

Epistle of At the Well Gathering, December 2018

We are a people that follow after those things that make for peace, love and unity.”

~Margaret Fell 1660

We, twenty-four Quaker women and genderqueer people with a call to ministry, gathered at Stony Point Center, New York to explore and nurture our different ministries. As have the many generations of Quaker ministers that have come before us, we gathered for renewal. Coming from many places in the U.S. and Mexico, we arrived parched, excited, discouraged, weary, and hopeful.

Those present at the pre-gathering lit the communal fire and warmed the space for others to arrive and be welcomed. As our circle widened we were welcomed to the well through a Godly Play story that illustrated the shifting sands of the desert (that are so easy to get lost in) and the Biblical well at which Jesus provided a Samaritan woman with the “living water” that quenches spiritual thirst. We each selected a water-polished stone that had been collected for us from the shores of the nearby Hudson River: a stone that had, we were reminded, perhaps been found and loved before. We gave it the warmth of our bodies and tucked it away for a later time in the gathering.

We wondered about our ministry in terms of the bucket the Samaritan woman carried: sometimes empty needing to be refilled, sometimes essential to bring liquid water to parched and drought-stricken neighbors, sometimes a heavy burden we carry around with us. One among us wondered what would it be like to lay down her ministerial bag of tricks, leave it behind, and deliver her message simply and in as straight-forward a manner as Jesus had.

We settled into a day of Experiments with Light and of unconference dialogues emerging from those present. Many of us centered clay on pottery wheels, our bodies on yoga mats, and our breath on massage tables. Through the nourishment of our entire beings we sought the center of our ministries. Later, pulling our Stony Point stones from our pockets, we symbolically laid down our burdens on the Godly Play desert-scape, naming that which we were releasing: self doubt, worry of what others will think, a sense of powerlessness...

The Seed, or Grace of God, is small in its first Appearance, even as the Morning Light; but as it is given Heed to, and obeyed, it will increase in Brightness, till it shine in the Soul, like the Sun in the Firmament at its Noon-day Height.
~ Elizabeth Bathurst, 1655-1685

As we settled into our weekend, drinking deep from the hospitality of At the Well, from each other, and from the wise words of our Quaker ancestors, we named and recognized the power of our ministry. Our yoga teacher, Jody Atkinson, led us into warrior three: a balancing pose in

which we stood on one leg, with our other leg reaching back towards the ancestors and our arms extending forward towards the future. In this pose our bodies remained strong and balanced in the center of *now*. Similarly, our Experiment with the Light facilitator Jaimie Mudd, advised us that the heart and soul of the future – of our ministry – is in the writings of early Friends. Heeding the message, we, the authors of this epistle, are intentionally weaving past, present, and future throughout this text in the name of women’s work that has often included weaving. Take for instance the epistle of Philadelphia and the Jerseys from 1694, an excerpt of which we weave throughout the remainder of this epistle. It begins:

“Friends are reminded that our religious Society took form in times of disturbance and that its continuing testimony has been the power of God to lead men and women out of the confusions of outward violence, inward sickness and all other forms of self will, however upheld by social convention.”

Here we find our ancestors reaching forward through time to us, in our own time of tumultuous change. By naming “social convention” as an obstacle to living in the Light, 17th century Friends are acknowledging systemic bias in the culture. We can take some comfort in knowing that our ancestors have known this challenge and have worked with it. In the spirit of continuing revelation, we recognize that the challenges faced by early Friends are different from the ones we face now, and our understanding of those challenges have evolved.

During one dinner we held an optional conversation on racism, white supremacy, Quaker myths, and the need for truth-telling. A Friend read an article by another Friend in attendance, which generated passionate threshing on the topic and kept us engaged well past the scheduled end time. What began as an optional dinner conversation with most of us in attendance, continued as our plates were cleared and the remainder of us squeezed tightly into the small room and the depth of our discernment.

Steeped in systemic White Supremacy Culture the Religious Society of Friends participates in systems of oppression which we find difficult to address. This is not new. We are uncovering the truths of the violence of Quaker Indian Boarding Schools and Quaker-owned enslaved people, both done in the name of “good intentions,” a conundrum with which many of us struggle.

