

Worship and Action Update, 7/11/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

This week's Worship and Action Update focuses on Coming to Peace, the theme of the just-concluded 2003 Gathering of Friends organized by Friends General Conference. Next week's Update will be distributed on Tuesday, July 15, and will consist of our Worship & Action Report in preparation for New York Yearly Meeting annual sessions. The following week there will be no Update as we will be sojourning at Silver Bay!

THE 2003 FGC GATHERING "COMING TO PEACE"

Last week (June 29 - July 5), nearly 120 NYYM Friends worshiped, studied, talked, listened, played, and rested with over 1,600 Friends who had traveled from as far away as South Africa, France, Ireland, and Canada, and Hawaii, Alaska, California, Texas, Alabama, Florida and Maine to the campus of the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown in the wooded and rolling hills of western Pennsylvania. Children abounded.

Friends participated in intensive six-day workshops, single-session interest groups, and "Pieces of Peace" (offering a potpourri of activities for Friends of all ages). They heard speakers at plenary sessions (Dudzile Mtshazo, Vanessa Julye, Christopher Sammond, Tony Prete) and gathered to discuss Friends' peace activism and responses to the war on Iraq. Friends also came together to worship, listen to music, make music, and dance.

Here are a few impressions of "Coming to Peace" from some of the NYYM Friends who were there.

A People Gathered

Chris DeRoller, codirector of the Powell House Youth Program and a member of Old Chatham Meeting, shares how she became focused for the Gathering and how that vision was fulfilled:

"Youth Weekends and YouthQuake obligations and a new puppy kept me hopping right up until I left for FGC. In fact, I didn't even plot a route or look carefully at the maps until I was heading south on I-87. It was near the end of the journey that the full import of the Gathering began to hit me. I noticed a Howard Dean bumper sticker. On the same vehicle, I saw the AFSC NO WAR IN IRAQ sticker, and I knew a Friend was driving. The image came to me of Friends at that very moment converging from all parts of the country - a people Gathered. It was a most comforting vision and one that was sustained in the reality of the Gathering. We gathered to share peace stories, experiences, disappointments, joys, love, and music. Lots of music! There was singing and dancing of all varieties scattered generously throughout the day and across the Johnstown campus. Through the music and stories and the worship, the Spirit moved among us and drew us closer together and drew me closer to the vision of a whole world, a good world, a truly possible world, a truly existent world."

Racial Healing

Dudzile Mtshazo, a South African Friend and assistant clerk of Friends World Committee on Consultation, offered a plenary address Sunday evening (June 29) on coming to peace with insidious and institutional racism. One Friend synthesizes that presentation and how the spirit of racial healing is moving among Friends:

“Her talk was grounded in her experiences at home during and after the apartheid era. After the South African government removed many of the signs indicating separate building entrances for ‘whites’ and ‘coloreds,’ Duduzile made a wrenching discovery about herself. As she approached a large public building and could not immediately see the ‘coloreds’ entrance, she, as a person of color and as a dutiful citizen, walked all around the structure to find the correct entrance. She then realized that apartheid had become so deeply embedded in her soul that she had embraced its philosophy by her behavior. Duduzile also told of the damage done by apartheid to the souls of whites who engaged in the unspeakable brutality that underlay the system. With loving words, she spoke of reconciliation.

“The FGC Committee for Ministry on Racism offered several loving, Spirit-led Meetings for Racial Healing. People spoke of the pain racially based assumptions can cause all Friends. Parents of children of mixed parentage spoke of the difficulties of explaining skin color to their young children, how it should not make a difference and yet it does make such a difference. People spoke about racial wounding from language used by Friends: negative images of darkness, positive images of whiteness. And the word *overseers*. Friends of color have published articles in several Quaker journals about the pain caused by use of this word in Quaker meetings, a term most people previously heard only in descriptions of the slavery system in the United States.

“At the close of one of the sessions, the clerk of the Committee for Ministry on Racism spoke, expressing her strong conviction that we can move forward against racism within the Society of Friends. She told us in her loving, gentle way that we all need to listen and listen again. Anti-racism work is like that grain of sand in the oyster, she said. It is difficult; it irritates and irritates, and irritates again, but at the end we can achieve our goal. As I sat in the session and counted over 90 people in attendance, I had a vision that one day the entire Gathering will join in a Meeting for Worship for Racial Healing, all listening together.

