

Report on the 2014 Summer Sessions Meeting for Discernment – July 23, 2014 –

Morning Queries- *What are your hopes and dreams for your Monthly Meeting; for your Regional/Quarterly Meeting; and for New York Yearly Meeting over the next 3-8 years? Where might God be leading us?*

My hope is that there not be divisions between monthly, regional, and yearly meeting; that the work of the Spirit moves seamlessly upwards and downwards.

My dream for all Quakers who attend NYYM is that a burning bush of understanding of the need for coupling Earthcare and Social Justice will sweep through and move us to action.

Westbury has been through a difficult testing – a school with declining enrollment and financial difficulties. There have been distrust, rivalries and factions. This could have split the meeting, but we have come through whole. However, this testing has been very difficult on leadership. So we now have no one willing to serve as permanent clerk. We've all been raised to be distrustful of authority, so when someone steps up, there's the temptation to vilify and not appreciate and support the individual. Early Quakers thought the inward guide would be enough, but found that structures and discipline were necessary. My hope is that with the approval of the work of the Priorities Working Group that we will see ourselves as a body pulled together, that people will be called to leadership and we will trust and welcome the talents and gifts of these leaders.

I have lots of hope. Recently some very good financial things have happened. One is that our income from outside renters has increased from \$9,000 per year to \$40,000 per year. We hope to hire a budget manager, and to devote a percentage of our money to upkeep of the physical plant, and a percentage to future projects. We'd like to restore our covenant donation and increase our outreach. Young families are looking for congregations that show diversity. We hope to break the Westbury bubble, become more active in our local community, reach out to all, and follow the testimony of equality.

My hope and dream for all three [Monthly, Regional/Quarterly & Yearly Meetings] are joyful healing together.

My hope and dream for my monthly, quarterly and yearly meeting is to discover a more profound and gathered sense of community – a community of love. Community is more than a vehicle for nurturing individual spirituality. It's more than hands on deck to do the work. I've been working the last two years for a Jewish non-profit, and have discovered what a sense of community can be. Many different kinds of Jews are joined by a common history that goes far back in time, and extends all over the world. Raising children to be Jews involves they're being part of this continuity of history, and having responsibilities to the community. My hope is that we raise Quaker children in a way that meetings and the Society of Friends are not simply a context for transmitting the right values. A community is a precious legacy. We need to discover and reconstruct a sense of organic beloved community.

I'm in the happiest time of my life. Every day brings new joys. My hope for the Religious Society of Friends is strong. My prayer is that we get our light out from under the bushel. My call is to evangelism; to get out of the Quaker cocoon.

I've been in conversation with Ben Pink Dandelion; he thinks I might be onto something. The lines of Quaker community are being re-drawn and transformed in this global age. We connect with Friends

General Conference (FGC) programs, Friends United Meeting (FUM), Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO), Friends Work Committee for Consultation (FWCC), Quaker Earthcare Witness, Quaker Voluntary Service, School of the Spirit, Friends in the Fellowship of Christ, Quaker Spring, Pendle Hill, Powell House. I wonder; are Yearly Meetings becoming obsolete? In 20 years will Yearly Meetings be necessary? As we grapple with the future of regional meetings, are we doing the same on the yearly meeting level? I repeat – I have great joy in Quakerism, and great optimism for the future of the Religious Society of Friends. I wonder – are we in the first paroxysms of the struggle to lay down Yearly Meetings? I have no answers, only the question.

Several Friends have spoken my mind. I have love and admiration for Friends in the trenches – it's not easy. I have enormous respect. What is normal is different for those under 35 as compared to those over 60. The Society of Friends needs to get to being sustainable. We have a phenomenal history including women's ministry and peace work – we're here to stay. The other thing is I have a dream about Quaker Higher education. (At present, it has the same problems as the Ivy League. And Quaker private schools have the same issues with class and color diversity as all private schools.) I dream that Quaker Higher Education could be affordable by persons of all classes – a great step toward making the Peaceable Kingdom.

My hope is for Manhasset Monthly Meeting to become an integral part of ministry to substance abuse and homeless and autistic people on Long Island.

I haven't been here in awhile. At Brooklyn I've thought, "Why do we need these little meetings; why don't they just fold up and die?" But here I've been meeting some people from little meetings. So I hope we break away from our tables and get to know each other during the rest of our week here.

Friends need to take on the abolition of the school-to-prison pipeline; the prison industrial complex; the penitentiary system including the death penalty, solitary confinement, and other forms of torture. In other words, Quakers will once again take on the abolition of slavery.

