

## **Report—Young Adult Field Secretary**

**Summer Sessions 2014 – July 23, 2014**

Good Evening, Friends.

When I was called to serve as YAFS in 2011, I heard many hopes about our future as a vibrant, connected, involved, multigenerational faith community, locally and regionally. I heard YAF wanting to make connections with other YAF and that the Yearly Meeting was excited about this work, and the changes that are part of it. I am in my 4<sup>th</sup> year now, and I feel I need to bring back to the body some of my reflections on this work. I want to be very clear. This is not MY work. This is the work of every individual, in every meeting, in the whole of the body of NYYM.

In late May of 2014, YACC had a retreat to discern what they are led to do as a committee. They did a role-play where they had to talk about their faith, and Quakerism with a stranger. There was a prevailing sense of surprise that they did not have the language, or the knowledge to speak about their faith tradition. This is not the first time I have encountered this with Quakers, of all ages. But it was at this gathering that I heard anger and frustration. They asked how could they have grown up in Friends' Schools, JYM, First Day School, Powell House, and not know what a Quaker is and about the *practices* we have. They could talk about SPICES, and yet could not say where they came from or how those testimonies were a part of our faith tradition. This committee, faithfully serving YAF, was at a loss. After some talk about our own experiences of God, and faith, and divine experiences, they began to glimpse more.

I have a series of objects that I hope can illustrate some of what I am hearing from younger and older Friends as I travel in this ministry throughout our Yearly Meeting.

### **Light bulb.**

It is my understanding that traditionally when one holds someone or something “in the Light,” that the whole person or issue has the bright light of God shone upon it. That in shining that light, we not only see the parts that make us feel good and fuzzy, or allow us to feel that we can help in some way. The Light is also shone on the cracks, the fears, the shame and the pain. In that way, God’s love can reach those otherwise dark places and begin to fill them with grace. When we are holding something in holy light, we may see things that we do not want to see. But only then can we heal and grow. I ask you to sit with me while I hold some light up to things that I have noticed in this work. I ask you to bathe them in Light and prayer while understanding that that is how Grace happens.

### **Chain.**

Our work is a continuum. It is a chain, linked together through the human development. It is like the chain of water molecules that is pulled up through a large tree, from the roots, up the trunk to the leaves. As the water evaporates off the top, more molecules are pulled along the chain. If the chain is severed, the whole system suffers.

We can work hard to nurture the young adults specifically, but our work will not endure unless we, as a body, work together to realize the vision of an intergenerational faith family. After all, we are all coming from somewhere and going somewhere. We have to look at the

spiritual health and vitality of **all** age groups in our chain. How do we tend to and strengthen each link so that the ones before and after benefit?

*Can we hold the light of God up to this chain, seeing where there are cracks, or holes? Can we look at where we can grow and carry this work together?*

### Soil.

I have been doing a lot of gardening lately. I have learned that good soil is essential. It has to be rich in nutrients that are available to the plant or else, no fruit. What has been a surprise to me is the importance of the ecosystem that surrounds this process. There are insects, and other plants, and rotting waste that go into good soil. (By the way, poop makes really good fertilizer.) The waste of our experiences, even the ones we didn't like, is really important for good soil. Rich soil doesn't just happen. If you plant certain plants together, they grow better through symbiotic relationships. If you allow other life, chickens, worms, insects, bacteria to be a part of the system, the results are surprisingly beneficial. Healthy soil builds on itself. The intentionality of a gardener to the rhythms, cycles and biodiversity needs of the soil allows the soil to remain fertile..

Let me carry this metaphor into our Quaker ecosystem. In order to grow strong, faithful, healthy members, we need to look at where we are growing them. We can start by looking at Religious Education for all ages. We need to look at how history applies to us *now*, how our soil has evolved. We need to be intentional about nurturing the meetings so that the nutrients of our faith can help to grow our kids into young adults, then older adults. *It's time to look beyond SPICES, and share the tools that our tradition gives us.* **Worship** waters our soil and sheds light on our leaves. **Discernment** tells us what and where to plant, what to prune, what to listen to and how to observe. **Holding in the Light** helps us notice the places where we need to be more mindful, and attend more to each other and our ecosystem. Mindful gardeners are always adjusting. If a plant is not thriving, they pay attention to the growing conditions. As we get transplants from other religious gardens, that rich soil needs to be in place. We need to be able to say what is in our soil, and communicate that rich theology, history and practice to the growing, budding Faithful.

Can we please look at all the plants in our Quaker soil? Are the same people in the same place, or committee, for too long? Maybe we need to rotate our crops, moving our plants so they balance the life of the soil. Do we need to prune parts that are taking energy from the life we envision? Are we neglecting to feed the plants that are already there? Our whole eco system is critical.

