

EPISTLE – PACIFIC YEARLY MEETING 68TH ANNUAL SESSION 2014

July 19, 2014

To Friends everywhere:

Youth and prophecy
Quakers of all ages join
Spirits united

Quakers from California, Nevada, Hawaii, Mexico City, and Guatemala gathered at Walker Creek Ranch in Marin County this week, from July 14th to the 19th, to celebrate the 68th annual session of Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. The theme of this year's gathering, "Youth and Prophecy; Awakening to a New Creation" sought to reflect the growing centrality of youth concerns in our Yearly Meeting in recent years.

There is an evident sense of joy upon our return to Walker Creek Ranch. We have enjoyed worship and fellowship in this valley surrounded by the golden summer hills of California, the home of fox, deer, quail, wild turkeys and horned owls. The Miwok people cared for this valley not long ago, and we are honored to be able to meet here. The wind whips through this valley, shaking the tent in which we meet. For some of us in this community, these landscapes are a part of who we are.

Our happiness at being here and at being with one another have allowed us to lay aside many of our burdens during this time. Our Yearly Meeting in recent years has struggled with difficult business sessions, division, and unresolved conflict. Like many Quaker groups, we are also coping with a lack of diversity at our gatherings, concerns of an aging population, segregation of age groups among us, declining participation in Meetings, and declining attendance at the Annual Session. Intergenerational planning before this gathering resulted in changes to this year's schedule, and those changes reflect several of these concerns. Nonetheless, many of us arrived at this Annual Session with fundamental questions. Why should going to Yearly Meeting be stressful? Where is the spirit that should be at the center of all that we do?

We have felt the spirit with us this year, and many Friends have felt a renewed sense of community emerging among us. At Walker Creek Ranch we have made time for worship and business, eating and singing, laboring and playing with one another. Simple, direct and challenging worship sharing queries drew us together in small, gathered groups. We worked together with important proposals this year, in community. We decided to embark on a new revision of our book of *Faith and Practice* for the first time in many years. We listened carefully to one another regarding minutes of concern, and our Yearly Meeting's ability to speak to issues of peace and social justice with a unified voice. Two youth-led plenary sessions led us to collective deep moments.

Our Yearly Meeting's seeking has been helped along by the extraordinary passion and commitment of our young people. This year, our youth bid us welcome to the revival of this blessed community. They told us that they were engaged in an experiment of radical trust, and they invited us to join them as they sought the living Spirit . . . with us. In their own call to this year's gathering, they advised us plainly that living up to the fierce Light within us requires nothing less than our own striving for divine perfection. These words and the spirit behind them have handily cut through our preoccupations over long-held conflicts and carefully "word-smithed" minutes.

This year's keynote speaker, Jonathan Vogel-Borne, began our gathering with a passionate testimony that stayed with us during our time together. He provided us with ways to imagine our situation, and he presented us with some tools to help us seek transformation. Jonathan attended Pacific Yearly Meeting during his youth, and went on to work as Secretary of New England Yearly Meeting. He shared warm childhood memories of growing up in PYM, and spoke of his own spiritual opening and call to ministry. He began that call by asking himself the question, "Am I living my life so fully that I would be willing to die at any moment?"

Jonathan offered us the verse from which the calling to this year's session is drawn:

' I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young ones will see visions, your old ones will dream dreams' (Acts 2:17)

He reminded us that "those days are still here." By speaking of the earnestness of youth and his search for "some age-appropriate earnestness," he pointed the way for all of us to embrace the fire and spirit towards which our very own young Friends have invited us.

Jonathan reminded us that a prophetic message can not be contained, and comes like a fire. We have felt in many ways the effect of these flowing currents of energy, and the fruits of having more time for Worship, fellowship, and being present with one another. In our way, we have begun to accept the invitation extended to us by the group Friends referred to as "Young Adult Friends" or "Junior Friends." We now seem jubilant, rather than ambivalent, about seeking new ways to facilitate programs for young Quakers in California and beyond. We are aware of more contact between the generations, rather than just more "intergenerational" activities. Listening sessions before big issues are presented at plenary seem to have created an appropriate container for clarifying discussion and centering community, both easing pressure on our strained business agendas and allowing for more worship-centered Meetings for Business.

As we celebrated the lives of our members who have passed on since we last gathered, a young Friend shared the story of an older friend and mentor making her feel more, because he had complete faith in her. He told her he was not worried about the future of our Yearly Meeting, because he had complete faith in the youth. We share this willingness to trust, and we share this faith in our Yearly Meeting.

In peace,

Steve Smith, Presiding Clerk
Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends