

Utopia: Powell House Youth Program

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Many people have read *Utopia* by Sir Thomas More. More depicts his idea of a perfect society, to the very last detail. My own Utopia greatly differs from that of Sir Thomas More; his values are different than mine in many aspects, the worlds we live in are extraordinarily different, and my personality is, undeniably, my own. My Utopia, surprisingly, already exists; I have the privilege of visiting it about once a month. I am a Quaker—one of, I believe, two in the entirety of Sauquoit Valley High School. Being so named, I am an attender at a place called Powell House, a Quaker retreat center where I met nearly all of my true friends. It is a place very difficult to put into words, and I admire More for succeeding in putting his into words. I will try, though, all the same.

School doesn't agree with me. My temperament, as may have been noted, is not one that enjoys being drowned daily in the throes of popular culture, my mind tossed about like lettuce in a salad spinner. I don't take kindly to peer pressure, the values instilled into teenage minds, or the way "we kids" treat each other. I have very strong values and a sense of who I am, and being stuck in a world where, left, right, up, down, and diagonally, I'm being told by media, peers, teachers, guidance counselors, and the very walls who I should be, what life is all about, what my goals should be, and what my life should be focused on... well, it just doesn't agree with me. I know who I want to be. I know who I will be. And I know who I am. My Utopia is where I can be that, and I am loved, respected, and understood for it. Somewhere where I can do the same for other people, and help them understand what amazing and worthwhile people they really are, instead of letting the rest of society tell them, "You're too fat. You're not wearing enough makeup. You have no sex appeal. You're worthless. Shut up and buy this. You'll only be beautiful if you have this product. Life is about money. Life is about having things. You can't achieve your goal; you're not good enough." How much of that damage can I undo? My Utopia is where the healing takes place; where you're beautiful *as* you are, for *who* you are. Not how you look, what you buy, or who your friends are. Where you're accepted regardless of beliefs, background, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. This is Powell House; this is my Utopia.

At Powell House it's okay. It's okay to have acne; it's okay to have stringy hair; it's okay to be overweight; it's okay to not exactly be model material; it's okay to have completely off-the-wall taste in clothes. It's okay to not be the sharpest crayon in the box; it's okay to get muddy and sweaty playing soccer but be absolutely terrible at the game; it's okay to cry; it's okay to rant about home or school or parents; it's okay to want to be on your own; it's okay to need a hug; It's okay to feel lost; it's okay to get sick; it's okay to listen to weird music (we'll all listen, too; maybe we'll like it!); it's okay to be a terrible singer and sing anyway; it's okay to need help finding out how something works or where something goes; it's okay to make mistakes; it's okay to be a kid; it's okay to be an adult; it's okay to not really know what you are; it's okay to relax and just... be. And not only is it okay, it's *wonderful!*

At Powell House, hugs are spontaneous, and even if you're new, you get a hug (if you want one) as soon as you walk in the door. Most everywhere else in the world, love is a very strong word, and rarely used; if you told a friend you loved them, you'd get some weird looks. At Powell House, "I love you" is used often, in a completely nonsexual way; it's wonderful to hear an "I love you" with your name on the end a hundred times a day. Everyone is included, but if you want some alone time, it's given gladly. If you have a passion for singing, playing an instrument, reading, writing, acting, telling jokes, or anything else that's performable, time is set aside for you to be able to share it. Whether you are amazing or aggravating, as long as you respect your audience in your performance, your right to give it is respected. Whoever you are, whatever you're like, bring it on—it's welcome at Powell House.

For as long as I can remember, I have wished I could bring Powell House to the rest of the world. If someone needed help, someone else would give it. If someone looked down, someone would be standing by with a hug. If someone had different sexual preferences, it would be respected, as long as they were respectful. If someone had a passion for volleyball, but wasn't very good at it, they could go ahead and play, anyway! No more, "I'm gonna kill ya, dude! *laughter*," or "f*** off." Friendly debates are always nice, but no need to shout his head off or break his jaw over it. Forget all those ideas of perfection; you are perfect, as you are, who you are. No need to get thinner... no need to hide behind your hair because of your acne... no need to fear being pulverized because you seem in the slightest way... different. You can be happy without more "stuff;" there is no such thing as fashion, and TV? What's that? Time to get lives. Quaker values are simplicity, nonviolence, equality, integrity, and tolerance; I've been laughed at because: "Quaker? What kind of religion is that?" But, really, wouldn't that be nice?

At Powell House, we discuss the government quite a lot; I doubt there is a single one among us who thinks that it's doing the right thing, or that Bush should have been president. At Powell House, youth and adults work together to determine the program, and the adults and youth listen to each other's ideas, and take them all into consideration before making a decision; Quakers are actually a bit infamous for committee meetings. But any truly nonbiased government would do the same.

Powell House, with as many as 80+ attenders at a conference, has a system of being fed. At each meal a few people will help cook it, serve it, set up the dining room, and then clean it all up later. That's how all work is done there; everyone helps, but you get to pick your own jobs. Since everyone does it willingly (as is usually the case), it's fun, and no one has any problem with it. Food is grown in a garden on the grounds, and purchased from organic and naturally grown farmers; if you have a food allergy, it will be seen to. And illness? Homeopathic and herbal remedies, whether you believe it or not, are generally far more effective than antibiotics or commercial medications. Plus, if at all possible, the fewer chemicals in your body, the better! From a headache to nausea to a panic attack, it's treatable, and will be treated.

I could go on forever about everything that I can't stand and that I loathe about life as I see it, and I could carry on just as long about how incredible an experience I find Powell

House to be; but I won't go on quite that long. Society today, with its inability to accept who I am, and who many of my friends are, is fake and pointless. I don't need to be told who I should become, or how I should think. I do not need my friends who are homosexual, racially different, independent, or just not "everyone else" to be incriminated for being who they are. In my Utopia, Quaker values reign supreme. Not because I want to convert people to my religion and force every one to go to Quaker meeting and uphold our religion; that would completely defeat the purpose of my being a Quaker. No; I believe Quaker values should comprise my Utopia because they are a wonderful way to live your life, and they let everyone else live their lives, while you're at it. Simplicity, nonviolence, equality, integrity, and tolerance—wouldn't it be nice?