

**Fruits From My Sabbatical
General Secretary's Report
Summer Sessions
2013**

As I listened for what I felt led to share with you today, it became clear to me that what I did on my sabbatical leave was not as important as what mark it left on me, and the fruits I bring back to share with the Yearly Meeting community. I also became clear as to how this individual experience relates to the context of our larger experience as a community. I wrestled at length to try to put a wealth of experience, some of which I am still processing, into a report format.

I believe that the most important part of a sabbatical leave is what the person on that leave brings back to the community. And what I bring back is substantial. I come back refreshed and renewed in body, mind, and spirit. I come back with a fresh perspective on my work. I come back with a clearer sense of how to support the Life of the Spirit in this Yearly Meeting. And I come back with a renewed sense of the power and importance of our practice as Friends, a practice we have inherited in trust, and that I believe is an important gift to the wider world, not just for us. And I come back with a sense of awe as to the responsibility that entails.

I am clear we are called to go deeper with our practice. We have inherited the means to reach what Bill Taber, long time teacher at Pendle Hill and author of several seminal Pendle Hill pamphlets, described as “the technology of deeper levels of consciousness.” Much of this practice of early Friends had been lost. In the past twenty years or so, some of that has been rediscovered and reclaimed. It is a practice whereby in individual discernment and corporate worship, we hear God’s voice, and know God’s will for us, for the better use of our lives, and the benefit of humankind. This is an audacious claim, and yet one that

most of us can say, “we know experimentally.” We know this, we have experienced it in ourselves and in our fellow Friends.

Too often we act out the form of this precious reality without taking the plunge and entering into its substance. We need, individually and as a body, to grow deeper in this practice. We need to grow in our capacity to center down. We need to better distinguish between the word of the Divine, spoken in our hearts, and our own interesting thoughts, as we rise to speak in worship. We need to more universally know how to recognize a gathered meeting, and the spiritual reality that God is somehow more powerfully present in that meeting than in others, that this is not just a “nice feeling” or a “good experience,” but THE EXPERIENCE that we, seeking God, are earnestly hoping to be graced by. We need to be more adept at recognizing the leadings of the Divine, in ourselves and others. We need to share all this with each other. We need to teach it to our children. We need to share it, boldly, and not apologetically, with newcomers. As we do all this, we will grow and we will thrive. We are each of us called to transformation. We are each of us called into the Refiner's fire. Do we dare answer this call?

I am not denigrating our current practice; I know it has great value for all of us. What I am saying is that there is more, and that we need to consciously, assertively reach for that more. Let me tell you two stories.

One Friend, who had been deeply involved in Friends for many years, told me that in the same year he went to three different workshops, one on meditation, one of NYYM's Gifts Series workshops, and one on clerking. He said that it was as though his eyes were opened, and he realized that there was a whole other level of experience going on here that despite his years in Friends, he had been unaware of. It blew his mind. It transformed him, and his sense of our practice. It added meaning to his life. He went on to serve as clerk of his meeting, providing remarkable service at a critical time in that meeting's life.

The other story I will tell on myself. It was five or six years ago. I was driving across New York State to be part of a Spiritual Nurture Working Group retreat. I was late, driving fast. I got there late, and Friends were already gathered in worship. I found a chair, and joined them in a rich, gathered worship. After a while, it seemed to me that worship was over. Now, I had served on Ministry and Counsel of Twin Cities Friends Meeting for three years, frequently being the one to close meeting, and I was proud of my capacity to tell when worship was over. I looked around, with some judgment, at the others. I was mystified. These were all highly seasoned Friends. Most of them had been through a two-year program at School of the Spirit. "Didn't they get it?" But they were all still deeply engaged. So I tried once more to center down, and as I opened, I entered into the most amazing, powerful worship, which had been going on in the room the whole time, but I hadn't been in a place to access it and join it.

God is always present, but we are not always present and open to that Presence to the degree that is possible, a degree that would fulfill our deep yearning for connection to the Divine. Can we be the one entering the depths, drawing others to the awareness of the possibility of deeper worship? Perhaps the greatest gift for me on my sabbatical was being able to slow down more, to live in the present, and more in the Presence. It was a gift to worship every Sunday with my monthly meeting instead of at most twice a month, to have a home life not constantly interrupted by travel.

I felt, for the first time in years, that I had deep integrity in my practice as a Friend. My relationship with God, which had, imperceptible bit by imperceptible bit, become more of a "grab and go" relationship than one of sustained connection, was nurtured and renewed by extensive daily prayer. My life slowed down. I had more and more moments of joy and gratitude. And while I missed being connected to this wider body of Friends and its work, it was a crucial blessing to experience my walk with God apart from this role in service.

I come away from this time with a clear sense of the incredible potential of our practice as Friends to transform our lives and the lives of those we touch. And I come away with an equally great clarity that in most of our monthly meetings, most of the time, we barely touch that potential. And I see that clarity in the context of our years of searching as a community for spiritual renewal.

