

Sharing Experiences and Ideas for Creating a Vibrant Quaker Community Manuscript of Julia Ryberg's talk at Switzerland Yearly Meeting 2008

Thank you for this opportunity to speak, which has in turn given me an opportunity to gather my thoughts together. Please join me as I share with you what is on my heart and in my head, and share as well some of the texts that have been meaningful to me of late.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses an apparent conflict over leadership between himself and Apollos. He writes, *"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labour of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building."* (1 Cor 3:6 ff.) God gives the growth. We, like cultivators of the earth, provide conditions for growth. Someone has to till the soil, lay the fertilizer, plant the seed. But God gives the growth. The farmer has many tools and much knowledge about what conditions are conducive to growth, but it is not the farmer who creates the growth. So when I now share with you some thoughts about creating a vibrant fellowship, what I actually mean is that we are providing the conditions where vibrant fellowship can happen. What we need to do as faith communities, as Quaker meetings, is to cultivate the earth so that God can give the growth.

In his book *The Heart of Christianity*, theologian Marcus Borg writes that the very essence of a life of faith is the opening and transformation of heart. He quotes Thomas Merton: *"Life is this simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes, and we see it maybe frequently. God shows Himself everywhere, in everything—in people and in things and in nature and in events. It becomes very obvious that God is everywhere and in everything and we cannot be without Him. It's impossible. The only thing is that we don't see it."* How can we see it? Borg then introduced me to the concept of "thin places", from Celtic spirituality. Thin places are places, events, people, music, literature etc where God is more easily seen and where hearts are opened and transformed. All of us have experienced such "thin places". Meeting for worship is, of course, often a thin place for me. I can prepare myself to be more open during worship so that it more easily becomes a thin place, a time in which God can be experienced. Indeed, Friends believe that all of life is sacramental. God can shine through and move in each moment. Our Quaker communities need to be thin places where hearts are opened and transformed.

As I was leaving the Triennial in Dublin in August, where over 300 Friends gathered from all over the world, I had an almost physical sense of my heart being enlarged so that it could include all of those Friends—my family had grown considerably during the week! It felt both glorious and painful. Words by Andrew Harvey helped me understand what I was experiencing: *"If you're really listening, if you're awake to the poignant beauty of the world, your heart breaks regularly. In fact, your heart is made to break; its purpose is to burst open again and again so that it can hold ever-more wonders."*

Yes, my experience of God and of my faith community is often the sense that my heart is breaking in order to hold ever-more wonders. Equally true of my faith community is as a place to come home to. This is well-expressed by St Francis de Sales: *"When your heart is*

wandering and distracted, bring it back quickly to its point, restore it tenderly to its Master's side, and if you did nothing else the whole of your hour but bring back your heart patiently and put it near our Lord again, and every time you put it back it turned away again, your hour would be well-employed". Our Quaker communities need to be places where the heart returns again and again, where we can be "re-remembered", brought back to the Source, brought back into community with God and each other.

Parker Palmer, Quaker educator and writer, has also helped me in my understanding. He writes that to teach is "*to create a space in which the community of truth is practised.*" And he defines truth as "*an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.*" (*The Courage to Teach*) I have widened Palmer's words to include Quaker community in general. To be a Quaker community is to "*create a space where the community of truth is practised.*" And, again, truth is defined as "*an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.*" A Quaker community that is vibrantly alive will be a place where such passionate and disciplined conversations are taking place.

In preparation for this talk, I have enjoyed looking at your website and corresponding with a few Swiss Friends. You have identified your hopes for the Yearly Meeting as those of *Spiritual and institutional education, Inreach and Outreach*. With what I have said so far as a backdrop—that God gives the growth; we cultivate the earth to prepare it as a place where hearts can be opened and transformed—I would like to speak to the needs as you have expressed them.

I am a member of Sweden Yearly Meeting. At 53, I am just beyond the age limit of what you define as "younger Friends". I serve the Yearly Meeting as resource person, which involves a variety of so-called "inreach" and "outreach" activities. Sweden Yearly Meeting and Switzerland Yearly Meeting share the experience of being presently in a generation shift. In the past few years, many of our older, seasoned Friends have died. We who are in the next generation-- between the ages of 50 and 65--have had the distinct sense of having to take over and carry on as inheritors of a rich legacy. What responsibility do we have to honour the lives and service of these older Friends, who themselves took on responsibility for the Yearly Meeting from those who died before we were active? How do we also stay freshly alive and open to the Spirit as it moves in us today? As it happens, we have been blessed with an unusual number of new members—and most of them are significantly younger than usual—between the ages of 18 and 35. How do we open ourselves to the changes that this influx of membership has on the life of our Yearly Meeting? Indeed, just last week I spoke to my own Yearly Meeting when it was gathered around the theme of "Tradition and Change". It is not surprising that my preparation for both talks has been focused around the similar themes.

