

Quakers and Their Simplicity Testimony in 2000

Jenny Spinks approached her Regional Meeting, Canberra, with her leading to speak to Australian Friends about the Testimony of Simplicity, and living simply. She wrote an article about her leading:

Our culture encourages us to consume more and more. This makes us poorer spiritually by depleting the quality of our connections with each other, the earth and the spirit. These connections are what bring us greatest fulfilment. The global emphasis on materialism severely threatens the environment and human relations at many levels. It is part of our commitment as Friends that we try to live our lives under the guidance of the spirit. We have our testimonies of truth, peace, equality and simplicity. We have our processes for business, worship and clearness. We are well positioned globally to reach out to our affluent neighbours and offer well practiced alternatives to consumerism. Living the simplicity testimony improves our sense of wellbeing and the well-being of the planet. We benefit from giving priority to our spiritual connections and thus resist the seductive pull of materialism. We can support each other as we try to live our lives with integrity

A quote from a recent minute of an elders meeting in Canberra says 'a simple life is one focussed on the Spirit'. A minute on resource conservation and population from Friendship Monthly Meeting USA says "Knowing that developed nations use a disproportionate amount of the world's resources we urge Friends and others as stewards of the earth to find ways to live more simply... Let us all try to live so as to tread lightly on the earth".

Living simply helps us to "remove the occasion for all war" (George Fox); it helps us to deepen our spiritual lives; it connects us with the earth, improving our relationship with indigenous peoples; it helps us to develop meaningful community and reach out. I think we can look at simplicity from two angles--outer simplicity (living simply) and inner simplicity (focusing on the spirit). In my experience these two can work together--the one leading to the other in a spiral fashion. Early Friends understood the whole of life to be a testimony and it was based upon the understanding that we can be led by godde in all we do, (or we can choose 'to walk in the light' or 'to live in harmony with the great spirit of creation' or 'to live with sincerity' whichever semantics appeal to you).

I understand that living the simplicity testimony means - to decide to walk in the light; to make this a constant priority, a simple (though hard) priority. Each person's experience of making this decision will be different and we will all have different answers to similar choices in our life. No one way is the correct way. However my experience is that doing it -- making the decision -- actually letting go and letting godde- - relaxing faithfully into the Light can be very exciting and bring deep inner peace and joy.

I asked Aziz Pabaney, an elderly Indian Friend who visited here in '97, how we would decide what to do with the resources that would be liberated if we could convince people living in western society to live more simply and stop hogging the earth's resources. He said that I needed to understand that we in western society don't need to be living simply in order to help the third world, we need to be doing it for ourselves--we need to reclaim our connections with each other, the earth and godde. We in the western world are alienated from these basic human experiences that can bring us joy. He wants us to live more simply and sustainably for our own spiritual fulfilment.

Simple and sustainable living is effective when we are connected to each other; when we work together in community, and when we are connected with the earth; when we are closer to our food sources. People in the world who live in this way experience a happiness and fulfilment that we are deprived of-that deep sense of belonging that comes with those connections and that encourages a faith in godde, or the light, or the universal spirit. So living the simplicity testimony is not a series of personal sacrifices for the good of others. It is choosing a path that leads to our own inner wellbeing, and more joy in our lives. I believe that it does not help us to be hard on ourselves and act out of guilt. Instead we can see it as an exciting challenge to make it a priority to increase those connections in our lives and see how that improves our sense of inner wellbeing and, as a beautiful side effect, reduces the inequalities in human society helping to create a culture of peace.

Following are some words that came out of the simplicity workshop I led during summer school at YM 2000: 'Building a strong witness to simplicity as individuals and Meetings may offer a new focus for Australian Friends. Our affluent society is crying out for simplicity. Quakers could be offering guidance and a welcome to the joys of simplicity. This witness could form a basis for outreach in today' world, in the way our peace testimony has drawn people to us. Simplicity connects us with our Quaker roots and brings all generations together.'

Margaret Fell said 'we are a people that follow after those things that make for peace, love and unity'. This is still true and we have to be prepared, as she was, to risk losing all our material security as we follow after those things. What we gain is a deep inner trust in the spirit. Let's take the risk and support each other as we take it.

- Jenny Spinks