I hope we'll be able to see disappointment, pain, grief, conflict that attend diminished resources as opportunity to exercise the muscle of love, in the confident expectation that that muscle will be needed in the work that attends for us.

I don't have a specific programmatic hope or dream. My wish for our monthly meetings is that we come to know viscerally the Spirit that transforms from alienation to community and from brokenness to wholeness. We carry a radical message, that utter transformation is possible unto our communities.

I dream of a Quaker organization that at all levels is a robust channel for Quaker ministry in which we fund ministries rather than committees. I hope that all work might be considered ministry, and that members are encouraged to bring leadings to their meetings. That our meetings are eager and competent in discerning and supporting those ministries. That regional meetings welcome the discernment of monthly meetings, take on recommendations for larger work and are likewise eager and competent. And that yearly meetings take on even larger work eagerly and confidently, for work beyond the yearly meeting. So that there's a constant fountain of God's work rising up from meetings. And everyone has served on clearness committees and feels safe and confident that what we fund has received the same attention and support.

Look at the diversity of our Yearly Meeting and really give support to smaller meetings. Because as a member of a smaller meeting I feel left out. Think about increasing membership – we haven't got that support. Until we recognize that small meetings struggle day after day and have no growth – what can we do for smaller meetings?

Historically there was a call for Quaker education; it was said that every meetinghouse should have a school. There's need for more education beyond children – learning about AVP, prison reform, support of released prisoners, Earthcare, racial healing. My first knowledge of Quakerism was from friends attending Quaker schools. We can bring in more people not by proselytizing but by education and by giving attention to those who are suffering.

Grateful. Humbled. Remembering. We Friends seek ways, paths, structures – a way to touch the world and perhaps change it. We are each of us conscious of the manifestations of our Source, a Source outside of space and time that we gather to touch and be touched by. All struggles, causes, hopes, dreams are solved in this knowledge and experience. We've become quiet in later years – it saddens me. We need to share words of great power not limited to any form. Fox said the Spirit of Christ is unchangeable. Woolman spoke of a Principle which is pure. I discovered something today from the brother of Jesus. “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” [James 3: 17-18]
We have been given a charge. Our struggles and difficulties have already been solved. Our task is ministry – broadly and courageously.

I hope for a pastor who can hold the Meeting together. We don't have our own pastor, though David Herendeen has been kindly coming down from upstate. My hope is that 15th Street and Manhasset – our partner meetings – that our relationship and mutual learning continue to grow, and more than once a month so we can know what each other is doing.

My hope is that we take the time to see all individuals, regardless of age, and raise up their gifts, and the service they've been given to do in this world. I belong to a CSA, and recently there was a need for many pots to be filled with dirt to grow seedlings. Someone realized – kids like dirt, and they're good at filling containers. So they recruited a bunch of 2-9 year-olds, and they joyfully filled 3000 pots in two hours. The adults were pleased to be spared that task, and the kids were thrilled to have made a contribution to their future food.

Reflections on the Morning Session

We were really good this morning when speaking about hopes and dreams for the Monthly Meetings, Quarterly/Regional Meetings, NYYM, and the Religious Society of Friends.

This morning the depth of the worship and strength of the container was so apparent when I arrived (really late).

I took the elder role in this morning's session and sat with a certain detachment. What I heard was like a symphony. Nothing was left unsaid in the morning. Anything that I wanted to have heard was heard, pretty much.

I served as an elder this morning. My experience was that it took us a while to center, but we got to a really deep place before the vocal ministry began. The strong clerking really helped – strongest clerking that I’ve seen, having been at many meetings for discernment – and it was wonderful. People who speak long were more concise than usually. One person got lost in details and I prayed he would find his center (I’ve labored with him in other venues), and he came out with this one, beautiful last sentence that said what his hope was.

I served as recorder during the morning session. As I settled in, the words of John the Baptist came to me – he must increase as I must decrease – and I heard it in Steve Davidson’s expectation that we might stop funding committees so much as funding ministries, and heard it again in Carol Holmes’ testimony where she raised the question, “Are we experiencing the first paroxysms of no longer having yearly meetings because we don’t need them?” I’m not an advocate of laying structure down, but those were things I heard. I liked hearing the willingness to sacrifice structure if there is no life in it, but more life somewhere else that needs to be nourished. That willingness to let structure go if that’s asked of us was very heartening.

When the meeting for discernment was first proposed, I was extremely dubious. I was concerned about usurping things that were the prerogative of the business meeting. I was wrong. From my sense, what the meeting for discernment has done is to teach people the depth of worship that is possible, the space out of which messages can be given. I was particularly touched this morning by the quality of the extended worship and then the messages that arose from the body. I thought the pace was really, really helpful. I’m grateful that I was wrong.