At the very centre of what we are about is something that is true for our two Yearly Meetings and for all Friends. We are inheritors of a 350-year-old legacy, begun by people who experienced that revolutionary transformation of heart as they, individually and collectively, opened themselves to and were changed by the Holy Spirit. And they, in turn, felt in direct relationship with and inheritors of the early followers of Jesus Christ, who had also experienced that revolutionary transformation of heart as they, individually and collectively, opened themselves to and were changed by the Holy Spirit. Of course, The Society of Friends is not the only place where God can be experienced. Yet, each of us here has in some way committed to the Quaker way as being a good place in which to practise the community of God.

If anything can breathe new life into your Yearly Meeting, and into ours, it will be the realization that the same power of love and transformation is as alive and available now as it was then – 2000 years ago or 350 years ago. Are we willing to open ourselves, individually and collectively, to that fact? Are we willing to undergo the discipline of love and work and commitment that is necessary for our small Quaker communities to grow in spirit and in numbers, meeting the needs of each member and becoming better equipped to reach out to the needs of the world around us?

Our two Yearly Meetings share some other characteristics. We have small worship groups throughout the country who struggle to meet on a regular basis. Many of those Friends have families and work commitments. There are challenges of geography, time and venue. When I have visited some of these small groups, it has been encouraging to see that there is a longing to meet and a commitment to the Quaker way of worship and community despite the challenges and limitations. There is the realization that the alternative—no Quaker meeting at all—is inconceivable. These small groups are exploring ways to make their time together richer by studying together, by sharing their spiritual journeys, by finding ways to integrate worship, a common meal and further sharing out of the worship. They want to get to know each other better, to deepen their community despite not being able to meet as often as they would like. The fact that “younger” Swiss Friends have been responsible for arranging this Yearly Meeting is also a sign of commitment and longing to find a way forward, despite the challenges. I will take this back to my own Yearly Meeting as a suggestion for the future.

I'd like share more about our Yearly Meeting. At present we feel relatively lively—it has not always been that way. We have certainly had our ups and downs! We have spent ten years writing our *Faith & Practise*. It has been both challenging and vitalizing to document what we actually do. Many people find us through our website, and we have put effort into making it welcoming and informational. We hold retreats about 6 times each year, and these are opportunities for newcomers to get acquainted with Quaker spirituality. The newsletter is sent to a large number of enquirers. We offer a week of all-age camp at Svartbäcken retreat centre, and we hold all-age worship in Stockholm twice each term. Groups have tried alternative times for worship and have experimented with alternative forms of worship. When possible, we send Young Friends to international gatherings like Junior Yearly Meeting in England and the Quaker Youth Pilgrimage. Applicants for membership are expected to have attended at least one Meeting for Business before becoming members. They are then incorporated in suitable ways, for example by sending them as our representatives to more established Yearly Meetings. We have had a structure of six co-clerks for about 10 years, comprising the Executive Committee. This is a way of sharing responsibilities as well as providing a training opportunity for new clerks. We have a small group of Elders for the whole country, who not only travel among the worship groups themselves but also encourage other Friends to travel and nurture the small worship groups around the country. An idea that the Elders hope to make reality is to encourage a more experienced Friend to travel with a new or younger Friend to isolated and/or elderly Friends to hear their stories, share worship and a meal. This kind of travelling in the ministry can be a way of transmitting both spiritual and historical knowledge. Both the Executive Committee and the Elders meet each year over a weekend for deeper sharing together—with no agenda. I have understood that you struggle to find Friends to can take on responsibilities within the Yearly Meeting. Perhaps you will be able to find new and creative ways while remaining faithful to our Quaker tradition and practise.

In each of my contacts with Swiss Friends in preparation for this talk, I have been told of a characteristic that our Yearly Meetings do not share. It has been presented to me as one of

your major challenges: language. I do not know all the practical implications of this, and it is perhaps insensitive of me to ask the following question, but I will do it anyway: Is it possible to view your Yearly Meeting's tri-lingual nature as an opportunity, or at least to focus on any positive aspects of it? I compare your situation with that of Finnish Friends, who also have a tri-lingual situation with Finnish, Swedish and English. I asked Jaana Erkkilä, who is responsible for the Finnish Friends' newsletter in three languages, how she and other Friends deal with their language situation. She answered that it is most important for each Friend to feel included, regardless of what language they speak. Community is very important, even though Finnish Friends also struggle with tiny groups and isolated Friends. Perhaps, using English as your common language, you could explore some sharing of experiences with them.

