

Presiding Clerk's Report to Interim Meeting
Baltimore Yearly Meeting, 3rd Month, 2018

You Can Do This Hard Thing

*Here we stand breathless
And pressed in hard times,
Hearts hung like laundry
On backyard clothes lines.
Impossible just takes
A little more time.*

--Carrie Newcomer

As I approach the end of my fourth year as your Presiding Clerk, as much as I would like to focus on successes and joys, I have found myself focused more on disappointments and frustrations. Perhaps that is my nature ... or human nature? As I have reflected on this, I was reminded of a song by Quaker songwriter Carrie Newcomer—"You Can Do This Hard Thing"—and I realized that our Yearly Meeting has indeed been trying to do hard things and also new things—new things that are hard.

We have gone through a transition in our General Secretary position; we have conceived, designed, built, and financed a new bathhouse for Catoctin; we have labored with finding a way forward on our *Faith & Practice* revision; we have re-examined our staffing needs and how we can better serve our local Meetings; we have begun a major effort involving new staff to become a more whole community by trying to clear pathways and create opportunities for fuller participation by younger Friends and by people from more diverse backgrounds; and we have challenged ourselves to raise the money to sustain this and other work. Just to name a few. All of these are hard things. And we are not done; we are not where we might have hoped we would be. "Impossible just takes a little more time."

If these were easy things, they would have been done long ago. If they were easy, just one or two people may have accomplished them on their own. Hard things require community. They require a pooling of talents, time, and resources. They require careful discernment and deep listening. They require worship and reliance on Divine Light. They require commitment and faithfulness to each other and to God. They require Love. And when we step up and engage these challenges together, they offer the possibility of transformation, spiritual vitality, and greater wholeness.

As it happens, I have also been drawn recently to consider the distinction between communities and organizations. At the late October meeting of the Central Committee of Friends General Conference (FGC), I was asked to participate in a panel discussion on what FGC provides to Yearly Meetings and why it is important to them. As I considered my response, I saw parallels to our YM and what it offers to local Meetings and the Friends in them.

I began my remarks by reflecting on how my Quaker life has been richly blessed by connecting with wider and wider circles of Friends, including both FGC and Baltimore Yearly Meeting (BYM), at each level encountering still more Friends whom I have grown to admire, treasure, and love. Feeling a growing consciousness of connections also helps grow my connection to God and, in turn, all of Humanity and Creation. That describes an experience of the Community of God, not merely an organization.

When I first became involved with FGC years ago, I found it helpful to think of FGC as a service organization, delivering services to individuals and Meetings to nurture their spiritual growth and build the Religious Society of Friends. That's all well and good and can be a useful way of understanding FGC. It's easy to be drawn to a similar understanding of what BYM is. But, especially as we hear from time to time from Friends wanting to know "what do we get" for our Meeting's apportionment contributions or from BYM's contributions to FGC, I've become uneasy with limiting the understanding of either FGC or BYM to being service organizations. That mindset invites a transactional model for understanding the relationship, that is, "what do we get for our contributions." I've come to understand that FGC and BYM are more than that, more than organizations or associations. I've really come to understand them, first and foremost, as community, as a blessed community, as part of the Community of God.

I have asked and have heard others ask, "what exactly is this 'testimony of community?'" Of all our testimonies, I think it is the least clearly articulated. I would love to know of resources that really try to spell that out; there are many that come at it from different angles or focus on a particular piece, but I can't think of one that puts it all together. But I think one piece of that testimony, at least, is to understand how we are connected to each other and to God and all of Creation through the web of ever-widening circles of faithful community. Participation in those wider circles and identifying ourselves as a part of them is one way to witness to our testimony of community.

I strongly encourage Friends to embrace that consciousness of connection and belonging to our Quaker community at every level (and with that also duty and responsibility). We may choose to focus on our local Meeting as our primary community and keep quite busy enough with that. But even so, especially if just a few individuals from our local Meetings engage the wider circles of Friends, those wider circles can still profoundly enrich the life and vitality of our local Meetings. Individuals in local Meetings who have never heard of BYM or FGC nevertheless can and do benefit, sometimes in profound ways, from the richness of Friends and the services provided through those wider circles and the experiences they offer to Friends, who then bring that experience back to their local Meetings. Then, at every level, we are more and more equipped to do hard things.

A community—a blessed community—is better equipped to do hard things than a mere organization. And life in such a community is ever more rich. That is what you are part of in Baltimore Yearly Meeting.

Love and Light,

Ken Stockbridge,
Presiding Clerk