

Epistle from the Third Gathering of Friendly Mystics: Touching God Together

June 16, 2015

Greetings to Friends everywhere. We gathered in God's loving embrace for this year's retreat titled "Touching God Together: The Third Annual Gathering of Friendly Mystics," sponsored by the mystical journal, *What Canst Thou Say* (WCTS)? The retreat was held June 12th to 16th, 2015, at the Conference Center at Quaker Hill, Richmond, Indiana, and included Friends from 14 states, plus Belize.

Our annual gatherings emphasize being a welcoming space in which to share our stories of faith and mystical experience. Unique to this year's gathering, WCTS engaged Quaker Spiritual Director Elaine Emily to guide the retreat activities in a workshop format for the first two days. Herself a mystic, Elaine employed a butterfly metaphor to describe our mystical journey. The journey of a caterpillar takes us into the cocoon where we become "goo," unaware of our intention to become butterflies. "We are short of people who can walk us through that. We need to share what we know and encourage each other to be the most outrageous butterfly, to be what God wants us to be."

Elaine helped us to explore the questions: *What does it mean to live your life as a mystic? How has the mystical become or not become habitual? What hinders or blocks most fully coming into communion with God? What encourages or draws you into full communion with God?* We were challenged to accept who we are and our role in the spiritual evolution of humanity by each stating "I am ____, a child of God, a mystic, and I have been called to give voice to my experience." As the words traveled the circle, the power that filled the room was palpable.

Several Interest Groups were offered: "Mystical Experiences Involving Jesus," "Sound Waves from a Crystal Bowl," "Sexuality and Spirituality," and "Encountering Evil." A hot topic at mealtimes was, "How can we bring our mystical experience to our Friends meetings?" During free time participants were drawn to each other, identifying another who could speak to their condition. One participant told of a near-death experience and shared with the group the message that there is no need to be fearful of judgment because we will all be received with love. Mike Resman shared his new book titled *A Contemporary Mysticism*, and K. Maia Tapp gave a multimedia presentation of the longing and life of the planet titled "Prayer of the World." We began to recognize these offerings as a way of impregnating a caterpillar society with the hope and the pathway to a butterfly future.

Our closing activity strongly challenged the edict that so many of us had long integrated into our being: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Using a contra dance format, retreatants formed two lines facing each other. One side offered a blessing to the person across, then moved down the line, so that each person blessed and received blessing from every person. The murmur of multitudes of blessings became the background music for the one each gave or received, and we each felt enriched and supported to go forth renewed.

Following Sunday lunch we said good-bye to the few who didn't remain for the two days of extended worship sessions, which began that afternoon. Spirit was indeed present, as three issues that had failed to find resolution at the two previous gatherings were spontaneously resolved. Elaine Emily's program potently responded to the previous year's discussions around the question, "Am I a Mystic?" The second issue had been the feeling that this group should be "doing something." The impact of focusing solely on nurturing and supporting one another throughout this 2015 retreat made it clear that no other "something" is needed.

The third issue was the leading that had arisen in the first gathering that this group was to "Name the Spiritual Condition of the World," a calling that had inspired conversation but little naming. As we entered extended worship, the "Prayer of the World" continued as a theme in worship with messages describing our human impact upon Earth, including the specific example of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (thousands of square miles of plastic in the ocean) which led to a lament and a chant to Yemaya, the Yoruba goddess of the ocean. One participant said she felt this heart-felt worship fulfilled that leading to name the spiritual condition of the world.

Two participants shared about having a sense of William Penn, and a sense of his guidance that the Children of the Light are much more free to speak now than in the past and have a part to play in the coming times.

One participant said, "As the extended worship continued, I had a sense of the Meeting, a growing awareness of the unfolding love and support surrounding us, including ancestral support. The experience was crystalized in the two sung messages, first the anguished lament over the environmental damage to earth, and then the lullabye, 'Hush Little, Baby, Don't You Cry.' For the first time I truly felt that although Earth has a pile of garbage, we are all held in love, a love that, even with all that is wrong, will carry us into the future."

The entire retreat was transformative for many participants. One said, "I had prayed to God for a support group for my mystical experiences because I had felt raw, lonely, and vulnerable. This weekend, like the butterfly metaphor, brought me from that raw, lonely state to feeling loved, with a strong trust and closeness to God. It was a safe place in which

to share to my experiences. In the Meetings for Worship I felt God's presence all around me, like when I have had out of body experiences."

It was unanimously agreed WCTS will sponsor a retreat again next year, when we will continue to lovingly listen to and support one another and wait together in worshipful silence to receive God's guidance. The planning committee has decided that the next Gathering of Friendly Mystics will be held in September or October of 2016 at the Cenacle in Chicago, which is a Catholic retreat center near public transportation. Information about the WCTS journal, and future retreats is available at whatcanstthousay.org.