



Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

Quaker

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Epistle 2011

To Friends everywhere:

Our 332nd gathering created an opening for Friends of all ages to honor and embrace the common threads that connect us as brothers and sisters, one to another. Thus connected, Friends wrestled with discerning the path forward through a time of crisis in the world and in our Yearly Meeting. We heard wonderful examples of Friends and meetings responding to God's call, but as a Yearly Meeting, we struggled with clarity and direction and how to proceed with a smaller staff and with a reduction in the income from our resources.

Over 500 Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting gathered in Annual Sessions July 27-31, 2011, at DeSales University in Center Valley, PA. The theme, "Powerful Beyond Measure; Trusting the Call to Leadership", invited us to understand that leadership can be defined as "initiative in relationship," and that it is our *community* that will be "powerful beyond measure". We explored what it means to be a leader, a leader of youth, a leader with a distinctively Quaker style that rejects "power over" others and embraces a spiritually led partnership in pursuit of success for the community. Irene McHenry, Executive Director of Friends Council on Education, and Michael Minnig of Westtown School, drew on the lessons of gratitude, generosity and grace as central to leadership. Jay Marshall, Dean of Earlham School of Religion, challenged us to ask, "For what purpose am I leading?"

*"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure."**

We heard from Diane Randall of Friends Committee on National Legislation who asked us to trust our call to action. She said that Friends' ability to listen deeply brings a deep respect and increases our influence, such that even the conservative right is now asking for cuts in military spending. What would it take for our congressional representatives to call on us for direction? Through PYM's Called to Action group, we are reminded that we have the power to do great things. One Friend said, "May we find our path to hallow all life on earth." We were reminded we have the tools of non-violent direct action. During sessions, a group of 20 Friends went into a local bank and raised awareness of the bank's complicity in environmental and economic injustice.

*“We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.”**

Children and young Friends under the age of 18, a full 25% of those attending sessions, provided repeated lessons in leadership, from the four-year old proclaiming in session that “God is everywhere!” to the Youth Summit, during which a model of monthly meeting to quarterly meeting to yearly meeting discernment generated a minute of intention: “To make the world a better place and share our Quaker faith by treating all as brothers and sisters. We will do this by raising money and helping those who are hungry and homeless.” Having been asked the previous day by the presiding clerk to “help the adults through our sadness of saying good-bye to some beloved staff members”, the children wrote a minute of concern for those who have lost their Yearly Meeting jobs with a desire to help them find new jobs. The presence of a common spirit was readily evident in the work of the children’s program. These cherished Friends modeled a grace and joy throughout their discernment process that many adult Friends yearned to experience in their own discernment of the gathered Meeting’s path forward.

*“And as we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”**

Friends participated in many workshops, discussion groups, and community-centered projects throughout our time together. We heard stories of monthly meeting’s experiences of deepening and strengthening their meetings through Meeting Enrichment Services. Displays of Friends’ actions in the world showed our present and unmistakable commitment to service and action. Heard within the workshops and Friendly discussions was a yearning for a shift in our thinking – a shift that will lift the burden of waiting for the future, replacing it with the joy of living powerfully now. There is life in our Yearly Meeting, and we know there is a different way that we are being called to live. We have not yet found that way. We approved moving forward with a long-term discernment and planning process to help us discover what we are called to be and do.

*“It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us...You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world.”**

Young Adult Friends, vital and growing, drew us into listening sessions, giving testimony to their yearning for a deeper sense of belonging within the Yearly Meeting, expressing feelings of abandonment and that their work was not valued. The Yearly Meeting longs to embrace their energy, influence, and leadership.

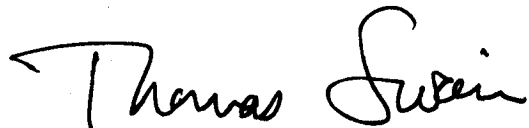
*“As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”**

As budget considerations led to the elimination of staff positions and program reductions, we experienced loss and pain. We long to be released from our burdens, to do the crucial work that we are already called to. We ask ourselves: Do we want to

be custodians of things that do not serve our fundamental purposes? We were offered, a biological metaphor. During the life of the caterpillar, there appear “imaginal” cells within its body that push the formation of a chrysalis. At first these cells are destroyed by its immune system, but eventually become so numerous that the caterpillar is overwhelmed and the chrysalis is formed. The caterpillar must die, and its body becomes a biological soup to feed the formation into a butterfly.

Are we ready to die in order to be reborn?

Signed in and on behalf of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Swain". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Thomas Swain, Presiding Clerk

*Quote is from Marianne Williamson, [A Return to Love](#)

Text of the Fox Group epistle/song (sung to the tune of a song currently popular on the radio):

I throw my hands up in the air sometimes!
We are hopin'
Way will open.
I want to celebrate!
And live my life.

Oh we love to sing,
And do the slip and slide.
We had helping hands
And we played outside.

I told you once!
I told you twice!
We popped balloons—
Like they were DYNAMITE!

This year the Fisher second and third grade group had twice as many kids as last year. On Thursday morning we heard a story about George Fox's Big Questions and learned about Mary Fisher, the Friend our group is named after. That night we continued talking about what qualities a leader has and had fun playing outside. Friday morning we heard stories about Jonah and Moses; we finished art projects about leadership words. We

talked about how sometimes we are brave like Moses or Mary Fisher and we listen to God in our hearts. Sometimes we may be scared like Jonah and not listen to our hearts. Friday night we had a leadership challenge where we had to listen to each other, be prepared and be gentle in order to succeed. Then we ate ice cream! On Saturday we listened to God's big idea for us at the Children's Summit. That night we played more games and acted out "Mary" and "Jonah" moments. Sunday morning we heard a story about business meeting and had a closing ceremony with all the children. This is what's most important about Children's Sessions: having fun...stories...friends...learning...being with my sister...everyone.

