

Beloved Community:

What Does It Mean to Belong – to Ourselves, to Each Other, to the Earth?

by Marlene Coach-Eisenstein, Keith Runyan, and Peni Hall

Pacific Yearly Meeting, July 23, 2022

Laura Magnani

The process of working with the keynote speakers is just pure blessing. It was such an extraordinary experience, I think, for all of us. I just want to testify to my own experience of that work – as people are called to ministry and discerning what to bring you. So, I'm enthusiastically welcoming you to our 2022 Keynote Panel

Diego Navarro

Welcome to the keynote panel session. Laura Magnani asked me if I would facilitate this session. I just want to welcome you all here. I'm Diego Navarro from Santa Cruz Meeting on the lands of the Amah Mutson people.

The theme this year is "beloved community." What does beloved community mean to you? What does it look like? Some may be thinking right now that the world is burning, and why are we so focused on ourselves? I hope to set the context for why.

The three queries the presiding clerk provided to the panelists to consider for their ministry today are:

- What is it that attracted you to Friends? Why is it your chosen community at this time?
- Have you had experiences of being othered by this community, and can you share one example?
- Can you name one thing you would change about Quaker culture to help us become a post-colonial culture and embrace a beloved community?

Our three speakers who will be ministering are Marlene Coach-Eisenstein, Keith Runyan, and Peni Hall.

Marlene Coach-Eisenstein is a member of Honolulu Friends Meeting. She's been a helper since the age of five and has been led by Spirit throughout her life, allowing her to be forthcoming with an open heart and mind.

Marlene's life has involved working with patients in occupational therapy, who had physical disabilities, patients who were dying on oncology unit, children and families, child welfare, veterans with PTSD and other traumas – and she is a war veteran – and taught students at college and university levels in the fields of social work, human services.

Marlene has learned from the people she's worked with in various ways. She admits that not only was she helping them, but that they were helping her to expand and grow.

She expresses her love to others through her behaviors and actions. Marlene's ministry is about love, inclusivity, and compassion within our beloved community

Our second speaker, Keith Runyan, is a lifelong Friend, growing up here at Pacific Yearly Meeting – a climate activist, a podcast host, and a teacher. Keith spends much of his spare time as a caregiver and a visionary, networking with movement leaders around the world. He aspires to be truly faithful to his conscience and the leadings of Spirit, and to be courageous in perilous times.

Keith is actively discerning a leading to begin a Quaker traveling ministry to gather together a satyagraha spiritual community. This community would seek to inculcate on earth fast movement on ecological justice and spiritual transformation, which might shift the landscape of power within United States in the critical years ahead.

Our third speaker is Peni Hall, who has a background in theater – both in performance and technical backstage. When she became disabled in 1977, she continued doing theater in a different way. She moved to Berkeley and became involved in Wry Cripps disabled women's theater. Peni is an artist and a disability rights activist.

She attends Strawberry Creek Meeting and was married under the care of Berkeley Meeting in 2006. She lives in Redwood Garden Senior and Disability Housing, and she is active in the tenants' association

To set context for this session, I ask the question: What does it mean to be a beloved community when we are perpetuating harm? How can we have inclusivity? We need to stop the harm to marginalize groups, to our ministers who are not of the dominant society. Stopping harm and finding our way to an inclusive Quaker beloved community is doable. Quaker practices and ways provide us with the way into this unknown future. When harm occurs, do we want to recognize it, and understand what is to be revealed by it, and what to learn from it?

Many of us are blinded by our assimilation and our socialization into the dominant and dominating culture of the United States. One task is to become open to the spirit, lifting the veil of our socialized ways, our ways of causing and perpetuating harm in our community, from our blindness to our socialization.

In the beginning of our religious society, early Friends focused on awakening to their socialization. Back in the throes of the English Revolution, they went through the painful process of discovering and ridding themselves of what they called “disorderly walking.” They had a name for this process. It was called the Lamb’s War. They were led to see that it was unjust to tip their hats to the upper class. These radical small acts of disobedience led to imprisonment, and more importantly, to fundamental change in the dominant society.