*Can we shine the Light of Grace on our amazing garden? Can we lovingly say what is working in our ecology and what needs attention?*

### Mystery object in a bag.

I am going to describe an object that is in this bag. It is not a car. It is not sweet. It is not cold. What is it? Hard to know it's a book, right? (Produce object) Now, I want you to turn to a person near you and **quickly** tell them three **brief** things you are **NOT**. (wait) How many of you now have a better sense of who your partner is? How many feel known in a new way by the other person you described yourself to?

Quakers are so many amazing things. I would love to see us talking about who we ARE instead of defining ourselves by who we AREN'T? ? It is not only *nice* to know about each other's faith journeys, it is critical to our soil. Sharing our stories, our experiences of Spirit,

of the poop that has informed our faith, fertilizes our soil. We need to share those not only because they are important to us, but also because all of us *need to hear those stories* of how faith is **alive**. People of all ages, benefit from knowing our stories, traditions, and the ways that God is continually moving in us, then and NOW; the ways that we are continually *hearing God and living as a result*. This is not **proselytizing**. It is giving testimony to how our faith is present in each of our lives. *This is part of seeing that of God in each other*.

Early Friends had more than a handful of testimonies, they had hundreds. They were living on the outside how God was moving on the inside. They were not afraid of offending, excluding or influencing others. They were being faithful to the Light in their hearts that was the center of their life and work. *Their numbers were growing*, not because they were brainwashing, or forcing their faith, but because they were *living their faith*, authentically, in a way that was obvious to everyone. They were a peculiar people, maybe weird, and they went against what their culture accepted as normal. But they were faithful and *said who they were*. Worship was not just a silent respite from their lives, it was an opportunity to listen to God and have their world rocked by what they heard. They were waiting to witness the in breaking of the kingdom of God into their lives. They gave their kids, and newly growing numbers, tools, and courage, to use in their difficult lives. What a gift that their children could witness not only that there was God in everyone, but HOW GOD WAS WORKING and how to faithfully make decisions of all kinds.

How can we build into our first day schools, JYM, monthly, regional and YM ways to teach tools of what makes our tradition unique, so that they are no mystery to kids, or adults? Kids as early as toddlers can learn about our traditions and tools. Again, this is not indoctrination. It is giving information about the tools our faith gives us.

***How can we shine the Light of Grace onto who and how we ARE?***

### **Spark plug.**

A spark plug is part of a system that makes an engine function. A spark plug emits a spark that ignites the gas that makes an engine run. Spark plugs alone cannot make a car engine run.

I feel very supported and blessed in this work. And yet, I have to speak plainly for a moment. I have spent the first part of this work trying to be the spark plug and also be a motor. I can't do all of that, nor should I have to. I am realizing that is not what God wants for me. I am burning myself out. I feel that I am being called to be a spark plug. I am committed to keep sparking and connecting and reporting back the important pieces of what I hear. But this is where you all come in. I wonder if you can help me. This work takes all of us. When I make connections, and invite people to Meetings, and gatherings, there has to be something that they can connect with. I need to know that there are people in all corners of the Yearly Meeting that are taking the information I am reporting and doing something with it. I do not have all, or even most, of the answers, but together we might. I'm looking for motors. I am keenly aware of how busy and distracted we all are. I know that it *appears* that time is scant. Friends, *We have all the time we need*. If we are to **see** the growth we SAY we want to see, then we have to be more intentional, and even look at the things that may be hard to acknowledge. *It is hard to do this work unless there is more of an institutional framework to hang the work on*. This is the work that was inherent when you trusted me to faithfully serve as the Young Adult Field Secretary. Can we all, individually,

in our local meetings, in our quarters and as a yearly meeting body take this work into worship?

Here are four starter suggestions to consider, not as the only way, but as a place to start the conversation:

1. We can make a conscientious move to make sure meaningful and relevant Religious Ed happens at all ages. This includes opportunities for newer and more seasoned Friends to also engage in exploring their faith. This requires active support and education of those who carry out the programming. It means thinking outside of the box.

2. We can focus on making personal connections and invitations to participate in different Quaker opportunities based on what we know of people as individuals, and their gifts. I find writing hand written letters to individual Friends inviting them to something, and WHY I think they are a good fit, a very effective tool rather than a blanket invitation.

3. We can speak plainly about who we are, and what we do, moving towards a shared vision so that people who come to us know what we are about; and the people who are already there, can talk about who we are and our practices. This is a way of inviting people who are hungry to partake in what we offer.

4. We can create and focus on meaningful opportunities to be engaged without serving on a committee.

Are we brave enough, and ready, to shine the Light of Grace on our work, nurture our soil, keep the chain strong, be the sparks plugs, *and the engines* to support this work? I want to leave you with the refrain of a song by the Indigo Girls that has been in my heart a lot recently. "Life is more than a vision. The sweetest part is acting after making a decision. I gotta get out of bed and get a hammer and a nail, learn how to use my hands. Not just my head, I'll think myself into jail. Now I know a refuge never grows, from a chin in a hand, and a thoughtful pose. Gotta tend the earth if you want a rose."