I’ve casually attended meetings for discernment. This year’s experience was much more powerful. There was something much different about this dialogue. In particular, this morning the dialogue was more active, and I found I gained insights into my Meeting, the Region, and the Yearly Meeting. I was reluctant to speak, but filled the ears of my meeting’s elders at lunchtime about what happened. Why was it different? I think it was in the approach to the dialogue, to the content invited. This morning was about relationships – between Monthly Meetings and Regional/Quarterly Meetings, between Monthly Meetings and the Yearly Meeting, all kinds of relationships.

Afternoon Queries - *This morning we considered our hopes, dreams and leadings for the immediate future. May God lead us this afternoon as we consider how we are going to achieve this vision.*

For many years I felt that my enthusiasm was an inappropriate vision of our faith. I am beginning to feel that lifted and a sense of permission to be enthusiastic about Quakerism. Another resource we have is our understanding of Scripture.

By profession I am an attorney whose training and background is in arbitration and mediation. I have served the Yearly Meeting in conflict transformation. From those experiences I am led to hope that as we grow we take better care of each other, that we intentionally make sure the other guy is OK, that we don’t mistake our testimony of the inward light as if we have the only light or the most assertive light or the light that must prevail. I hope we become more attentive to each other, that we learn to listen very well to each other and that this still distinguishes the way Friends treat each other.

I am told “Demand not.” But my need and my aspiration is that all the life forms on earth are part of our meeting and that we care for them in what we are and what we do.

I am on Nominating Committee of our meeting and I am aware of how many committees there are, and how to keep people informed of what the committees are doing, and how to get people to serve on committees. We had a job fair recently; nobody signed up for committees but many people signed up with gifts. Our meeting is now beginning to figure how to nurture people’s gifts—without committees.

I’ve been part of Northern YM for much of my life and came to NYYM more recently. We have begun to be defeated by our fear. Not only because we are getting old. Ours is a litigious society. We have lost confidence in our spirit-led life. The spirit requires connection. This is hard when everything is dissolving around us. It’s hard to know whether we have a gift, a gift to pass on.

Some years ago, I was told “You are the elders we have been waiting for.” I didn’t know they meant me. I don’t know if we are up to the task.

We are old and we are tired and we have done some tremendous work in our lives. When the challenges come, I hope we will pass on the best of what Quakerism gave us.

Recently I asked two people who are not involved in NYYM to be a support committee to me. If everyone in this room went to two people in their meeting and asked them to be a support committee to listen, test, and learn, it would instantly expand the number of people involved in NYYM by two or three times.

I am on the aforementioned support committee. I feel estranged even though I was in the first group of Powell House youth, graduated in the second class of Friends World College, did my alternative service, married internationally. I’ve returned reluctantly to NYYM at the urging of Earthcare witness. In my youth I felt that we were given license about what to do. I was part of the New Swarthmore community. What we needed then and need now is elders guided by the Presence in the Midst. Only one God and that God IS. The God in the Bible is I am, and we are made in that image. We need to be in touch with this reality, which is our creative power. I am saying all these things because I saw the seeds many years ago; we can’t restrict ourselves; we must be open to what really is, that we *are*. Our faith is founded not on the niceness of human beings but on the spirit moving in our lives.

I’m thinking about categories, kind of like committees. I hadn’t been a Quaker very long when I first came here. Do we need to be this formal? I don’t know. Now when we are assessing, it may be a good time to ask how our categories serve us. Committees? Gifts? We recognize ministry and healing, but some gifts are quirky and individual. The query I want to offer “Are the categories that are expressed in our list of priorities a way of loosening us from attachments or a way of locking in different kind of attachment?”

One gift is patience. God is *so much vaster* than my Patience.

I keep feeling that my prayers are being answered and little gifts from God. I feel such gratitude. There’s a disconnect between that and what I hear in these meetings.

In my home meeting I see people annoyed by other’s ministry, and at the end of meeting someone new will say thank you for what you said. Why can’t we be grateful?

I have thought about the gifts our meeting doesn't have, but we have two large gifts. Proximity to a programmed meeting. We are an unprogrammed meeting with a programmed meeting in the same building. We do things together, but we haven't asked Manhattan meeting what do they do and why.

Our location is the other gift. On the average Sunday we have 40 to 60 people in meeting and at least 20 are visitors. We need courage. When a visitor walks in, will we have the courage to ensure that if the visitor belongs they will know about that before they walk out the door.