We ask, “What is the impact of our current practices?” Friends threshed how far too many Quakers, especially those of us who are White, are conditioned to protect White cultural dominance in society. After sharing and listening to stories of oppression and struggle, we concluded that some Quakers often use Quaker language and practices as a tool of oppression.

Many of us White Quakers do this using the Quaker practices and ideologies of peace, love, and silence: by asking Friends to settle when conflict occurs rather than seeking the hard truth, by

seeking to shame and shun those that speak out rather than deeply listening, by sustaining comfort rather than attending to the well-being of Friends of Color and other Friends who are actively being oppressed. Many of us have heard “that’s not Quakerly” used to silence dissention toward White Supremacy Culture. This is not new in Quaker culture. Only recently, Friend Benjamin Lay has been embraced by the four Meetings that disowned him for steadfastly speaking out against Quaker slaveholders and Quaker silence about the unholy practice of chattel slavery. It’s time all Friends face and address this pattern in Quaker culture.

While we note with gratitude all the many ways monthly and yearly meetings have supported our ministries, we also note a kind of invisible violence. Ministers At The Well are often struggling with the economics of sustaining a ministry. Many of us are expected to suffer greatly to carry our ministry. When financial support for ministry is requested, we are often regarded as suspect for requesting funds to not only pay ministry related expenses but also enough to sustain daily life. Consequently, as women are conditioned to do, we often turn the blame inward thereby further inflicting systemic violence upon ourselves. Some of us, employees of Quaker organizations, and ministers too, are afraid to speak out at work with our full prophetic voice and our gifts of ministry are sometimes denied and underutilized because of a Quaker taboo against “hirelings.” It occurs to us that in these examples too, White Supremacy colors everything.

“As death comes to our willfulness, a new life is formed in us so that we are liberated from distractions and frustrations, from fears, angers, and guilts. Thus we are enabled to sense the inward Light and to follow its leadings.” (Continuation of epistle of Philadelphia and the Jerseys from 1694.)

We believe that very often through pain comes transformation and through laying down our burdens comes relief. Just as globally we are facing an unclear climate reality, to which we must acclimate even as we also fight; so too must we as ministers in the Religious Society of Friends face an unclear cultural climate in the future of our Society with a hospitality to the renewal of our faith tradition. We find ourselves facing a form of death and rebirth in which we are both hospice workers and midwives of Quakerism.

“Friends are advised to place God, not themselves, in the center of the universe and, in all aspects of inward life and outward activity, to keep themselves open to the healing power of the Spirit of Christ.” (Continuation of epistle of Philadelphia and the Jerseys from 1694.)

We cannot do this work alone, just as we need the healing powers of Spirit, we need allies. We need the Light in each other to live into the Kingdom of God. As was stated in the Friend’s article, We are not John Woolman, Benjamin Lay, or Lucretia Mott. We are the Quakers of today, of this world. We note that many Friends we admire today were not embraced by their Quaker communities in their own time. In his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr.

speaks of “the loneliness of the pioneer.” Many of us At the Well spoke of this feeling. Yet in one another we find community and we seek community with the Religious Society. We do not wish to entertain this loneliness. It is our work as ministers to welcome, with hospitality, what is real, to speak to what is real, to hold the people who are real, and to welcome the future without shame, even if it is sometimes with fear and uncertainty. Through relationship with people in the Light of God, communities and the world are transformed.

We recall the words of Margaret Fell, “We are a people that follow after those things that make for peace, love, and unity,” and we challenge ourselves to truly live into embodying the full meaning of these words, rather than using them to maintain the status quo. What does love look like in times of conflict?

“Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Seek to live in affection as true Friends in your Meetings, in your families, in all your dealings with others, and in your relationship with outward society. The power of God is not used to compel us to Truth; therefore, let us renounce for ourselves the power of any person over any other and, compelling no one, seek to lead others to Truth through love. Let us teach by being ourselves teachable.”
(Continuation of epistle of Philadelphia and the Jerseys from 1694.)