

The State of the Society, Australia Yearly Meeting, Canberra, January 2009.

Trish Roberts, Canberra Meeting.

Dear Friends, reading the reports from Regional Meetings in preparation for this talk felt to me like hearing spoken ministry in meeting for worship. My response to those reports also felt like the kinds of musings and sparks of illumination which might also take place in worship. I ask you to receive what I say in the same way as you would receive spoken ministry – that some of it might speak to your condition and some of it might not.

There are similar things happening across meetings. Outreach is one, particularly the Quaker Quest. Study sessions have taken place, some with formal programs such as Hearts and Minds Prepared, and You and the Quaker Tradition, while others include topics such as Heritage, the Underground Railway, Elizabeth Fry, the work of Parker Palmer and the less formally named “Learning about Stuff”.

Apart from the education and spiritual nurture of children, meetings are trying to observe the requirements of standards of care, and of being able to fill the roster with adults who hold appropriate designations such as the Blue Card or the Working with Children card.

A couple of items in the reports particularly caught my attention. One is the Meeting for Stitching, something different to our usual concerns, and which will create a tangible object, which shows our Quaker life and times. Another is the category of sojourning membership. This is a way of acknowledging the membership of a Friend, who remains in membership in their home meeting but who is living elsewhere and worshipping with another meeting for a significant period of time. I was a sojourning member for four years with Clear Creek unprogrammed meeting, Richmond, IN. I participated fully in the life of the meeting, serving on committees and as Assistant Clerk, while maintaining membership and links with Canberra Meeting.

The reports reveal that meetings are trying to grapple with climate change in practical ways. These include providing funding for installation of a rainwater tank and solar photovoltaic cells. Other considerations include the impact of travel. The cost of petrol is becoming a limiting factor in some Friends being able to attend Meeting for Worship. We may need to address this further in the future.

I notice that one meeting has laid out its activities as “worship, reminiscences, sharing of friendship and food.” I like these, as they are naming essential qualities I regard as contributing to the vibrant and successful life of meetings. To these qualities I would add addressing conflict, and there is evidence of this in several of the reports. I am reminded that it is not required that we can always resolve conflict; what is required is a willingness to address conflict, and this is happening.

The traditional question asked of meetings is “How has Truth prospered among you?” to which I would add a spiritual director’s questions, “What gives us life? What feeds our Spirit?”

There are comments in the reports about the level of busyness in our meetings and I wonder if all of it does indeed feed our Spirit. The reports ask: are we overburdening individuals and overworking committees? Could we work more effectively? One report mentions the tension between contemplation and action; the challenge of trying to find balance between busyness and opportunities “to be.” The report asks: Might this lead to a reduction in the diversity of ideas? The Presiding Clerk, in his report, mentions the need for

nurture, not once, but several times. I suspect that the level of busyness increases the need for nurture and pastoral care among Friends, yet decreases the capacity to provide it.

In the past few years we started, as a Yearly Meeting, a process of looking at “Energy and Resources,” and the Open Space Technology – a process for clarifying where a group’s energy and passion lie. Did we not take these further because there was no need for such an evaluative process? Do we have plenty of energy to do all the things we embark upon, with ease and with no strain? Or, just possibly, are we too busy even to stop and consider that we may be too busy?

Friends, I seriously doubt that all the activities we engage in are well within our capacities. We are sometimes quick to take on new tasks, and hesitate greatly before laying anything down. It concerns me to see Friends tired and over-stretched, and Nominations committees struggling to find people to fill all the tasks which seem necessary. It would be useful, I feel, to have something in reserve, so that when something comes along which must be attended to, or to which we would joyfully wish to attend, there is that capacity.

In his book *A TESTAMENT OF DEVOTION*, the Quaker author, Thomas Kelly, wrote, “We are not called to die on every cross, nor are we expected to”. While making allowance for the language, the message is clear. It is not possible, either individually or corporately, to be fully and effectively involved in every single cause that claims our attention. I speak as someone who needs to consider carefully whatever I am involved in, to see if it fits within my personal limits of energy. I wonder why we do not do this as a group.