In co-operation with two other Friends, I was responsible for organising the small worship and sharing groups at the Triennial last year in Dublin, where language was also an issue among the 300 Friends from all over the world. We encouraged the small groups to view the time used for interpretation as an opportunity to listen and to uphold each other, rather than to experience it as a frustration and waste of time. Interpretation into Spanish and French of all the speakers and business sessions, using modern technology and the amazing effort of dedicated interpreters, was an honest attempt to remind ourselves that English is not the only language in the Quaker world! That said, it was apparent that the English-speaking Quaker world dominates. It was also apparent that awareness of this has been raised.

This brings me to the next of my areas of Quaker service. Last year Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, England and the Europe and Middle East Section of FWCC (EMES) asked me to work for them jointly to explore on-line learning in a European Quaker context. One part of this vision is to find ways to use the on-line medium as a complement, and in some cases even an alternative, to face-to-face Quaker fellowship for learning and sharing our experiences as Friends. A second part of the vision is the hope that the on-line medium can be used for outreach. It can help people, who find Quakers on the internet, to learn more about us when geography prohibits them from attending Meeting for Worship and learning by experience. A third part of the vision is to make it possible to learn about Quakerism, and to experience Quaker fellowship on-line, without having to be fluent in or even familiar with English.

The vision is now manifesting itself in an on-line introductory course about the Quaker way. Over 20 Friends, speaking 11 European languages, are taking part. The pilot course, which was run in English, has just ended. Now the course material is hopefully going to be translated into Czech, Danish, Dutch, Esperanto, Finnish, French, Georgian, German, Hungarian, Latvian, Norwegian, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Swedish. As the course becomes available in each language, it can be offered on-line to Friends and enquirers in that language and facilitated by a native speaker. The idea is that small groups of people can be interacting on-line, learning and sharing their experience of the Quaker way. As we gain experience of the on-line medium, it can be used in other ways for groups of Friends to interact within Europe—and even globally. There is conversation going on between Woodbrooke, the FWCC World Office, and Pendle Hill (the Quaker Study Centre in the United States) about how the on-line medium can be used for Friends around the world.

I have faith in this work because of my own experience of being an on-line student in an on-line community. For six years I pursued a post-graduate degree from Earlham School of Religion, the Quaker theological seminary in the United States, through their new on-line programme. It would have been impossible for me to study in the traditional way by going to

the United States for a three-year period, so I am thankful that others had faith in the vision and started the programme. I know now that it is possible to learn and to nurture community using the on-line medium. I would like to share that possibility with Friends all over Europe and throughout the world.

The on-line work is something that many Friends will need to be involved in. We need participants in the on-line course as it is offered in German and in French. We need on-line facilitators, and we need Friends to work with translations. This is an opportunity for younger Friends, who are perhaps knee-deep in work and family, to both give and receive in a wider Quaker context. It is also an opportunity for isolated Friends to be connected and involved.

I would like to speak now a little more about Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, which is located in Birmingham, England. For over 100 years it has been a vibrant centre for Quakers and others to meet and learn. It hopes to serve Friends all over Europe. Woodbrooke offers a wide variety of short courses lasting 2 or 3 days. It also offers longer periods of study. One of these is the two-year *Equipping for Ministry* programme for Friends to explore and gain clarity about how they are called to let their lives speak. Two European Friends are currently taking part in this programme. Another is the *Eva Koch Scholarship*, which is an opportunity for individual Friends to spend a longer period at Woodbrooke to do research. Two new scholarship recipients are Canadian women who are doing research into the lives of two historic Quaker women in order to portray them in artistic ways. Yet another possibility is the *post-graduate programme* in cooperation with Birmingham University.

There is a special fund to enable non-British Quakers to make use of Woodbrooke. *The Corder and Gwen and Catchpool Fund* is the result of one German man's experience of Woodbrooke. Rudi Schmidt was so impressed by his stay at Woodbrooke that he left his estate to be managed by his dear friends, the Catchpool family, and to be used specifically for non-British Quakers to attend Woodbrooke. You can apply for funding as an individual if you would like to go to Woodbrooke for a course. The Catchpool fund also sponsors learning events especially for European Friends. For example, there is a translators gathering in July, where participants in the on-line project will gather to work on translations of texts that will be used in the project. Two years ago there was an Anglo-German gathering, and this summer there will be an Anglo-Scandinavian gathering. In February of 2009 there will be a Catchpool-sponsored course for European clerks. Swiss Friends Hannes Bircher and Esther Funkhouser took part in the first one in 2007. Perhaps you will send two new clerks in 2009!

