**How I finally made it to FGC Gathering**

How is it that I had never, before this summer, made it to Friends General Conference Gathering? True, as a West Coast Friend, the Gatherings tend to be in far off locals, like Ohio, Florida or New York. But I have no idea why I didn’t make it a priority to go in 2006, when the Gathering was just a ferry ride and a short drive from me, in Tacoma, Washington.

But, with CYM not in session this year, and with an 11-year old daughter, Rebecca, pinning for a Quaker gathering, this seemed like the year to make the trip. After some family discussions, we had decided that my wife, Grace, and our son, Colm, would stay closer to home, with a road trip of their own. Early July saw Rebecca and I, excitedly saying a heartfelt goodbye to the rest of our family, flying to Central Canada, hitching a ride with some Friends to Niagara Falls, NY for FGC Gathering.

Everyone seemed quite concerned that I might feel overwhelmed by Friends General Conference Gathering, and certainly it was by far the largest gathering of Quakers I have ever attended, with more than 1000 Friends in attendance. In many ways it seemed like home - very much like a Canadian Yearly Meeting or even Western Half Yearly Meeting, albeit with no Meeting for Worship for Business and a lot more going on. In other ways it was its own thing – almost a Quaker resort, which took some getting used to. It offered everything from daily workshops to contra-dancing to movie viewings. I was glad to see a few familiar faces from CYM to make the experience seem a bit more familiar.

I don’t think that I can do the number and diversity of activities justice in this brief article, so I will just list a series of impressions or lessons.

**Morning Workshops, or Am I a Conservative Friend?**

The centre-piece of the FGC Gathering program is the morning workshops. A week-long study of some aspect of Quaker belief or practice, these workshops allow participants to explore a topic or participate in an experience in detail. And such a range of topics – from bike riding (exploring what the Niagara area has to offer) to personal healing practices to Quaker history.

I chose to participate in a workshop titled “Who are Conservative Friends?” Since FGC is pretty unabashedly Liberal Quaker in orientation, the reaction I typically got when I told others at the gathering this was: “Oh… Interesting.” But I’ve been inspired by both Conservative Friends in CYM and by writer Lloyd Lee Wilson’s writings, and so wanted to explore this tradition further. Moreover, I’ve been concerned that CYM needs to be a more welcoming place for this branch of Friends.

Led by Andrew Wright, a member of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative), about 15 of us met each morning to hear about and discuss the history, practice and discipline of this branch of Friends. “Conservative Quaker” does not, of course, refer to political conservatism, but rather to a commitment to traditional Quaker values, practices and understanding. Conservative Friends Meetings are unprogrammed and non-evangelical. But they are a whole lot more likely to use Christ language and emphasize the authority of the Monthly Meeting in their lives.

After a week at FGC I concluded that in many ways I am a Conservative Friend – although Christian language doesn’t yet flow off my tongue. After coming home I dug out my old copy of Christian Faith and Practice – which was the discipline of CYM when I started attending Friends Meetings and which has been an inspiration for me since then – and found that I could see little difference between the Quakerism described in it and the Conservative Friends traditions that I had learned about. Perhaps I’ll feel less shy about expressing that in the future.

**Learning about other Friends’ traditions**

Most Friends attending the Gathering were from more Liberal Yearly Meetings, and I was sometimes surprised to learn about differences between their ways of doing things and those in CYM. From hearing about Quarterly Meetings in New York Yearly Meeting (is this a model for organizing Monthly Meetings on Vancouver Island?) to realizing just how small (in terms of numbers and geographically) some Yearly Meetings are (perhaps CYM should consider breaking into smaller pieces? – something I’ve always resisted), there were a number of things I learned that caught me by surprise.

With afternoons set aside for a wide range of programs, inter-generational activities or just relaxing, there were plenty of opportunities to talk and interact with Friends. Provided, of course, that you don’t try to do everything.

**There is such a thing as non-theist Quaker evangelism**

Evenings at FGC typically offer a speaker or speakers talking us through some important issue of the day (although Wednesday saw an improvised multi-generational musical/artistic activity.) Kenneth Deer, of the Mohawk Nation, spoke one night on the Convention on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and an American Friends Service Committee-hosted night focused on Palestine.

But for me the most fascinating talk – in terms of delivery and content – was on the final night, by Pamela Boyce Simms, a non-theist Quaker Buddhist, a resident scholar at Pendle Hill and the convener of a six-State “Transition Hub.” Pamela challenged us all to “reground ourselves in the source of unified, searingly accurate corporate Quaker vision that can jumpstart and sustain meaningful 21st century transformation, indeed, evolution.”

The passion and charisma with which she called for a recommitment to the vision of George Fox was remarkable – seeking to recruit a new Valiant 60 – which she calls “Seeds of Light.” Her speech is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTRo-G2JlxQ> (starting at 11:30 in), and is well worth a watch.

Rebecca and I rounded off several evenings (way past her regular bedtime) with Contra-Dancing – led by the “George Fox Trotters,” both playing fiddle tunes when we knew them and learning the expertly called dances when we didn’t. It was a lot of fun.

I’m not certain when we’ll next get back to Friends General Conference Gathering, but I hope that we do. Rebecca and I both had a blast – and learned a lot about our faith in the process.

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