

Annual Report to the 336th Annual Session

By the Baltimore Yearly Meeting General Secretary

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Nurturing the Seeds of Baltimore Yearly Meeting

A few weeks ago, I was sitting in Plainfield, Indiana at the Friends United Meeting Board Identity Retreat. The advent of my presence at this event had come up rather suddenly. I'd been asked to go by a board member from Baltimore Yearly Meeting. I'd had a while to speculate that it might happen, given up on it entirely, and then been invited at what was for me the last possible moment. It was not a logical decision; it was not a sensible decision - there was simply no time to go. It jarred my sense of family life, not with some deep spiritual crisis, but because while I was in Plainfield, I would miss my partner's birthday, feel a bit eclipsed by his near-simultaneous business trip to London, and neglect my duties as co-care person for his dog. I simply felt moved to go in a way that went beyond words. It just felt like the next step. There was, too, the inescapable overlay of memory that in almost every summer of my childhood I flew to Ohio or Indiana for an extended stay with my relatives. Over the years I had learned about famed Midwestern qualities of pragmatism and predictability, but also of the less famous Midwestern nonconformity that, when cultivated, may grow like the tree that slowly takes apart the concrete pavement. I also came to know about my forebears there, even things about my parents back home in the East, the kind of things that only relatives can tell you.

During the retreat, one co-facilitator spoke of her deeply fundamentalist upbringing and the collection of circumstances that brought her to her first semester at Earlham College - and very quickly to tears, surrounded by people she didn't know, and doubted that she would ever know well.

Therefore, I was unprepared for a later occasion when, after some open and searching sharing exercises, she asked us all to consider a quotation from "one of my Wiccan friends." I just thought, Oh no! You did not just say that! I could only wonder what might happen next in a room where the span of beliefs seemed to be stretching us all to the limit. It was one of those times when I feel like I've found the Quaker equivalent of surfing. I also realized that I had gone from wondering if I would be able to take it as she began her first story, to wondering if some others in the room would be able to take this new piece. Had I been tricked into actually feeling empathy for people different from myself? What I do know is that from then on I felt an electric tingle - a thrill in the air. I must admit that it may have partly been the habitual drama I experience when listening to people trying to talk about lesbian and gay issues without saying the words, but truthfully I was realizing that, despite my fears of being isolated, I was excited by a diversity of people in the room that challenged the assumptions of some Quaker groups who think of themselves as diverse.

Perhaps you are wondering why I am telling you this for my annual oral report. Could it be that this is somewhat emblematic of how my first year as General Secretary has felt? Perhaps. I could have given you the list of tasks completed that I have given to

Supervisory Committee. That can be supplied. But maybe this experience actually tells you more. Some of you may be Quaker surfers, too.

As we moved into the subsequent FUM board meeting after the retreat, I listened with rapt attention to fascinating, irresistible, frightening problems. I did suggest to myself that I might only be able to feel this kind of excitement for the problems of an organization whose staff I could never be on! But in truth I saw some people investing themselves and their resources in a race to heal a beloved, flawed organization and the people it serves. I had my reservations about how FUM does its work. But in what I gathered was a sign of a changing FUM, the Africa Ministries Representative, who had come from his native Kenya, spoke in painful, unflinching detail about the problems facing African Friends, and then gave his own view on the situation that we'd been sometimes talking around in the retreat: "When you send someone to us, we do not ask about all of the details of their life. We are just glad that they are there to help us."

So back to the retreat. I was sitting in Plainfield, listening to Friends from many Yearly Meetings share deeply and differently. I was hearing historian Thomas Hamm talk about the unique history of Friends United Meeting, of the Richmond declaration of faith never having taken root in Baltimore Yearly Meeting (Orthodox), and reading from old minutes of assorted Yearly Meetings that challenged our assumptions about the "liberalness" or the "Christianness" or the "Easternness" or the "Midwesternness" of our Yearly Meetings over the decades. To that end, he circulated old leatherbound copies of books of Discipline for Indiana, New England, New York, and Baltimore Yearly Meetings, all dated from the 1870s.

Friends' words, Friends' Spirit – what is it that we have in common? I found myself wondering – what is it about my Yearly Meeting? What makes us who we are? What had made, and makes, us as a Yearly Meeting less likely to draw that historic line in the sand with other Friends? Is there a cultural DNA that an organization carries?