How, then, can we choose where to put our energies? If we want to simplify our lives, and that includes becoming clearer about what tasks to take on, how can this be done? The answer, I believe, lies in discernment.

I am pleased to see several mentions of Clearness Meetings in the reports. Clearness meetings are a form of discernment and the one most readily available to Friends. Used carefully, a clearness meeting can assist in going deeper into that which is Eternal, in determining if a course of action is Spirit-led. Kelly writes that we do not put aside rational thought in decision-making, but that rationality is not the only criterion in settling on a course of action. Early Friends also warned of ‘notions,’ the understanding that something could be a good idea but not necessarily be a leading.

We would also do well to remember that all discernment is at best partial. Often it is not until much later that hindsight confirms to us the rightness of a decision. Even when we feel most strongly that a decision is right, we can rarely be entirely sure. Occasionally history reveals an event which, at the time, seemed right, yet now is seen to be misguided. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Quaker-influenced treatment of prisoners was to allow them barely any communication with other people. The windows were too high for them to look out. Inmates were confined to their cells for the duration of their sentence, which could be years. In some instances they were kept hooded. The only person they spoke to was their jailor, and that only briefly. Quakers saw this solitary confinement not as a punishment but as a time for reflection and remorse. This treatment was planned with the very best of intentions, but we now understand that it was inhumane and drove many prisoners insane.

Even when discernment takes place and action is rightly ordered, there must be an accompanying awareness that this task has been laid upon us, rather than something we decided to do. The time may come when it is right to lay something down, otherwise there is a risk of outrunning one’s Guide. The moment to cease may come sooner than we expect.

In the reports from the meetings, there are frequent references to the Quaker Quest. It certainly seems to have struck a chord with us and I think it is a great program of outreach. It has been successful as a method of inreach as well. That is to say, those of us who have

taken part found that the experience was valuable in deepening our own spiritual growth and connectedness to the meeting, as well as for the purpose of presenting Quakerism to others. It does prompt some thoughts, though.

Often, when we are asked about Quakerism, it is tempting to explain it by listing what Quakerism is not. We do not have ordained priests or prepared sermons, and so on. Quaker Quest is useful in forcing us to think, "What do I believe? What is my experience?" We tend to preface statements with: "I can't speak for the Society as a whole but only what I personally believe." However I have begun to feel slightly uncomfortable with saying; "I can't speak for the Society, only for myself."

In Quaker theology, we may feel there are no rules – we can believe whatever we want. That seems, however, to indicate that there are no common core beliefs. I don't actually believe that that is true. I think there are some commonly held assumptions, even if we don't articulate those. I well remember, many years ago, a Scotsman who used to spend time at different churches around Canberra. He was a wanderer, who would spend time at each church until either he left or the group became too uncomfortable and, I guess, encouraged him to move on. He had been spending some Sundays worshipping with us. There came one final and particularly difficult meeting for worship. The visitor spoke at length and inappropriately. A Friend rose to his feet and remonstrated with him. The visitor replied, "There are no rules here, but be careful if you break them." That was a moment of clarity for me. We do have common understandings, and we do have boundaries. It could be a useful exercise to examine those either privately or corporately.

When we think of outreach, we want to be welcoming and make people feel comfortable about visiting the meeting and worshipping with us. For many of us, coming to Quaker meeting was like coming home, so of course we want to make other people feel as welcomed as we were. It's hard for us to convey fully our practices and beliefs. We don't want to frighten people off. With outreach, though, there's a risk that people we draw to us through programs such as Quaker Quest might be different, might change us. As the US Friends might say, "Is there room for a Republican amongst us Democrats?" This is the cost of engagement with the wider world.

There's a dynamic tension in our faith as we try to be in the world, but not of it. As newcomers stay with us, we attempt to convey our values and practices. With the current generation's focus on individuality, do we neglect to tell our newcomers that we practice group discernment as well as individual decision-making? We recognize that the Light is more clearly discerned by the group. It may be a strange concept to people that authority does not lie solely in the individual but also in the meeting.

We believe in "Let your lives speak," and it is an admirable goal. We try to live our beliefs, and make every decision reflect our values. And now, this is a new thought for me, Friends, and I ask you to go with me on this one for a moment – do we then try to remake the meeting into reflecting our lives? Do we take something that we choose to do at home, and decide that the meeting must automatically do the same? This would make the meeting look more and more like ourselves and our preferences. It reinforces the idea of a 'club' for like-minded people, and can cause exclusion. Friends, Quakerism isn't just about a cosy club for 'people like us.' It isn't about having the meeting be exactly like our own lives. It is a religious society; it is about worshipping together and discerning the will of God together. And, at times, it is about submitting to the communal sense of right ordering.

Culturally, many of us come from traditions of questioning and dissent. We bring our habits and attitudes into meeting. This can include questioning all the structures and practices of the Religious Society of Friends. At some point, however, individualism may take us too far. Any worshipping community is a tension between the fire of inspiration and

the containment of common sense. We tend not to like containment. This is partly the spirit of the age, and partly the kind of people who are attracted to modern Quakerism.

I was particularly interested last year to read an article published in the Friends' Journal from the United States. It was reprinted in our Secretary's Newsletter for August. The article is called "Yo! Are you Amish?" and was written by Max Carter, a Programmed Friend from Indiana in the Midwest. He has also spent a significant amount of time living and working among the more liberal, unprogrammed Friends on the East Coast.

Max writes that he has occasionally been mistaken for an Amish person rather than a Quaker, and this has caused him to reflect on the two communities. He says that the Amish have a strong sense of the distinctives of their life and faith. He wonders what, if any, are the distinguishing marks of Quakerism. In his years of working in Philadelphia, he found that Quakers there had, by and large, adopted the social, political and religious norms around them. He believes that we have succumbed to what he calls "tofu Quakerism." Like tofu, Quakers have something of substance, but they are "marinated" in, and take on the flavour of, whatever culture they happen to be stewing in at the time. This results in a certain sameness and predictability in liberal unprogrammed Quaker meetings' belief systems and common causes. It comes from our immersion in the prevailing culture. We may say that we are "in the world but not of it." I suggest that we are more like "the world" than we care to admit.

I see something of this in my own life. I was asked to be a presenter for one of Canberra meeting's "Know your Friend" sessions. I wrote up my life story and as I mulled over it, I became aware of something. I'm a baby boomer, grew up in the Sixties. I thought I was being totally individual, rebelling against my parents and against conventional authority. I thought it was all my own idea. When I look back now, I see how much of it was the zeitgeist, the spirit of the time. My rebellion was not so much individuality, as being caught up in the grand sweep of history. It does not make it any less real in my life story, but it does show me a life vastly influenced by the times. I was tofu marinated in my society.

What I take from Max Carter's article is that Australian Friends may also be failing to be sufficiently self-reflective about what issues and concerns we take on. Perhaps we should be more discerning about whether our choices are Spirit-led.

So we come back to the reports from the Regional Meetings. If you haven't read them yet, I most strongly urge you to. If I have failed to mention something that you wanted to hear about, then I urge you to read the reports. In this address, I've given my overall impression of the Society. We achieve a great deal. I suspect we could be even more effective if we expended our energies more wisely. If action is truly Spirit-led, then, I believe, the inner and outer resources will come.

In reading the reports from Regional Meetings, I feel a deep affection for Quakers in Australia. The reports include our lofty ideals, and our efforts to make visible our beliefs in the world. They reveal our best efforts, and idiosyncrasies, and at times our peculiarities. They also include rather endearing little comments, such as a clerk who admits that she having difficulties with some new arrangements for clerking, and promises to do better in the future. I think the Regional Meeting reports are the most interesting part of the Documents In Advance. In fact, I always read them first. I encourage you to do the same.

Finally, what can I say, Friends, that's achievable? Do less, not more. Be faithful. Care for each other. Have fun.