“So many times during the Gathering, I heard the message that part of ‘Coming to Peace’ is ending racism within the Religious Society of Friends. We have a long way to go, but we are definitely working on it, and the Spirit is with us.”

Peace in a Culture of War

On Tuesday (July 1), Bruce Birchard (FGC executive secretary) and Mary Ellen McNish (AFSC general secretary) spoke and led a discussion on the Iraq war, United States foreign policy, and Friends’ response. Bruce invoked the power of the Quaker Peace Testimony but expressed concern that the fruits of the testimony may wither on the vine because its roots are in danger of being strangled by our secularizing society. He

counseled Friends to be mindful of the separate spiritual and activist parts of our Society and to avoid treating the peace testimony as a creed rather than “the power of that light” by which we live.

Mary Ellen said we need to become involved in the electoral process if we want to move our nation away from a course of continued warfare, diminished liberties, and a politics of fear. She described AFSC’s determination to vigorously pursue a program of voter registration, voter education, and voter participation in the 2004 national election. AFSC has identified 13 critical swing states for the coming election and plans to focus its work in four of them (Missouri, New Mexico, Ohio, and Pennsylvania).

At an interest group on Wednesday (July 2), Chuck Fager asked “in pursuing this ‘Lamb’s War,’ can we learn from the principles of strategy used by the world’s war makers?” He offered three lessons to be drawn from the approach of the military:

1. Think long-term - The military systematically examines past events and projects 30-50 years into the future. Where is our long-term perspective on peace work?
2. Visibility - There are over 300 military museums in the United States. How many peace museums are there?
3. Think Strategically - The forces of war governing this country have a grand strategy and set goals (to run the world and stomp any potential challengers for the next 100 years). Where do we want to go with our peace work over the next 100 years? What resources do we have or can we access? How will we get there?

Chuck then offered three possible grand strategies for the 100 years’ Lamb’s War:

1. Return the United States to being a law-abiding member of the international community.
2. Convince the major religions (particularly Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) to agree to pursue their goals nonviolently.
3. Make the Society of Friends into a body that can be a significant player for good in these endeavors by cultivating leadership and continuity within the Society and by developing and deepening ties within and without Quaker circles.

And Chuck suggested four things Friends can do now to build that future:

1. Learn Arabic, Hebrew, Chinese, Republican.
2. Work on opening a peace museum or a Quaker peace center or other peace project that will last for at least 35 years.

3. Teach First Day school; teach peace.
4. Add a zero to your contributions to your meeting to prepare funds for suffering.

Going Deeper in Community and Worship

Sue Wolf (Staten Island Meeting) explains: “The hardest part of FGC Gatherings is to decide what *not* to do. There is so much available to nourish every part of you: worship, music, art, fun with all ages, dancing, speakers and concerts – the list is overwhelming.” Yet Friends’ time in workshops and other sessions, and time with children brought experiences of learning to be still, of listening and hearing, of sustaining practice:

“My personal workshop, about labyrinths, sacred dance & chanting, was very pleasant and restful. I may end up working with the kids at my home Meeting on a labyrinth. I am hopeful that it may be a more accessible technique for entering into meditation than just sitting quietly in a chair.” —*A Quiet Friend*

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“My experience of the Gathering was strongly influenced by spending a majority of my time there with children – with the lively six- to eight-year-olds in the junior gathering group where I was a support staffer and with my grandchildren. My strongest impression was of the effective effort that goes into helping the children who are present have a positive experience of what it means to be a Quaker. Other high points were being surrounded in the auditorium by the singing of about 1,000 Quakers, an interest group on the Nonviolent Peaceforce, and breakfast conversations with friendly strangers. Those who can attend Gathering are privileged to be able to afford this type of sharing and on Wednesday noon we were helped in the realization of just how privileged we are, as we shared in a simpler meal and read literature distributed by Right Sharing of World Resources.” —*Jane Simkin (Poplar Ridge Meeting)*

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“The Gathering continues to be a time and place where Friends nurture and minister and challenge each other. Opportunities for growth and joy included a couple-enrichment workshop focused on the retirement phase of life, superbly led by Vern & Shirley Bechill, and an evening with Baba Jamal Koram (the “Story Man”) whose stories and drumming and openness to the children flocked around him was uplifting.” —*Sue & Rich Regen (Rochester Meeting)*

