

THE JAMES BACKHOUSE LECTURE  
2007

**Support for our true selves -  
Nurturing the space where leadings flow**

**Jenny Spinks**

## James Backhouse Lectures

The lectures were instituted by Australia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) on its establishment in 1964.

They are named after James Backhouse who, with his companion, George Washington Walker, visited Australia from 1832 to 1838. They travelled widely, but spent most of their time in Tasmania. It was through their visit that Quaker Meetings were first established in Australia.

Coming to Australia under a concern for the condition of convicts, the two men had access to people with authority in the young colonies, and with influence in Britain, both in Parliament and in the social reform movement. In meticulous reports and personal letters, they made practical suggestions and urged legislative action on penal reform, on the rum trade, and on land rights and the treatment of Aborigines.

James Backhouse was a general naturalist and a botanist. He made careful observations and published full accounts of what he saw, in addition to encouraging Friends in the colonies and following the deep concerns that had brought him to Australia.

Australian Friends hope that this series of lectures will bring fresh insights into the Truth, and speak to the needs and aspirations of Australian Quakerism. This particular lecture was delivered at Friends School, Hobart, Tasmania on First Day, the 7th Day of the First Month 2007 (Sunday, 7 January 2007).

Lyndsay Farrall  
Presiding Clerk  
Australia Yearly Meeting

If we can be our true selves, open to being led minute by minute by the Spirit, we will live in a way that cares for Gaia (the earth), but there is clutter that gets in the way and blocks connection. This lecture looks at Ways Quakerism offers to consciously/actively support our true selves and nurture the space where leadings flow and at how the freedom to express emotion in committed spiritual F/friendships helps clear the clutter and nurtures the space. The Religious Society of Friends' role is to uphold and support us in nurturing connection.

## **About the Author**

Jenny Spinks was raised in a Quaker family in the UK. Later, in her late 30's, as an isolated Friend on the South Coast of NSW, she became a convinced Friend.

After her children, Ailsa and Peter Wild, left home she was moved to examine the Simplicity Testimony, visiting Friends in India and spending a term at Woodbrook College. On her return, during her year with the Australian Meeting for Learning, Canberra Regional Meeting adopted Jenny's concern to travel with the ministry of simplicity. Meetings from Canberra to Cairns helped Jenny to host workshops; discussions and worship sharing on alternatives to consumerism and that year the leaflet about the simplicity testimony was drafted.

Jenny lives in Bega with her husband Chris Allen. She works as a member of a workers co-operative in a small wholefoods retail business and is involved in the Bega Eco Neighbourhood Developers Inc. a not for profit community group creating an ecologically sustainable and socially diverse neighbourhood based on permaculture principles and integral to Bega.

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## 1. Introduction

Take heed dear Friends to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us new life. *Advices and Queries 6.1*<sup>1</sup>

Let us think about the universe - the vastness of it. Everything we think, say or do has a ripple on effect throughout the universe even though we are each the tiniest speck. It is important to understand how powerful we are and yet how small. We can be true to ourselves and live a life that flows with the Spirit of creation, or we can be drawn into the confusing messages that human society gives us.

We are encouraged by many messages to be greedy - to accumulate things for ourselves that we 'need' to live a certain life style. In Australia and the US the average person lives in such a way that if everyone on the earth consumed at the same rate as we do, we would need 5 planets. We are using five times our share and we are only 5 percent of the world's population.<sup>2</sup>

We recognize that living this way is not supporting truth, simplicity, equality or peace. Quaker Service Australia's mission statement reads: 'We seek to promote basic rights and peaceful co-existence for all living things through respect for and sharing of the world and all its resources.' And yet we each are inextricably caught up in consumerism and an economic system driven by the profit motive.

I am not going to go into all the mistakes that humans have made and continue to make that are causing death and suffering to millions of our species and destroying the beautiful eco-systems we have here on earth. Knowing more of the horror of it may motivate you to take action in your life, or it may bring on hopelessness, despair and apathy. I would rather give attention to what it is that helps us to stay open to the leadings of the Spirit so that we have the courage to be our true selves.

When I was asked to write this lecture it was suggested that I write about simplicity and care of the environment. What came to me was a leading to explore how we nurture what motivates us to act so that the environment and all humans are cared for, and to communicate this in ways that are as accessible to as many humans as possible.

This written version of the lecture is not as accessible as I would have liked, but I see it as a step in the direction towards creating something, probably a picture book, that does make this story accessible.

I use the word humans rather than the word people because I want to encourage a humble recognition that we are only one of many species on this planet. We are part of the whole of Gaia.<sup>3</sup> We are not separate from her. (I have taken the word Gaia from James Lovelock's Gaia Theory and used it in my way to describe the earth.) Like all of nature we have evolved and belong here only if we co-exist with the rest. We need to embrace a way of thinking about ourselves that sees us, as we truly are, completely integrated into a whole.

Gaia needs each of us to flow with the Spirit of creation and to live as an intrinsic part of her. We all have the capacity to flow with the Spirit of creation. I call this being our true selves. If we can be our true selves, open to being constantly led by the Spirit, we will live in a way that cares for Gaia.

Connection with the Spirit is always available to us. Unfortunately there is clutter that gets in the way, blocking the connection. In this lecture I look at the nature of that clutter and ways of sorting it out and tidying it away.

I describe how Quakerism provides spaces where we practise clearing away clutter and being open to the Spirit: the spaces where the Spirit can fill us with courage as we struggle to live our lives adventurously with integrity minute by minute. I also will share my experience of having the freedom to express emotion in committed spiritual F/friendships and how that helps clear the clutter and nurture the space where leadings flow.

I'd like us to have a sense of excitement (in the same way that early Friends did) at the reality of human connection and belongingness with all things - the power of being led by the Spirit - and to be motivated to make exploring that connection a priority.

The Religious Society of Friends' role is to uphold and support us in nurturing the space where leadings flow.

When George Fox discovered the inner teacher and Quakerism was born, there was the understanding that each one of us is connected to the Truth, to the Spirit of Christ. It was for this that many early Friends lost their property, were persecuted and died. When they refused to swear on the bible in court they were affirming their connection to the Truth. They formed the Religious Society of Friends - the Friends in Truth. I understand Truth to be that moment of connection, of clarity, of knowing who we are in this universe. Friends in Truth support each other in living in the Truth.

'How doth the Truth prosper amongst us?' <sup>4</sup> (This was a question that Friends Meetings were required to answer at regular intervals.) Do we nurture a space in our lives for ourselves and for each other for the Spirit to flow, where we can recognise our mistakes and move on? Can we see this happening in each other's lives, in the life of the meeting?

Friends have had 350 years of practising this openness to the Spirit and I believe that this practice and experience is what Friends offer the world. It is not our testimonies. The testimonies are not unique to us. They come from human leadings. The first paragraph in the introduction to the Advices and Queries says: 'As Friends we commit ourselves to a way of worship which allows God to teach and transform us. We have found corporately that the Spirit, if rightly followed, will lead us into truth, unity and love: all our testimonies grow from this leading.'

When William Penn was new to Friends he asked George Fox whether he should wear his dress sword, customary among men of rank and fashion at that time, George said 'wear it as long as you can.' George had the confidence that William would stay open to the Spirit and there would come a time when he could no longer wear his sword. After a while William found he could no longer wear his sword.<sup>5</sup> Do we have the confidence that if we remain open to the Spirit we will come to a time when there is no doubt about what we should or should not do?

Should I eat meat? Should I drive to work? Should I buy a new fridge? It is not useful to rigidly stick to rules about what is right and what is wrong. It is better to be open to the Spirit and be led by the Spirit. As the Elders of Balby <sup>6</sup> wrote in an epistle in 1656; 'the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.' We need to

practise this openness to the life that the Spirit gives and we need each other's support - the support of our Religious Society.

Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right doing there is a field. I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass the world is too full to talk about ideas, language, even the phrase each other doesn't make any sense.

Jelaluddin Rumi (1207-1273)



## 2. Setting the scene - what I believe

### 2.1 Gaia

We do not own the world, and its riches are not ours to dispose of at will. Show a loving consideration for all creatures, and seek to maintain the beauty and variety of the world. Rejoice in the splendour of God's continuing creation. *Advices and Queries 6.42*

**Gaia is amazingly complicated, beautiful and nourishing to human life. Humans are inextricably a part of the ebbing and flowing organism that is Gaia. We may be close to destroying the balance in Gaia that allows for human life. We have the power to turn around the destructive trend and return Gaia to the balance that will work for us. This will mean altering the way we live.**

Gaia is a name that many people like to use to describe the earth - every single atom that goes into this planet - all the atmosphere around it, the rock and soil that makes up the surface and all the solid and not so solid centre of the earth. The water, the gases, and all the life on earth, all the trees, plants, flowers, animals, birds, fish, insects. And of course us - we humans. All these animals, vegetables and minerals go into making the wholeness that is Gaia.

It is one amazingly complex organism and all its parts inter-relate to keep a balance of differences that ensure the health of Gaia. Everything has its role to play within the organism. And the organism itself interrelates with other bodies in the universe. Gaia is totally dependent upon the sun and completely bound up with the moon.

Gaia is extraordinarily beautiful and beyond comprehension in all her intricate diversity. In my small front garden (one and a half metres by eight metres) where I have planted flowering plants, shrubs and grasses that are Indigenous to this part of Australia, there is a remarkable diversity of shape and colour. Some leaves are delicate, some are solid, some are long and thin; others feathery and others broad and round. Some flowers are blue, others red, yellow,

purple, white, mauve. Some spread over the soil and don't raise themselves above three cm. Others shoot straight up for 30 centimetres and others spread their foliage and grow to higher than a metre. Yet others throw out climbing tendrils in order to reach the heights.

My garden is one small corner of Gaia. The diversity and intricacy of soils, clouds, marine life, insects, birds and animals that make up our utterly priceless gem of a planet are amazing, and each part - including we humans - is dependent upon all the other parts.

In the times of Jesus (2000 years ago) and of George Fox (350 years ago) human relationship to the earth was clear to most people. There were few cities and folks on a daily basis participated in direct interaction with the other than human world for their survival. Today many humans are disconnected from the other than human world and do not have a constant awareness of their dependency.

If Jesus and George were around today they would be telling us to not only love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and mind and soul and thy neighbour as thyself, but also to love Gaia.

And perhaps they were telling us to love Gaia. Translations of the words 'lord god' from Jesus' time indicate the 'lord god' <sup>7</sup> as meaning something equally female and of the whole universe. And George Fox said in his Epistle to the Elders of Barbados <sup>8</sup> in 1656 'Keep in the wisdom of God that spreads over all the earth, the wisdom of creation, that is pure. Live in it.'

## 2.2 The Spirit

Bring the whole of your life under the ordering of the Spirit of Christ.  
*Advices and Queries 6.2*

**The Spirit is all that is good, fun, creative, loving, truthful, beautiful. For me this is one divine presence or energy. Other names are God, the Light, our inner guide, our inner teacher, our higher power, Jesus. The Spirit is our guide, teacher and comforter. It can help us in every moment to remember who we are and what is important in our lives. We can stay open to the Spirit and be led in all we do, or we can carry on as though the Spirit isn't there. If we do the latter the Spirit will still prompt us in different ways.**

I believe the Spirit is always present and is everywhere. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, the Spirit is with us. And it is everywhere we are not. The Spirit flows through all things. It flows through trees, flowers, birds, fish, animals, the stars, the moon, the sun, mountains, rivers, rocks, plastic ducks, nuclear weapons and railway lines. It flows through earthquakes, hurricanes, tidal waves and traffic jams.

