, and there was no hope that he'd become part, even peripherally, of the life of the meeting. I had grown to realize the importance of a shared spiritual life for couples, and I began to feel that this was so important for me that I couldn't

entertain the idea of caring for someone who couldn't share my Quakerism with me, at least to some degree. One of my F(f)riends asked me, If I were ever to remarry, would I want to do it under the care of the meeting? And when I said "Yes!" he said, "Why not marry the meeting, then?"

To my mind this meant that if I joined the meeting I'd be saying that I wouldn't consider remarrying unless it could be someone who shared an interest in Friends. And by extension, this meant it was unlikely that I'd ever remarry, since I was drastically cutting down the pool of eligible men. I prayed to become willing to turn this over to God, and slowly, I felt more and more comfortable with the idea. So I applied for membership and was accepted.

People ask me where I get the idea that I'd have to marry a Quaker. Indeed, the days are long past when members are read out for marrying out of meeting, and that is as it should be. This really has nothing to do with Quaker faith and practice; more with a willingness to give up my hope of remarrying, and with a willingness to grow away from my past marriage. The things that hold us back from applying to join the meeting are many and varied, and it can take seven years—or even 27 years—to discern what they are. As it happens, deciding that I'd probably never remarry still left room for many good things in my life. I am content now, and feel that I've come home.