We have, as a body, been seeking spiritual renewal a long, long time. In preparing this report, I reviewed work done in the 1969 Committee on Renewal, the 1993 Renewal Committee, the Ad Hoc Committee on the Function of New York Yearly Meeting, the Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing and Structure, and the Committee on Committees. Many of you will remember those different efforts at addressing what changes we need to make to ready ourselves for the renewal of the Spirit. From the perspective of my sabbatical, and reflecting on somewhere around 200 visits to monthly meetings, quarterly and regional meetings, and worship groups, spiritual renewal is about the monthly meetings and worship groups, and our worship in those communities. And that starts with each of us, individually, here, today. Spiritual renewal won't be accomplished by structural changes and sweeping top-down programs. Spiritual renewal happens as each of us is faithful to the Light we have been given. And the depth of that Light, and the depth of our renewal in the Spirit, is inextricably woven into the fabric of our individual lives. One of the titles I have used for workshops on deepening our worship is "Living the Worship Life." Our practice is not one that happens for one hour on Sunday morning. It is a way of life. If we pursue our practice as Friends with integrity, our worship deepens. And out of that deeper worship comes direction for our lives. And if we are to practice that way with integrity, we will have to make some changes, hard changes, individually.

A report from the 1998 Advancement Committee clerk, entitled "How Many Quakers Does Renewal Take?" had this to say:

The first suggestion comes from recommendations of the 1993 Report of the Renewal Committee, and from analysis of the State of the Meeting Reports from the past few years. These documents reflect on how Friends are busy, involved, and increasingly "simply don't know how [we] can be true to [our process and witness] and survive..." In recent State of the Meeting Reports, Meetings most often expressed "busyness," "geographical distance," and "living simply" as major concerns than any other type of issue. We find we don't have the time to live as we would like because not only are there too many Quaker pulls on our time, but merely living, raising kids, and taking care of the house take up more energy than many of us are able to consistently give. Furthermore, many of us can envision no alternatives that would be more satisfying, despite our stress and dissatisfaction. We find our testimonies of simplicity, integrity, peace, community and care for the earth deeply affected by our need to rush, to quickly get to disparate places, to pack one more thing into our days (and nights), to accomplish tasks, even to eat meals, in the least time possible, but we do not see acceptable options to our frenetic pace of life.

Let us bring the issue of our use of time out into the Light. Let us discuss it in committees, let us seek clearness and discernment about how to have our watches lead us less, and the Spirit more. Let us help each other, help families in our Meetings, help our gatherings consider how we as Quakers can be an example to the culture around us in allowing our priorities to dictate our use of time rather than our use of time to dictate our priorities.

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These are the fruits I bring back from living my practice as a Friend with more integrity, and in listening for how this experience relates to our life together. I also bring back many fruits from engaging deeply in study and activism around high volume, slick water hydrofracking, or fracking. I come back with a passionate concern that we need to do all we can to stop burning hydrocarbons.

If we take global warming and climate disruption seriously, and after Superstorm Sandy and the raft of other extreme and anomalous weather last year and this, it is hard not to; if we really believe that we have already surpassed the tipping point, and have done irreparable harm to our planet, our only home, then our behavior needs to match the seriousness of this reality. We need to do everything we can, both individually and corporately, to move away from a hydrocarbon burning future, and towards a renewable one. This includes choices in our investments, probably one of the harder choices many of us may have to make.

As I became more and more involved in the work seeking to prevent fracking in New York and to stop it elsewhere, I became more and more concerned about my own use of hydrocarbons. If I viewed what the gas companies were doing as wrong, intentionally dishonest, and destructive of the planet, then how could I support them by consuming their goods? Barbara and I had long ago sold off gas and oil stocks, so that was not an issue. And we heated with wood, which, while still burning hydrocarbons, is marginally better, in that we were burning hydrocarbons still in the current cycle, not fossilized carbon. To reduce that amount, we had an energy audit, and will have changes done to our house later this summer that should reduce our use of wood by 25 percent.

Yet the electricity we were using came from the burning of gas and coal. So we sold a bunch of stocks (believing them to be an uncertain form of security in the world of climate disruption) and bought two large photovoltaic panels. Producing our own

electricity has made us incredibly aware of how much we use, which has caused us to be much better at conserving. Now the only gas we use is for cooking, which is pretty minimal, and I feel that I can be in opposition to fracking with some integrity. And I know many Friends, who have similar stories to tell, of doing what we can, large and small, to act with more integrity in this area.

If we take seriously burning fossil fuels as the primary cause of the destruction of life on earth as we know it, we need to view profiting from the production or use of fossil fuel with the same level of moral concern and spiritual necessity that John Woolman viewed the use of products produced by slave labor. And we need to start now, not later, to unhitch ourselves from dependence upon them. Many of us have already made many changes in our lives that reflect this reality. We need to share these with each other, encourage each other with the examples of what can be done to radically modify our lives in keeping with the seriousness of this threat to our future and the planet we love.