The Spirit embraces all, is within all and shows us how we can open ourselves to all we sense so that we can know our oneness with all of Gaia. I believe that all animals, plants, molecules, atoms have a nature that is theirs and that the Spirit is there reminding them constantly of their nature. When we open ourselves to the Spirit we are connecting with the whole of Gaia and we are opening to our true selves. We get a sense of what it is to be fully human. The Spirit leads us to do our part within the complex diversity of creation so that we take our rightful place in the universe.

The Kogi of the Tairona people<sup>9</sup>, a threatened Indigenous culture on the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia, South America, the highest coastal mountain in the world, have someone meditate each time clay is dug from the ground to make a cooking pot. This meditation is practised before anything in the environment is used by the people. They are aware of their connection to all that is and the need to flow with the Spirit of creation. Sometimes it is not right to take the clay.

The Spirit acts as a guide and teacher. It helps us to see 'that of God' within us and sheds Light on our lives so that we can see what we are being that is not true to the Spirit. The Spirit helps us to be brave and to make the changes we need to make so that it can shine through us in our lives.

My F/friend Joan Mobey has reminded me of the story of the person talking to God as they walked along the beach. She asks 'Where are you, why do you not accompany me on my difficult, lonely journey through life?' The reply is 'I am always with you. Look at the footprints in the sand behind you.' She looks and sees that sometimes there were two sets and sometimes only one set. 'Where were you when there was only one set?' God replies 'That was when I was carrying you.'

I believe that if all humans checked in with the Spirit about everything they do each day not only would humanity have a better chance of survival on this

planet but we would all lead more connected, joyous and fulfilled lives. I try and remember to check in with the Spirit, but even when I don't open myself the Spirit can get in there with me as it did when Friends were led to ask me to give this lecture.

### **2.3 Humans - their nature and their role in Gaia**

Remember that each one of us is unique, precious, a child of God.  
*Advices and Queries 6.22*

**Humans are inextricably a part of Gaia and in themselves they are amazing. We work, rest, play and worship. We can get hurt in many ways and we can heal. How we think, speak and act profoundly affects ourselves and all of life around us. Within each of us is 'that of God'. We have the capacity to choose to live consciously connected with the Spirit and with Gaia, being our true selves, or not.**

When our family lived with the Pitjantjatjara people in Amata, in central Australia, I learned from them to understand that by seeing something we are affecting it - we are connecting with it, we are affirming it in the same way that we affect things by touching them. What thoughts we have about our bodies affect our body's health. What thoughts we have about the plants in our garden affect the plants, or a mountain, or another person, or the ocean or a dolphin. Scientists are beginning to confirm a sense and knowledge that many humans have always known; what happens in our minds affects our bodies and affects beyond our bodies.

In our culture we are not encouraged to see humans in the context of Gaia. We will go for a walk and marvel at the trees, the birds, the flowers etc. but rarely will we marvel at the wonderful humans that we meet.

Humans are remarkable beings. Our bodies are amazing - even as they become older and begin to function less brilliantly, or even if they are disabled in some way - they are precious miracles of creation. For example the way our eyes do what they do - helping us to understand the environment around us through sense of sight; helping us to connect with each other through expression; and giving rise to cleansing, healing tears of truth.

Our minds are amazing too. That we are aware of our environment in the way that we are; that we can communicate in the way that we do, that we can hold in our minds concepts, visions, hopes and possibilities is incredible

Like other animals we connect with Gaia through our need for food and shelter. It is intrinsically human to find food and to make sure we are sheltered. The food we eat and the way we protect ourselves from the elements reflects the nature of our connection with Gaia. Do we do it in co-operation with Gaia? Do we do it with gratitude and respect?

The only work I do in my little front garden is weed out non-indigenous plants. I trust that the plants will survive as they have done for hundreds of years without me watering them. I stand in my window and marvel at it. I come home from work and give thanks for it. I am convinced that this time of gladness is part of our human role in Gaia. The act of worship nurtures and sustains us as humans within Gaia.

I believe that the way indigenous (pagan) cultures connect with Gaia through ceremonies, dance and song is like sun and rain to Gaia. It is part of what is required for the wholeness of this planet. Our prayers and thanksgiving allow her to flourish and in so doing continue to provide us with all we need to live. They also keep us whole.

Those of us who are no longer able to go about the physical work of finding food and shelter have more time for the important role of spiritual practice. We have time for gratitude, worship, acknowledging our mistakes and asking for forgiveness on behalf of all humanity.

What we know as Quakers about humans is that there is 'that of God in all of us'. There is a lot that describes that of God within us. I think it is our capacity for being open to being led, drawn or called by the Spirit so that we walk in the Light/flow with the Spirit/live in the presence of God/be our true selves. It is our capacity to persistently love and cooperate with each other and with Gaia; our capacity for persistently seeking truth and justice; our capacity to think creatively and rationally about our lives and the world about us; our capacity to play, have fun, laugh, live life with delight; our capacity to feel and express sadness, grief and loss; our capacity to create with colour, movement, sound, invention; our capacity to express fear and rage.

We also have the capacity to become removed from connection to the Spirit and the capacity to act, speak or think in ways that diminish or tarnish or silence that of God within us.

We are flowing with the Spirit when we are aware and in the present doing simple things such as dancing, having a chat with a friend, doing tai chi, in a meeting, praying, gardening, building a house, playing an instrument, walking along a beach, painting a picture, changing a baby's nappy. However menial the occupation we can be loving, cooperative, funny, peaceful, joyous - consciously or not being our true selves.

Often we do these deeply human things without a sense of connection, without an awareness of how right our life is in this moment. The clutter in our hearts and minds is overwhelming, or the circumstances around us are distracting us from the truth, goodness and beauty in the world.

It is easy for our connection to become less obvious. However if we take time to listen to each other we see the Light shining there within. If we pay loving attention to others it's not hard to spot the goodness flowing. If we open ourselves and pour out our hearts to each other, or to the Spirit, or to the earth, we can begin to understand that our true selves are buried below a pile of confusion and upset.

Whoever we are, whatever our faith background, if we experience connection, or live our lives on the basis of that connection, our experiences are similar all over the world. Those who choose connection love more fully. They have more courage. They don't necessarily have less fear but they do not act so much on fear. Choosing connection can happen unconsciously, as Jesus said 'bless little children for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'.<sup>10</sup> We can see in small children their unconscious connection to their true selves.

We humans within Gaia are each unique just as each tree, plant and animal is unique and we are different in many ways. This diversity of humans is also essential to the well being of Gaia. We bring different gifts to her and each gift is important. We need to respect, value, cherish and enable what each other brings.

Think about yourself. What gifts do you bring? Is there something that you give that is different because of who you are and how your life has been?

## 2.4 The clutter in the way/the dirt on the windows

Come regularly to meeting for worship even when you are angry, depressed, tired or spiritually cold. *Advices and Queries*. 6.10

Be honest with yourself. What unpalatable truths might you be evading? When you recognise your short comings, do not let that discourage you.

*Advices and Queries* 6. 1

Bring into God's Light those emotions, attitudes and prejudices in yourself which lie at the root of destructive conflict, acknowledging your need for forgiveness and grace. *Advices and Queries* 6.32

Do not let your desire to be sociable, or the fear of seeming peculiar, determine your decisions. *Advices and Queries* 6.38

**There is clutter that blocks our openness to the Spirit. It can be reduced, re-used and re-cycled. We can learn about our own clutter and we can take charge of processing it, systematically sorting it and putting it where it will no longer be in the way. We all are struggling to break free from the clutter and be our true selves connected with the Spirit and with Gaia. We can choose to not be swayed by the clutter and instead to act in a way that is consciously open to the Spirit.**

What is it that gets in the way of us being aware of our connection to the Spirit of creation, our connection to Gaia, our connection to each other and to our true selves. What is it that prevents us from walking in the Light? What is the clutter in the way, the dirt on the windows?

I believe it is the stuff that is not useful where it is. There is nothing that does not have a place in Gaia. There is nowhere to throwaway rubbish. We know that land fill is not the way to deal with our waste. Sweeping bits from the floor under the carpet does not get rid of it. However the rubbish can be pulled apart and the separated pieces reused.

We need to be mindful about what we take in to our lives. Is it something we need? Will it help maintain our connection with each other, the Spirit and Gaia, or will it clutter the space where that connection is nurtured? This applies to everything we encounter each day.

We can ask ourselves 'Is what I'm walking into here going to nurture the space? If it isn't going to nurture the space but it still may be the right thing to do

am I going to be able to process the resulting clutter? Have I the time, energy and resources to sort out any fallout from making this step?'

We can't avoid upsets, disappointments or grief. They are all part of life. We can't protect ourselves, or each other, from these hard feelings. We can't totally protect ourselves from being exposed to insidious messages that undermine our true selves. We can't protect our children from these things. But we can learn how to process them and we can teach our children to process them. We can learn ways to recognize, reduce, re-use and recycle the clutter and then make a regular practice of sorting and appropriately distributing it

However, the management of clutter is not taught in the mainstream of our society. Our education system is not primarily set up to give children the confidence to be their true selves. It is set up to equip us for the work place in a profit-motivated consumer society. It results, for example, in some people believing that they can't think very well, while other people become addicted to problem solving, and others are stuck in a pattern of conformity. As our children negotiate their way through childhood they need a hand with processing all that blocks their connection with their true, loving, co-operative, intelligent selves.

Let's look at a situation where a mother has an accident and hurts herself in the presence of her small son. This is scary and distressing for him. While he is distressed and hurting the feelings are so overwhelming that the calm process of understanding everything that is going on around him at the time is interrupted. But there is a lot of information coming in and his senses are still working; he can hear a telephone ringing, smell antiseptic, and see anxious faces. He knows that he is hungry and wants to be fed.

When the flurry of looking after the mother has subsided, the son will want to share his own distress. He will show it by trembling, crying, or yelling. If there is no one to listen, or his expression of upset is too quickly quelled, then those bits of information get mis-stored. Instead of him understanding that a phone ringing is mostly to do with happy constructive things, he may carry a nervous response to the phone ringing and similarly to the antiseptic, the anxious faces and the hunger.

Those pieces of information accumulate and get in the way of him confidently responding as his true self in new situations. The pieces, each in themselves quite harmless, become a conglomerate of clutter that needs sorting and putting away so that the space is cleared for leadings to flow.



Each little person will respond to the physical or emotional hurts that he or she receives in different ways. I believe that we are all born with the expectation of being given love and respect. If for one reason or another children are not given love and respect they may assume that they are not good enough for the love that they want, and this assumption may well be reinforced by many subsequent incidents. The result is humans who lack an awareness of their goodness.

Humans of low esteem may go on to behave very shyly and not share their gifts with others. Or they may behave violently in a vain effort to assert themselves; or they may decide that if they have a lot of money then people will like them; or they may behave in many other ways that do not flow with the Spirit of creation.

Our true selves do not want to get stuck in behaving in these ways. Often these 'ways of being' are an effort to heal from the upset that was put there in the first place. I think that these behaviours - or feelings, or attitudes - are wrapped around us, while underneath our true self is struggling to break free. This is what is cluttering the space of openness to the Spirit.

If I can be aware when I am feeling an 'I'm no good and nobody likes me' feeling, I can decide to remember that it is just a feeling. The truth is I am another gorgeous human being and many people do like me. When the negative feeling becomes apparent it is good to stand aside, be aware of it and decide not to act on it.

