**A seasonal learning at Woodbrooke**

This is a report in brief about my sojourn at Woodbrooke and the Eldering workshop I participated in this past winter. One of the many benefits serving as a Friend in Residence (FiR) is the learning available, when time allows, and the wonderful international connections one makes. Quaker educators at Woodbrooke are the best in the world. I had been an Eva Koch scholar in 2008 and have taken several inspired courses since then, but this was the first time I served as a FiR.

Woodbrooke College was founded by George Cadbury in 1903, when he donated his Victorian family estate to the Society of Friends in Selly Oak, Birmingham, and turned it into an International Quaker Study Centre. For over a century it has welcomed f/Friends from five continents, it's most illustrious guest was Mahatma Gandhi. Today Woodbrooke also offers graduate and post-graduate courses in Quaker studies. I recall Betty Polster, while steering me towards Woodbrooke a decade ago, telling me that when she lived there in the early 1990s she had assisted John Punshon in researching his book, ***Portrait in Grey***. That's about as experimental as historical research gets, for the Quaker Way is nothing if not experimental.

Woodbrooke has now expanded into a Conference Centre and a B&B as well. This is where Resident Friends continue to provide a Quaker presence for the guests after hours and on weekends. A half-hour meeting for worship begins each day and Epilogue closes each evening. The centre wears three hats order to generate the revenue required to run its buildings and grounds, its courses, its kitchen and staff, and the upkeep of the second largest historical Quaker library in the world. It must bring in 5,000 GBP per day to cover costs. That's roughly $8,700 CDN per day - an ongoing challenge.

The Bevan Naish Library, compiled by Paul Bevan and Arthur John Naish, is held in locked glass cabinets in a refrigerated room to preserve the books. These letters and epistles were published from the mid-17th to mid-18th centuries. I worked with some of these publications looking for details about George Fox's encounters with Native Peoples in New England. In his journals Fox states that his meetings with Indian emperors, kings, and councilors were gentle and loving, but gives few details. That will require more digging. Letters from those who travelled with him through the forests have not yet been catalogued - unlike William Penn, who has been thoroughly documented. Penn was so loved and trusted by the Indigenous peoples that for seventy-five years Indians in the Pennsylvania area would not attack or kill Quakers.

The Woodbrooke course on Eldering and Oversight was led by Zelie Gross and Judith Roads. The following summary is taken largely from notes provided by Zelie, (author of With a Tender Hand). Here is an overview of the process of Eldering, which in Canada we call Ministry and Counsel.

Elders are Friends looked to for spiritual counsel and discerning truth who take responsibility for the spiritual wellbeing of a meeting and its members. When a Friend is appointed as an elder it does not mean they have been elevated to a higher position, but that the meeting recognizes their gifts to serve. It is a weakness today that as the older generation dies, taking its wisdom with them, they are not being replaced by sufficient numbers of Friends who carry equivalent knowledge. A similar shift is happening in the UK, but they have 35,000 members, while in Canada we have 1,000 over a much larger geographic area. Eighty-five percent of Quakers today arrive as adult seekers carrying baggage from other faith traditions, or none, which must be unlearned. The isolation and distances between meetings in Canada is another challenge, though technology helps to bridge that divide somewhat. The Quaker Way attracts highly educated people, but the practice itself has little to do with academics and must come from the heart if it is to be authentic. If I were to summarize the role of elders, I would call their gift the Ministry of Presence. However, elders are also human and prone to making mistakes like anyone else, and this is where humility becomes so important. (Advices & Queries #17...Think it possible that you may be mistaken.)

Chapter 12: British Faith & Practice (5th ed.) states that "with our structure, we risk failure in understanding and transmitting our tradition, and our failure in pastoral care. We do not always adequately support one another. When we approach people to carry out tasks for us, there is a danger of approaching this in too secular a way... We can and must pray for them to receive the necessary gifts and strength from the Spirit." The spiritual life of a meeting for worship is strongly influenced by the quality of its vocal ministry. Some highlights:

* Will the contribution be worth breaking the silence for?
* Will the contribution be of service to those who are present and those who are not?
* Does the contribution come from the heart, rather than the mind? Will it speak to the heart of the listener, rather than their intellect?
* Is the timing appropriate?

Zelie said that giving a quiet personal word of thanks to a Friend for their contribution afterwards may give encouragement to an attender for future. And holding short After-Words at the rise of meeting can help to dispel the need to break the worshipful silence inappropriately. Vancouver Meeting calls these last 10 minutes following worship, the Joys and Sorrows of our everyday lives.