This yearly meeting has united in a minute opposing hydrofracking. We, individually and collectively, can't be against fracking while enjoying its benefits and still be in a place of integrity. We have stated our clear objection to this practice. Now we need to stop profiting from it.

I had thought that my work in the area of extractive industries and fracking in particular would be largely reading, study, and some travel to interview and witness those living out of a different paradigm than one that supports extractive industries. Yet as I settled into my sabbatical time, I found myself clearly and powerfully led to STAY PUT, to not travel at all. Despite some opportunities to travel in the aforementioned study mode, and several warm invitations from good friends to please come visit, I was very clear to stay home, day after day. For the first three and a half months of my sabbatical, the only times I was clear to leave home was to go on three different retreats.

At the same time, I found myself immersed in the culture of extraction, which I had thought I would be studying at arm's length. As part of the Zoning Advisory Board for the Town of Homer, I was one of an eleven-member board comprised of ardent pro-drillers, equally ardent anti-frackers, and a few neutral—but-leading-towards-pro-drilling people. Our job was to revise the town's Comprehensive Plan and make recommendations to the Town Board and Zoning Board for zoning changes relative to fracking.

The Town of Homer comprises 50 square miles. So all these people, in common understanding as well as in relation to Jesus' teachings, were my neighbors. Some of them were very difficult to love. The pro-drillers countered well laid out arguments based on independent research with spun facts, industry-funded studies, arguments based on emotion and prejudice rather than facts, and smear tactics. They were knowledgeable, aggressive, unyielding, domineering, and at times sneeringly condescending.

I learned a lot from these people. We eventually managed to form a remarkable rapport, as we wrestled with our differences in an open manner. A member of the county anti-fracking group visited us one meeting, and was astonished at the level of trust and rapport we had developed with each other. That we got there others credited to my skill in group dynamics, learned amongst Friends. But I tell you, no group of Quakers ever was so difficult to work with as was this one. In the end, we passed changes to the Comprehensive Plan with a unanimous vote of those ten members present. One of our final recommendations, to mandate significant setbacks between gas wells and water wells, we passed 7-3.

I learned a great deal about seeking to be heard by those who really, really didn't want to hear what I had to say. I both learned much by doing that wrong, and a few times, by trying ways that worked somewhat. I will be sharing most of what I learned in this process in an interest group later this week. But I will share here what was the most surprising bit of learning.

For both those who were neutral and those who were pro-drilling, there was a strong, unconscious belief in the State of New York and the Department of Environmental Conservation as being part of the good, the just, the True. For them, those bodies were “us,” not some “other” to be feared and held suspect. At the outset of our work, everyone except the anti-frackers (four of the eleven) thought that the best course of action was to simply do nothing, as the DEC would do all that was necessary to protect us. Information to the contrary was not heard. It simply would not go in.

This experience caused me to remember a book from my seminary days, by H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. He lays out six different ways in which Christians have historically related to the culture outside the church. The people I was trying to engage with were all clearly “Christ in Culture” people—people for whom the Good and the Holy are intrinsic in their culture—the air that we breathe. The anti-frackers are clearly “Christ Against Culture” people—we see the Good and the Holy as set against the cultural norms of our day. A lot of our not being able to hear each other came from this clash in deep, unconscious, cultural assumptions.

What I learned from these people, and from this specific experience, was that the biggest barrier we face in engaging people in change is this unconscious attachment to the way things are as being inherently good, and any threat to that status quo as being suspect, and therefore to be resisted at all costs. I think that increased awareness of this vast unconscious cultural difference could make us much more effective as we seek to be agents of change in the world.

My sabbatical changed me. I am still living into those changes. I return with a heightened sense of the urgency with which we need to resist fracking, not only because it despoils vast quantities of precious water, and damages the local ecology, but much more so, because it would mean yet another nail in the coffin for life on earth as we know it. My sabbatical allowed me to

engage in this work on a level I never could have while working a full time job—not, at least, with any degree of sanity and spiritual integrity. With the time I had available, I was able to play a major role in a tiny part of a larger movement. That piece of work feels almost done now.

I also come away with a clear sense of the power of our practice as Friends, and its potential for the renewal that we have been so earnestly seeking for so very long. As Friends, we need to reach for living in what Thomas Kelly referred to as “the Divine Center.” We need to relearn how to access those deeper levels of consciousness that Bill Taber wrote about. The heart of who we are as Friends is about learning to listen to the still, small voice, and to be faithful to its directives. It is to be an instrument for the voice of the Divine, in worship, in our business, and in our dealings with others. We can deepen in this practice. We can open to the “more” that is always available, always being offered. We have to do this work individually. Yet our extended community can support each of us in this crucial work. By our witness, by our example, we can spread this holy contagion far and wide.

Spiritual renewal happens as each of us is faithful to the Light we have been given.

In my travels I have consistently encountered a deep spiritual hunger. Our practice as Friends, deeply engaged in, can more than meet that hunger. We have long sought renewal. That renewal will come as each of us is faithful to that measure of the Light we have been given. But that means more than maintaining the status quo. We are called to go deeper. I pray that we are faithful to that call.