I have come to learn where my clutter comes from. For me the guilt about my privilege as a white middle class person brings on the 'I'm no good' feeling. Root causes of my 'I'm no good' feeling are racism and classism.

When I meet someone I could act out the 'nobody likes me' feeling and hold back in a shy, scared way, and they may well believe that I don't like them because I am not being friendly. They may feel scared of me and behave in a way that reinforces my feeling of not being any good. Or I can choose to behave towards them in a friendly way, trusting that they will be my friend, rather than my holding back in a shy, scared way.

What I have just described is consciously deciding to be friendly. It is not pretending without awareness to be friendly. I think that the most important thing is to be aware of my own feelings and why I am feeling as I do. I grew up and

now live in a culture where we are taught to be nice to each other whatever we are feeling. A lot of the clutter that comes in the way of me being open to the leadings of the Spirit is the fear of what will happen if I am not nice. That fear is not a good reason to appear friendly.

It's not always easy to hold the space for the Spirit. Maybe clutter is addictive. Sometimes it feels easier for me to live with the clutter of worry than to open myself to goodness knows what possibilities. I feel safe with my clutter and dirty windows.

The Quaker advice to live adventurously <sup>11</sup> is asking us to let go of comfortable, familiar, known ways of being. It is asking us to risk being open to the Spirit, to risk cleaning the windows and letting the Light in. The Light may make it clear that I be or do something very scary. No wonder that I want to resist cleaning the windows.

The clutter we experience may feel overwhelming but we do have the capacity to clear it away and connect with the Spirit. It is never too late.

## 2.5 Human Society - Internalising Misinformation

Seek to understand the causes of injustice, social unrest and fear.  
*Advices and Queries 6.33*

Respect the laws of the state but let your first loyalty be to God's purposes.  
*Advices and Queries 6.35*

Consider which of the ways to happiness offered by society are truly fulfilling and which are potentially corrupting and destructive. *Advices and Queries 6.39*

**Misinformation, injustice and oppression in human society creates much of the clutter in the way of our connection with the Spirit with Gaia and with each other. Misinformation becomes internalised; we learn to believe untrue messages about ourselves and become disconnected from our true selves. Racism, classism, disability oppression, sexism, homophobia, the oppression of parents all contribute to the piles of clutter. We need to be clear about the difference between misinformation and oppression on the one hand and the truth that comes from open connection with the Spirit on the other.**

If we are to be true to ourselves we need to keep deciding to understand for ourselves who we are and what we are to be or to do. Society cannot define who we really are. It is the Spirit that leads us to be our true selves. To be fully human we need to listen to the Spirit of Christ within. This is the essence of Quakerism. From that place the early Friends, 350 years ago, risked the loss of all their worldly goods, persecution, and death to stand against society's definitions of how they were to be as citizens.

Humans need each other to survive and are naturally cooperative. However the cultures that have evolved within human society contain elements that undermine our ability to be true to ourselves. Today the most powerful paradigms of human society do not nurture Gaia or God within us.

Racism has been around for thousands of years. It has the function of supporting riches going to a privileged few. Having millions of people who the wider society often appears to suggest 'don't matter' makes it easy to leave them hungry while those who 'do matter' get fatter. If there were no racism, with its attendant trio of colonialism/ slavery/ dispossession, then the people of colour on this planet would not be the hungry ones.

It is easy to see how racism hurts Indigenous peoples materially. We are learning how it hurts them culturally and individually. The message that they don't matter becomes internalised. They lose faith in their power to make a difference in their lives, and they lose their respect for themselves and for each other. This internalised racism may get in the way of their connection with all humanity, and with that of God within them.

It's not so obvious how racism hurts us non-Indigenous people. The truth is we are hurt by lack of connection with, and fear of people of colour, or people who are different from us or who may have a grudge against us. We are hurt by the arrogance we have learned - the sense of superior intelligence that denies us the humility and humour that enables connection. Our racism, that I believe is inevitably there because we are white in a white racist society, is a whole pile of clutter to be transformed or dissolved so that we can be clear and open to the Spirit.

We have looked at the clutter caused by racism and internalised racism that blocks the space from which leadings flow. The rest of this chapter looks at other forms of oppression and internalised misinformation.

Parents in human society are doing the most important work of all; raising new people. Gaia needs humans who can be their true loving, generous, joyful selves. Deep down, every parent wants the very best for their children; they want to raise loving, generous, joyful people.

However, our human society, does not support parents well. It does not encourage them to give their children the love and attention that they need and deserve. Instead it pressures them to maintain careers and consume more.

Parenting is under resourced, undervalued and not rewarded because it is not seen as productive. Parents internalise feelings of inadequacy because they are neither productive nor do they get a sense that they are doing a good job as parents.

Parents who have little material backing because they are poor or on low earnings have added struggles and often a greater sense of inadequacy. Parents aspiring to be middle class often struggle to provide material things or educational opportunities when time and loving attention are what is needed. 'Owning class' (sometimes called upper class) parents are hood-winked into believing that their children don't need them at all so they are left with nannies or sent to boarding schools. Whatever class background we have we are left with experiences that leave little confidence in our ability to love and nurture.

In our society people are separated into poor, working, middle and owning classes. This creates deep divisions. Although class differences appear blurred to middle class people, those divisions contribute to the profits enjoyed by an economically privileged few. Our profit driven economy would not work without unemployed and poor people suffering the indignity of material deprivation. Fear of this indignity drives working class people to work in conditions that deny their intelligence and physical well-being. It drives middle class people to deny their true selves and to work as managers of people in a way that keeps people disempowered. It isolates owning class people in a mountain of material wealth

Oppressive and inequitable systems lead to us being deprived of the joy and fulfilment that comes from working together co-operatively so that we all have food and shelter. They also lead to what can be called internalised misinformation. We may be scared of people of different class backgrounds and may dislike our own class. Our sense of self worth is reduced.

There is the oppression of people who are physically or mentally different. Again this is deeply hurtful to all of us. The truth is that whatever our abilities we can contribute to society and we are to be valued and celebrated. It makes sense to live our lives consciously including all people.

When I developed cranial dystonia I began to understand internalised misinformation and I learned the power that the human society has over our minds and our sense of self worth. I learned about the nature of the clutter in the way of my being at one with Gaia.

The spasm started in 1988. I had been working as a nurse for years and felt that I had respect for people with disabilities - that I had no sense of superiority. When the spasm started I believed that I was no good; I was of no use to anyone. I was an embarrassment to people who had to look at my contorting face. I was unable to drive and believed that therefore I was dependent. I thought I should be put out on the scrap heap because I could no longer work as a community nurse and home birth midwife.

Where did these thoughts come from if I had always believed that people with disabilities were just as precious and important as those without? I think that I had absorbed misinformation from society and, at a time of loss and uncertainty, self doubt came in and played that misinformation back at me.

I have a friend, now in her twenties, who was born with cerebral palsy. She can't walk or talk or feed herself. When she was eight her mother discovered that Maresa could read and she worked out a way for her to talk by pointing at a letter board. Maresa is currently studying English at university and holds a pivotal position in a non-government organisation<sup>12</sup> lobbying for inclusion of people with disabilities in mainstream society.

Gender is another area where our society divides us and where the space of connection with the Spirit becomes clogged up with clutter. Feminism has helped us to be aware of how women are oppressed. Despite improvements as a result of the growing awareness of the value of women to society, female humans invariably undervalue themselves. They have internalised the misinformation that the role of women is to look after the men and their perceived sexual needs. When I choose not to do this it is hard to keep away the feelings of inadequacy. I feel as though I am bad.

Men are also oppressed by sexism. The image of the macho fighter is deeply imbedded in the minds of many men. Throughout history they have been called to fight for their country over and over again; to be strong and prepared to give their lives protecting others. They are encouraged not to show grief or fear and not to get emotionally close to each other.

The oppression of lesbian, gay and bisexual people is exacerbated by sexism. If men become too like women they may not fight the wars for territory and natural resources. If women become too much like men they may not take on their unpaid caring role.

We need to be clear about the difference between misinformation and oppression on the one hand and the truth that comes from open connection with the Spirit on the other. Can we make the commitment to hold a space free of clutter for ourselves and for each other?

Richard Meredith in 1982 wrote

...it might be well for us to consider to what extent we, along with many other well meaning Christians, are still imprisoned in our Quakerly ghettos (programmed or un-programmed, pastoral or non-pastoral, evangelical or universalist); in our Christian sectarian national, or hemispherical ghettos; in our ignorance, arrogance, pride or complacency; in the constraints of prejudice arising from race, class or sex. Few, if any of us, can claim to have escaped the bonds of all these forms of personal imprisonment or intolerance. But we can seek to recognise the limitations to our growth and begin to work on at least one area....<sup>13</sup>

### 3. Inner simplicity - holding the space

#### 3.1 How do we humans hold the space/keep the windows clean

Seek to know an inward stillness, even amid the activities of daily life.  
*Advices and Queries 6.3*

**It is within our nature as humans to heal ourselves; to hold the space of connection to the Spirit free of clutter; and to keep the windows clean so that the Light can shine through. We can do it intentionally or unintentionally. Some ways we do this are: worship, tai chi, yoga, meditation, connecting with nature, artistic expression, social change, and friendship.**

How can we live so that we are led by the Spirit to act, rather than be too frightened or powerless to act, or be driven to act by fear, guilt or anger? That space of being open to the Spirit, to being our true selves, is often cluttered and the windows of clarity are often clouded so that we are less open to the Light.

We can choose to be aware of our connection with the Spirit, with Gaia, with each other and with that of God within ourselves and to consciously and continuously be open to that connection, to consciously hold the space of openness. This is not holding tight, it is holding with awareness, confidently, firmly and gently - like cradling a baby, giving it attention, letting it be, providing for it.

We are healing ourselves when we clear away the clutter in the way of openness to the Spirit. Love is the greatest healer and love is triggered by love. This is what Jesus taught us. He showed us how to love ourselves and forgive ourselves. He showed us how to reach out to others whoever they are and however they live. He showed us how to love practically.

Humans take on activities to clean the windows and sweep away the clutter, clear a space and hold it for the Light to shine in, so that we learn to be our true

selves flowing with the Spirit. Here is a list of 'window cleaning' and decluttering activities.

## Worship

Giving time to prayer and stillness is holding a space of openness to the Spirit. Indigenous peoples hold special ceremonies to celebrate Gaia, to give thanks and to ask for the relationship with Gaia that brings us community, food and shelter. People of all different faiths gather in their places of worship to do these things. We have different names and different stories but essentially this is what we are doing.

As we come together for worship we are holding the space for each other, or there is someone or some people whose role it is to hold the space, so that we practise being open to the Spirit. Many churches fill the worship space with activity that may not encourage openness but they do remind us to be grateful, to care for each other and to ask for the relationship with Gaia that brings us food and shelter.

## Tai chi and yoga

These practices help us to notice our bodies, the energy that flows through them and our physical connection to Gaia. Choosing to spend time doing yoga or tai chi is holding a space where we gain the skills of being open to the Spirit. Some of these practices help us to understand about holding the space by encouraging an awareness of the practice of holding energy. The tai chi chi kung form, the Sulahan <sup>14</sup>, demonstrates beautifully our capacity to nurture the energy of being open to the Spirit.

## Connecting with nature

Spending time in the world beyond buildings, paying attention to the marvels of creation, working with Gaia by growing food or replenishing land that has been over used can create a space of openness to the Spirit. I believe that if we listen, with some part of our being, we can learn to hear the plants, rocks and animals speak to us and to each other. Just as birds and animals were aware of the need to move up hill away from the approaching tsunami in Asia on Dec 26th 2004 <sup>15</sup> I believe that we also have the capacity to understand what Gaia needs of us and what Gaia has to give us.