Eldering is Quaker leadership. Assumptions we may hold from other experiences can hinder our understanding of Quaker leadership, which is not about creating hierarchies in meetings. We will miss is if we assume it's about exercising authority, or managing people, or being in charge. A Quaker leader is a servant to the meeting. "Sometimes what we call leadership can simply mean holding on to a calling, to the knowledge that Grace is present, even when everything seems to fall apart around you." (Margery Post Abbott, Listening to the Voice of the Light). It isn't easy to spot because elders often express this service silently and their contribution can be taken for granted. The word 'modelling' was used. This reminded me of traditional Native ways where children are taught by example, not by instruction.

According to Zelie Gross and elders in Britain, there are five strands to Quaker leadership:

1) **Ministry of spiritual nurture**: This supports the spiritual health of our community through example, as Friends come to Meeting regularly with hearts and minds prepared, with a presence that adds to the stillness of worship. We also express our leadership when we speak in response to a leading, by tending to our own Quaker learning, and fostering opportunities for this in Meeting.

2) **Ministry of building community**: Doing things together is the best way for people to get to know each other and not only over the kitchen sink. People feel more responsible for a community when they are known and connect with one another. Leadership is needed to support Friends' engagement, to promote welcome and inclusion, and enable many purposeful opportunities for people to connect.

3) **Ministry of encouragement**: Everyone brings something to contribute to the life of the Meeting. When people share their gifts and skills, including the gift of leadership, others are encouraged to share their gifts, too. Leadership encourages this by fostering an inclusive community, like a vessel with few passengers and many crew members.

4) **Ministry of discernment**: This involves enquiring and listening, being open to leadings, and observing right ordering. It isn't the responsibility of clerks and conveners alone - we all participate in discernment. The quality depends upon each of us expressing leaderful behaviour in how we model good practice and support leadership.

5) **Ministry of getting things done:** This enables the practical work of the Meeting to be planned, organized, maintained, and developed. We share and pool our gifts. Leadership shows the way for people get on board. Friends who get things done are those fostering a shared vision and enabling willing involvement.

Three key practices of both our faith and our leadership are Listening, Trusting, and Acting according to Diane Randall, in Everything I needed to Know About Leadership I learned from Quakers (And My Mom).

It is the role of Elders to ensure that right ordering for business meeting is understood by all and that spiritual discipline is maintained throughout, with care for the needs of seekers and attenders. Elders promote the right holding of Meeting for Worship and are responsible for its quiet gathering. They restrain unsuitable vocal ministry with the understanding that responsibility for the Meeting is shared by all. Ministry is not the place for intellectual exercise, but the knowledge that the spirit speaks through us, not from us. Elders encourage punctuality and arrange for the closing of the meeting. They visit those unable to attend, or arrange a Meeting for Worship in their homes. They also take responsibility for the right gospel ordering of Meeting for Worship for special occasions such as marriages and funerals.

*Meetings are not about a few doing everything - everyone needs to contribute in some capacity, according to their individual gifts and talents.*

Zelie stated several times that eldering is not about telling someone they are out of order, as is often believed. It's actually a very small part of eldering. However, our disciplines need to be upheld and this is a small but significant part of eldering practice. Being eldered can be painful and embarrassing, and speaking privately is the best way, which is the least disturbing for the whole Meeting. This also enables the elder to consult with other Friends in the event that they may be mistaken in their judgement.

It helps to think in terms of 'positive eldering' by giving people opportunities to share their spiritual lives and life journeys; holding meetings for learning and creative listening, and worship sharing groups, sharing experiences of worship with each other similar to what Friends in Light Groups do. This can help friends build the confidence to give spoken ministry and to deepen their practice. One way to make attenders feel included is to ask them to find a passage in Advices and Queries that speak to them, then have them read it aloud to the meeting on the First Day of the month, once Meeting is settled.

Elders ensure that right ordering is followed in the formation of our committees. There is a reason why three-year terms were established and six years of service in one position is max. One member committees are not in right ordering and can lead to stagnation. Elders encourage Friends to take part in the life of the local community and encourage inter-visitation, welcoming those who belong to other Christian bodies, other faiths, and to none. A Meeting that shuns the outside world is a problem.

There is a danger when a Meeting becomes too secularized and loses its spiritual punch, that we become, as Alex Wildwood puts it in A faith to call our own, "purely cerebral in our worship, our faith becomes heady and ultimately purely notion, the very thing early Friends railed against... Without the experience of (spiritual) power in our Meetings, we make an idolatry of silence, a formalism of the absence of forms." This is a huge responsibility for Elders to carry and everyone must assist them to ensure this doesn't happen.

Much of the work Ministry and Counsel (Eldership and Oversight) do is routine but remains confidential. A friend can request any record in which they have been discussed or clearly identified, but is not available to the meeting as a whole. No one is allowed to request a confidential minute about another Friend. Zelie handed out some inter-active exercises and we broke into small groups over the weekend discussing various situations that might arise.

The above is by no means a full 'job description' so to speak, but if meetings understand what some of the responsibilities are that Elders (Ministry and Counsel) carry, I believe it strengthens the whole meeting.

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