



ILYM Meetinghouse, McNabb, Illinois

Illinois Yearly Meeting *of the Religious Society of Friends*

Consisting of 22 Quaker Meetings and Worship Groups
in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, and Wisconsin

2021 Illinois Yearly Meeting Epistle

To Friends Around the World,

For the second year in a row, Illinois Yearly Meeting did not meet on the grounds we hold deeply in our hearts, but through computers, forming a patchwork quilt of faces on a screen. This year's sessions focused on the Testimony of Equality—How are the choices we make considering all of our Beloved Community, and not the few who speak loudest or the group that is most dominant? How are we finding that of God in those around us, not only to acknowledge our shared humanity but to celebrate it fully?

We so often think of differences as burdens, as things to be handled. But during a panel presentation on the Testimony of Equality, Adrian Nelson shared what a gift it is for something often considered a burden to instead be considered a gift. When we step away and see these differences as strengths, we gift each other with the love and knowledge and community that we are all so different, and yet at our core the same. And so, rather than seeing shifts away from traditions and long-held “norms” as a burden, we can instead see them as a gift. We can see this time as an opportunity to rebuild our practices and processes in ways that both keep the beauty and strength at the core of what it means to be a Friend and move away from that which “gatekeeps” our community.

In her presentation on environmental justice, Shelley Tanenbaum, of Quaker Earthcare Witness, shared a query from Potawatomi scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer. At its core this query asks, “What can we change that may be difficult for us, but make positive changes in the lives of so many others.” On this deep dive into the Testimony of Equality this week, many of us found that our idea of equality is rooted in our own experiences, rather than those of the people who have long been denied that equality. We recognized that to fully live into the Testimony of Equality is not to treat everyone exactly the same, but to treat people as they want to be treated, embracing the differences in culture, ability and norms that make us each special.

Dwight Wilson, Quaker author and minister, spoke Saturday night, fittingly on the first Juneteenth recognized as a federal holiday. Dwight shared from his heart, talking not about “white guilt,” but of a new way of love. Telling stories of his ancestors—not only their struggles, but their triumphs—he spoke of a promise he made himself years ago to be considered an ancestor one day; not just someone his family spoke of in passing, but someone who people would look to for guidance and strength. He left us with the wisdom that the work we do now is not about us in this moment, but about us in the future—we may not see the fruits of our labor with our own eyes, but our children, grandchildren and future generations will see them, and that will still be us. We must own our past, while moving forward in our present. Simply talking about things will not change anything; we must

pair our internal work with external action.

We have spent the last year deeply searching for the ways to feel connected as we have needed to be physically apart. We have pivoted in ways we could not have dreamed a year and a half ago, when the COVID pandemic started raging. In that time, we have found intense joy, intense sorrow and everything in between. Some who have been kept away from their meetings for decades were able to return, while others found videoconferencing via Zoom overwhelming and needed to break away. As meetings start to meet in person, or with a hybrid option, we will not—and we cannot—see it as a return to “normal.” This year has taught us that “normal” was not working. Instead, we will walk away stronger, holding tight to that which makes us Friends, shedding what serves only portions of our community.

As we find a new rhythm to our lives, it will be tempting to return to patterns that are so deeply engrained in our daily routines, from both dominant cultures and Quaker traditions. Seeking inclusive alternatives, we are called to hold each other in the Light, as we co-create a better future by working for a world where equality is not more equal for some, constantly asking ourselves what love requires, remembering the call to enlightened action “What canst thou say?”

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