

State of the Society address

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land where we are meeting, the Noongar people, I pay my respects to the elders both past and present and I thank Noel Nannup and Sandra Hill for the way they connected us to this place and a different sense of time.

I have attended only three previous Yearly Meetings and it was therefore something of a surprise as well as a privilege to be asked by the nominating committee to do this State of the Society address. It has been an enriching experience for me to read *Documents in Advance* carefully, prayerfully and thoughtfully—something I would not have done with such attention had I not received the invitation. It has made me aware that one of things that Love requires of me is to value diligent preparation for Meeting for Worship for Business sessions at Regional Meeting, and here at Yearly Meeting. Reading *Documents in Advance* many times has been time well spent. It has led me to seek through the reports what I might learn about how we record our use of time—in some sense also I might come to answer to the question posed to Junior Young Friends in Hobart in their sessions: *What are Friends for?*

As I read the various reports I was struck by the optimism, engagement, accounts of what each Meeting was able to do within its limits and resources—how Meetings and Worshipping Groups were discerning the energy and capacity of members and attenders to undertake tasks. I recalled the challenges we faced within West Australia RM as we grappled throughout much of 2010 with the question: *What does love require of us?* and now the ongoing task of working out roles so that individuals in the Meeting are not unduly burdened and the gifts of all enrich the life of the Meeting.

As the Clerk pointed out in one West Australia RM session, ‘We do not simply volunteer for tasks within the Meeting; names are considered as part of a process of discernment.’ Mutuality is subtle. It is not the negotiation of structures or responsibility. A group where everyone self asserts is chaotic to the point of losing all cohesion. The challenge is to find that happy medium that leaves room for personal style and initiative without losing a common sense of purpose in the process.

The integrity of ‘speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15) is linked into

the gifts and virtues of a community engaged with growing together in Spirit and being knit together in love.

Of course, none of us can build community on our own, no matter how heroically we give space to others. The whole point of mutuality is that it goes in every direction. So this means that I must not only be generous in giving but also gracious in receiving, willing to be loved as much as to love, open to being served as much as outgoing in offering assistance. It is only within the context of an integral common life that I can acquire the virtues that I need. But I often find I do so unwillingly. How can I learn patience and the art of saying ‘sorry’ unless situations arise in which I’m called upon to turn agreeable theory into laborious practice?

Many of the Regional Meeting reports describe ways in which F/friends are sustaining and building community—working bees, study groups, retreats, QSA stalls and other fundraisers. Community and mutuality are dear to Quakers, but their practical implementation is neither simple nor easy. That this has been so for Quakers past and present is evident in Australian *Advices and Queries* No. 29 which the Presiding Clerk quotes at the start of her report:

Live adventurously. When choices arise, do you take the way that offers the fullest opportunity for the use of your gifts in the service of God and the community? Let your life speak.

On Friday, those of us who met for a Creative Arts Day experienced leisure time that was contemplative in its focus—time that left us open to the deeper regions of the soul and

experience: transcendence in the midst of the ordinary and customary. I am not good with my hands so I don't naturally choose or gravitate to be among *Friends in Stitches*, although I admire and value the work of these groups and the shared experience and mutuality of such contemplative time.

The mystic, Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) wrote: 'Time is what keeps the light from reaching us. There is no greater obstacle to God than time.' This quote came to me as I read the report from Queensland Regional Meeting. There Tony Arden writes:

I imagine that other meetings are faced with the dilemma of how to find time for meetings (one Sunday for Peace and Social Justice discussions, one Sunday for Meeting for Worship for the Conduct of Business, other days to hear guest speakers and visitors, and occasionally a shared meal just to talk with each other. It would be good to hear how other Meetings are managing competition for time.

How important therefore to see within Regional Meeting Reports reference to retreats, silent days, continuing interest in and support for Meeting for Learning, the growth of Silver Wattle as a Quaker Centre, and to the contribution made by Friends in Residence and Resident Elders to the life of Silver Wattle.

As F/friends' experience shows, there is a rich diversity among us: some prefer to work, others to support or entertain, while others gently sustain and hold a spiritual space. It is the principle of complementary gifts at work. Those who are drawn to more practical pursuits will often be confronted by those with more spiritual pursuits. In some sense this tension is not only unavoidable, but healthy if we approach it in this spirit. We are all both unique and incomplete. We work best when we work together.

Several reports mention that Meetings and Worshipping Groups are facing increasing age and infirmity among members. Like many other faith communities, we are becoming collectively older. As life continues and we journey into later life, our pace naturally slows and there is time (and need as well as value) to reflect on the meaning and purpose of our lives. It is common to let go many of the things that were important to us at an earlier stage of life. In later life we may have time, quiet, and solitude available to us. A workshop conducted by Canberra Regional Meeting (*Care of Self and Family*) provided members of that Meeting with one such opportunity for F/friends to think about the choices available during the latter years of their own and their family's lives.