Some would say that today we need to unravel our indoctrination into the dominant society, to decolonize our minds. Without doing this work, are we able to say, “We are in the world, but not of the world”?

In preparation for this plenary session, the panelists raised three questions, and I'm sharing them with you to hold as they minister: What does beloved community look like? What does it feel like to be in it? How do I know when I'm being held in beloved community?

These three friends will be ministering about their experiences. Let's please hold them in worship

Marlene Coach-Eisenstein

Good morning, Friends. I'm Marlene Coach-Eisenstein from Honolulu Friends Meeting. I feel honored to have been asked to be on this panel as one of the key note speakers

I've been a part of the Honolulu Friends Meeting since the mid-90s and became a member of that meeting around 2016. During this time, I've learned a lot about myself and a lot about Quakers.

As I think about Quakers, I also think about the world, and as I think about the world, I think about the world being part of our beloved community.

The world is in turmoil. There are wars all over, not just in Ukraine. There are people suffering and dying and losing their communities. I really feel in my heart that the broader world community, is suffering, and so is our environment. The destruction of our environment as seen by climate change show that our world is hurting.

So, when I think in terms of the world community, my heart is filled with sadness, because a lot of the things that are happening in the world can be avoided; especially the wars and all the money that's put into the military-industrial complex. There are people in this country and all over the world who are starving; there are people who need healthcare and housing- in our country and a round of world. I just feel that we are only looking at certain things in our world, and we're not looking at the big picture.

That's the first thing I wanted to talk about. But I also wanted to talk about my life experience and becoming a Quaker, a Black Quaker.

I was born in Michigan and live there until 1986. I went on active duty and lived in Illinois until 1989 at which time I was sent to Hawaii. I got off of activity and remained in Hawaii. I lived in Hawaii for 10 years before moving to California. During those 10 years a friend introduced me to the Honolulu Friends meeting and that was the beginning of my Quaker experience. I was warmly received and welcomed to the meeting. I became a regular attendee at the Honolulu Friends Meeting until I moved to California.

Once I was in California, I realize that there was a huge difference between California and Hawaii. It is like living in a foreign country and moving to the Continental US. I experienced racism, discrimination, micro aggressions, and invisibleness. It was a real reminder that things on the continent had not changed for the positive.

I started teaching at San Jose State University when I moved to California. It was a tough adjustment but I was able to adjust. While I was in California, I attended a few Quaker meetings but did not feel welcomed. I even took a girlfriend with me once and she found it to be pretty interesting but noticed that no one spoke to us. I was able to take an early retirement and moved back to Hawaii.

I started off in the Army reserves and I went on active duty after my son went to college. I went on active duty just to see what it would be like. I was never a conformist but I did know how to play by the rules. I was an officer, and everybody wanted me to be what they wanted me to be. I tried not to do that. I tried to be who I am, and of course, that caused pushback from a lot of people, of the dominant group who were not of my skin color. I've been in this skin all my life, and I know what it's like to be in this skin. I don't know what it is like to be in the skin of someone else who's brown or white. All I know is, our experiences are different. We are all humans, and we all share similarities such as eyes,

noses, mouths, ears, etc. As a woman of African descent my experiences of being born into a certain family are different, and what comes with that is different.

I have been othered all of my life. So, I didn't know what it's like not to be othered until I moved to Hawaii. There are so many brown people here, they don't really care what color you are, what your background is or what level of education you have. They were respectful, kind, helpful and friendly. I was waiting for this to change, but it never did. I was able to let down my guard and felt comfortable being able to live my life without judgement.

Spirit led me to do all the things that I've done. I don't really feel like I made choices on my own. I feel like the doors were opened, and Spirit led me through them.

As I said earlier, I've been a helper since the age of five. I have been doing work in the helping profession all my life. When I was invited to attend a quick meeting, I was told that Quakers provided services in the communities. I thought this might be something I might like. When I first decided to attend a quaker meeting, I didn't even know what Quakers were. I went, and everybody was friendly, warm, and receptive. But I still didn't know anything about Quakerism. I thought Quakers were this group of people who did not have a minister, which was something I was really happy about, because I my experiences in different churches were not good ones. So, I was in a meeting where there are all these wonderful people being sweet and open to me, but I still didn't know what Quakerism was. No one asked me if I was new to Quaker meetings. No one took me under their wing and said, Marlene, let me explain Quakerism to you. Once I started going to meetings on a regular basis, I started to learn on my own some of the values we have as Quakers. I also learn things by asking questions and reading about Quakers.

