

# Epistle from the 74<sup>th</sup> Annual Session of Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends 2020

*"I will ask the river to return to you," [Lucia] said. "But just as the river gives water to all who are thirsty, no matter who they are, so you must learn to treat everyone with kindness, even those who seem different from you."*

- *The Woman Who Outshone the Sun* from a poem by Alejandro Cruz Martinez

To All Friends Everywhere:

Early Friends worshipped in barns, open fields, Friends' houses, and jails. This year, we modern Friends of Pacific Yearly Meeting met in virtual space on Zoom around the theme of "Radical Inclusivity: Responding to the Persistent and Insistent Love of God" from tenth to fifteenth day of Seventh Month, 2020. We delighted in the access and participation that Zoom afforded to those of us with mobility and communication challenges, while also grieving the reduced presence of our children in this virtual space and carrying a concern for inclusion of those without access to the technology that makes it possible.

In opening worship, Spirit spoke through one Friend with an invitation to consider our spiritual house. While some Friends are granted deeds of title to the house, others are treated as houseguests expected only to perch on the plastic-covered sofa. How might we work together to knock down some walls, build an addition, and rearrange our furniture such that our house is a welcoming sanctuary for all?

This image of our spiritual house echoed through our session. Many times we were called to wake from our slumbers, to stumble from our individual chambers into our common living room.

One such wake-up call was the keynote address delivered by our beloved Friend Mica Estrada, who helped us open our eyes to the Truth that when we don't anchor our sense of security in Spirit, we contort our environment to make ourselves feel safe. Our fear leads to domination, as it did for the villagers in the story Mica shared, *The Woman Who Outshone the Sun*, from a poem by Alejandro Cruz Martinez. This inner system of survival, occurring deep in each of our brains, is mirrored by our social systems. Mica called us to see the complexities of these systems and the complexities within our Society, yet also illuminated the simplicity of the way forward: connecting ever more deeply with the Presence. She shared advices to nurture this connection: maintain a daily spiritual practice, find a practice that helps us reconnect when we inevitably feel disconnected, focus our energy on what is loving and kind, and forgive ourselves for the things we find difficult in others.

In our plenaries we labored to be loving with each other even when our waking up included grogginess and crankiness. We experimented with a new house rule introduced by our clerk, Sandy Kewman, helping us to live into radical inclusivity. Any time a Friend heard something hurtful, like the use of a "we" that only encompassed white Friends, we were encouraged to notify our "chat elders" of that hurt so the clerk could call for a pause to breathe and notice,

## Epistle from the 74<sup>th</sup> Annual Session of Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends 2020

perhaps to journal, and for Friends to use a breakout room to process what occurred, if necessary.

Our approved minutes of action included removing the alienating word “Oversight” from the name of our Ministry Committee. Like a pedestal left after the statue has been removed, we will live with the empty space until Spirit reveals what belongs there. Friends found unity to engage further discernment about the role of our Representative Committee, and whether it is time to have a paid administrator in addition to our Youth Programs Coordinator. These decisions share a thread of care for the health of relationships among Friends in this house.

Outside of our plenaries, we gathered on the patio of our spiritual house for affinity groups; spent time in our parlour doing interest groups, Bible study, and early Quaker writings study; visited the playroom for some intergenerational online games; enjoyed shared meals in our Zoom dining room; performed early morning *chi* movement on the front lawn, and reflected lovingly on the portraits hanging on our walls during Meeting for Memorials where we offered thanks for the lives of forty-three Friends this year—more than is usual.

We are learning to pick up our metaphorical broom, ordering our houses by doing the inner work of transformation without taking any shortcuts. Many Friends read Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* at the clerk’s request, and Friends of European Descent met daily to do the work of white allyship. Friends of Color met together daily to consider what name might better describe their fellowship and to worship on the query, “How has the pain that we have experienced from racism, classism, sexism or homophobia, etc., opened us to the Divine?”

The clerk named our collective grief response to the triple pandemics of COVID-19, racism, and climate crisis, reminding us that our house does not exist in a vacuum. We reconstituted our Unity with Nature Committee and approved a new process for amplifying our monthly meetings’ minuted voices and actions outside of our walls. In considering our foundation, we remembered the land and economic systems our house is built upon. We are grateful for the welcome and blessing given by Wukchumni tribal elder Darlene Franco, who celebrated her people’s ability to do ceremony on the land and host Quaker and Wukchumni youth camps at Quaker Oaks farm.

Throughout our session, our Zoom coordinator welcomed each of us to our virtual spaces as a beloved child of God. Though we feel this moment in time pregnant with suffering, injustice, and grief, we also feel a burgeoning opportunity to shift the systems that uphold our illusion of separateness from others, from Earth, from God. As we open to our interconnectedness, our house becomes a House of Spirit, it turns inside out, and we greet all the world as family, beloved of God.

signed by Sandy Kewman, Clerk  
on behalf of Pacific Yearly Meeting, 10-15th, Seventh Month, 2020