I have been struck by how few Quakers have ever written over the years about their spiritual experience in later and late life and how extraordinary are the writings of the few who have! This is a potentially such rich area for sharing within and beyond Friends. Sharing insights on spiritual ageing will enrich the ways we ourselves grow old. Spiritual reminiscence creates a particular sacred space. How wonderful then to see Friends here at YM Summer School offering an opportunity to journal and create spiritual biographies!

On Friday I shared a conversation with a Friend whose elderly mother is now in residential care. This Friend spoke of her surprise at how much calmer and easier her mother was to be with now in comparison with the past. Bravely, she shared this observation with her mother who pointed out that now there were not the family responsibilities that she, as mother, had carried for so many years. Might it be that as we feel free to shed responsibilities we in turn become freer to truly be ourselves? What might shedding responsibilities mean for our individual and collective spiritual lives and for our Meetings?

Whilst participating in West Australia RM sessions addressing: *What does love require of us?* I experienced a sense in which I was really entering into the life of this Quaker community anew. I realised in quite different ways that unless and until I felt more deeply engaged within the Meeting, I could not really become permeated by its spirit.

Sacredness depends not on setting or place but on the quality of life of those who dwell there. But to enter the Meeting as a sacred space requires a certain attitude and subtlety of

mind. There *are* many practical tasks to be done---committees and groups to convene to ensure that business is in right ordering; differences to be endured; and even conflicts to be resolved. It is all too easy for me to be caught up in the challenge of doing things for the Meeting that I fail to see the mystery in which I am involved.

There's a verse in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem *Aurora Leigh* that says;

Earth's crammed with heaven
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit around and pick blackberries.

Blackberries must be picked, of course, but it is important that they do not become the major preoccupation in the Meeting. There are deeper mysteries into which, when we consent, we are drawn: Listening one another into being; Engaging in Conversations with Mystery; Spiritually companioning and befriending one another. How encouraging to realise that these too have been offered to us as part of Summer School this year.

Visitors to Quaker Meeting for Worship remark on the special quality of silence that evokes in them a spiritual awareness that is often latent. In the silence different things occur, not because of anything that was said or heard, but simply because stepping outside the familiar world, they are confronted by a different part of themselves as we are ourselves. Like travellers in a foreign country we can all find ourselves responding to events in ways we never would have while at home.

Being part of a Quaker community teaches or reminds me that I am just part of the whole, a thread in the fabric of God's creation, a note in the symphony of life.

Most days, however, I don't want to be carrying on creative activity and be involved in change. It seems too hard. I want comfort, ease, stability.

Then I remember that stability comes from the verb *stare* to stand. We all know that it is very difficult to stand still for a long period without moving. We can walk for much longer periods than we can stand still because the various muscle systems are alternately exercised and rested. Stability is not immobility. The best way to persevere is to keep growing, to keep adapting to changing circumstances. The magic of stability lies in taking a long-term view of life—to see the links between the short-term tasks and the long-term aims.

Stability is neither progressive nor conservative. Its strength lies in attention to the present moment, like the peasant at the plough, concentrating on the task at hand and not much looking up from it. Yet labour is sustained by the hope of the harvest.

A healthy community provides us with a style of spiritual life that renders perseverance possible: perseverance to ensure that we hold Gathered Meetings, sustain quality affective relationships, undertake creative work, provide inclusive governance, offer one another support and feedback, maintain some realistic boundaries, and have regular enjoyable times of fun and relaxation together.

In reading the reports and in writing this address, I have reflected upon the flow of spiritual time in the changing tides of the life of the Meeting. Time and tide come from the same Anglo-Saxon root word meaning 'season' or 'hour'. We can *waste* time just as we *keep* it. We do of course *lose track of time*—especially when we are really engaged. We experience *good* times and *bad* times; a few of us have experiences that we describe as the '*the time of our life*'.

At different points in our lives it is appropriate to ask ourselves: Where am I headed? What will become of me? On the one hand those questions may be construed as anxiety speaking. On the other hand, they are exactly the questions all of us quietly ask ourselves and should be asking ourselves. In doing so, we often dream of things that are yet to be as if they

already were. Then, when we are focused, we progress towards the goals we envisioned—peace, justice, equality.

Our reports suggest that collectively we are an ambitious group. In our own various ways we take on the world—Earth care, refugee advocacy, AVP and prison work, nuclear disarmament ... the list goes on. Our Quaker Testimonies are demanding. What do Integrity, Equality, Simplicity and Peace require of us? How do we build or maintain our spiritual capability to live up to these challenges?

The reports in *Documents in Advance* record 'This is the life of our Meetings'. When reading them I received images of people who care about and for one another deeply and with sensitivity, snippets of contributions of some of those who have died as well as welcome and expectation extended to those who joined the Society, images of projects completed and others still undone, of trees planted and earth renewed. Of griefs and joys. I was left with a sense of community and continuity.

And I imagined there were moments which could not easily be recorded—brief moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfilment, where in our Meetings and gatherings we felt ourselves there . . . moments when divisions, distractions, worries, sadness that dragged us down were somehow dissolved, or brought into alignment, so that we felt united, moving forward, suddenly capable and full of energy. Spirit at work in us.

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