

Clerk's reflection at our closing celebration

NEYM Sessions 2020

Friends, what a remarkable week! As we finish our big experiment with online sessions, I am filled with gratitude for the immense amount of planning that went into this week, for Friends who showed up and stuck with us all week and others who dropped in, and for the grace that we have received, in our awareness of God at work in our midst.

And I am aware that at the same time that there are some Friends who were able to attend because we were on Zoom; there are other Friends who stayed away, because of discomfort with Zoom, or because they did not have the bandwidth to join.

I don't recall another Yearly Meeting sessions where the various pieces felt so aligned, from the opening celebration a week ago through Dr. Kemp's plenary, through Bible half hours, business meeting, and home groups.

Our State of Society, referring back to Xinef Afriams' 2017 plenary, asked us to be more comfortable with being the unstructured cellular soup of the caterpillar in the chrysalis. We were reminded that the "imaginal cells" are what begin the process of transformation to butterfly. And Amanda Kemp suggested that imagination is a critical ingredient to a future that is not bound by what we think we cannot achieve. "When we nourish the imagination, we water the seeds of the future."

We heard an epistle from the gathering of people of color at Friends General Conference, reminding those of us of European ancestry that people of color amongst us continue to feel "the systemic racism too often found in our American Quaker community."

We heard a number of individuals speak about work they are doing, both internally and in the wider world. Work to help them understand racism and how to be anti-racist, and a few inspiring examples of how Friends have been led into justice work.

In considering a letter of Apology to Native Americans, those of us who identify as white felt the discomfort of recognizing the horror of the deeds of our ancestors, and we reacted with heightened patterns of white supremacy. We were reminded that in approaching work with Native Americans or other people of color, we must learn to de-center our whiteness. The work we do cannot be to satisfy our own need for redemption. We must listen to the lead of the people who have been hurt

And yet, in another business meeting, we were able to set aside our discomfort and be carried by a sense of trust and openness.

Three different documents that came to us used the phrase "Call to Action." One was from the people of color at the FGC gathering, asking friends who identify as white to engage in reflection and action about the racial pandemic, both among Quakers and in the wider world. One was from the Yearly Meeting reparations working group, encouraging Friends to learn more about Native Americans and to work on their behalf. And the last being a wider appeal for justice for people, for the earth and for the people who suffer most from climate degradation.

Indeed, the decay of the environment, the spread of a pandemic which has laid bare the inequalities many of us have turned a blind eye to for years, and the constancy of police violence have created in

many of us an awareness that our complacency has festered for too long, and we are ready to engage more deeply in helping to create a world where every individual is recognized and treated as a child of God. We were reminded, in the words of Coretta Scott King, that starving a child is violence. Neglecting school children is violence. Is it time for us, as a people who preach a foundational belief in peace, to fight not just against militarization and nuclear weapons, but against the systemic racism which inflicts violence on the poor and on people of color?

I heard a quote recently from Dr. Anthony Fauci who, in explaining why the U.S. had a much higher rate of infection than other parts of the world, said “because we are not rowing together.” And while I was charmed by his reference to our theme this year, it feels an imperfect analogy. Rowing together brings to mind images of a roman galley with 50 oars sticking out each side. I know that a number of us have longed for, if not expected, some “one big thing” for NEYM to engage in. If that happens, the analogy of many rowing together in the same boat would be more apt, but that “one big thing” has not emerged. Twenty years ago, as Fresh Pond Meeting was emerging from its infancy, many of us felt a similar longing for some cause that would engage all of us. We experienced some disappointment and even confusion when that did not emerge. Gradually, we came to realize that many of us in the meeting were doing significant work, in the world and among Quakers and that, while that work could not be easily summarized under a “one big thing” banner, Friends were being faithful, responding to the call that they heard, and using the gifts that they have been given.

Our State of Society reminded us that we have everything we need; we have healers, teachers, mystics, artists, philosophers, nurturers, and hard workers. Can we honor all our many gifts and give each other support?

Cherice Bock, quoting Romans 12, shared that not all the members of the body have the same function “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us”; and using the model of fractals, gave us paradigm shift in how we look at our place in the world, as members of increasingly large communities.

So while a roman galley with many oars is not the right image, neither is a host of rowboats going off in different directions. Romans 12 also offers the concept “the body of Christ,” where each of us has a role, and none can exist without the other. We need activists, and we need ministers, but we need people to support the ministry, we need elders to ground all that we do, and we need pray-ers to pray for us all. We need Martha and we need Mary. No one should feel that they are not pulling their weight because they are not out stopping a coal train, but we hope that no one is complacent. I mentioned yesterday how I have felt held by God, and by elders, through this week. But two weeks ago I spoke with someone who confessed that she felt very alone in her work, and this week I heard a plea for Quakers to more actively support and engage with those among us who are led to preach and to act publicly. Can those of us who cannot march, or are not led to work in the wider world, inquire of others what support they need?

Someone told me recently that there is an essential pattern to our learning: Learn, DO, Reflect. Repeat. Since friends have been reminding me to breathe this week, I’d like to suggest that breathing should be part of reflection. I think we have all learned a lot this week. Let’s go home and start doing, but not at the expense of reflecting, breathing, and learning more. Let’s go home and spread the message: “the divine Spirit is at work among us, and the world needs our attention.”