**Report:**

**My Experience at Friends General Conference (The Gathering) July 2018**

Dear Friends,

I am thankful for your love and generosity in providing me with funds that allowed me to attend my first large gathering of Quakers. This is an opportunity that I am very grateful for. This experience provided me with an opportunity to deepen my spiritual journey, to immerse myself more deeply into the life of our wider Society, and to contribute to my fledgling vocation of spiritual care. In sum, I came away more informed about the Society of Friends and my vocation and the issue of mental health within the Society but did not come away feeling spiritually renewed. The experience was more practical and informational than spiritual. There was much learning but little reflecting.

The facilitators of my workshop used a helpful tool with which we ‘checked-in’ every morning about our experience of the workshop and the conference in general. We would express what our roses (positive experiences) and thorns (negative experiences) had been for the day and day before. I thought it would be a useful way to report on my FGC experience to you.

In Friendship,

Jordan Kerr

**Roses:**

1. **Workshop - “Quakers and Mental Illness”**
   * An excellent and informative experience filled with both practical information of mental health and developmental disorders with a focus on the Autism spectrum and anecdotal information about the participants experiences with their own personal struggles and those within their Monthly Meetings concerning mental illness and disorders. It was a very connective experience and I left with a wealth of practical tools and resources.
2. **Developing Relationships**
   * My current relationships with Toronto Friends who also attended FGC were deepened and became more connected. Sitting with these Friends in evening Meetings for Worship among the fireflies, rabbits, racoons and deer that ventured out onto the campus after the heat of the day and having deep and quiet connective conversations before bed drew us closer together in the things that are eternal.
3. **Meeting New Friends**
   * Being surrounded by like-minded Quakers for an entire week was a wonderful experience. To walk everywhere and call everyone Friend was a treasure. To meet new Friends and becoming connected to them was the start of new F/friendships.

**Thorns:**

1. **Busyness & Lack of Silent Worship**
   * There was, in my opinion, a lack of silent Worship. It was present, of course, but to a far lesser degree that I’d expected. In going to FGC I think I expected a week of contemplation and spiritual reflection but found instead a busy schedule of activities that caused more anxiety than contemplation. As the week went on I found myself more able to create a schedule and routine that spoke more to my condition and to my energy level. I am indeed more monastic than activist! I did expect more Silent Worship involving the whole community, of which there was little. There was a short early morning Worship which saw 8-10 people come out and an hour long mid-day worship put on by the Quakers for LGBTQ Concerns which was also not largely attended. I was very much looking forward to the final community wide Meeting for Worship but found myself disappointed in how it unfolded.
2. **Activist Focus**
   * I am not an activist Friend. These concerns are close to my heart and I support my Friends and my Meeting when unity is found on issues of action and justice. I, however, I am not often called to take direct action on social and political issues. The focus of the larger Gathering community was on social justice and action, something I had difficulty fully participating in as my personal leadings for action are more quiet and focused on individual healing from oppression and trauma rather than speaking truth to power.
3. **Music** 
   * As my Friends know music is always on my heart. However, I was disappointed at the music of FGC. Several of the musical activities I felt rather out of place as they were suited more to those more musically trained. The daily noon sing was also somewhat disappointing as the music choices were often again more of an activist theme than a spiritual theme. I would have found myself out of place in suggesting the songs which I would have liked to sing. My voice raised with the rest in singing “Solidarity Forever” with fire in my heart as these leadings are buried within me but felt uncomfortable in suggesting the music closer to my heart. Also, in not being among Friends for very long some of the songs well known to others were unfamiliar to me and I found it difficult to connect to them.

**Follow Up:**

The leadings from which I took from FGC were related to my workshop on Quakers and Mental Illness. Spiritual communities attract people looking for peace in the midst of their internal struggles and this is as it should be. This sometimes means circumstances and reactions that can disrupt worship and make people uncomfortable. How do we welcome and integrate struggling people into the life of our Meeting? I have been investigating the experiences of Toronto Monthly Meeting in dealing with people mental health and developmental concerns. I am aware that there are some resources and connections in place to assist in these situations. I would like to revisit these, update, and make them more accessible to Friends and visitors. Mental health is a very diverse and context dependent issue that cannot be understood with a cookie-cutter plan or perspective. Each person, each situation, must be addressed on its own in the spirit of love and in recognizing that of God/the Light in everyone in their own individual realities. I propose:

* The creation of a standing committee on Mental Health and Developmental Concerns to be formed and initially meet to:
  + Draw up a minute as a spiritual blueprint on how our values would have us ideally respond to mental health issues within our community, especially when those are deemed disruptive to our worship, processes, and safety
  + Create general resources and contacts to be made openly accessible to Friends and newcomers struggling with these concerns
  + Put into place an available network of professional resources and potential referrals (both inside and outside the Meeting) to which Friends may consult on personal issues and issues affecting the wider community
  + After these are created the committee would only then meet when called upon by necessity
* Present a brief overview of the information and resources that I took away from my workshop.