I have received some harmful comments from Friends in my meeting and in other Quaker spaces. When I actually moved to California for a short while, I attended meetings in California, and I didn't feel real warm fuzzing feelings there. I just was there, and people would just say, "Hi" to me, and that was it.

At the first annual session that I went to in person, I felt like I was a person that was there, but not there. I was not really acknowledged. No one spoke to me. No one reached out to me. At meal times I was not invited to sit and eat with others except for a few times near the end of the annual session. So that was my first experience at annual session. There was another Friend from my meeting who attended the session and she was basically the only other person I spoke with except for Friends of Color who were there.

Now I can go on and on and on. But I think at this point I need to talk more about what it means to be in this beloved community. What is a beloved community? What is a beloved community about? What does a beloved community mean to you, to me, and what does it entail? My guess is that we may not all be thinking the same things about what a beloved community is. Some of us are very much in our heads in terms of thinking. Some of us are more in our hearts, and have more compassion than others. And I think that we get really stuck – as we think about what we should do, and what we should not do, and how we should do it.

I've been doing a lot of sitting with this topic, and sitting and talking to the Spirit. And like I said, I feel like I'm Spirit-led. And I'm also filled with Spirit in my heart. I love being a Quaker. I love being part of this community. But I also feel like this community needs some changes. We need to be more inclusive. Inclusivity means not just being together with one another, but also with the environment in which we live, with children and young adults,

having intergenerational activities, ensuring that the needs of disabled Friends/Attendees are met, and continue to be welcoming of others who may be different. All of that is inclusive. Right now, we look at different people, and we look at different things, we looked at able-bodiedness, we look at people who are disabled, and we don't even notice them. How inclusive is that? So, I really believe that we have some work to do.

If you open up your hearts with compassion and love, I truly, truly believe that we can come together as a beloved community and change to be more inclusive. If we don't, we're going to find that our beloved community will dwindle down because it will not meet the needs of everybody.

Thank you

Keith Runyan

It was a gorgeous spring day, and I was sitting in the awning of Stout Meetinghouse on Earlham College campus, where I was a student at the time. I had started meditating a few months earlier, after reading *The Way of the Peaceful Warrior* by Dan Millman. And it was such that I settled in that afternoon, as a concert played in the worship room beside me. I drifted off, and when I came to, I experienced an unnamable feeling, unlike anything I had experienced in my life up into that time – a feeling I'm guessing that many in this room have also felt.

A great peace washed through me, that seemed to permeate everything around me. Time itself seemed to slow down, and it was like there were lifetimes being captured in every moment.

When I opened my eyes, the world was washed with color and light. My heart sang to it. I was radiating love, joy, tranquility, and a precious sorrow at the beauty of the world.

They say that one good experience of meditation can ruin meditation for you for years to come. This was definitely my experience. I engaged in what you might expect from a young, rather brash, very egoic, 18-year-old white man, who had had some sort of experience of this sort – I chased the experience. I wondered if I could get any closer to it, whether I could be there at all times, whether I could be a balm to the world. And so, I would sit in meditation, and really try to sit and center down - but in reality expected or hoped that it would happen again. Occasionally, whenever I was not trying to do it, some inkling of the experience would come back.

But beneath all of that, subtly, something had softened in me, which was, as it turned out, the much more important piece. After that day, despite all of the ego in all of the trying, there is a gentleness in me that hadn't existed before that time. And the world never stopped looking anything less than beautiful.

And so, I would go through these phases of really trying to go back there and just being absolutely crushed by my extreme lack of self-discipline, my ADHD, my struggles at college, and it was a very tumultuous time for me, and it was painful. It was very painful. But it was also beautiful, and I had a lot of love to give.

