

A COMMUNITY OF FRIENDSHIP

A locus of communion
In a delicate and dynamic balance
Between that of the Divine we hold
In-common
And that perspective of the Divine
Each individual carries.

Community thrives in our knowing each other,
Our gifts,
And all the burdens we bear
Through living
As humans.
Through loving conflict
We let die our will
And come to unity.

And from that death
We each rise
To begin that process once more.

To co-create and sustain
Our portion of this sacred Trust of Being,
Four stout legs are required:
Listening,
Praise,
Adoration,
And communion.
Standing thusly we free our gifts
From our own desires and willing.
Standing thusly we walk
In Friendship with all that is.

Greetings from the thirty-fourth annual Sessions of Northern Yearly Meeting, at Lions Camp on Lions Lake, in Rosholt, Wisconsin. This year our theme is *f/Friendship* and with North Country thoroughness we plumb the depths and soar in the sun fires of the heavens.

In singles, or groups of family or friends, we have arrived. In addition to veterans embracing old friends, we find an astounding number of first timers: lost in maps, lion effigies, strangely shaped bedsheets, and agog with wonder at the natural loveliness of our retreat site. That eighty-four out of our 308 attenders registered for the Simple, Natural Foods alternative in the lodge is one of many indicators of our increasing testimony of Earthcare and Earth friendship. Coincidentally, this year we put the final touches on an Earthcare Witness chapter, the fourteenth of our developing *Faith and Practice*.

Why do we come here? A lot of us come to see old friends. Yet, a major motive for attendance among some adults is their kids being so bonded to this yearly event. The kid-to-adult ratio continues to increase, with the one-to-two ratio we had last year being greatly surpassed this year; and there are a monumental thirty-nine older teens. Though young people are drawn here at least as much by affection for each other as by programming, Sessions brings plenty of opportunities for fun and challenge. Our ropes course, for instance, fills the pine forest with applause, as each youth, in turn, reaches a milestone.

We come for community. Our larger and larger investment in younger Friends marks a change in our pattern of relatedness. We who write this epistle have witnessed our elders passing on or becoming fragile in physical health. We are in transition as we step up to fill their shoes and simultaneously welcome that generation behind us into its majority, ready to begin to add the role of significant service to our community, to their job as learners and competency builders.

Our members seek greater intimacy with nature. The camp is beautiful this year and the weather perfect: cool, star-studded evenings, bright, clear days, and temperatures inviting both lively exertion and relaxation. Many young people swim in the chilly lake. And there appears to be a perpetual game of Ultimate Frisbee on lawns of glowing green.

We learn: in informal conversation we share the latest about Godly Play, and discuss the tension, in our First Day Schools, between freedom for each child to explore their own spirituality and our desire to pass on the gifts of Quaker culture to them; and there is Quaker Quest; and Compassionate Communication; and opportunities for convergence in our many-branched tree of Quakers.

We labor with business. This year, we experience particular tenderness as we approve an ad hoc committee's recommendation to put our meeting house in Menomonie on the market. Also, our new communications

committee improves our opportunities for connecting with each other through new technologies, such as an updated website, facebook for the teens, and online newsletter publication.

In the midst of global financial crisis, we, along with many other Quaker organizations, are looking at cuts in income. To steward our resources responsibly, we must take a careful look at priorities, in order to continue with our service to the Divine, our meetings, and our members.

We seek to have more spirit-led lives. Last year we delved into leadings of Spirit and how they panned out in individual growth and sharing of gifts with the community. This year, Friends have come back from service to some of those leadings with significant learning. For example, NYM has given substantial support to individuals carrying projects in Rwanda and El Salvador. Now, how can we offer support and anchoring for faithfulness as they continue with work spawned by these experiences? Further, as we mature in our intentional recognition and acceptance of spiritual gifts and grow in our discerning and naming of them, we face the challenges of busyness. How do we learn to be faithful to a small number of corporately discerned concerns? In short, we have begun to labor with individual responsibility to the community. When a Divine call to service comes through the voices of a committee in deep discernment, do we respond as autonomous individuals having many choices of ways to use our time and energy, or do we heed the call and serve that of God in our community?

The young people have also grappled with our theme. Some of the older teens led a session on friendship for the young teens group, where those present told personal stories in response to challenging queries, such as, "Was there someone with whom I never expected to become friends and did?" and "Have I ever had a friend who wasn't afraid to be herself or himself and how did she or he help me?"

Our youth talk about these relationships between friendship and integrity with probity and transparency. Someone asked, how do you act when you know you're being yourself?" One answer was, "It clicks and flows with good friends." Another said, "You never really get bored." Another, "You can have comfortable silences." As ever, we are a musical meeting that includes Nightingales and Friendly Folkdancers. And Sunday morning, we sing, "There are Angels Hovering Round," as we move from Memorial Meeting for Worship to Worship with Attention to Business. It feels sacramental.

On a lighter note, our annual talent show, largely organized by younger members of our community, surrounds us with song, instrumental music, and laughter--what gifts we share with each other!

How goes it with our meeting's concern on race and class diversity? This last January we gave four women in our membership spiritual and other support to attend an FGC train-the-trainers for a new phase of this work, brought on as we celebrate the publication of *Fit for Freedom, Not For Friendship: Quakers, African Americans and The Myth Of Racial Justice*. For our plenary session, one of these members, as well as an FGC staff who has participated in the project and authored the study guide, and another NYM member, shared some excerpts from the book and then gently guided us through some difficult exercises. They touched some of the deep pain we view as precipitated by our attitudes and values concerning race relations. Queries invited us to release some of our woundedness in a safe environment as we shared without judgmentalness.

We are learning as a community that much of the fear we attach to "The Other" stems from our distrust within our own selves, of elements of which these "others" remind us. How might we come to bring more of ourselves into our meetinghouses so that we can surrender it in Divine service to community?

In work and recreation, tears of sorrow, and dances of joy, the best we can offer to each other and to readers of this Epistle is ourselves, as we come to know one another in the Love that is eternal.

In the Light,

Doug Kirk, Clerk of Northern Yearly Meeting