

2021 Epistle: ***Gonna Keep on Movin' Forward***



Greetings to our Beloved Friends, from Northern Yearly Meeting, with 33 Quaker Worship Groups living on the Upper Midwest Lands of many Native Peoples:

In our second year of virtual sessions, we have learned to see through our own computer screens into the gathered group, but screen time is still taxing. Our clerks deftly organized reports and other information outside the online session, bringing to discussion only actionable items. With Zoom captions, we could match up names, faces and locations of 163 adults, 10 teens and 7 younger children attending.

In the opening plenary session, we learned how New England Yearly Meeting is “Noticing Patterns of Oppression and Faithfulness.” They use nonjudgmental prompts to call out unintentional exclusions that reinforce unjust existing power dynamics. We can learn these tools to notice how our own “-isms” hinder us in this hard work of love.

In worship with attention to business we carried this query: “How do decisions support our goal to be an anti-racist faith community?” Our time being short, unresolved issues were given to committees for further discernment. For example, lack of racial diversity was raised in discussion of the trial introductory Nimble Responders committee. Recognizing how NYM’s racial homogeneity limits us, we undertook to question practices that may be obstacles to diversity.

The finance committee recommended we spend down our \$65,000 surplus to fund NYM travel and young people’s programs. Other proposals asked us to renounce the Doctrine of Discovery and to broaden our use of the anti-racism query, but we were not of one heart. Further work will dive into emotional and real world consequences of moving forward on these issues.

Many had watched the film *Stories I Didn’t Know* prior to the workshop on the history and present situations of Indigenous Peoples of our area. Acknowledging the lack of awareness that many of us bring to encounters with Native Peoples, the Native presenters generously lifted up the value their Nations place on the Great Mystery and on the truth of not knowing. We heard examples of listening actively through differences in family, culture and community. Encouraged, we came away with queries about moving toward healing in right relationship with peoples of the First Nations.

Other remarkable workshops also led us to “live our lives as doers of the truth,” as individuals and as the Religious Society of Friends in our time. Zoe Mulford's song-writing workshop presented the creative process as a spiral, circling around to pick up what might have seemed useless before, like the process of life, or of Quaker decision-making. Attenders learned creative strategies to "Keep on Movin' Forward."

In a workshop with the Friends Committee on National Legislation, we brainstormed about cutting Pentagon spending, knowing power cannot protect us from the deep fears that motivate our military might. In another, a friend in Korea spoke at 6 a.m. her time to describe movingly the nonviolent protests on Jeju Island against a US military base. In another, NYM Quakers shared services with our evangelical partners in El Salvador: “We are blessed by each other’s prayers, sharing of hymns. We love sharing the same God.”

At times we stepped away from work for inspiration and relaxation. Drop-in virtual potlucks focused on leftovers, nettles, pastas, hostas, dandelion science and silly jokes. In the wise second plenary session, Jan Stanley challenged breakout groups to consider their own responses to the pandemic, urging us to thrive resiliently by intention. “Well being can lead to well doing.”

Among the poetry, music and pandemic songs of the talent show, we saw a puppy twirling as its young owner sang commands. A children’s-time book described a young woman centering herself, feeling one with the Earth. A listening child drew a picture of the globe, with long dark hair and dark sparkling eyes. Having so few children with us online, these images are precious.

Sunday morning’s memorial service brought silence, poignant memories and a singing of “Keep on *Lovin’* Forward.” Mulford’s heartfelt concert later that day featured her song, “The President Sang Amazing Grace.” She gave joyous voice to historic moments and courageous actions that inspire us.

In the summary State of Society plenary, we watched film segments from six meetings about losses, struggles, growth and triumphs of the past year, and then met in breakout rooms to share. Hoping to meet face to face soon, we are exploring hybrid meeting technologies to continue to include Friends who cannot join us in person. We trust in our testimonies to guide us in moving all our decisions forward.