

supposed to respond to another's comments during worship-sharing. I know Marie to be a woman of great integrity. That I found myself amused rather than upset allowed me to consider that she might be right. So I spent much of the silent time that followed pondering what it could mean for me to praise God with integrity, not falling back on old patterns that I no longer believed. Here is my conclusion: while God certainly does not need to hear my words of praise, it is important for me to tell others what God had done for me. Giving voice to the grace of God in my life by speaking it to others, that is praising God; and it is a good thing to do. By reading this, you are reading my testimony that God is amazingly gracious and patient and kind and has a sense of humor. I praise God by telling you about it.

I have been able to reconsider and explore and *then find a way* to bring praising God back into my faith practice.

Those are the deepening effects of FWCC on my life. Here's the widening (and slightly scary) piece.

4. I learned that Friends in FWCC want to hear about me, yes, but they also want to know about my Yearly Meeting. This has been a profound challenge, because it has forced me to engage my own people, outside my safe local meeting, and join them more fully. I have come to love and trust my own Yearly Meeting in a way that I wouldn't have thought possible just a couple years ago. I have told them about Friends in FWCC and my previous three points, and while many are happy, there are some of my YM Friends who still have a hard time trusting any non-Evangelical Friend. But I cannot walk away from them; and I carry their concern with me when I come to these meetings. This is hard, deepening work. This is the work of peace-making. This is the work that FWCC has and is preparing me to do. This is an on-going story; talk with me about it sometime.

QUERIES

Following are some queries about the text, which you may wish to use for reflection or study, individually or with others.

1. In what ways have you offered or received spiritual hospitality?
 2. Julie found new understanding of her theology through running and while visiting a different group of Quakers. How have you found new understanding from unlikely sources?
 3. Have you ever laid down a practice (like Bible-reading, or praising God, or running), only to take it up again years later, seeing it in a new light?
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Julie Peyton "discovered" Quakers during a lecture from a member of her old faith tradition. She and her husband, David, are members of West Hills Friends in Portland, OR, which is affiliated with Northwest Yearly Meeting. In 2005 NWYM decided on a three-year trial affiliation, and Julie was appointed as one of the first representatives. After a lengthy discernment process and despite difficult differences of opinion, her yearly meeting became a full member of FWCC. Both Julie and David work at Portland State University, Julie teaching chemistry, and David as a researcher.

This article is an edited version of a talk Julie gave at the annual meeting of FWCC Section of the Americas in 2008.

ABOUT THE WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP

The Wider Quaker Fellowship is a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas. Through our mailings we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages, cultures and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows live in over 90 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. Wider Quaker Fellowship depends on the financial support of its readers to provide this service.

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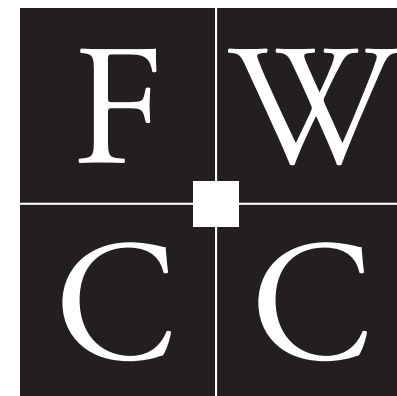
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A Personal Journey: Why I Deeply Love FWCC*

*Friends World Committee for Consultation

JULIE PEYTON



The Wider Quaker Fellowship
La Asociación de amigos de los Amigos

A PERSONAL JOURNEY: WHY I DEEPLY LOVE FWCC

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

T.S. Eliot—“Little Gidding”
(the last of his Four Quartets)

Fifteen to twenty years ago I found my theology—my Bible-based, rational, Evangelical Christian, carefully-crafted systematic theology—in a shambles. The process took several months, but it seemed more like overnight, from one instant to the next. I had been putting off the moment of facing all the contradictions that were built into my understanding of atonement and salvation, of Biblical inerrancy and eternal damnation. One day I could put it off no longer, and the lovely structure I had built collapsed under its unsustainable weight. The basic problem went like this: I believed first and foremost that God is Love. I believed God created time and space, the planet and all its creatures, and that God had a plan from the beginning. But I also believed that people who didn’t “come to Jesus” were doomed to an eternity in Hell; not that God wanted this, but that people chose it. But by this understanding and belief *most* of humanity was bound for Hell, even if self-selecting for it. If God knew this was going to be the result (a few, a lucky, blessed few, would spend eternity in Heaven with Jesus and the angels, the vast majority of all humans wouldn’t) why would God start the whole process? Heaven and hell no longer made sense with my experience of a loving Center of the Universe. I had to choose either to hold on to my theology of salvation, with its inexplicable short-sighted God, or let it go and risk something as-yet-unseen. It wasn’t much of a choice, to be honest. I let it go.

