

Epistle from the 75th Annual Session of
Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends
2021

Epistle from Pacific Yearly Meeting Annual Session July 23-28, 2021

“...i remember you with marigolds...
place me at your altar, i am there...
though i never knew you, i worship for you
and i remember you with gold flowers
i remember you with marigolds”

From “Worship on a Mass Grave” by Gabriela Portillo Alvarado

“...We have been here before
We know the Hanging Tree, the rope
The rape of our bodies, our Cultures
The theft of our Songs & our Children...
We’ve been through it all before
And we can get through it all again...
We have been here before & together we can heal!
I know we can!!!”

From “.....I KNOW WE CAN!!!” by Avotcja Jiltonilro

To All Friends Everywhere:

We are called to both love and justice. Led by our Racial Justice Subcommittee, we began the process of creating a sacred space in which healing and transformation can occur. The initial step is to learn to recognize and express when one is hurt by bias or microaggression (“Ouch”) or has caused hurt (“Oops”) or has witnessed another’s being hurt (“Whoa”). Vocal ministry during meeting for worship included expressions of “Ouch” or “I’m sorry” or “Whoa.” The subcommittee held a time each evening for debriefing our sacred space process, and the Ministry Committee listened to people’s reports of hurt.

We were deeply moved by the poetry and stories of the keynote speakers, Gabriela Portillo Alvarado and Avotcja (Avacha) Jiltonilro. Both of them wrote of the multi-generational trauma of being nonwhite in the United States. Gabriela recounted their pain experienced while researching the human skulls of nonwhite persons, including Native Americans from the early 19th century, in a collection at the University of Pennsylvania. These remains have not been repatriated, and Gabriela’s poem “Worship on a Mass Grave” spoke of the day they sat in worship above the storage room.

Avotcja described herself as a believer in perpetual revelation and as one to whom the Creator usually speaks in poetry and music. She wrote and distributed a love poem, “Street Children of the Night,” to children outside at night near her home, and was later amazed when a small girl hugged her on the BART subway system and recited the poem verbatim, expressing gratitude because, as she said, “nobody ever talks to us.” From the poem that Avotcja wrote in response to the 2016 presidential election, she led us repeatedly in a chorus of everyone’s voices declaring, “I know we can!”

We were excited to see the faces of Quakers from California, Nevada, Hawai’i, Mexico, and beyond. This was our second annual session held online via Zoom, and this year has brought

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other changes as well. We grieved the loss of 50 Friends at an extended memorial meeting. Our total membership is 1,173, down 36 from last year, and our Nominating Committee encouraged committees to set goals of a size appropriate to the strength and light of current members, because no big influx of new people is occurring. In this age of more digital communications, the administrative work required has expanded even as the available volunteer energy has declined, and we approved hiring a half-time administrative assistant. Simultaneously, the Ministry Committee will be listening widely and deeply to discern the Spirit's call to the yearly meeting -- and the structures that would support our heeding that call.

Discussions about love and justice continued throughout our time together. Most people when they spoke included in their introductions an acknowledgment of the indigenous people of their region. In Bible study, we were reminded that the instruction in Micah 6:8 is "to do justice" -- not just to talk or to read about it or to expect someone else to do it. How are we doing justice? We heard Quakers' stories of advocating for racial justice, housing equity, farmworker rights, and environmental justice, as well as providing financial support of undocumented students.

The life of our Quaker communities can be nurtured by eldering, and the process can be one more tool in creating sacred space. The Eldering Subcommittee of the Ministry Committee created a schedule of elders for holding the space of each meeting for worship or plenary. For each keynote speaker, the presiding clerk, and some other individuals exercising their gifts of ministry for our community, an elder provides prayerful and sometimes practical support. At an interest group, the subcommittee encouraged participants to practice this holding of space while a group worships or an individual presents or ministers. Doing so helps grow the good in our meetings. Eldering can contribute to the work of decolonization, in that the elder sets aside their own ego and their needs in order to be in service of the spiritual growth of another.

We know that we join many other Quakers in wrestling with issues of racial justice. We encourage Friends everywhere to give up the expectation of comfort: in conversations about race, discomfort is natural--it means that we are growing. Let us create ways to help each other be brave. Let us take time to connect with the indwelling Spirit that connects us to one another and to all of creation. Let us break the bonds of racism by continuing to learn, and continuing to tell the truth, and becoming willing to make repairs. We can then take the next steps into sacred space together. We know we can!

Note: In "normal years" there would also be epistles from younger Friends in Pacific Yearly Meeting, but as the 2021 Annual Session was conducted online via Zoom, there were no such epistles this year.