Another way that Woodbrooke serves Friends is to go "on-the-road", with tutors travelling to Quaker meetings and holding courses there. Catchpool funding can help with on-the-road courses, also. Swedish Friends, for example, will host a Woodbrooke-on-the-Road in June on the Quaker business method. I have offered Woodbrooke-on-the-Road events in Poland, Russia and Georgia within the past year. Woodbrooke also hopes to bring non-British Friends to Woodbrooke as tutors. Two Dutch Friends, mother and daughter, have led two well-received weekends on the mother-daughter relationship. I have led two retreats. Another Swedish Friend will be co-leading the Anglo-Scandinavian gathering in July. There are many fine resources among European Friends that Woodbrooke would be happy to make use of.

I have spoken so far about my work for Sweden Yearly Meeting and for Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre. My third area of work is with EMES, the Europe and Middle East Section of FWCC. As you may know, the world body of Quakers is gathered under Friends World Committee for Consultation, which is divided into four geographical sections. EMES is "our"

section. Your representative to EMES is Art Funkhouser, and Fritz Renken serves on the Executive Committee. Bronwyn Harwood has served for 6 years as Executive Secretary to EMES. Her successor, Marisa Johnson, has recently begun service. I serve EMES as Ministry and Outreach Co-ordinator. Along with developing the on-line project in co-operation with Woodbrooke, I am developing the Visiting Friends programme. This programme has been in existence for some years in a variety of forms, but now we see an increased need for visitation among Friends in the Section. Older established meetings, like yours, sometimes need encouragement and inspiration. Sometimes there are conflicts that require help from a Visiting Friend. New meetings have emerged in Eastern and Central Europe, and there is need for teaching and nurture of these groups and of isolated Friends. There has been an increase in applications for International Membership, and the Visiting Friends programme has been able to co-operate with the International Membership Committee in connection with interviewing for membership.

In telling you something of Woodbrooke and EMES, I have widened the perspective to the European level to show that Friends in other parts share your challenges. You are not alone. There are ways that we can help teach, nurture, serve and encourage each other. That said, I would like to remind us all of something very important: Our first responsibility and privilege as Friends is to share Meeting for Worship with each other as often as we can. That is, fundamentally, what it is all about. If you have only limited energy and resources, commit faithfully to your local meeting community. Worship together, eat together, share your spiritual journeys with each other. Learn about each others' lives. Uphold each other. Be a place where hearts are opened and transformed. Our small worshiping communities need faithful, committed Friends.

This is connected with your concern for outreach. Indeed, we hope to be instruments of love, justice and peace in the wider world. And we hope to increase awareness about the Religious Society of Friends. Faith in action is absolutely fundamental to Quakerism. Yet, William Penn's testimony concerning early Friends is important to remember: "*They were changed men themselves before they went about to change others. Their hearts were rent (torn open) as well as their garments, and they knew the power and work of God upon them...*" It is the transformation of hearts, generated by God's work in the worshiping community that then spreads...to our places of work, our relationships, to situations around us where violence and injustice dominate. We long to be vibrant faith communities that are active in service and peace-building projects in the wider community. That is sometimes not possible for a tiny worshiping group. We can, however, nurture and uphold each other in our individual service in the wider world. We can cultivate the soil of our fellowship so that the guests who come to us find a safe and welcoming place to rest, seek and worship.

My mother shared with me a poignant story of the Quaker meeting of my birth, Paullina Monthly Meeting of Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative) in the USA. For nearly 100 years it was a large and vibrant meeting of mostly Norwegian Quaker immigrants and farmers. Each year, the meeting hosted a cornbread supper for the wider community to raise money for UNICEF and for service in the local community. It was a major part of the meeting's outreach and service. Now, the meeting is dying out. Only a handful of Friends remain there. But the cornbread supper continues, now ecumenical in nature and run by the various churches in the town. We do not know how our faithful example can bear fruit in the future.

I close with words from Julian of Norwich, who expressed something of what a vibrant worshiping community entails: "*Be a gardener, dig a ditch. Toil and sweat, and turn the*

earth upside down, and seek the deepness and water the plants in time. Continue this labour and make sweet floods to run, and noble and abundant fruits to spring. Take this food and drink, and carry it to God as your true worship.”