

Finding a Home, and Fellow Travellers

Benjamin Warnke

Brooklyn Meeting

I suspect most Quakers in New York Yearly Meeting have heard other Friends—convinced or birthright— express a reluctance at membership in anything, including membership in the Religious Society of Friends. Seekers, after all, are perhaps by definition not joiners. Even the term “convinced” carries a trace of this disinclination: many of us have struggled against our call to membership, persuaded finally by that quiet voice that continued to insist that we belong.

There is another common thread in conversations about membership: we recall that moment, sometimes immediate, sometimes after months or years, when we realized in meeting that we were “home.” For many of us this homecoming hardly seemed possible. We had spent too many years searching for the Spirit and too many years finding ourselves again adrift and alone. This was all true for me. I started attending Quaker meeting twenty-one years ago, when my wife, our two daughters and I moved briefly to Washington, DC, and I, struggling through what seemed an interminable stretch of profound uncertainty, walked into a meeting for worship and discovered that I was where I belonged.

My journey to membership has been both brief and prolonged. I joined Brooklyn Meeting, after some hesitation, two years after finding Friends; I have embraced the full meaning and joys of membership only recently. When I joined meeting, I was not entirely certain what I was joining. In my letter for membership, I expressed my doubts about the existence of God. I also wrote of my appreciation for the wisdom and faith of others in the meeting and my hope that their example and instruction would lead me.

I felt then as if I were signing on to a pilgrimage without a set destination but with some general agreement on protocol and direction. It seemed like an acceptably loose compact, with few obligations and personal entanglements, as if we had all agreed to pool our resources and head towards Canterbury. It would be

fine if some of us ended up in London instead and fine also if we kept to ourselves for the entire journey.

Despite my involvement on a variety of committees, over the years I have mostly kept to myself. In recent months, however, I have become convinced that a part of the promise of Quaker practice lies in a far deeper engagement with other Friends. The men and women I listen to in meeting or in committees with interest and admiration—often with wonder—are not just my guides and teachers, but my vital and necessary companions in our mutual search for the divine. If the essential Quaker revelation is that we are all invested with a portion of the Light, perhaps we are most transformed by this bright fragment when we are in community, moved by what love can do.

Early Friends travelled together to spread the word that the Spirit was available directly to all of us. Part of this practice of companionship was practical, spurred by concerns about safety and mutual care, part motivated by a corporate concern about spiritual discipline, but part was surely informed by the knowledge that our spiritual lives blossom when the Light is active in us in ways that only love can engender.

Quaker practice invites us to participate in each other's journeys; perhaps it demands that we do, but I think that our discovery that love is available to us, and infinite, and that we are, after all, home, allows us to walk along our spiritual paths with courage and joy and sometimes—or often—hand in hand. Perhaps that's the essence of membership.