And I think there's a reflection between my story and the story of humanity on our planet thus far. There's a way in which we've also been striving, that we've been trying to move past our light. And I found that reality has a way of humbling us in this. That the excesses of

our military, our popular culture, our technologies, and our markets, are destined to the same fate as all things that move too quickly in hubris beyond their light. Reality has this certain gravity that captures all who in their adolescence would fly too close to the sun.

So, in 2017, I was finally able to receive the gift of being humbled. For the record, I had not received this gift up until this time. I had been working at something called the Buck Institute for Research on Aging. I'd managed to scramble out of college with a neuroscience degree, which I'd taken to try to understand what in the world was going on in my head. And I was doing an unpaid internship, which was not what I had expected at that time. I was really hoping that I would be leading some sort of grand thing, or get some sort of professorship. And instead, I was just working this job. And I lost that job. I lost the job because, at that time, I was so disoriented.

I was living out of my van, and I couldn't be a good employee, and so I got fired from an unpaid position. I got let go. And my ego, which at this time was still trying to hold onto the last vestiges that I was somehow "different," finally received a last hurrah that day, in some ways. I didn't know it at that time, but something far deeper was moving through me as all that was happening. I didn't realize that this was a healing thing for me at the time, but I had finally accepted at that time that I was no different, better or worse, than anyone else. And with it, through those tumultuous years, came a great distrust of anything forced, anything trying to be more or less than what it is.

So, instead of continuing the rat race that I was on, trying to prove myself, I took a humble job at the suggestion of a friend, at San Mateo Outdoor Education school. And this was one of the most graceful moments of my life. It was in this job that I experienced beloved community, at really my lowest point. And for the first time, I think in my life, I met all of my colleagues, all the folks that I was working with, and I adored them. I just was absolutely in love, admired them, and any comparisons that I think I would have previously made were gone in me. I just was happy to be with them. And I was fascinated by their lives.

So, there was a way in which that turn within me also made me feel more real with the role that we are playing on the planet. Suddenly I was disinterested in anything that looked like that kind of striving, in anything that looked like moving past our light. And I was called to listen, and to get to know the world which we are so blessed to be a part of.

The scale of what's at stake in our times is not a one-hundred-year event. It's not a one-thousand-year event. It's a sixty-five-million-year event - what is at stake. The best science shows that, if the most likely business-as-usual outcomes occur in the next century, life would recover in about ten-million years, which is a scale of desolation that I have difficulty pondering.

But I think that in this time of extinction, we're called towards regeneration. We're called towards what we can give, the life we can bring forward. And it does not escape my notice that the same is true for the Religious Society of Friends - that we are also in the situation where it's unclear if there will be a Religious Society of Friends in the twenty-first century, if there will be a civilization in the twenty-first century.

So, I feel called to speak just a little bit to the situation I find ourselves in, which is that there are a lot of Friends who I have come to have deep respect for, who I know quite well personally, and who in all of this feel like giving up, feel like our Religious Society of

Friends is not going in the right direction, that it's too petty, that it's not worth it.

And I want to turn us back to the very flawed James Nayer. And I would say that we need to turn towards that spirit that we can feel, that can endure, that does not seek to right any wrong, but delights to endure all things. It's that sort of spirit that we need to hold in community, that spirit that knows where home is, where source is, and always moves from that place, and has a forever patience and unyielding love for the world of which we are a part, that might play some small role in helping us navigate these times.

So, I want to end by quoting an old spiritual

We are the world.

We are our children.

What wouldn't you give of yourself in service to life?

So, as the blood in your veins returns to the sea,
And the earth in your bones returns to the lands.
And we come to the end of our lives.

And it comes to be your time to give yourself to the world, ask yourself:

"What is the final gift I would make of my life to the beloved community of this earth?"

Thank you.

Peni Hall

Good morning, Friends. I am Peni Hall. I am a woman with a disability.

Those of you who've seen me at yearly meeting visibly have seen me zooming around in an electric wheelchair. And the thought is, okay, the door has to be wide enough. There needs to be ramps. There need to be bathrooms, and how do we make them accessible? And that's awesome, as far as It goes.

I also have invisible disabilities. I have a number of chronic illnesses, and I spend a great deal of my life in this bed, you see. That's less known, and that's not visible.