An epistle to the Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting and Quaker youth everywhere from the Fell Group of fourth and fifth graders, who gathered for our Yearly Meeting's Annual Sessions at DeSales University at Center Valley, PA from Wednesday, July 27, to Sunday, July 31, 2011.

Our group is named for Margaret Fell, and we began our time together this week learning about Fell and how her home, Swarthmoor Hall, was a refuge and headquarters for early Quakers, including George Fox. Margaret Fell led by taking care of others in the early Quaker community and by speaking out for the equality of women's voices.

We built our community and got to know one another by building our own Swarthmoor Hall and playing games. We laughed together a lot. We explored ways both to lead and to find our way together. We built cairns and made lanterns. We learned about the troubles and persecutions of early Quakers, and created our own Quaker characters who might have lived in 1676. In those roles, we explored the journey to America and life there. As always, we LOVED snack and water-play. But this year was MORE ice cream AND the Children's Summit, where the Fells clerked the monthly meeting group. We made a lot of new Friends.

Together with the Fox and Fisher Groups, we heard a story this week about George Fox, who discovered that the answers to his BIG questions were in his heart, but he needed to journey for a long time to find that out. We also heard the biblical story of the Exodus and the journeys in the desert that are sometimes part of a people's struggle for freedom and direction. In both those stories, God and Light led the way.

(Middle School Friends video epistle could not be reproduced here.)

Young Friends Epistle

"Dear Friends, Dear Friends, let us tell you how we feel . . ."

It is difficult to put in a letter the intricacies and passions of what makes our Young Friends community so strong and essential. We experience Young Friends as a place of acceptance where we can feel safe and at home being exactly who we are. 2011 Annual Sessions has been an intimate gathering, our smallest yet, but we have welcomed new people and reached beyond our circle to interact with children from Junior Gathering, Middle School Friends and Young Adult Friends.

We feel the pain of Young Adult Friends (YAF) in the loss of their program leader; we experienced a lot of that pain in the spring when we thought we were losing our coordinator. We are relieved and grateful to have Cookie for another year as our leader. Young Adult Friends is our future. It is daunting to think of leaving Young Friends and going into a void. We offer friendship and solidarity with Young Adult Friends and welcome them to FAP for us so we can benefit from their talents, energy and leadership. We also want to plan a joint YF and YAF event or gathering to sustain opportunities for fellowship and worship.

As we look toward the year ahead, we know that there is a continuing budget crisis. We are determined to stick together and work together to stay strong as we prepare for an uncertain future.

We love you so,
Young Friends

Young Adult Friends (YAF) Epistle

(Note: We would like to clarify that our writing of an Epistle this year does not mean that we are not in unity with the wider Sessions Epistle.)

Young Adult Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting send their love to all members of PYM and Friends everywhere. We are grateful for this time of accompanied seeking, support, and growth at Annual Sessions.

We are in a struggle to become or remain fully engaged in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. While our individual experiences with this year's budget-making process and outcome are varied, we are left with serious questions about our future as Friends in PYM. During this budget process and these sessions, we have felt a divide between the professed priorities and interests of the Yearly Meeting in regards to Young Adult Friends and the lack of institutional support as expressed through budget decisions. Despite these concerns, we, as a community, are steadfast in our intention to retain and strengthen our commitment to the Yearly Meeting. Though many of us are in an unsettled stage of life, we feel that spiritual community is based on more than geographic location and affiliation; we need a spiritual home.

The budget process over the past several months has felt disillusioning and disempowering. Many of us have tried to make our concerns known, and we have not been heard, not only because we are YAFs, but because we are often led to say things we sense others do not want to hear. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting must strive to remain open to Spirit-led wisdom from all voices, even when those voices come from surprising places, express uncomfortable truths, or challenge the established wisdom of our leaders. This spring has shown us a process controlled by politics, personal agendas, non-transparent decisions, and lacking in love, trust, and Spirit. Despite our sadness that such a process has resulted in the elimination of our staff support, the Young Adult Friends community is committed to co-creating a better process for the future.

The young adult community is struggling, not only with the financial fallout of the budget process, but with the implication we heard in the decision about our value to the Yearly Meeting. That message is difficult to accept. Young Adult Friends make invaluable

contributions to the Yearly Meeting, in both volunteer and staff roles. We understand that our value does not lie in budget decisions, but rather our own Spirit-led involvement, the gifts and creativity we have to offer, and our desire to continue to be part of the whole.

Although much pain surrounds the decision that was made to eliminate the YAF Coordinator position, the YAF Working Group is seeking a structure to move forward. We want and need support from PYM and other Friends organizations. Some of that support needs to be financial. Some needs to be in making a greater effort to know and work with this population, name and nurture the gifts that exist in it, and connect us to opportunities that strengthen our relationships and spirit.

Young Adult Friends are not the future of the Yearly Meeting, but the present. The wider PYM community needs its Young Adults just as much, if not more, than Young Adults need the wider PYM community. At these Sessions, outside of business meeting, many Older Adult Friends expressed interest in engaging with Young Adult Friends and hearing our needs and concerns. For that we express our gratitude. The YAF Working Group is committed to organizing YAF events and retreats throughout the coming year. As a community, we are determined to take these setbacks as an opportunity to grow stronger and to build our program through adversity; as members of the wider Yearly Meeting, we are led to help PYM in seeking the same guidance for the rest of its programs.

We believe that the YAF community has a bright future as we seek to be faithful to that which we are called.

With love and peace,
The PYM Young Adult Friends