

It Takes a Meeting to Raise a Quaker Printed in *Friends Journal*, July, 2007

You can raise a Quaker without First Day School, without lesson plans, even without ever figuring out “what does every Quaker child need to know about Quakerism”—but you can’t raise a Quaker without community. Young people raised among Quakers become Quakers for much the same reason that people do who come to Quakerism as adults. They get hooked on the experience of spiritual community; they become passionate about the truths learned by plunging into the living water together. Even if no one ever quoted scripture to them—“love ye one another”—still they get it and they hunger for it and they come back for more.

I never set out to raise Quakers. Being new to Quakerism myself, it would have seemed presumptuous. A member of a very small and invariably silent worship group, there was no First Day School to offer. There were stories and songs in the home, silent grace at dinner time—but no religious ed curriculum, and the stories in the home were more likely Buddhist dharma tales from their storyteller father. There were certainly books starting with readalouds at a young age. For the older child, a choice book tailored to his or her nature might be offered, or simply left out on the table to be grabbed. Add all of this to the conversations in the family, and you have a “no lesson plan” version of spiritual instruction. These things are all part of raising children—but none of this would make them Quakers.

“It takes a village to raise a child,” says the African proverb. Well; it takes a meeting to raise a Quaker. The Quaker communities that raised my children were the teen meetings—meetings of young people and their adult leaders and other adult friends—of the yearly and quarterly meetings. These infrequent but intensely experienced meetings have a huge impact on young lives.

Going to Pacific Yearly Meeting was at first another homeschool offering on my part. Not a teacher, and a lazy non-teacher at that, my chief gift as a homeschooling mom was the ability to notice the difference between “clunk” and “ding” when a resource or experience was offered. Yearly meeting for my preteen son was a bigtime “ding!” It became a necessary event in our year. Participating in Junior Yearly Meeting (JYM) for five days in the summer starting at age 11 leavened Michael’s whole year.

Like many other young people, he bonded to meeting for business and worship sharing long before he had any comprehension of meeting for worship. The catch, of course, is that to do meeting for business or worship sharing, you have to “get” sitting with expectation and acceptance in the Silence. From the results, the JYMers seemed to take to it as though born to it, and it is indeed supremely innate to the human spirit to sit together in a sacred circle. The year we at Pacific Yearly Meeting were struggling painfully with our somewhat legalistic minute on the civil right of marriage for same sex partners, JYM brought to plenary their own penetrating and simply worded minute. For the teens, the experience of connection with the spirit leading to heartfelt action left a lasting imprint. For the rest of us, the JYM minute helped us to see past our conflicting emotion to the heart of the matter, allowing us to unfold to the reality of how much we do love and celebrate each other. And I believe that many of us, while loving the ring of truth, also loved it that the message came from our children.

The girls entered JYM five years after Michael, my daughter Faith and first one friend (because it will be more fun with a friend) and then two more friends (because they heard about the good times and asked to come). By that time there was also a quarterly teen program, and they all absolutely had to go every quarter, never mind the seven hour drive each way. The exuberant energy of four girls and me and all our gear in a little Subaru! They explained to me that teen Quaker gatherings were the place where they could be their real whole selves and be accepted; they could say whatever they wanted or needed to say. They talked intimately in worship sharing mode about drugs, about relationships between men and women, about sexual orientation. They thought together about war and about the planet. They learned to run meetings, to appoint clerks and committees, to plan their own gatherings and respond to things that happened at those gatherings. They roughhoused and stayed up late—some times just “hanging out” and sometimes in a late night worship that would start at 11:00 and leave most of the gathering in tears. God bless their gifted (and often underappreciated) adult leaders who entered into and guided their community!

As young adults, four of five are still actively involved with Quaker community—one a member of a monthly meeting, another an attender of a monthly meeting; another attending a Quaker college; but most notably all four active in the young people’s community which drew them in to Quakerism in the first place: active in yearly meeting, and in the Western Young Friends New Years Gathering. It is a joy to me to watch them go off to New Years Gathering together, and to share the deep commitments of their earnest young lives. My gratitude to the meetings that helped me raise them is deep.

The weakness of the teen meeting system that I experienced, of course, was its usual isolation from the rest of the community of Friends. Looking back, I have wished for “my” children to have had also the experience of being cherished by a monthly meeting from early childhood. I have heard adult Friends talk movingly of the love and acceptance they felt from elders in their monthly meeting as children. I also wish for more of the adults in our monthly meetings to share the life and light of the young people. So many young people drop out of meeting starting around age 11—about the age when the great mystics of many traditions were experiencing their first searing mystical experiences—and about the age when the “teen” meetings were beginning to make their deep impression on the lives of the children in my care.

John Woolman in his mid-twenties was deeply fixed on his concern for the slaves and slaveholders. He traveled extensively in the ministry, speaking his message with earnest love. Where can we find amongst ourselves the twenty-something year-old Woolmans of today—are they embedded in our meetings, or have we cut many of them loose a decade or more earlier? If we could stay in relation to our teenagers as meetings, we might have more fire and less comfort. And a good thing for us and for the world that might well be!

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