## Artistic expression

The moment of creation of art, music, writing or poetry is a space of openness. In the space that we allow for self-expression the Spirit can help our unique creativity to flow. That space can also provide for the outpouring of clutter that may be necessary before we can be open to the Spirit. Once we have cleared out the clutter the space is there for Spirit led creation.

Singing and making music, and listening to music, has a cleansing effect that leaves space for the Spirit. When the Heartsong Sacred Music Choir, that I belong to in Bega, performs we encourage silence rather than applause after each piece. We conclude every rehearsal with a Taize chant and then slip immediately into deep meditation.

## Social change

There is a lot of institutionalised clutter to be cleared out of the way so that all humans may lead lives of dignity. Oppression, injustice, violence and greed in the fabric of our society has to be undone. The work of social change is holding the space for the Spirit. By holding a vision of simplicity, truth, equality, and peace and working for it we are affirming that space of oneness with Gaia, each other and the Spirit.

Friends are persistent and committed workers for peace and justice. As we work many of us experience the clutter of despair. We can allow space for the Spirit by emptying out our despair so that there is room for the natural hopefulness of our true selves to bubble up. We need to remember the truth and beauty and goodness in the world, and in all humans, as we work. Celebrating each step forward with gratitude, pride and joy is part of holding the space for the Spirit.

## Friendship

I consciously and regularly clear away clutter by talking about the things that are worrying me, that I feel guilty about or ashamed of. I deliberately express the emotions of grief, anger, fear or embarrassment that come up. It works best for me to arrange to do this with someone, who will listen to me with complete respect for the goodness and preciousness that is me, a spiritual friend, who will be delighted with me if I cry, or giggle and laugh, or shake and tremble. Learning Re-evaluation Co-counselling has assisted me in this practice.

A 22-year-old friend, when talking of another young person, said 'she will find someone to talk with who will help her to understand who she is and what her life is for'. Friendship offers us the safety to practise being our true selves. As we share together with honesty and love the space is created for the Spirit to work with us. The close human connection that we can have makes a big difference in our capacity to be led by the Spirit. The Spirit leads us into close friendships and is nurtured by them

### 3.2 As a child amongst Friends

Rejoice in the presence of children and young people in your meeting and recognise the gifts they bring. Remember that the meeting as a whole shares a responsibility for every child in its care. How do you share your deepest beliefs with them while leaving them free to develop as the Spirit of God may lead them? *Advices and Queries 6.19*

**The experiences I had as a child amongst Friends that helped nurture the space where leadings flow included: experiencing the physical pleasure of being alive in Gaia and the joy of connection and closeness with others; being treated with the respect that comes from being amongst people who know that there is that of God in everyone; hearing the stories of courageous Friends in the past; access to music, literature and poetry; feeling a sense of belonging amongst other Quaker children; and a culture of inclusion rather than competition.**

The moments in my early childhood that I remember now as me being connected to the Spirit all come under the heading 'being delighted'. My sense is that being connected to the Spirit as a child happened lots more in this way than it has as an adult. It happened when there was fun - when I was free to be my true self - delighted with the world.

I can clearly recall these times. Holidays at a Cornish beach playing with my father in the sand, with my cousins and sister in rock pools. Using all of my young body to play in the waves, climb trees, balance on high walls. The cuddles and stories before going to bed. Delighting in delicious food, playing games with friends and family, singing together. Learning how things work, how to read (the squiggles on a page having meaning), to write, to communicate, to connect. Learning about people who had lived honest courageous lives. Walks and talks in

Greenwich Park with my grandfather. Staying with my great aunt in the Dales in the spring - the new lambs, the streams, rivers and water falls.

I think that the best thing about being raised in a Quaker family is that our parents and those around us believe that there is that of God in everyone. I think that we are treated with a bit more respect than other young ones are. In different ways my parents demonstrated that I was worthy of their respect and their trust. For humans to connect with the Spirit it helps to have some clarity that we are worthy. Nurturing that space of worthiness is something that Friends do for all people when they remember that of God within them.

In Sunday School, at Redland Meeting in Bristol, I loved the stories of courageous Quakers in the past such as the Quakers and the Indians<sup>16</sup>, the children who kept the Meeting in Reading when their parents were in prison<sup>17</sup>, Elizabeth Fry<sup>18</sup>, and, especially, I loved the story of my grandpa, Herbert Dobbing, being in prison during the first World War for being a conscientious objector and my grandma, Gwen, writing him illicit letters on the inside of the brown paper covers of the books that she was allowed to send him because he was teaching literacy to other prisoners.

The courage of these Friends has inspired me to have the courage to keep trying to live a life of truth, and more recently to consciously hold a space for the Spirit. And their faith set the example of faith to me. These impressive people believed in God, whatever that meant. It was clear that believing in God helped them to live inspiring lives. This was surely good soil for my own faith to grow in.

As an adolescent the moments of connection were mostly with friends: the delight of knowing that I was with someone who saw things the same way as me; walking home on a crisp winters night after singing carols; on Friends' School long walks on the moors and coming home on the back seat of the bus telling stories, singing songs, making jokes; getting close to a friend when he was sick; the excitement of getting close to lots of other young people especially the ones who had different life experiences from mine; the Quaker Schools pilgrimage, making new friends, and the gathered meeting on Firbank Fell.

There was also the delightful connection of minds when I understood something of what a poet or writer was trying to say. I loved reading books that gave me insights into myself and the world, and ideas of who I could be in the world. I remember one Meeting for Worship when I reached clarity about an

aspect of my future. I knew that I didn't want to earn money for money's sake and that any job could be a job of service to others. That maybe I would earn money by delivering milk and that would be fine.

All these were moments I remember of being in the present, flowing with the Spirit. There were lots of times when I was not easily flowing with the Spirit, when I thought nobody liked me, when all I wanted to do was crawl away and lose myself in a book. I think that, as I grew up, the times I had with other young people from Quaker families drew me away from that isolation and may have helped me to feel a sense of belonging.

I went to Yorkshire Quaker Summer School for a few summers. This was like Junior Young Friend's camp. We had older Young Friends with us who modelled generosity, co-operation and friendship. We learned to listen to each other in discussion groups and appreciate that all of our different thinking was worth listening to. It was possible to explore relationships and stay awake late at night talking.

I remember an atmosphere of inclusion rather than competition. At Summer School we showed respect for each other, acknowledging that of God in each other. It was a space created for us to be 'of God', though I remember very little talk of God or spirituality. The barn (bush) dancing was the best!

### 3.3 Worship

We seek a gathered stillness in our meetings for worship so that all may feel the power of God's love drawing us together and leading us. *Advices and Queries 6.8*

Let meeting for worship nourish your whole life. *Advices and Queries 6.10*

**Meeting for Worship is where openly and fearlessly we can become united as a 'priesthood of all believers'<sup>19</sup> honouring the Spirit that flows through all creation, honouring God. A gathered meeting is more likely to be achieved if we each take on the responsibility of relaxedly holding the space. In that hour of worship we can take rest and ask the Spirit that flows through all Gaia to remind us of our true nature. However dry the Meeting, I've noticed in the days after that there is a little more Light in my life, things flow more easily, I make smoother, more useful decisions.**

This is where the heart of Quakerism is – ‘a way of worship which allows God to teach and transform us.’<sup>20</sup> This surely is a space from which leadings flow. But is it? And do they? Is this our experience of Quaker worship? If not what is needed for us to be open to being taught and transformed? What space do we need to provide so that we can be led by the Spirit into connection with our true selves?

I think that we need to come to Meeting with the intention of holding a space for the Spirit together with others. To do this we need not only humility but also courage. We need an awareness of our own personal worth, and of the responsibility we all share. We need to be prepared to take the risk of opening ourselves for a communion of that which is God within us all and which is throughout the whole universe. I think that when we talk about a gathered meeting this is what has been achieved.

My experiences of Meeting for Worship have varied. I have been at many Meetings where I have not been in touch with a sense of gathered stillness and I know it is often because I have been distracted. I have neither entered into worship with humility nor have I 'held' the meeting - I have not taken my share of responsibility. I am aware that I have heaps of internal clutter, a chattering mind full of worry or problem solving, and there doesn't seem to be any space at all, no room for Light to shine through my grimy windows.

Nonetheless my experience is that the act of coming to Meeting and sitting together with worshipping Friends 'cleans the windows'. It acknowledges that there is more to my life than the clutter and the grime on the windows. If I make the smallest effort to clean the windows, if I act on the faith that there is the divine beyond me by choosing to respect the space, then I am already more open to leadings in the rest of my life.

When I think about the Meetings where I have experienced the gathered stillness, it seems that a Meeting is gathered when many of us are taking responsibility for 'holding the space'. Meetings for Healing, in my experience, have usually been gathered and I think this is because we are all committed to holding people in the Light. We are in unity opening ourselves to the Light for our Friends.

There was one particular Meeting for Worship that I remember when a man came into the Meeting room in an unsettled way. He had some plastic bags with

him and he spoke angrily to us all. He found it hard to settle into the silence and repeatedly spoke despite requests not to. As the meeting went on an older Friend sat with him and touched him in a reassuring and friendly way and he settled down.

My desire was for him to be embraced by love and to relax quietly into the Meeting with us, to 'feel the power of God's love drawing us together' (though I was not aware of that Advice<sup>21</sup> at the time). I wanted to work on the gathered stillness: to pray for it, for him and for all of us. I also was putting my trust in the Spirit. I could have left because I was scared things were going to get ugly. I could have got up and remonstrated with him but I decided to be still and trust. I believe that many of us were doing the same. My experience at the end of the Meeting was that it was a deeply gathered Meeting. I believe that holding the space is making the decision to trust in the Spirit. It is deciding that this Meeting for Worship is for honouring the Spirit that flows through all creation, for honouring God. It is a time to give to God, to listen to the Spirit. Now is the Spirit's turn. (Of course it has been all week, but now I am stopping everything else to give very close attention.) This means cleaning the grime from the windows so that we can give attention to the Spirit.

To clean the grime I suggest to my chattering brain that it can relax and trust the Spirit, that flows through all of Gaia, to take charge of this next hour. It is " not my responsibility to do anything right now except be open to the Spirit. I let my body find a centred solid position to sit and I consciously relax my body. I give thanks for being in a restful space of worship and I notice all the people who are there. I have little messages of love and appreciation for people that go through my head (or is it my heart?) and the biggest message is of gratitude. How wonderful that they are there affirming for me that it is good for humans to sit together quietly trusting in a power much greater than themselves.

As the time goes by different thoughts flow into my mind. Some I hang onto and then realise that I am actually hanging on to them so I say to myself 'let go, let God'. Some thoughts just flow past and I hardly know they are there. Sometimes I realise that I have been miles away and I bring myself back to the present. Maybe I will say the words 'here I am' to the Spirit, offering all of myself. Sometimes a thought will come that gives me a bit of a jolt, sort of in my chest. 'Oh dear', I think, 'is this a call to minister?' I notice what the thought is and try to tell if it is a message for more than myself. If the jolting feeling continues I have learned to trust that the words should be said.

My experience is that giving spoken ministry is prompted by physical sensation as well as a mental conviction and it is followed by inner trembling and sometimes by outward 'quaking'. I feel fearful when it is time to speak but if I squash down a true call to minister it does not feel in 'right ordering'<sup>22</sup>. If I minister without humility from a righteous desire to preach I am also left with a sense of not being in right ordering. I have been confused by the times when I have been about to speak and someone else rises first. But often the other f/Friend expresses in different words the same message.