We have ears that can listen to that of God in each other and have it fill our being and have it part of connecting with one another, with others in our community, with our earth. I remember Lucinda Sangree bent down and scooped up water from the lake and said, we must find where this oil is coming from. I've learned from the woman's worship sharing about other earth care matters.

Acceptance of myself and of our meeting. Our meeting is small but we are doing things. Worship sharing that includes others; vigils that include others; stone soup isn't just Quakers. We seem not to have a lot of excitement about sitting in meeting for worship with a concern for business.

I heard the word joy this morning and it spoke to me. Joy of seeing our children who may not follow in our path of Quakerdom, but they bring joy beyond us and I want to celebrate that.

Over the years I've seen meetings and committees rise and fall in their capacities. The resource I could name (which is simple) is **people**. I can think of meetings where people arrived and the meeting thrived, and the reverse. Likewise in committees.

We shy away from naming, embracing and developing the gifts of our Friends. The gifts are given by God for the good of the community. Naming, embracing, supporting and holding them accountable is how we thrive.

Committees don't do things, Meeting don't do things. People do the work and we do a variable job of supporting them in their spirit-led work.

I need a community that worships deeply and faithfully, at my monthly meeting, at the Yearly Meeting. When my kids were small I could carry things for them. That is one of my gifts. I have a vision of a people of faith and I ask you to carry that with me because sometimes I waiver and I need you.

I'm dubious about the official recognition of gifts but it's important for us to appreciate what people are doing.

Three people from our meeting spoke about Quakerism at an interfaith program at SUNY Albany. The reception was enthusiastic, and Quakerism on the road might be useful.

I need to make a difference in the world. I am lucky that in my meeting and in NYYM there are people who help me figure out how.

We all have the tremendously powerful openings of early Friends and generations of Friends who lived into the Spirit. And we don't just have those openings. We can read original tracts, and journals,

Margaret Fell's letters and readable translations of Penn that can inspire us and fire our own sense of faithfulness.

Your meeting can read Ben Pink Dandelion's works, view QuakerSpeak videos. And share your own stories with each other.

There once was a man who owned a large farm. He walked and as he walked he saw a tree. "I remember that tree when I was young, but it has not fruited so it is time to cut it down." The foreman said give me a year and I'll manure it and see if it flourishes.

God has manured this "Tree" Manure is messy. It's the end product. People are like that. Let's not cut this down, let's not cut down the people but incorporate them into the Tree. As the farmer and foreman walked away. the plants heard the Tree singing, "dung me Lord, dung me, make me a fruitful tree."

Not quite a need, more a desire...an intense desire: To be able to see my life as part of a story, the story of my species, struggling generation after generation to find a way to live together in peace and love and harmony with the earth, and joyfully. And what I bring to the Religious Society of Friends is the conviction that this is not my design, this is the desire of each and every human being who breathes or has ever breathed.

At the close we were invited to continue worship not with our eyes closed but wide awake, looking around with gratitude and love. And we did so, and smiled gently.

Reflections on the Afternoon Session

This afternoon when the topic was needs, resources, and aspirations, we were mostly speaking about ourselves and only sometimes about our monthly meetings, and we heard more about needs than about resources. When I heard that, I wondered if other people sometimes feel as I do that I'm going to have to pursue that great big dream out there all by myself.

The afternoon had a slower pace – not sleepy, but a slower, deep rhythm, where we got to a pretty deep place that we haven't always gotten to.

About this afternoon's slowness, after the messages started, one friend was giving a message and I had a clear sensory experience of my mouth being filled with sweetness, so I think that this afternoon was quite sweet. I'm grateful for the good, friendly clerking.

This afternoon, I was thinking about relationships between individuals and monthly meetings as corporate bodies. The queries for this afternoon were a lot more like those for previous meetings for discernment – different from what was put forward this morning.

I was trying to be an elder in the afternoon and in the silent part was struggling with fatigue and being able to be in prayer. After the vocal ministry started, I felt so connected with everyone and what was being said that there was no struggle anymore, just joy.

I was eldering this afternoon and really appreciated the 45 minutes to center down, so I could get into a space where I could actually elder. Both meetings went well. They were very different (hotter this afternoon). The clerks asked us to be disciplined in a fairly forceful way and that contributed to the quality.

Given the role I've played in many of these meetings for discernment and my natural disposition, I'm more attuned to the content of what's being said. I was glad to hear this afternoon particularly the number of things that are gifts friends bring to the world that transcend how we organize. I also heard that some kind of support is greatly necessary to make it work. That's what I got from the messages.