Other ways of disability being invisible are like seniors among, you may discover that you are getting more pain in your body. Your parts of your body – heart, whatever – are not working as well as they did. You have pain in your joints, and you feel young, but you really feel old and hurting.

What do we all need? We have people with mental disabilities, people who may or may not make that manifest in an obvious way. What do these folks need to be In community? We have people with developmental disabilities. We have other folks like on the autism spectrum or other ways of being neuro-divergent.

I get debilitating migraines, and I have identified often as neuro-divergent, just because my whole nervous system is shot when that starts happening. And yet I appear to be in pretty good shape for someone who goes around on wheels.

Audre Lorde said we do not live single-issue lives. The circles of our lives go round and intersect.

We have stories and experiences stored in our bodies. They're held in different parts of our bodies and manifest in different ways in our bodies. But we all have bodies. Our worldview is shaped by what has happened to our bodies, or what does happen to or with our bodies.

Disabilities, you can be born with them or you can acquire them. I was completely non-disabled, an active theater person, planning to make a career of teaching technical theater. I wasn't planning on becoming disabled. Most people don't write that into their life script ahead of time.

So, our worldview is shaped by what happens with our bodies when we acquire them, how we acquire them, what privilege works with us, and how we're treated – class, gender, race. But at the bottom of disability, of oppression, the root of it is fear – the fear of disability. It is the worst thing that could happen, because you look at the medical model of disability, and how who gets disability has to do with privilege and race and all those things. People think, "I'd rather die." They make movies about people who are heroic in that they choose to die rather than live the life of someone with a disability.

Our lives are not seen as meaningful, or that we contribute much. In the medical model, we are seen as The Other, the bodies being experimented on – the Holocaust being a very good example of that. A friend who taught a disability-liberation workshop said that if it were not for disability oppression, disability would just be another way to live your life. Wouldn't that be nice?

Sadly, disability is very isolating. And isolation is what keeps us powerless. It keeps us out of community. What we want is connectedness. How we get it is access. And in terms of access, you know, there's getting in the door. There's getting up the up the ramp instead of a step. That's really cool.

Besides getting in the door, we need a seat at the table. Besides physical access, we need emotional and social access, feeling a part of things, spiritual access, feeling connected.

People have good hearts; they think they're doing the right thing. But don't assume that what you're doing is the right thing; ask us.

What do we need to be part of the group? Empathy feelers – everybody can develop their empathy feelers. Ask, "How would I feel if I couldn't be part of a group with ease?" Curiosity. Ask, "How does this work for you? What is it you need, to be doing and feeling how everybody else is?" We need to talk to people about our needs, but the balance is making sure that we are not the one that have to come up with all the answers. Talk with us; listen to our needs. This is what accessibility looks like.

I appreciate our self-examination around racism and environmental activism – all the work we've done so far and all the work that we are going to continue to do. What would it be like if we explored ableism in the same way? There's a great deal of creativity in this group. And amazing things are possible if we are determined to do it.

I would like to have discussions among people with disabilities and among our no- disabled allies on the concept of unlearning ableism. Like, "What interesting ideas you've got! What if we got together and put them into practice?"

I want my meeting to be a place of spiritual and emotional connection.

I want us to look at each other and ask, "What does that person need, to feel connected, to be connected? How can we connect with each other's scared parts, isolated parts, ableist parts?"

I also have really fast resources. There's a movie, the best movie you could look at, called *Crip Camp*. It was nominated for an Oscar. It was completely made by disabled people and allies. There's a book called *The Disability History of the United States*, just to get a sense of how we've been treated and how thinking has developed over the years. Look up "Sins Invalid, the Ten Principles of Disability Justice." You'll be amazed. You'll love it, you'll absolutely love it. And on YouTube, Cheryl Marie Wade is an amazing performance poet; she has made a film called "Disability Culture," which is highly entertaining, and you'll be just dancing in your seats, and I highly recommend it.

So, I guess, welcome us all. Welcome the gifts that we bring. Welcome the learning opportunities we provide. And we can all put it together and make the beloved community still.

Thank you.