We need to treat the space that Meeting for Worship provides with love and confident respect. We can come with our anger<sup>23</sup>, as the Advice suggests, but we do not splatter it around. Instead we cradle our anger in the stillness asking for healing. Although Meeting for Worship is not therapy sometimes the Spirit does move someone to share their inner vulnerability and this leads the Meeting into greater depths and unity.

We can come with huge concerns about the state of the world, (or the state of the meeting or the state of our personal relationships) and hand them over to the Spirit. In that hour of worship it is not our job to sort out the injustice. Instead we can take rest and ask the Spirit that flows through all Gaia to remind us of our true nature. We can ask to be able to carry the still space into the whole of our lives, and to be truly led to respond to the needs of the world rather than react to what fills our hearts with fear, anger or righteous indignation.

Coming with hearts and minds prepared<sup>24</sup> to meeting means to me that we have taken time to clear away some clutter, to learn how to be aware and unafraid of our feelings and to treasure the space of connection. We have practised cleaning the windows and being in the present. We have refreshed our memory of our place within Gaia and will fearlessly choose to hold the space for the Spirit in Meeting seeking unity with all those gathered there.

I asked a Young Friend<sup>25</sup> what she understood by the phrase 'holding the space'. This is part of what she answered: 'I think that's what we all look for in Meeting and what connects us together. It's the most powerful and honest place within us. It's not a place that we can get to by force, it's somewhere we are moved to by the Spirit when we are open and fearless.' (My underlining)

### 3.4 Discernment

Are your meetings for church affairs held in a spirit of worship and in dependence on the guidance of God? Remember that we do not seek a majority decision nor even consensus. As we wait patiently for divine guidance our experience is that the right way will open and we shall be led into unity. *Advices and Queries. 6. 14*

When decisions have to be made, are you ready to join with others in seeking clearness, asking for God's guidance and offering counsel to one another. *Advices and Queries 6.27*

**Humans have a natural capacity to discern minute by minute what is in right ordering with the Spirit of creation. Because this capacity has not been encouraged, it is not something that comes easily. It is a skill that deserves practise. Friends' meetings for business and clearness meetings offer unique tools for decision making in partnership with the Spirit. We need to treasure, practise and model these tools. The practice involves holding a space for the Spirit with awareness. When there is not clearness there are guidelines we can refer to, such as our testimonies.**

Quakers make decisions based on discernment of what is being asked of the group by the Spirit. This is very exciting. I believe that group discernment in partnership with the Spirit as practised by Friends is a model of decision-making that could make a big difference for humans and for the well being of Gaia.

Group discernment is more likely to be effective if, as individuals, we nurture the space from which leadings flow. If we want our decisions to be Spirit-led this is the space that we need to consciously relax into. I say relax into because it involves a letting go, just as we let the tension in our muscles go when we relax physically, we need to let the tensions in our mind and heart go in order to be open to the Spirit. We need to clear the space so that we can discern the leadings of the Spirit.

Discernment for me means finding out what it is right for me to do and say in my life. If I am being my true self, working in harmony as another precious part of Gaia, how should I think, act or speak? What does God want of me? How am I being prompted by the Spirit? Is what I am planning 'in right ordering'? Discernment is the process of answering these questions.



Discerning leadings is easier when I am in an uncluttered mental space. For example, the thought that comes to me when I wake in the morning is worth paying attention to. Some thoughts that come to me after a good cry, shake or yawn in a Co-counselling session have been life-giving directions for me. Moments of clear connection to others and the earth have been followed by a sense of the next right step.

When our country decided to go to war in Iraq I was asked to speak on ABC Radio National news about our shop's decision to not pay 10 per cent of our tax. I was given 20 minutes warning and was very scared. Rather than cluttering my head with things I should say, I decided to plan nothing, to go to the radio station and trust that I would discern the right words. I rang a F/friend, asked her to hold me in the Light, and then I went there shaking and came out shaking even more. But I held a space of openness to the Spirit, and the words that came were good.

### Meeting for Worship for Business

Friends call our decision-making meetings Meeting for Worship for Business. It is an accurate label, and also a challenge. What we each have to bring is precious, and we each also have to be prepared to let go of what we bring to create the space for the Spirit to lead us all.

Most of us have the experience of making group decisions in other areas of our lives and are accustomed to other processes. We may not have had much practice of trying to listen to the Spirit in our own lives, of laying all our thoughts and feelings aside, and waiting on the Spirit.

This way of making decisions deserves more practice. It deserves more faith. It deserves commitment, persistence, experimentation, exploration and attention. It is important for the process of our Meetings for Business to be made explicit to anyone new to Friends. This includes fearlessly explaining that we are waiting on divine guidance.

The 350 years experience we have as Friends is valuable. We have evolved processes to help us to listen to the Spirit. When it comes to group decisions there are understandings of how to wait together in the Light. It is worth paying attention to these traditions and not re-invent the wheel. It makes sense to patiently follow those Friends who have had the most effective practice and experience in Quaker decision-making.

## Clearness Meetings <sup>26</sup>

Clearness meetings are a distinctly Quaker practice where Friends come together with those who are feeling a lack in clarity to help them discern the way forward. Clearness meetings can be called by anyone for any difficult decision in their lives. Those needing help can ask F/friends to help them or ask overseers of the meeting to arrange the clearness meeting. Clearness meetings create a space where all speak their truth into and out of the silence until there is clarity.

They are well known for being used by early Friends to discern whether the desire of two Friends to marry was 'in right ordering'. The practice carries some stigma of Elders telling and testing the young couple, and depriving them of their individual right to make the decision for themselves. This stigma is unfortunate.

Our feelings get confused in a sexual relationship. Being 'in love' is not a reliable feeling and not necessarily a leading from the Spirit. Before launching into a lifelong commitment and bringing children into the world it makes sense to ask for guidance from the Spirit. We can ask Friends to help us reach clarity that we are being our true selves in this relationship.

When I felt led to leave the community farm where we lived and Chris did not feel the same leading we took our lack of clearness about our way forward to a meeting for clearness with some Canberra F/friends. The clarity that came from the meeting was that Chris and I love each other and have a lifelong committed relationship, that I should move from the community farm and that he should stay there until he was ready to move. We had not expected a shared clarity with Friends about our relationship. The clearness meeting was an affirmation, with the support of Friends, of our love for each other and became the Quaker wedding that we never had.

## Rex Ambler's Experiments with Light <sup>27</sup>

I feel that the Spirit is moving us humans, to recognise our connection to Gaia and to learn more about our ability to flow with the Spirit of creation. It is not surprising that it is at this time that Rex has brought to our attention the experiments with Light process and that it has been embraced by many Friends in the UK, USA and Australia.

Rex's research led him to understand the process of opening to the Light used by early Friends and he had the courage to share his experience with others. The Light groups, that have formed in the last few years, are groups of Friends taking the four steps that early Friends took to discern the reasons for the struggles in their lives and how to move forward. These steps are: minding the Light; opening our hearts to the Truth; waiting in the Light; and submitting to the Truth.

Either as individuals or within groups Friends look into their own lives, the life of their Meeting, or of the world, and, by meditating on specific questions, the Light opens them to aspects that otherwise would have stayed buried. By learning to accept what they have been shown and how to respond they are able to come to understandings that lead to a clearer awareness of their true selves and their role in life. After the meditation time the group is a place to share the experience and give encouragement and support to each other.

### Guidelines for Clearness

Often I am not able to discern what the Spirit is asking of me. The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) <sup>28</sup> has some guidelines that help us move in a life giving direction. They are: respect for ourselves; caring for others; thinking before reacting; expecting the best; seeking a non-violent path. Guidelines I use in my life are: 'is this thought, word or action going to help my connection: with others; with Gaia; and with the Spirit of all creation that also flows through me?' Or we can turn to the Testimonies: 'is this thought, word or action in keeping with: simplicity, truth, equality and peace?'

## **3.5 Deepening our spiritual lives**

Do you try to set aside times of quiet for openness to the Holy Spirit?  
*Advices and Queries 6.3*

Take time to learn about other people's experience of the Light. As you learn from others, can you in turn give freely from what you have gained? While respecting the experiences and opinions of others, do not be afraid to say what you have found and what you value. *Advices and Queries 6.5*

**In solitude we can nurture our inner lives. Our spiritual lives are also deepened in close relationship with others. We benefit from being listened to with love and without judgement. When we pay attention to the actual listening we are nurturing the space where leadings flow. Spiritual Friendships, Quaker Basics, residential weekends, Meeting for Learning, Pendle Hill, Woodbrooke, silent retreats, courses such as Hearts and Minds Prepared, are available to us to deepen our spiritual lives.**

### The Inner Journey - Silent Retreat

We can create spaces in our inner lives to deepen our connection with the Spirit and with Gaia. William Penn said: 'Look not out, but within .... it is a still voice that speaks to us ... not to be heard in the noises and hurries of the mind; but it is distinctly understood in a retired frame.'

'Jesus loved and chose solitude, often going to mountains, to gardens, to seashores to avoid crowds and hurries; to show his disciples it was good to be solitary and *sit loose to the world.*'<sup>29</sup>

George Fox spent many months living quite a solitary life searching for guidance and in the end he heard words that spoke to his condition from within. Later he said to the congregation in Ulverston '...what can't thou say? Art thou not a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?'<sup>30</sup> To know what we can say it helps to have time with ourselves.

When I decided that I would write this lecture I arranged a week's silent retreat with Drew Lawson in Bendigo<sup>31</sup> to try and firm up my relationship with the Spirit. Drew, as a Quaker and Catholic spiritual director, provides a nurturing space to make the experience of silence fruitful. An interview with him each day helped me to accept what I was experiencing and to set an agenda for the next 24 hours. Waiting on the Spirit, practicing relaxing and being open in that context, took patience. Connection for me worked when I didn't try too hard, and when I wasn't merely filling the space with other activity to relieve boredom.

That space of relaxedly waiting is not generally a place that we are encouraged to enter and we do not get tuition or practice unless we take the opportunity offered by spiritual directors like Drew. My experience that week was not always comfortable. It wasn't easy, but I did come away with a sense of my faith being confirmed. I was led to a place where I was reminded that I am

connected with all of Gaia, that when I listen I am led by the Spirit. In any situation I can be open to and led by the Spirit.

Brother Lawrence<sup>32</sup> wrote about his experience of living in the presence of God. He became so used to being open to God that even when he was managing a busy kitchen he knew he was in the presence of God. So we don't need to take ourselves completely away but it does help to sometimes retreat from our busyness to explore our relationship with the creative Spirit.

### Spiritual Friends

Our fellowship after Meeting can be a space from which leadings flow. The secret to good fellowship is good listening. It is worth taking the risk of saying nothing and seeing what the other person has to say, or the risk of asking a question that feels as though it may be intrusive, or sharing something that seems private. This may feel embarrassing but that uncomfortable feeling is worth risking if it leads to a Spirit led connection. Spiritual Friendships<sup>33</sup> happen when two people arrange to listen to each other with respect and without judgement. The *Quaker Basics* course is based on such Friendships.

### Residential Weekends

The Friends who organise residential weekends are creating a space where we connect with that of God within each other, where we get a clearer sense of our true selves. They are nurturing the space from which leadings flow. The spaces of eating, exploring nature, playing games, singing songs, telling stories, worship and exploring set themes, remind us of what it is to be fully human together. That sense of our full humanness helps our connection with Gaia and the Spirit.

