

Notes:

Quaker Parenting in Hostile Times

Western Friend Connect – Workshop Meeting Room – 6/8/2017

Participants:

- Gretchen Baker-Smith – New England Yearly Meeting
- Joy Conrad-Rice -- Vernon Meeting (Vernon, BC)
- Harriet Heath – New England Yearly Meeting
- Elizabeth Horstmann – Orange Grove Meeting (Pasadena, CA)
- Mary Klein – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Heather Levien – Berkeley Meeting (Berkeley, CA)
- Joe Magruder – Berkeley Meeting (Berkeley, CA)

The following notes incorporate ideas shared orally during the online conversation. Thanks to Charlene Weir for taking notes.

Thematic Summary by the Note-Taker:

- It is critical for adults to recognize their own sources of fear and anger, and to develop ways to set those feelings aside and communicate to children that adults are working to make them safe.
- We cannot actually always make children safe, but we can always demonstrate that we are on their side, that we are present, and that we are trying to make the world better for them.
- The support of a faith community is key to maintaining spiritual strength in a time of turmoil in the world at large.

Introductions: Each participant's particular interest in this topic

- My husband and I are about to have a child, so I have a personal interest in the role of the Quaker Community in raising children.
- I have been employed as a youth worker for many years, a lot of that work has been with Quaker youth programs. These questions are important.
- I hold a general concern about raising children as Quakers.

- My son well received in a Quaker meeting and he is doing well as a result, it's important to think about what worked well.
- My family has gotten great support from our Quaker meeting during difficult times with our children.

Questions for discussion:

- How does your sense that you are a child of God impact you in relationship to children?
- Think about our relationship with the Divine and how our spiritual core informs our relationship with children.

Discussion:

- Since WWII, people might feel like religion and God have failed them. It is worrisome that we might be moving even further in that direction – when people mistrust each other, feel isolated, have no sense of community. It is hard to communicate to our children that we are children of God when so many feel like religion and God have failed us.
- I struggle to trust that I am a “Child of God” because I struggle with Julia of Norwich’s notion that “all is well.” There is so much uncertainty in the world. I do trust that Love and Light are always present to us. But I don’t believe that the more we pray, the safer we will be. I believe we can be given what we need in any moment, but what we get might not be what we think we need.
- I feel like I spend a lot more time in trying to see “That of God” in others and not so much time with looking for “That of God” in myself.
- I too am always trying to look at people to find “That of God” in them. If we give our children that perspective, it helps us all find some common ground.
- I have almost given up finding common ground with people who are not in the Friends’ tradition. I go to Friends in the US and Canada for refuge. I often have to deal with people who are not in the Friend’s tradition and have to deal with hateful language. I find it difficult to bring a “That of God” perspective to my interactions with those people, even though I find it fairly easy with Friends.
- I sometimes wrestle with despair, and I need to find a font of energy, a source that I can trust, to get through those times. It is good to hear Friends say they can rely on each other to provide support and direction. I tend to mistrust humanity and I need to fill rooted in something larger, something that feels wholesome, so that I can feel like I can be a reliable, responsible companion to children.

- Children react differently to world events because of age or circumstances. It matters to children to understand that things will be ok, that the adults will take care of them. To really help youth, I have to be really honest with myself regarding what is going on with myself, and then find in myself that center that I can stand on – is in order to help children in times of trouble. To call upon the God within myself and to respond to the children from that place.
- It is a fine line that we have to work with. Can we only trust ourselves? Is there any such thing as community? We need to bring our children up in a trusting community. The Quaker community does that for us.
- I work with children whose parents are undocumented, or who themselves are undocumented. It might not be possible to tell them that everything will be ok. I am feeling a bit disconnected from my spiritual self in this work.
- Things work on different levels and some of these levels are hidden from us. The ways that we talk about things and the way things really are sometimes don't line up.
- We need to walk the talk. We can recognize the dire situation we are in, and then ask "What can we do?" We need to recognize that maybe we can't keep children safe permanently, but we *can* do *something* now. God can only work through our hands – our children will see us doing that. We are not helpless in a situation.
- The current situation feels overwhelming. We might need to coalesce within our meeting to decide where to take action. Can we build our meetings as communities of trust? It is hard to do personally.

Questions for discussion:

- Are there things that your monthly meeting is doing to help children deal with the state of the world?
- What would you like to see us do that perhaps we are not doing right now?

Discussion:

- I have found that it is important to be very honest and not give them more information than they can absorb. If children feel like the world is more than they can deal with, it is hard. Many young people find a way forward.
- The meeting can be very helpful. Asking the meeting to hold our family in the Light has been very helpful. And having other people besides our immediate family helping has also been very important to us. The yearly meeting has been helpful, too.
- Having a network of people who know the children is critical to creating a community. It is important also to celebrate how Quakers see children as people in their own right. We have this in our testimony of equality – respecting people as individuals, regardless of chronological age.

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- When different generations share their stories, like when an important Quaker leader can talk about how he was bullied as a child, and how he dealt with that – this can be extremely important to young people. The older generation can mentor the younger generation as they step into the world to speak their truth. Peer-to-peer conversations about our personal histories – between a children and adults – can have a lot of impact.
 - There are two Friends in our meeting who focus on the issue of affordable housing. One Sunday, they enlisted the students to help make signs for affordable housing, which communicated their passion for social justice to the children. We should share our passion with our young people!
 - Along with showing our passions, we can also model how to do it, how to make it happen. We can use many tools. For example, music can unite us in times like these. Music reaches across generations.
 - The children in our meeting reported at the end of worship recently that during that First Day School session, they had talked about yard signs they saw around the neighborhood – “Black Lives Matter” and “You are welcome here.” Then they made signs of their own. They were very excited about it.
 - There are many stories about how meetings have helped families and their children. For example, an adult can help through personal conversations or by suggesting books that a young person could read. The power of someone who sees us individually and gives us hope – this is immeasurable.
 - “Family Nights” are a common tradition in many Quaker quarterly meetings and yearly meetings. These are events when children are celebrated and respected. This year, I saw a very funny historical Quaker play written by an eleven-year-old Friend, performed by children and adults. The play was hilarious and we great fun. It doesn’t matter if someone screws up – everyone is supportive and has a good time.
 - “*The Lord Works in Mysterious Ways*” is phrase that can guide us in these times. My prayer for myself is to be open to that concept. It is something that we can teach our children.
 - We need to reassure our children in a time with so much danger. It’s in the way of Friends that we are there for each other. Maybe it is not the case that everything will be ok, but we are never alone. That is a comfort that Friends can bring.
 - Community is so important. You have to participate. You have to make the effort to be with each other. Giving children the experience community, of being together, is something Quakers can do.