So when the small old volumes came around, I had an idea of where I wanted to look. When I had moved to the Mid-Atlantic region years ago, I'd gradually realized the presence of the legacy of civil war. Both Baltimore Yearly Meetings straddled the Mason-Dixon line. We straddled the Potomac River. We encompassed both of the capitals of a divided, warring nation. The places we live, the highway signs, and even the occasional summertime Civil War reenactment we pass as we drive to Yearly Meeting each year, still remind us that there is, and was, nowhere to escape the reality of what happened. The names are always with us: Gettysburg, Antietam, Manassas, and even at our past meeting places, Winchester and Chambersburg. Both "Northern" and "Southern," we meet each other, united in many ways in community and concerns. In those old books that passed through our hands, under the topics of peace and slavery, the other Yearly Meetings had perhaps one to three paragraphs, clearly describing war and slavery as undesirable and forbidden. But New York, New England, and the Midwest had not seen the results of civil war and slavery the way Baltimore had. In BYM's volume those two sections went on for pages. I felt like I had been handed an old family photo album. The results of years of suffering and survival – of Friends hiding horses and draft-

age men in the Virginia swamps to prevent either from being taken by the military, of meeting in homes when Meeting Houses were taken over by soldiers, of traveling to assist others over dangerous roads, were here on display. Here were instructions for what ought not to be done with horses, wagons, businesses, land, money, and lives. Here was recorded the witness to the long, horrible march to nowhere. Friends' resistance to the fighting, and the choice to nurture instead, had gone deep, had sunken in and were here to stay. The tree of our Yearly Meeting had in fact pushed the crushing pavement of war aside. The written legacy from our forebears transmitted the best of their experience and revelation, codified in the language of their day. I wondered - How shall we translate it into our time? Maybe this old wound is still too fresh for our Yearly Meeting to forget. Maybe gift of our forebears is still fresh enough to remember and to rejuvenate.

One more word from Thomas Hamm. Not all of the fighting in the 19th century took place outside of the Religious Society of Friends. He said that Friends' 19th century experiment in Hicksite-Orthodox division, which had split our own Yearly Meeting for more than a century, hadn't worked any more than the Civil War had cured prejudice. He didn't claim to have either the preventative or cure for Friends then or now, but he said that instead of leading to a healthy resolution or to mended hearts, or to some greater witness through the work of the Society, the great division had led to even more divisions within.

The comparison of these two times is not so hard to make. Once again we are in a war over economic dominance and, most specifically, a resource of energy that is a cheap commodity for some and a crushingly, tragically costly burden for others. Wherever people are divided or demoralized, dominance by an outsider is possible. Once again, some Friends are feeling the pain much more than others. But this time it's global. Our Friends in Africa are not sitting on any known mineral reserves, but are not immune from the continental crossfire. This time, we in BYM do not, at least for now, ourselves experience this day-to-day trauma.

So this history may be one explanation why we were, and are, reluctant to deliberately set up something that feels like an exclusionary boundary. What kind of Yearly Meeting are we? What kind will we be in the future?

Here's one view: On my way out of the office the other night at dusk, I saw someone unloading one of our camp vehicles. He was returning from working at our Teen Adventure program. He spoke of the beauty of his summer, and of the satisfaction of being a part of a well-run program. He also talked about the next step in his summer, traveling to a conference on environmentally friendly ways of building. He admonished me: "You really need to design for this from the ground up. There's a limit to what you can do with older structures. Most of all, though, everyone just needs to get used to using less energy."

Here's another: an openly gay man, hired as General Secretary, apparently the first ever in any Yearly Meeting, being well supported as he meets with Friends who may be uncomfortable with his situation. This is possible in a Yearly Meeting that says clearly

and firmly and lovingly that if we diminish or devalue the Light of anyone, we know that we risk sacrificing our own Light as well.

And one more: Early one morning this week during Annual Session, I was walking along the sidewalk and was greeted by a Friend I had known for a long time (and perhaps a little too well) with, “How is your mental health this morning?” At that moment I realized that this is the kind of flawed and beautiful Yearly Meeting where we can sometimes ask that of each other, know that it is meant in love, and know that being a Friend of Truth can really require us to face the flaws, the wounds, and perhaps the beauty, in ourselves.

These are the flowers that grow from the seeds planted by our forebears, all in the cause of the love of truth and the truth of love. We do appreciate and depend on the beauty of the gifts in our garden, which in turn nurture us. We perform hard toil of our own to try to maintain what we have, that it may bloom anew.

We know some of the seeds that we are led to plant now. How can we best cross-pollinate and share with other Friends for the good of all?

- Riley Robinson