### Meeting for Learning

Meeting for Learning, an Australian Quaker creation, makes it possible for Friends to come together to learn more about being a Quaker, particularly in the area of listening - listening to that of God within us, listening to the Spirit and listening to that of God within each other. It's also a place where Friends can listen to the earth - to Gaia.

Meeting for Learning gives attention to that basic part of being a Quaker, that listening part, that part from which the testimonies flow.

By consciously listening we are being open to the Spirit with awareness.

When we pay attention to the actual listening we are nurturing the part of each of us that connects with the Spirit within all things.

We are paying attention to and honing the process of connection.

During my Meeting for Learning year I developed a better understanding of my worth as a human being. This helped my sense of being led to become clearer.

The two week-long retreats together with other F/friends were a time of paying attention to that of God within each other and helping each other to let go of the attitudes, thought patterns, and confusions that come between us and our connection to the Spirit, each other and Gaia. Setting aside a whole week away from our usual lives with regular worship times, topic times, silent times and sharing times creates a space that supports us being our true selves, and the topics of learning teach us about nurturing the space from which leadings flow.

The three-way listening times were particularly precious to me. My first experience of the listening in groups was scary. I knew that if I were given the opportunity to share my deepest self with people I would cry or shake or show ugly anger, righteous indignation and resentment. So, when it was my turn to be listened to, I started off by saying that I was scared that I would cry and that people would worry about me or pity me if I cried. As soon as I started sharing my fear I did cry and I was listened to with complete respect. My tears of grief, rage and fear were all welcome in those small listening circles.

In the three-way listening we were 'listening each other into being'. One of us was being listened to, another was encouraging that of God to flow within that person by asking questions or making encouraging statements and the third person was holding the process in the Light. We then swapped around so that we each had a turn in the different roles. There was an attitude of love, equality, and trust. I felt known 'in the things which are eternal'. Friends entered 'with tender sympathy into the joys and sorrows' of my life and were a 'channel for God's love and forgiveness'.<sup>34</sup>

The Meeting for Learning year also provided a space for me to provide spaces for others. It was during that year that I travelled in the ministry from far north Queensland down the east coast back to my home in south east NSW. I met

up with most of the F/friends who live outside state capitals on the eastern side of Australia, as well as with many F/friends in Brisbane, Sydney and Canberra. The support and encouragement that the Meeting for Learning tutors, students and support group gave me made it possible.

Early Friends who travelled in the ministry generally went in pairs. In the late 1600's The Valiant 60<sup>35</sup> were 30 pairs of Friends who travelled far and wide from the north west of England sharing the Quaker understanding of how we can all connect with the Spirit within. James Backhouse and George Walker<sup>36</sup> came to Australia together in the early 1800's. On most of his journeys John Woolman<sup>37</sup> took a Friend with him. I was anticipating being accompanied by Friend Annabel Cameron when I travelled in 2000. She died that year and I went alone, but not alone because the telephone kept me connected to the loving companionship of my Meeting for Learning Friends.

The space of trust created by Meeting for Learning was what I needed to remain true to myself, true to that of God within me as I travelled. It was tempting to feel over important or, at the other extreme, so humbled that I was not able to help hold a clear space for F/friends to consider this 'ministry of simplicity'. (It was not my ministry - it was ours. I went out with a concern from Canberra meeting because Canberra Meeting had adopted the concern.) That space of trust also helped in the writing of the simplicity testimony leaflet - my second Meeting for Learning project.

At Meeting for Learning I gained an understanding that some people have a need for symbol and ritual in order to connect with the Spirit. My understanding had been that it is intrinsic to Quakerism to empty ourselves of all internal and external clutter to be open to the Light. My personal experience is that symbol and ritual clutter the space and so I thought them alien to Quakerism. However I have begun to learn a tolerance and respect for other people's desire for symbol and ritual in their worship. For some the space of connection is created with, or sparked by, symbol or ritual.

### Woodbrooke College<sup>38</sup>

With help from the Thanksgiving Fund I spent the Autumn Term of 1998 at Woodbrooke Quaker College in England. It was a gift to be in a community of Friends devoting time in their lives to listening to the Spirit. We practised listening to each other; worship sharing being integral to much of the course work. We held the space for each other, consciously experiencing our individual

and group journey with the Spirit. I appreciated the mid term silent week. To choose silence and yet have company was good.

### 3.6 F/friendship with Joan Mobey

Do you cherish your friendships, so that they can grow in depth and understanding and mutual respect? In close relationships we may risk pain as well as finding joy. When experiencing great happiness or great hurt we may be more open to the working of the Spirit. *Advices and Queries 6.21*

**Joan and I meet on the telephone weekly to practise Re-evaluation Co-counselling<sup>39 40</sup> and then to study the Quaker Basics. We take it in turns to offload the emotional clutter that has mounted up in the last week while the other one listens, confident in the truth of our goodness and connection with all that is. We give each other permission to cry, laugh, shake, yawn etc. Using the natural process of releasing these emotions creates the space for clarity and openness to the Spirit. Friends are good at believing in each other's goodness. We need to overcome our fear of expressed emotion. After all we are called Quakers, so let us fearlessly quake and create safe places to encourage others to do so too.**

As well as being Quakers, Joan Mobey and I are members of the Re-evaluation Co-counselling Community. On Tuesday mornings she and I make ourselves comfortable in our separate homes - she in Sydney and I nine hours away in Bega - and we talk on the phone for an hour and a half. The first hour we co-counsel, taking it in turns to be 'client' first or second, and the last half hour we spend reading from the Quaker Basics material. One of us facilitates the Quaker Basics half hour taking the facilitator role in turns each week.

This is an important part of the week for me. The commitment that we have to each other helps me to stay committed to the Spirit. As our time together comes around each week I may be in a despairing miserable place (the ocean of dark). With Joan I am reminded of my true self (the ocean of Light).<sup>41</sup> When it is my turn to be 'client' I share with Joan what is going well in my life and what is hard. Her love for me and her faith in my inner strength breaks through my doubts and confusions. She encourages me to express the emotions that are there. And it is lovely to have someone who I have learned to trust to share my joys and excitements with.



If I am feeling angry she gives me permission to be angry. This could mean yelling or bashing a cushion. Usually the permission is enough to heal the anger and I dissolve into tears. If I am tired I don't have to force myself to do anything - I just let the feeling of tiredness wash over me. This often leads to yawning and stretching. When I am embarrassed or scared Joan knows that these are just feelings and she encourages me to allow the feelings to surface and to giggle or shake.

After half an hour of powerfully expressing emotion I may temporarily feel tired, but a vacuum has been created. There is a space for connection that is no longer clogged up with emotion. I feel stronger, my confidence is boosted and I have a greater capacity to love.

Buried feelings influence our thinking and actions without us realizing it. I have learned by practising Re-evaluation Co-counselling that at least 80per cent of the strong feelings that I experience now come from a long time ago. So instead of hurling my emotion at the current situation I cry about the time years ago when I was powerless to change the situation and was having similar emotions. I practise thinking powerfully and creatively about the current situation.

Sometimes I decide to have a 'think and listen time' where I explore different ways of thinking about things. Joan encourages my thinking. She never judges or gives advice. She asks questions and may give information. Having her attention, her love, while I think out loud helps me to reach understandings about the way forward. It is like a mini clearness meeting and I get a sense of where the Spirit is leading me.

When it is Joan's turn to be client I listen to her in a relaxed way. I have learned that once she has expressed how hard things are she is able to work out what needs to happen in her life. Occasionally I ask her what in the past her current feelings remind her of or I remind her how loveable and good she is, how intelligent she is, and I praise or encourage her when she yawns, laughs or shakes because I know that it is important to feel safe to express emotion. In our culture expression of emotion is usually discouraged and it is not easy to let it out with others unless there is safe acceptance.

Being the listener is a wonderful practice of holding someone in the Light. All the while I am remembering Joan's goodness, that of God within her. I feel no responsibility for sorting things out for her. I trust that she and the Spirit are in charge. My role is to listen, to love, to give permission and encouragement for the

expression of emotion, to nurture the space for her to be her true self in all the wonderful diversity that goes into making Joan be the human that she is.

This is not always easy. I am a qualified community nurse, Joan is an octogenarian with disabilities caused by having polio when she was three. Sometimes it is tempting to interrupt and give advice. However I have learned that she can take charge of her own life and she doesn't need me to rescue her. But she does need me to accept her, believe in her and listen to her. The regular practice of paying loving, non-judgmental attention to all my co-counsellors, Quakers or not, helps me to stay in the Light with my attention away from the addictive clutter (the ocean of dark).

Modern affluent society encourages fear of expressed emotion, just as it teaches us to be fearful of some sorts of spiritual experience. We are taught to be afraid of what looks like mental and emotional instability. We are afraid that we may be going mad or someone else is going mad, when what is actually happening is the natural release of a true person from a pile of clutter.<sup>42</sup>

Rather than hiding these emotions, or trying to circumvent them, it is important to experience them fully, and work our way through them so that we can find healing from our hurts. If we lose a loved one we are probably not handling it well unless we get to sob deep gut wrenching sobs. Only by experiencing the grief will we get beyond it. We need to go through it to heal from the hurt. When a Pitjantjatjara neighbour of ours died, the wailing at his camp went on for over 24 hours. In our culture this is not encouraged, indeed it is often discouraged and the result is a population of humans struggling for connection with the Spirit through mountains of clutter.

We all have hard things happen in our lives. We make mistakes. Other people make mistakes. There is tragedy and loss. I am convinced that without the safe space to process my joys and sorrows that is created by Co-counselling with Joan and other co-counsellors I would not have the clarity and strength to be my true self in my life as much as I am.

Our feelings and emotions are part of what makes us human. I don't think they should be ignored or suppressed. If they are we become less clear in our thinking - less connected to the Spirit - or even sick. However it is not useful to spread our emotions all over the place. People find it confusing and it can create more upset. We need to create safe places for each others expression of emotion and healing from hurt.

It is rather like training a child to use a toilet. We want the child to get rid of their poo and wee in a safe way. We don't want them to hang onto it and we don't want them to splatter it all over the place. Co-counselling helps me to get rid of the old pent up emotions within me without splattering them all around. Co-counselling sessions are a safe space for transforming internal clutter into creativity, or compassion, in the way that a composting toilet turns human waste into nourishing compost.

The time that Joan and I spend reading the Quaker Basics Manual has been useful. Currently I read very little. It has been good to have company and a structure for looking at the writings. Without those I would not have gained the insights nor the affirmation of my faith that some of the writings have given me. I am surprised how often the readings speak to my condition. Having Joan's responses to the readings as well as my own is invaluable. She will see something that I don't and so increase my understanding.

Joan and I have a precious relationship. We both feel supported by it and as the time goes by it becomes deeper as our trust in each other, in the space created by the process, and in the Spirit grows. This lecture has been written in close communication with Joan. Her confidence in my ability to be led by the Spirit has been part of what has made the writing fun rather than a chore.

