

Northern Yearly Meeting
Annual Session Epistle May 26-29, 2023

To our Friends everywhere:

Historically, Northern Yearly Meeting Annual Session on Memorial Day weekend in Rosholt, Wisconsin has meant at least some period of time spent in rain and clouds, hunkered down under cover of tent flap or roof... but this year we found ourselves under bright skies, warm temps, and seemingly endless sun. The kids and youth took to this grace and went to boats, beaches, and board games without hesitation; many adults took somewhat longer to blink in the sun and realize just how much light there was around us.

It has, though, been four years since NYM met in person as a full gathering. Perhaps a small amount of blinking is in order as we return.

Our collective, shared discussion theme this year was *Pruning Before Growth*. To make this metaphor real, our workshop leaders brought a houseplant to the opening session and—to some gasps—pruned off a long tendril in order to plant it in a more spacious pot elsewhere, while making room for new growth to emerge.

The weekend's agenda also pruned some traditional events and relocated them. The big budget meeting and State of Society reports were done a week prior to NYM, leaving more time during the Annual Gathering for unstructured time: people seemed happy to splash in the lake, play some board games, and find spontaneous conversations on the green.

Organizers split attenders into small groups to discuss a shared theme each day: *Pruning Before Growth*. This new schedule also included a Quaker Organizations Fair, which allowed for more questions and conversations between NYM Friends and representatives of different Quaker agencies. It also allowed the representatives from the different organizations to talk with *each other* as led in the moment, rather than with strict agendas! With the decision to have neither workshops nor plenaries, the organizers created lots of fertile ground for *connecting*.

A seasoned Friend who had been away for four years commented that the mix of deep familiarity and the sense of a lot of time having passed felt a bit surreal. He described *deja vù*: simultaneously accustomed, joyful, and strange. At this gathering, the first full in-person gathering since 2019, many people described feelings of coming home, reuniting, connecting, and glorying in tradition and years-old customs. At the same time, things felt different, changed, and new. Many Friends have returned physically to NYM after four years away or only connecting on Zoom. Others are meeting Friends in person with whom they have a deep connection, which has until now only been realized online.

This year's Gathering included 180 people, plus 10-15 joining on Zoom. 48 attenders are new to NYM Annual Gathering! 35 children and youth participated this year, as well as a strong, healthy, and engaged contingent of Young Adult Friends. We were pleased to also welcome Friends from Friends General Conference, the American Friends Service Committee, Scattergood Friends School, and young adult visitors from Germany traveling as part of a "Bus-eum" educational project.

Although it was hard to be far away from the dear friends gathered together at Lion's Camp, those joining by Zoom appreciated being able to share some portion of the time together as remote

participants. Getting the sound system and microphones working initially produced some noises and squeals; people speaking received calls to hold the mic differently ... but with some diligent work from the Planning Committee and the tech support team, remote participation in the Business Meetings got smoother and smoother as the weekend went on. Several remote attenders especially appreciated the live transcripts, as well as the experience of gathering in the small group discussions, which they described as tender and genuinely helpful. One remote attender said of the weekend, “I felt like I wasn’t alone.”

The Children and Youth stayed active and engaged in shopping and cooking together, planting seeds (pickle plants!), laughing, and playing unending, epically long games of Everybody’s It and Frisbee. Some of the younger Friends built a full blanket fort community, complete with a Meeting House at its center. Bright tie-dyeing created lasting memories and the Soggy Grass Symphony made its clanking, buzzing debut at the traditional yearly Talent Show. The parents, deeply grateful to those who cared for and led the children and youth, gathered for walks, long talks, and many cups of coffee. The Parents Support Group continued a conversation from the NYM Youth and Family Camp Gathering in 2022 exploring Quaker parenting and what NYM can do to support parents.

The pandemic has left notable changes in all of us, but one positive change has been how normal it now is to connect with people via video. Many NYM committees and working groups have now gathered by Zoom for years. Committee members said they now feel less pressure to get business done specifically during the three days of NYM as they know they can find focused time away from the Gathering to meet productively and virtually.

Amidst the sunlight and singing, we acknowledge what we have lost: particular and beloved members have died or moved on, three years of pandemic anxiety has left lingering effects on us, our children have missed three formative years of opportunities to grow together. Fewer people came to this year’s gathering than in years past. We are tired, doing too much, surviving, and getting through: we relished this weekend’s time and space to breathe and rest and re-form community, but also feel acutely just how badly we’ve needed it.

As we finish this round of pruning and preparing for new growth, NYM’s Nominating Committee’s efforts to fill committees drew our attention: We need to more fully take back up efforts we paused during the height of the pandemic. As we collectively heal and re-emerge, we need to rebuild committees, institutional memory, and active engagement in the work we are called to—and *need to do*—as Friends.

These are the pots and this is the soil in which we found ourselves this weekend: we are pruned, some by intention, some by accident. We are gasping, sometimes, at the prospect of profound change. Quaking, even, as we grow.