

Dear friends one and all,

We, as Young Friends, began this week in turmoil. The COVID-19 pandemic has left our community, like so many others, in need of rebuilding connections and finding unity once more. We have struggled to find a common wavelength, to once again be united in Quaker community, sharing in our collective joy and labors of justice. However, we were stalwart in our intentions to once again see ourselves in the light of shared love. So we, the 17 high school aged Young Friends of New England Yearly Meeting (NEYM), met together at Castleton University in Castleton, Vermont from the days of August 6 to August 11, 2022. Though bombarded by brutal heat, which left many tired, sweaty, and possibly a bit sunburned, we set about the work of repairing.

In our opening celebration on Saturday, Gretchen Baker-Smith shared with us an important message on how our gifts and ministry can touch the hearts and futures of so many. Even the perceived smallest of ministries can act as the strongest of cornerstones for a community or a cause. Her words gave us strength and courage, guiding us to use our gifts to restore our grieving community.

On Sunday we opened the day with intergenerational worship. We were asked, as individuals, to write our emotions and thoughts on pieces of tissue paper and to then join them with our greater NEYM family in one giant collage of hopes, dreams, appreciations, and grief. We were led to consider, especially, this grief. We grappled, in grief, with lost experiences and frayed community. We were asked to recognize that grief is not something we should seek to forget. It should be embraced, it should build our communities to greater heights and teach us its lessons. We had the burden to use these lessons that same morning when we returned to the program and began to sing.

That morning we were compelled to consider a favorite youth song. The community was informed of the history of the song's creator who was also responsible for the creation of Minstrel Shows, which featured harmful caricatures of Black People, represented by white people in "Black-Face". The community considered how to respect many member's joyous memories associated with the song, while also acknowledging the many people harmed by the stereotyped and regressive attitude encouraged by racist media such as Minstrel Shows. This experience showed a common theme seen in Young Friends this week; how difficult situations and walking with each other in them can tie us closer in community.

We also reached outside our corner of Young Friends to seek connection. Later that day we joined our friends in Junior Yearly Meeting and Junior High Yearly Meeting for electives such as capture the flag and creation of shrinky dinks, which are works of art made from melting plastic into wild and mysterious shapes. Further, on Monday morning, we engaged with our younger

friends in an art project led by Young Friends Coordinator Maggie Fiori. With Maggie, we participated in Monotyping, a process where a thick plastic sheet is painted, then a piece of paper placed atop it to capture some facsimile of the paint put to plastic. Many Young Friends found this a great outlet for releasing stress and any collected negative energy.

Tuesday saw us headed to a local lake. We engaged in card games, conversation, and swimming at the lake. We talked with friends and youth programs' staff, and relaxed alongside other youth in the broader Yearly Meeting. This joy in the community brought us closer, showing us that joy is also needed to build a strong community.

That afternoon we had the pleasure of building a bridge. However, the group's general lack of carpentry skill meant it had to be a metaphorical bridge, for our friend Gretchen Baker-Smith. Gretchen is retiring from her over 30 years of ministry as a youth coordinator for New England Yearly Meeting. Gretchen has done so much, for so many youth and youth programs' staff across the larger Yearly Meeting. She has inspired so many to share their gifts. She acts as a shining example of what one individual can do for a community; her honesty, her care, her amazing hugs all given to her community with the compassion of all her heart. Gretchen will be missed in her role, but we as a community give the warmest hopes of happy rest and continued joy to our dedicated lighthouse of love, Gretchen Baker-Smith.

It is in this spirit of care of community and honesty that the youth of Young Friends must shine a light on some concerns we have for our greater New England Quaker community. Tuesday morning, Young Friends joined in on Meeting for Business. Young Friends were present for discussion on two items of business. The first was an update on, and response to a letter of apology that the Yearly Meeting had sent to many local Indigenous Tribes. The letter conveyed the deep sorrow for our and our ancestors' role in colonial oppression towards Indigenous peoples. The second item dealt with delving into Yearly Meeting records on how our Quaker forebears were involved with Indigenous Boarding Schools, seeking how Quakers were involved in teaching and financing these schools. Schools which harmed Native Communities by destroying culture and forcefully teaching assimilation.

Many Young Friends were troubled by aspects of these items. A few Friends even asked to stay behind at business meetings in order to voice these concerns to the rest of our community. It seemed to some among our community that these actions were more related to resolving the guilt of our community's involvement and not to the seeking of change and restorative justice for Indigenous peoples. These concerns arose from Young Friends in view of how much importance was put on firmly quantifying the contributions of New England Quakers to these Boarding Schools. It is nearly impossible to quantify the damage done by colonial powers to Indigenous peoples. How can one put a price on what amounts to attempted, and in some cases successful, cultural genocide. In the process of the Yearly Meeting asking merely what our contributions

were, we can be seen to be ignoring the larger needs of the Indigenous Community outside our Quaker community.

In further reflection undertaken Tuesday night many voiced confusion and frustration at the length of time it has taken for the Meeting to act. The Quaker process of decision-making has beauty in how it seeks group discernment and unity. However, when many years of sessions must be spent to write only a few paragraphs, we do not leave time to discuss and organize action in response to the need for justice.

As Young Friends we ask all of our fellow Quakers to get to work. To seek out, learn from, and support the activism of those who work for Indigenous issues in the present. We ask that our greater Quaker family note the abundance of issues that Indigenous populations in not only the United States face, but those issues faced by Indigenous populations abroad. Populations who are affected by the same colonial oppression. See these issues and act for those in the here and now; for those who are losing their land at this very moment; for those who can not receive proper justice for lost loved ones at this very moment. We must examine the past to acknowledge our culpability, but that examination and acknowledgment mean nothing if we can not help those who are still suffering in our present day.

This Young Friends community also brought concerns towards how the spirit conveyed in Quaker testimony this week centered on a Christian interpretation of the spirit. We in Young Friends have found a more complete understanding of our community through the experience and testimony of those Friends among us who share different theological perspectives. Perspectives that differ from more common Christian interpretations of the spirit. A barrier is created when Friends who have come to our community without the knowledge-base of Christian theology must break through Christian language to find their own understanding of Quaker testimony. Young Friends ask that our wider community examine their use of Christian language in business to support those Quakers among us who have entered our space with different perspectives on the light of the spirit.

We as Young Friends recognize the grief that our community faces, but as our intergenerational worship on Sunday morning taught us, grief must walk with us. To find comfort in our grief is to seek actions from its cause, not to find ways to dissolve it. We walk in grief with the rest of our New England Yearly Meeting family.

The Young Friends of NEYM have grown in community through our struggles and our joys this week. We are dedicated to the ministry of helping our Yearly Meeting grow and repair all facets of our Quaker community and in helping any and all across our world to find justice, peace, and joy. We hope to serve in ministry to you as you have to us.

In our grief and in our hope,

The Young Friends of New England Yearly Meeting