If I had spoken this afternoon, I would have said that one of my gifts is having an ability to fail, because you can't experiment with the truth if you're not willing to fail. The courage to engage in meeting for discernment as a new practice was an experiment and it could have failed. Even if it had failed, it's good we had the courage to experiment with it, and it should encourage us to experiment when needed again.

Reflections Session

I heard a lot of hope and a lot of enthusiasm. I heard, "it's the people," and the idea of it's the ministry, not the committees. I heard about being able to do service and to utilize your gifts. Monthly meetings will be there when people come in the future, even if it's a small monthly meeting. We lead by example. I found it exhilarating and exciting

For me, this experience began Sunday night when we had a meeting for the elders. When I was coming to the meeting, I was grumbling about so much time devoted to this stuff, and the minute I walked into the room, I felt so centered. I was wrong, we need this time, it is valuable. You never know when practice will speak to you and call you to the center.

Overall, the meeting for discernment today was a more active experience for me

It's been my experience that around 3 p.m. during meetings for discernment, there's a quality change and we begin to hear ministry that we would not normally hear in meeting for worship, because we've had enough time for friends who've had something deep within them to come to the surface. Those messages – we had several today – are the main justification for holding meeting for discernment morning *and* afternoon session during annual sessions. We need that ministry and there is no other way to get it.

One of the things that's growing is our knowledge of the practice of deep worship. We as a body have really learned how to do deep worship together, and that is a gift. Also, the more we have deep worship in this space, we teach the space how to hold that worship. That's true in our own meetings. So our practice makes a difference – the accumulation of experience is important. We are a very different body in practice than we were at the first meeting for discernment here. That's not just a result of the clerking.

Gratitude is not one of my gifts, it doesn't come to me easily, but I'm exceedingly pleased that there was a query asking where God is leading us. I didn't speak to it, I couldn't do so briefly. I'm not sure how many others spoke to that query either. My hope for the meetings for discernment is that you will continue to find a place for it, and that we as a body will grow to live into it, and that this is part of the process of our rediscovering the importance of that query as individuals and as a body.

There's one more thing to raise up and that is the intentionality that we bring both as individuals and as a body to holding not just what happens in meeting for discernment, but also what happens in our sessions and between sessions, how the work that God is calling us to is being filled in our Monthly

Meetings and Regional/Quarterly Meetings, and taking the time for opportunities as we each experience and respond to them – some experience them through prayer, some through visions, imagery. What holds us together is when we bring a level of intentionality to our practice together.

Reflections on the Experience of Eldering

In the time leading up to the morning session and after the session, in the elder role I was looking for a balance between giving Lucinda (clerking) a space to be herself and being supportive. I focused my prayers surrounding Lucinda, which is different from the way you do eldering for the whole group. I felt that I was able to do that, to gather strength and energy and bring it around the area where Lucinda was, so she could best be able to do her work.

Also, I have a couple of new mentors. There are a few people among us who know what's going on – you can't see it or feel it, but there's something else that's very real and tangible – people who know how to swim in those waters.

For me, eldering is an opportunity for prayer. It's an opportunity to hold the meeting in prayer. It was an opportunity during morning and afternoon worship when a person was speaking – I was praying for that person at the same time, so whatever came out of the person would come out with enlightenment. I was able to use the opportunity to sing songs – I was worshipping. When eldering, you have to carry the people, lifting up our brothers and sisters as they speak, because we need to have that flow, the in and out. So when I'm asked to elder, I have to step back. I'm reading a book about contemplating prayer. We're not listening to the words people say, but how the words when they come out will reach others in the room. It gives me the time and space to thank God for the opportunity.

I want to honor the trees. When laboring as eldering, I turned to the trees out there and asked for help and sure enough, the trees helped, as did the breeze coming through here.

Regarding my experience of holding Ann Davidson as the clerk, I had the experience of the three of us (with Lu Harper serving as other elder holding Ann) as being one; that we were together. It was an incredible experience.

This afternoon I had a sense that I might have a message – and I was holding Ann as an elder – so I had this arrangement where if I did stand to speak, Ken Harper would step into that eldering role for me. It felt important to do that.

I want to thank the elders who shared their methods. I found that very, very helpful.

Morning Session: Lucinda Antrim, Clerk,
John Edminster and Karen Snare Note Takers

Afternoon Session: Ann Davidson, Clerk
Karen Reixach and Steve Ross Note Takers

Reflection Session: Roger Dreisbach-Williams, Clerk
Spee Braun Note Taker

Report Prepared by Roger Dreisbach-Williams