## 4. Quaker testimonies - following our leadings

### 4.1 How I have been led to live

Try to live simply. A simple lifestyle freely chosen is a source of strength. Do you keep yourself informed about the effects your style of living is having on the global economy and environment? *Advices and Queries 6.41*

Remember your responsibilities as a citizen for the conduct of local, national and international affairs. Do not shrink from the time and effort your involvement may demand. *Advices and Queries 6.34*

**I have been led to explore the simplicity testimony - creating inner simplicity to be open to the Spirit and living outward simplicity as much in harmony with Gaia as possible. The following areas of my life are influenced by my struggle to live a life that is connected to the Spirit and that minimises my ecological footprint on the planet: having fun, giving space for the Spirit, shelter (our current home and our plans for the Bega Eco Neighbourhood), food, clothes and furniture etc, money and work, politics, transport and holidays, and community.**

Many events and people in my life have been signposts and support on my path to a more simple life. I will mention five of these:

- I was eight years old when our family moved from a middle class suburb in the south of England to a mining village in the north of England and I learned at a gut level that I was privileged. This led me to make a commitment to myself that I would never have more materially than any of my working class primary school friends.
- The man I was led to share my life with, and to have children with, Chris Allen, seems to also be on this path. Of all the people I know he is one of the least compelled to consume and also he is devoted to caring for the earth.

- Living amongst the Pitjantjatjara people gave me an understanding of humanity's deep connection with the earth.
- Choosing to leave my homeland and my family on the other side of the world I have learned how to hold people and places in my heart. I can have them clearly in my mind whenever I want them so I don't crave always to be somewhere else with someone else.
- I acquired the disability, cranial dystonia, that challenges me throughout the day to be still. The spasm also makes it hard for me to drive. This has helped me to live in a way that is not dependent on a motor car.

I've tried to create inner simplicity and to live a life of simplicity in these ways:

#### Having fun:

These are times for me of being fully human - connection with Gaia, with the Spirit. Reaching consensus in a challenging meeting, celebrating successes, going for long walks, making music, sharing birthday parties, going to local concerts and performances, sharing people's lives with them, visiting the ocean every week, playing games, organising special events for special people, being close with Chris, weekends when we get together with family. These are all things that I do manage to fit into my life. I can be suddenly full of gratitude when I have an unexpected visit from Lyzzy, my daughter-in-law, with some neighbours' children whom she cares for - Eli and Llew, or Jarrah.

#### Giving space for the Spirit:

Perhaps neither watching TV nor reading national newspapers gives space to the Spirit. When I am at home alone it is usually quiet. I prefer not to have background noise. This is largely because of my spasm which tends to kick in if there is too much stimulation. However my brain seems to be more able to come back to the Spirit, to the desire to walk in the Light, more readily when there is less going on.

I spend a while getting to sleep each night. I need time for the spasm, which is now affecting my left arm, to settle down and this is the time of saying to my arm and then to the whole of me I be still and know that I am God'. When worries

crowd in I say 'let go and let God' and it's as if the whole of me very gradually shuts down and I go to sleep.

The Bega Valley Worshipping Group now meets twice a month and we have Meetings for Business every three months. I join with the local Buddhist Vipassana meditators on Wednesday mornings before breakfast. When Chris and I sit down to eat, the silent grace we share gives me the experience of deep relaxation and awareness of how blessed we are to have each other, a roof over our heads and delicious food grown by good people in Gaia's soil.

### Shelter:

We have a small house (by Australian standards) where we have insulated in the roof and under the floor to reduce the need to burn fossil fuels. We have solar heated hot water and a system that drains our bath and shower water onto the garden. We choose the more expensive ecologically friendly, less toxic paints and varnishes. We are both founding members of the Bega Eco Neighbourhood Developers (BEND <sup>43</sup>) a not-for-profit association with the aim to establish a street in Bega where it is possible for residents to not only reduce their ecological footprint but also enhance the environment by returning human waste safely to the earth and power to the grid.

When we and the other 30 odd households are living there we will be collecting and re-using all our own waste and water. We will not be connected to the mains water or sewerage. We will also be collecting solar energy and contributing electricity to the grid. Our houses will be built of materials that have as little embodied energy as possible and will all be designed for passive solar heating. The neighbourhood will be just another street in Bega with the difference that it will demonstrate that it is possible for everyone in the world to live in a relatively comfortable house without using more resources than the earth can sustain.

The Neighbourhood Association will be responsible for seeing that, if anyone needs help managing their composting toilets etc, support will be organised. Because we are managing our own water, sewerage, electricity etc. we will be less dependent upon the Council and more aware of how our lives impact on the environment. The shared responsibility of managing the neighbourhood will lead to more interaction with our neighbours and will probably encourage a sense of community.

BEND has bought the land and the Council has approved the Development Application. Our sense is that the timing of this project has been right in terms of getting the support from Council who see it as something positive for Bega. BEND has had over 100 members, most of whom do not plan to live there but who want to support the vision becoming a reality. We would like to avoid the scenario of an up market neighbourhood and aim to make it inclusive and have one third of the Lots available for rental accommodation. The whole of the project has operated mainly on private loans and some grants with approximately 25 local people being the key players using consensus decision-making.

#### Food:

I am daily challenged by a sugar addiction. However, I try to take responsibility and see that I am a healthy part of Gaia. Chris and I are not strict vegetarians, but we don't eat much meat. The meat we do eat is local or organic. This is true of almost all the food we eat. We aim to eat local produce, in season, organically grown and unpackaged. Chris and I are not brilliant at growing our own food but we do have a vegie patch. The BEND neighbourhood includes land held in common for community supported agriculture and it is hoped, in line with permaculture principles, that a lot of food for the residents will be produced right there.

I work in a bulk wholefoods shop. The shop is stocked with food that fits into the categories above and also food that is required by people with special needs and that is not available in super markets. Selling in bulk means a reduction in packaging and that people can buy the precise quantity they want. Though we do sell local produce, there is not enough produced locally to meet the demand. There is a Farmers market once a month in Bega.

#### Clothes, furniture etc:

I appreciate colour and beauty but don't seem to have the confidence or patience to spend time thinking much about clothes so a while back I decided to stick with blue. We buy most of our clothes from second hand 'op shops'. Shoes, socks and undies are the only things I buy new. All of our furniture, crockery, cooking utensils etc. are either gifts we have received or second hand. As for electrical equipment; we have a computer, a laptop, two phone lines, a twin tub washing machine, a stereo with a radio, a small fridge, but no freezer, microwave, or television.

## Money and work:

We bank with a not for profit community owned credit union and our superannuation is with the Australian Ethical Superannuation Fund. Chris and I both work part-time. By sharing housing and land with others, and by Chris building one house, and with some help from family finances we have not needed to work full-time to payoff a mortgage.

Working part-time was a leading that came to me when I was at university. I was studying to be a social worker and it became clear to me that I would rather work as a community worker empowering people at the grass roots. The more I learned about community work the clearer it became to me that I would like to do it as a member of the community and not for money. So I decided to learn to be a nurse. Nursing would be a way of earning money part time anywhere in the world and I would have the time to do community work voluntarily.

However I got waylaid by midwifery and the joy of empowering women to be their true powerful selves as they gave birth. For four years in the 80's I worked full-time as a community nurse and midwife and Chris looked after Ailsa and Peter when they were little. (Sharing our parenting and all household jobs has been an important part of our relationship).

A system operating in many parts of the world is the Local Employment and Trading Scheme (LETS).<sup>44</sup> In Bega we trade our skills and labour with others in a local LETS economy that is not debilitated by interest rates or debt. A friend of ours built her small cottage under the LETS system and is paying it off over time. Bega Valley LETS also has regular small working bees in different parts of the valley. These include a shared lunch and much fun. Less money often means more time, and more time means more space for community. More community means more help from others and the need for less money.

The wholefoods shop, my work place for 18 years, is a not-for-profit workers co-operative with everyone working part-time and everyone being paid the same hourly rate. It is a privilege to earn my money by providing a service to people who care about what they eat, how it is produced, and where it comes from and also to work co-operatively.



We have very little superannuation and no private pensions or insurance. We will retire from work with our own house and will be dependent on state pensions. Having lived on a low income for most of our lives we are taking the risk of not saving for our old age. It's true that there is a high chance that we will inherit money. I wonder what we will do about that. I am encouraged by the Douglas Smith's statement; 'This brought me to the financial level of the old age pensioner, but with no regret. The pension leaves us room for happiness, contentment and laughter. Compared with an Indian or African peasant, our pensioner is princely rich'.<sup>45</sup>

## Politics

I stood as one of the Green candidates in the last local government election. My platform was grass roots democracy - one of the Greens' four principles. My sense is that if we each are aware of our value as unique human beings we will act more from 'that of God within us'. In many areas of my life I put energy into empowering people. Part of my privilege as a white middle class person is to have increased access to power and I want to share that.

## Transport and holidays:

This is an area where my footprint is far greater than my share. Since my father died I travel by air to the UK every two years to visit family - particularly my mother. Recently I also have been flying from the Bega Valley to Sydney or Melbourne, rather than taking the nine-hour bus journey. I'm not at peace with this arrangement and I rationalise it by saying that I have supported Chris to plant thousands of trees that may give me some carbon credits. I would prefer to decide that we have the time to travel by bus and not use jet travel within Australia. Otherwise our holidays are usually local. It's not hard in the beautiful Bega Valley to have a good camping holiday.

Our home is very central to Bega so I am able to walk to work, to the bus stop, to choir practice, to the dentist etc. This is good for my precious body as well as for Gaia and it means that I get to meet people. Some of the local Indigenous people that I know meet in the gardens that I walk through on my way to work. It's a good way to keep in touch with many different people. I just need to make sure that I leave home with an extra 10 minutes for chatting on the way.

## Community:

Chris and I have always been involved in many community activities. Currently I am involved with BEND, The Re-evaluation Co-counselling Community, Heartsong Choir, Bega Valley Worshipping Group, The Bega Greens, The Bega Chamber of Commerce, The Bega Area Committee of the Council, The Environment Network Centre, The Faith and Environment Group, The Candelo Arts Society, and so it goes on! All these groups and activities bring me into contact with many different communities within the Bega Valley and I am glad that I know folks from all the different strata of Bega society. And of course we have circles of family, friends and neighbours especially the family around the corner with five young people between the ages of 2 and 14 whom I lived with for three years.

It is a full life and in many ways right that it should be so at this point in our lives. However it is a challenge to remember to eat well, sleep well and be open to the Spirit. Attempting to live with integrity is a struggle. It brings us into conflict with those who are comfortable with the status quo. There have been times when my thinking about the way forward has not been shared by others. Once or twice this has stretched my patience beyond its limits, and often my desire to be compassionate with all people is challenged.

## **4.2 Twenty-first Century Quakerism**

Are you open to the healing power of God's love? Cherish that of God within you, so this love may grow in you and guide you. *Advices and Queries 6.2*

Live adventurously. When choices arise, do you take the way that offers the fullest opportunity for the use of your gifts in the service of God and the community? Let your lives speak. *Advices and Queries 6.27*

Attend to what love requires of you which may not be great busyness. *Advices and Queries 6.28*

**There is hope for the human race if we choose to develop our connection with Gaia, and live our lives daily in relationship with the Spirit of creation. Friends can**

**make an important contribution to the world by honing our practice of listening to the Spirit for guidance, and demonstrating it in our lives.**

**Six areas we can address:**

- **Choosing to be our true selves in the context of Gaia - We will benefit from listening to Indigenous Australians and from informing ourselves about how our life style is impacting on Gaia.**
- **Downsizing - We each need to make a stand against the consumerism that is destroying human community and destroying the earth.**
- **Living the Testimonies - every aspect of our lives can be a testimony to our faith.**
- **Refusing to act on our feelings of despair - we can learn from the Spirit what is meant of us and practise the courage of making changes that are uncomfortable.**
- **Bringing about change - the important work of the Society of Friends is to support individuals to live lives that flow with the Spirit of creation.**
- **Being Friends in the Truth - We can use Quaker processes and Quaker wisdom to support each other in being our true selves.**

### Choosing to be our true selves in the context of Gaia

This is something that we can practise and learn from Indigenous cultures. The effect of genocide on Indigenous Australians has been so great that the information about the practice and experience of spiritual connectedness and listening to Gaia is not easily available. Most Indigenous Australians are also engulfed in the false messages and mire of affluent consumer society. However, only 200 years ago or less they lived in groups that were consciously dependent upon and deeply connected with Gaia. We have a lot to learn from Indigenous Australians. We can play the powerful role of listening - of helping to hold the space in their lives for the Spirit.

