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Children and Youth Field Secretary's Report

Melinda Wenner Bradley

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NYYM Summer Sessions

Good morning, Friends. My name is Melinda Wenner Bradley, and I serve this yearly meeting as the children and youth field secretary.

In preparation for our sessions, and the theme of Bringing the Peaceable Kingdom to a Turbulent World, I turned to the writing of peace studies scholar and activist Elise Boulding. She wrote about families and children often in her work. Boulding writes:

“If we want to rediscover human joy and wholeness and creativity, and to learn to care for our planetary household as one earth family, we cannot continue to insulate

adults and children from each other. Children need to be present to us, and we to them [...]”<sup>1</sup>

Friends, we need to continue to engage in the ways we know — and are discovering — to be in multi-age, multigenerational spiritual community.

The charge to do that exciting, challenging, and Spirit-filled work is in all our hands. The spiritual nurture of our young people is the business and responsibility of the whole yearly meeting. That charge is also like a compass that guides all parts of the work of the Children and Youth Field Secretary.

<sup>1</sup> “The Personhood of Children” by Elise Boulding

In the first fifteen months of this position's existence, I've traveled thousands of miles, visiting and worshipping 27 times with Friends in local and regional meetings across the yearly meeting. I have gathered with parents and families to share our joys and challenges at Quaker Family Meetups, partnered with my Powell House youth colleagues to lead Youth Institutes, collaborated with faithful volunteers, played — and worshipped — with kids, listened to teens, supported religious education and outreach committees, and been supported by extraordinary colleagues on the Yearly Meeting staff. This morning I would like to share with you two images for this work, and invite into this space the voices of our young people.

One of the metaphors that came to me while describing the CYFS work in my advance report was a switchboard operator, the kind who listened and connected calls across a big switchboard lighting up in front of them.

Every time I travel among Friends in our yearly meeting I encounter the ways we are sharing our Light with one another, in the ideas and energy that are serving monthly meeting and regional programs for children, youth, and families. I imagine the map of the yearly meeting, lit up before me.

Part of what I am called to do in this work is find ways to connect Friends with one another and facilitate that sharing — and the relationships that grow from it. There will be fresh resources populating the youth pages of the new yearly

meeting website this fall, and you can subscribe to the CYFS e-newsletter to hear more about new resources and what's happening in local meetings. I'm particularly interested in sharing ideas that provide our children with experiential learning about Quaker faith and practice, including our witness in the world. I've had multiple conversations here at sessions with Friends interested in how to share their witness and ministries with young Friends. Yes, please! We need not wait; let us include in our witness the raising of children empowered to make authentic change.

Let's give them both spiritual and practical tools; teach them about witness anchored in faith, and create opportunities to join the community in service. I think we must do the work that encourages and prepares our children to be, as Robin Mohr says, "the Quakers the world needs." A people who listen for God and dwell in what we profess.

Let's also support the Friends called to the ministry of building spiritual community with the children and youth in our local meetings.

This afternoon, you're invited to a conversation under the care of Nurture Coordinating Committee, discerning the way forward for the yearly meeting Youth Committee. Together with the Friends serving on and nominated to the committee — and older youth are among those Friends, it will be multi-age committee — we're exploring how to broaden that network and nurture a community of practice among Friends called to youth work. I imagine us working together at the switchboard, plugging in the different lines, connecting Friends, ideas, and resources.

Last summer after Sessions, Marissa Badgley shared with me responses to the following queries from visits to the 3rd/4th Grade and Junior High groups at JYM:

What is your spiritual condition?

What does being a Quaker mean to you?

What is the spiritual condition of this JYM group?

I'd like to share just a few of the responses from young Friends:

- Growing together and learning
- Noticing the light
- Searching for a home
- Being included in what my meeting considers an adult decision
- Finding the patience to help find the bright light in all people
- It means being part of something bigger than yourself and always being welcomed
- I know I believe in the light but it is confusing
- A community working together to improve the world through spirituality
- Togetherness into infinity

Let's take a moment just to hold those responses from JYM participants. They lift up community, and they also spoke with candor and hope about their spiritual lives, and what it means to them to be a Friend.

The Monthly Meeting Partner Project seeks new ways to best support the spiritual lives of children and youth and nurture multigenerational community life and worship.

The Yearly Meeting is now inviting applications for two more meetings to join the Partner

Project. We start by listening to the condition of the meeting and all ages in it, asking questions:

How do we welcome one another? Do we know each other's gifts? Do we know how to participate?

How are my gifts included as part of the whole?

The metaphor of going on a group hike has seemed appropriate to the work we're doing: When we head out on a group hike, we decide how far we would like to go that day, and what trail to take. On any hike, we may encounter a turn in the trail we did not anticipate, or someone will get a stone in their shoe and we'll need to slow down and wait for them. We take breaks for sustenance and we encourage one another.

I anticipate that some of this will be true in the next two years of the project as partner meetings set out on new trails and seeks new ways to be a multigenerational spiritual community. I look forward to walking with them, and sharing what we learn with the wider yearly meeting body. I continue to be deeply grateful to Montclair and Wilton Meeting for their partnership on this journey, and look forward to welcoming new meetings to the project.

If you're interested in hearing more about the Partner Project, please join us for dinner on Friday in the Gullen Lounge of the Inn — I'll be joined by Friends currently engaged with the project, from Montclair and Wilton.

Finally, Elise Boulding enjoins us that children need to be present to us, and we to them. In the last year, we have gathered for multi-age worship together at all our Sessions and also at Farmington-Scipio's Spring Gathering. In each experience, we were challenged in some way by one another, and God, to listen, be patient, and hold that space for everyone.

During Community Worship at Farmington-Scipio Spring Gathering, there was deep sweetness in what the children were working on in that time during worship

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Including a child taking all the wooden people figures out of the story basket and putting them in a big circle before pausing and intently rearranging them by size and shape — He nudged me to look at what he had made, and whispered, "It's infinity." I whispered back, "Tell me more." and he said, "It's the mothers, then the babies, who become kids, and then they are adults and it starts all over again. Infinity."

That which is Infinite. Endless. Boundless. It was in the space of the silence, in the communion of waiting and listening together, that Spirit was present for all of us, all ages.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve and share in this grace with you.