An evangelical Quaker church of Northwest Yearly Meeting welcomed me anyway, and the people of that church saw my condition more clearly than I did. They saw God at work in me even in this dark, dark time, and *they told me so*. They asked nothing of me except to share honestly of my experience—there was no pressure to repent or change my belief (or lack thereof), only a welcome to their fellowship and encouragement to listen for the guidance *that would be given* in my own heart from the Inward Teacher, whoever or whatever she/he/it might be.

One day our pastor asked a group of us, “Is there anyone here who doesn’t ever expect to speak during open worship?” [the period of silence in a programmed worship service. *ed.*] I was the only one who raised a hand. When asked why, I replied, “To speak during meeting, one must believe that the Spirit is giving one a message. Since I don’t know if God exists, I can’t believe that any message I might hear is from God, thus I cannot speak. QED.” (I am not sure I actually said QED, but I thought it. It was very rational and reasonable.) No one had a response and the class went along. Just a few weeks later, during the silence of our open worship, I was once again pondering how I’d fallen so low, how much I had lost, and how sad I felt. I had recently taken up running, including marathons, and I was thinking how life-changing running was, how I had experienced more genuine transformation after a few years of running than I had had during 20+ years of being a Christian. As soon as I had that thought, I heard a Voice telling me to stand up and speak. I resisted, saying, “I can’t do that; it’s too personal and it won’t speak to anyone else, and besides, I’m not sure I even believe in You.” The Voice said, “Are you going to be obedient, or aren’t you?” I knew that if I remained seated and silent, my heart would explode within my chest. So I rose and spoke of how running had wrought more change in me, spiritually as well as physically, than my years of trying to be a Christian. And I sat down. And I realized, “I *do* have faith; I have a deep living faith; I just don’t have a theology.” I can’t describe how profound a realization that was. And it was a turning point. It was years before I could even begin to formulate *what* I believed, but I knew at that moment *Who* I trusted.

In the silence I had learned a stunning, incredible truth about *theology vs. faith*. It was in the silence that I learned how much I did, truly, have a deep, *deep* faith in the loving Heart that is at the center of everything and everyone. And I learned that for me it was useless to try to replace my theology—I had to live “theology-free” for a long, long time.

So what does FWCC have to do with this? Here are a few of the ways FWCC has directly helped me recover good things I thought I had lost forever, and to find something wonderful and scary that I never expected.

1. My local Quaker meeting is not unique. Its ability to hold together as a community while individually maintaining a wide variety of beliefs is something Friends in FWCC do all the time. This ability continues to amaze and inspire me. They keep alive the spirit of early Friends, and resist the human drive to divide and conquer. Raelyn J.,

a Friend from an unprogrammed meeting, demonstrated this to me at my first Annual Meeting in 2005. She chased me down after our first small (worship-sharing) group because she wanted to talk to me, an “evangelical friend,” about missions and missionaries. She wanted to know my experience and wanted to share hers; she wanted to know what I thought, and wanted to share her concerns and opinions. It was a delightful conversation, without a whole lot of answers, but genuine dialogue. Her courage and example opened a door for me: listening truthfully would be as important as speaking truthfully.

2. In the summer of 2005 I went as an FWCC Visitor to Pacific Yearly Meeting, a fairly liberal, unprogrammed yearly meeting. It was there, among mostly “liberal, non-Christ-centered” Friends, that I found myself reaching for a Bible with anticipation rather than anger or angst. After my theological breakdown, I hadn’t been able to open a Bible without great anger. Yes, it was irrational, it wasn’t the Bible’s fault, but it was automatic. After multiple attempts to get back to studying it, I gave up and decided to wait. Our yearly meeting doesn’t have organized Bible studies during its annual gathering, nor does my local meeting have such a thing, so ten or more years passed. In 2005 Pacific Yearly Meeting had two Bible studies a day, a formal, well presented class in the morning, and an informal “reading the Bible in the manner of Friends” hour in the evening. It was during the latter that I realized, while reaching for one of the Bibles stacked on the floor, that I was reading the Bible without the rush of negative emotion. It was like finding old letters in a long-lost shoebox. I could read with new eyes, without all the theological overlay of my younger days, letting it speak as the Spirit quickened the words. The anger was gone, as when a scab falls away and healthy skin lies below. Why there then, at Pacific Yearly Meeting’s annual session rather than among Evangelicals? Whenever I ask that question, I only sense a bemused silence.

And I now have back in my life a daily practice of reading the Bible. I don’t think it is a coincidence that this healing was completed at Pacific Yearly Meeting.

3. Last year, at the annual FWCC meeting in Providence, I was explaining to a small group of Friends that “praising God” was something I’d abandoned because I didn’t understand it, but that “thanking God” was something I did joyfully because *that* I understood. Marie H., a Conservative Friend, said to me firmly, “You *should do both*.” I could accept this from Marie, because I know her; we spent eight days together traveling in Guatemala in 2006. I was amused because Marie broke the rules of small groups. One is not