It is important to inform ourselves and face what our lifestyle is doing to Gaia and our fellow humans. When we research the size of our ecological footprint<sup>46</sup> we can see how aspects of our lives use up the earth's resources. Minding the Light, opening to the Truth, waiting in the Light and submitting to the Truth will lead us to changes that may seem small to begin with, but my sense is that every smallest step in the direction of the Truth gives Gaia a sigh of relief

and brings relief into our lives too.

## Downsizing

Being led by the Spirit is not only about big decisions in our lives. It is also about discerning how to be our true selves in the fine detail of our lives. Leadings apply to every waking moment. If we see leadings in this context and if we see ourselves in the context of the whole of Gaia - every atom that goes to make up Gaia - and if we act on those leadings then we will continue to make changes to our lives in ways that will be helpful to Gaia and the human species she sustains.

Living this way is swimming against the tide of consumerism that dominates the world we live in. It is not easy. However we are not alone. There are groups, magazines and web sites for people who have been led to explore downsizing their lives and creating community. FairShare International <sup>47</sup> is one such organisation, with one or more Quakers as founding members.

We are finding that building community around us and at the same time downsizing our lifestyle is fun. This is something that we each need to keep doing in our own lives. It is an ongoing process and it is like unilateral disarmament. We need to take the risk. Without waiting for everyone else, we need to make a stand against the greed and consumerism that is destroying human community and the earth. Everyone might not be doing it yet, but many are. The Australia Institute<sup>48</sup> recently did a survey and discovered that 20per cent of Australians have downsized in the last decade<sup>49</sup> and this does not include those returning to education or starting a family.

I give this information to encourage us, as individuals, to reach out to other Australians. I think that deep down all Australians would prefer the fun and struggles of connection to Gaia, each other and the Spirit, to the false security and comfort promised by affluence.

We need to address the spiritual poverty in the affluent streets where we live by developing community. Street parties, car pooling, sharing the tasks of creating compost heaps, growing vegetables, visiting the sick and the lonely, will help build the connection that we all yearn for. Helen Steven says 'I came home from Vietnam convinced that the real task of development lies at home at our own door.'<sup>50</sup>

## Testimonies

When I pay attention to Young Friends I notice the importance they give to aspects of 'that of God within us'. Young Friend's commitment to fun and play, music, caring, and plenty of physical closeness I see as a witness to our true nature. It is a testimony to the importance of love and connection in their lives and it speaks to me. I learn from it.

Every aspect of our lives can be a testimony to our faith. Whether we want it or not our lives do speak. Every minute aspect of our lives is an expression of how the Spirit is flowing through us, of how connected to the Spirit we are, of how true to our true selves we are being. As Friends in Truth our lives could be the message the world needs.

My mother uses the acronym STEP when thinking about Quaker testimonies. Living the testimonies means taking steps towards living a life true to that of God within us, living the Kingdom of God here and now. One way of looking at how the testimonies connect is to take the steps from Simplicity to Truth to Equality to Peace. Simplicity provides the space for our connection with Truth that leads us to live Equally with others which leads to Peace and then back to Simplicity.

My understanding is that Peace will not come in the world while Gaia and the humans she sustains are not treated with Equal respect. Only when those of us who are privileged in the 'western' world submit ourselves to the Truth of the basis and consequences of our privilege will we have the courage to do the downsizing that is necessary for there to be Equal respect for all peoples. If we nurture the space from which leadings flow we will be practicing the Simplicity required to be able to submit to the Truth.

### Refusing to act on our feelings of despair

We, in 'western society', are materially privileged. We are depriving others and altering the nature of Gaia. The alterations to Gaia are such that many species are inevitably becoming extinct, and our own human species is also threatened. This is a hard fact to sit with, to submit ourselves to. Truth can hurt.

We live in a society that teaches us to avoid discomfort and to numb out pain physical, mental and emotional hurts. I suggest that these painful feelings are 'of God' and that the fully human way of dealing with them is to feel them with

the support of others. Not to drown in the 'ocean of dark' but to make our way through it to the 'ocean of Light'. We need to wait in the Light when the feelings get bad and submit ourselves to the Truth so that we can learn what is meant of us and go on to practise the courage of making the changes that are uncomfortable.

I would like to see society completely revolutionised and I want to see it happen non-violently. I have wanted this for as long as I can remember and I am aware that I won't see it in my lifetime. However, by letting myself grieve my way through the huge waves of disappointment, despair and hopelessness that come up, I have continued to have the hope that is necessary to be aware of the ocean of Light, and to keep trying to live a life of goodness, truth and beauty. Despair is a feeling, not a fact. We don't need to act on despair; we need to act on faith, hope and love.

### Individuals bring about change

My sense is that changes come through the lives of individuals. To quote Rufus Jones: 'I pin my hopes to quiet processes and small circles in which vital and transforming events take place'.<sup>51</sup> Experiencing the courage of individual Friends and the testimonies to the Grace of God in individual people's lives has been far greater inspiration for me than the stories of Quaker protests, Quaker Service projects, and all the busy committees of Friends. It is the courage of those individual people that gives me courage.

What we do in all our individual Quaker lives makes a much bigger difference than what we do as a Quaker organisation. We have no way of quantifying the effect that our lives have on other people. We probably underestimate the support and encouragement that we give to others who are also trying to live a life that flows with the Spirit of creation. We probably have no idea about the folk whose lives have changed through knowing us.

It is sometimes easier to give money to an organisation to carry out improvements in the world than it is to make small uncomfortable changes in our own lives. There are many organisations that we can support, and it makes sense to do so if we have the spare money, but we need to also make the changes in our own lives. Making those changes: being open to the Light so that we allow ourselves to be led to live lives in harmony with Gaia is not easy. We need support.

In Australia the Society of Friends is very small. It makes no sense to expect our organisation to do much more than the work of supporting individuals to live lives that flow with the Spirit of creation.

It is a big job to support us all to walk in the Light, to live in the presence of God, to live a life under the guidance of the Spirit. It is unrealistic to expect much more than that from our corporate body. As individuals we can support well-founded aid organisations, peace groups, groups who support asylum seekers and refugees, and groups who are working to promote and protect the environment. As an organisation we can do the work that is almost unique to us: the work of nurturing the space where leadings flow.

### Friends in the Truth

We Quakers call ourselves a priesthood of all believers because we have no priests, and instead we all are priests. We all take responsibility for nurturing the space for the Spirit in our own lives, in each other's lives and in the life of the meeting. This does not mean that we can't also sometimes be a lost member of the congregation seeking reassurance and guidance.

Nurturing is a powerful thing - not sloppy, soft or wishy-washy. Neither is it urgent or over-protective. Nurturing comes from a place of love, respect for your role, and commitment to right ordering. It demands faith, firmness and courage. It means being your true self.

We are all engulfed within the wider human society. The messages from advertising and the media generally, and in many school play grounds and in work places, say we need to have more - more goods, more money, more holidays, more property, more sex. It is hard for any of us to be our true selves within this context. Can we help each other remember that the truth about us is that we really want more connection?

Being Friends in the Truth to me implies nurturing the space for the Truth to enter, nurturing the space for connection. For example, we may be driven or pulled by the clutter of guilt, duty, fear, or addiction to busyness, to want to work for peace. If we wait in a clear space for the leadings of the Spirit then we will be led to speak and act as our true selves working with the Spirit for peace and justice for all peoples and for all of the earth.

This may mean saying 'no' to what looks like important work that we are ideally suited for. It may mean spending a lot of time getting our own inner lives in order and not appearing to achieve anything. And it may mean suddenly taking on something that feels much too big for us.

Waiting is so hard. I once wondered if some Friends are called weighty because they have learned to wait! It is faith that helps us to wait, faith that we will be led, faith that the Spirit can reveal the truth to us. And often clearness will come without waiting. To know whether it is of the Spirit depends on different things but if we know ourselves well and watch our responses to different situations we will learn whether an urge to do or say something is our true selves responding or some of our internal clutter responding.

Thank heavens there is the Society of Friends to help us along. We have each other's support in discerning what is 'in right ordering' for us. Though we may each be led in different ways, we must still consciously, persistently and lovingly help each other by nurturing the space for Truth.



## 5. Conclusion

Hold yourself and others in the Light, knowing that all are cherished by God. *Advices and Queries* 6.3

I'd like to see us practise listening to the Spirit, waiting in the Light, and learning minute by minute what we need to do to be our true selves within Gaia, remembering that wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we are cherished by God.

Right now we humans belong here as part of Gaia. We are lucky to be a part of such intricate complexity, to be able to witness the beauty and wonder of it all.

However it is easy for us to lose touch with this truth. As a species we are blundering around destroying the very basis of our existence and causing deep suffering to each other. We each play a part in this.

This behaviour does not reflect the truth about ourselves. It merely demonstrates that we are not behaving true to form. If we were being true to form we would be loving and co-operative, using our amazing intelligence to ensure that all humans have the basic rights of clean air, food, water, shelter, respect and dignity without causing any harm to Gaia.

Every small child understands these human rights. Children have a clearer understanding of what it is to be our true selves and they can tell when we are not.

We are our true selves when we are connected to the Spirit, to each other and to Gaia. This connection is not something that is huge and unattainable. It is completely natural and can be as easy as switching on a light.

Being connected to the Spirit is nothing more than listening to the promptings of love and truth in our hearts. This is something that all humans do, but not always with awareness or intention.

We need to understand the clutter that gets in the way of this connection. We need to be able to recognize when the clutter is speaking and when we are being our true selves. We need to hold a space free of the clutter so that we can be led by the Spirit.

It is only clutter that makes us crave the false security and comfort that affluent society tempts us with. We can choose to clear the clutter away and think, speak and act as our true selves. Our true selves will insist on living in right ordering with Gaia.

It is not easy to be our true selves, fully connected to Gaia, each other and the Spirit. We need support. This lecture has been about ways of nurturing the space of connection. I want us to consciously, continuously and persistently practise holding this space for anyone we come into contact with, and for ourselves.

Quakerism is the understanding that we each can connect with the Spirit and live lives in the Truth. Friends have experience of nurturing the space where leadings flow. This experience is reflected in our writings.

'Knowing all are cherished by God'. Everyone fully belongs here in Gaia and we are all in this moment irreplaceable. This knowledge, at a gut level, can completely alter our lives. To have a sure sense of being cherished gives us the security to risk not being treasured by some people; to risk being peculiar; to risk being our true selves in the world; to risk a life led by the Spirit.

Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we are cherished by God. How does it feel to hold that space... the space of being cherished by God? What would change in your life if you could hold the clarity that God (or the Spirit, or whatever you understand as being the loving creative force in the universe) treasures you? How would it be to hold that space for everyone you know and for the whole of Gaia?

We all deserve to have a sense of being cherished. In that space our leadings will flow. We will be supported in being our true selves.

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