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“My workshop on Fear, Faith and the Creative Impulse combined many areas of creativity, and was well led. I chose to do shaped-note singing in the late afternoon. I first heard this type of hymn singing at FGC in 1994, and have been doing it ever since. The sound is reverent and inspiring, also easy to learn.” —*Charlotte Ehrman (Morningside Meeting)*

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“I see the Gathering in a series of short vignettes: kites flying over a hill, the slow graceful movements of Qi Gong, the sun rising each morning over the outdoor meeting for worship, the strength and beauty of the Universal Dances of Peace, the intensity of concentration in my workshop. But the vignette that is most poignant came from the nine- and ten-year-olds who I helped to lead in an evening Junior Gathering group.

“We worked all week on creating things from objects available to children the world over: trash, found items, and natural materials. The children were working individually, answering the challenge to create a gift for someone, designing, sawing, and drilling. In the intensity of concentration and a lull in the noise, someone started to sing ‘Magic Penny.’ Gently others took up the song as they worked and strains of ‘love is something if you give it away’ spread quietly until everyone was softly singing as they went about their task. In that moment I was moved by the spirit of God manifested in that room.”
—*Liseli Haines (Mohawk Valley Meeting)*

Shalom

The closing plenary session on Friday (July 4) featured a talk by Tony Prete on Shalom - Much More Than Just Peace. He raised up two questions: To what extent might our opposition to war be diverting us from paying attention to the social conditions that give rise to war? To what extent might our dedication to social activism be preventing us from hearing God’s desire for Shalom? Judith Inskip (Purchase Meeting) shares reflections on his exploration of these queries.

“Tony Prete brought a powerful message on Friday evening. He spoke of God as a partner, who said “Let there be light” as an invitation, not a command — and something responded; this was a sharing of power. Since God is relational and needs our partnership, our obligation is to call God’s attention to what needs to be done, that is, to be a voice for those who want to cry out their laments but cannot. We don’t have to *be* victims in order to pray for the oppressed, but we have to know something of their pain; then we can speak with conviction, and God will listen. But will God act? Tony noted that the Bible doesn’t give a definite answer; yet in some of its laments (in Psalms, Jeremiah, Lamentations) there does seem to be that affirmation, and it is in harmony with the Bible’s consistent witness that God is merciful. Although I had heard it stated before that we are God’s partners, Tony’s talk brought home to me that there is something (however small it may seem to me) that I can do about the suffering in the world.”

Summing Up

Sally Campbell (Morningside Meeting) reports on the coming to peace that grew as the week unfolded:

“Each year at Gathering, it seems to me, we play a jigsaw/dance game. It is just the opposite of the TV program named ‘Survivor’ where the person who gets rid of everyone else on the island ‘wins.’ In the Gathering Game, we see if we can make room for all

those players (1,600 moving pieces this year) on our week-long island and together create a Beloved Community where no one is left out.

“The people who attend Gathering are from all sorts of places and with unique personal histories, rhythms, vocabularies, hurts, and hopes. There are bound to be many collisions during the week, but because the players attempt to stay open to the Dear One’s guidance, these potentially painful collisions frequently become transformed into new insights and true friendships.

“By the end of the week, I saw a radiance on the faces of many of the attenders which showed me that they had discovered the ‘secret’ that God is Love, is real, and is here with us now and at all times. Having truly gathered, we then separated to spread this good news in whatever way we find ourselves led, perhaps to play this Gathering Game wherever we live and worship.”

Peaceable greetings,

*Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, and Fred Dettmer
NYYM Worship and Action working group*

F is for fun, fantastic, flavorful and friendly.
G is for good, what am I saying, **G** is for great!
C is for constant chaos when I’m not there.

H is the high I get just being there.
I is the independence we all receive.
G is the guard that I can let down and leave.
H is the helpfulness of everyone.

S is for the social life.
C is for the sense of community.
H is for the heat, internal and external.
O is for opposite ideas that are solved peacefully.
O is for the feeling you get when it’s over.
L is for the love that makes us like it so much.

All I know is after FGC, I always feel touched.

Alex Dettmer (Purchase Meeting)