

2010 Quaker Youth Pilgrimage

To Friends Everywhere:

Thirty-two pilgrims
From Friends to friends we became
With these words we part

Fall 2009.

An image of QYP begins to formulate, as fuzzy as it is, with twenty-eight youth and four adults sending in applications that will, over time, be reviewed and accepted. These thirty-two pilgrims are to gather together for a month in the summer of 2010, exploring Quakerism while journeying through parts of the Pacific Northwest. What brought us individuals together was our titles as Friends, and yet we were worlds apart in our definitions of Quakerism, as well as our expectations of what this pilgrimage would bring:

“I think QYP will give me a better idea of what all Quakers have in common, because I wonder 'what makes a Quaker?'- Emmie Touwen

“Through sharing and learning about other people and their way of life I feel I will gain something no other experience will allow me to gain.”- Simon Rolph

Of course, the time between applications and the beginning of our trip allowed our expectations and levels of preparation to develop, in some cases dramatically. Nevertheless, we universally entered this journey with less than concrete ideas of what was to come.

Perhaps the most significant factor to set QYP apart from any other experience, Quaker or otherwise, is the sense of immersion which comes from living in a close-knit and, in many respects, isolated community for as long as we have. Our use of music as well as our introduction to compassionate listening added strength to the foundation of our connection.

However, so strong a sense of community takes time and effort to build, mistakes are made, allowing for knowledge to be gained. Structuring and organizing our community was a particular challenge, as we were not all accustomed to Quaker business practice, and (naturally for an international group) there was variation in the practices with which we were familiar.

Exposure is unavoidable, both in terms of how well we have gotten to know each other and how honest we are forced to be with ourselves. With a lack of privacy, we could not hide our true traits and emotions from others; we were stripped bare and left vulnerable. We were forced to examine ourselves both socially and spiritually and, immersed in our secure environment, allowed to address our faults and develop as individuals. Our identity as Quakers was frequently called into question, both through intimate discussion as well as whole-group activities deliberately formulated for self-exploration. For some people even calling themselves Quakers became discomforting when faced with the spectrum of belief which exists within the Religious

Society of Friends. Since the majority of our group were previously unexposed to Programmed and Evangelical Friends, such experiences caught us off guard and again challenged our ideas on what unites us as Quakers.

Through some of these foreign experiences, we were forced to realize how limited our own knowledge of Quakerism was, and thus educating ourselves became an integral part of our shared experience. Among these, we gained a new idea of hospitality. We were the cause of genuine excitement not only in Quaker Churches, but also in the homes of Seattle, Portland, and Camas Friends. Contrary to our fears, Friends across branches were willing to hear our voices and our beliefs, not with the intention to convert but with the intention to listen with love. This in particular is among the most significant lessons we hope to bring home. Many of us also leave having unearthed an unanticipated respect for the teachings of the Bible and their relationship to the core values of Quakerism. Our growth and exploration throughout the pilgrimage also highlighted many difficulties. These included exploring the differences in our faith with other pilgrims and the limited time for exploring our spirituality as a group. This has left many of us with a desire to maintain and extend this interest beyond QYP.

As a gathered youth, we are empowered to speak of one final, lasting concern. Throughout the pilgrimage we were reminded of the saddening truth that we are not a complete gathering of Friends. We will not be a complete gathering until there is a fair representation of all sections of the Religious Society of Friends. In this pilgrimage there was only one youth from a pastoral background. Overall, there were four Friends—out of the thirty-two total—that consider themselves evangelical or conservative Friends. For those members of the community, it was difficult at times to feel safe in expressing their beliefs. With this in mind, we as Quakers call for a greater commitment to improving the diversity of this pilgrimage. While we cannot deny the power of the Spirit's presence in the group, it is important to realize that a greater learning experience could have been achieved from a more representative community.

August 2010

Our journey has finally reached its end; as a community we are readying to leave. We have written our words of reflection, hoping that those outside of the community will not only understand the essence of this pilgrimage but also that those within will be able to look back at this with the willingness to return to being vulnerable and honest, even in the presence of conflict.

“In the past, I couldn't bring Quakerism home with me. It was a week every year and then a couple of weekends when I could be a Quaker. Now I'm going to *be* a Quaker all of the time” - Mason George

“This trip has taught me that it's our actions that make us Quaker just as much as our beliefs. I definitely have more drive to 'put faith into action'” - Naomi Garnault