

BYM Sustainability Gathering

18-20 March 2016

Listening Friends' feedback, Sunday morning

Sam Robinson

One of the things I have learnt this weekend is that Quakers are surprisingly good at Frisbee! As we played we discussed the idea that the challenge of throwing and catching a Frisbee is much like the challenge of grappling with climate change and sustainability.

One way it is similar is that it is no fun on your own. Over this weekend I have heard Friends talking about feeling isolated, at times overwhelmed and hopeless, sometimes the only 'green suspect' in their meeting, struggling in a Society that has not yet fully taken ownership of its sustainability commitment. This gathering has however been an opportunity to "be tender with one, and to support one another" to share our journeys, ideas, hopes and experiences. Gradually we have built a nurturing, loving and supportive community over the weekend.

Another tip from the world of professional Quaker Frisbee playing is that approaching the Frisbee head on can be dangerous. Gregory Norminton encouraged us to "come at something that overwhelms us at a slant or an angle" using stories, metaphors and poetry. All weekend we have shared our stories and written new ones, stories that acknowledge suffering and stories that "affirm our vision of a flourishing of all life" (as Siobhán said).

You also don't want the Frisbee to end up in the lake so you have to be engaged with and aware of the world around you. Over the gathering we have discovered the potential we have for changing the social norms in the world around us and the role we can play in speaking truth to power, "recognising that hope is a state of mind, not a response to data".

Lastly, playing Frisbee is energising and fun! One thing I have heard a lot this weekend is laughter and it's that sense of fun and energy, grounded in love, that I hope we can take back to our meetings and continue to deepen and broaden our sustainability commitment, imbedding it in the fabric of the Society of Friends not as a new, separate thing but as a central, binding aspect of our faith.

Andrew Taylor-Browne

Most notable for me was the difference in atmosphere and mood between Friday night and Saturday lunchtime. People's early feelings seemed to be that their expectations were not especially high. Many people seemed to be bringing experiences of isolation in their dealings with their local meetings relating to sustainability concerns. Many had experiences of frustration from previous meetings and concerns of the tendency for despair. Many felt that, after years of working in these issues, they were stuck and unsure how to move forward. Some had concerns about the seemingly overwhelming diversity of thinking and possible actions leading them to wonder where they should be expending their efforts and whether they were doing the right thing or doing enough. There seemed to be a need for inspiration, energising and finding of right direction - but, I sensed, little realistic expectation of having these needs met.

Somehow the mood I was picking up by the latter part of Saturday morning was one of belief in each other and evidence of joy. This seems to have come from many places, but underlying it was a sense of belonging, support and acceptance by the wider group of people here this weekend.

This brought to mind for me the importance of developing compassion within and between ourselves. Presented with existential danger the human mind can easily revert to a 'threat response'. Unfortunately such a response has the effect of overwhelming all other states of mind - including those of pleasure, empathy and joy; and this can easily lead to despair and a freezing of our ability to act. If instead of such a threat response we can evoke the heart and mind of compassion it is possible to move forward with others, building confidence and joy. If we believe that the outcome of our efforts is all that matters we will be subject to endless doubt; if we have trust in our spirit led process then we can build support and confidence for each other. This seems to have been happening this weekend.

People's concerns then over the last 24 hours seem to be turning to how to sustain such trust and belief when we leave the support of this meeting; how can they find a community that places sustainability as core to all it does rather than being just another call on our time and concern? Now this is probably overreaching my remit as listener, but actually I want to recommend that you expect little of the world you are returning to and instead encourage that you use this community you have found here this weekend to form the basis of sustaining compassion. This, some have suggested, may be in acknowledging a need for continuing structural support for people following this weekend (and I hope Laurie and others may be able to progress this to some degree); perhaps most important it may be in each of us deepening, and continuing to share, the stories we have found here that help us to share our fears and joys with this our community.

Gill Westcott

Tracing our personal journeys like the course of a river. Where did mine begin? Landmarks on our journey included ordering a weekly box of organic veg, the excitement of its arrival, seeing a celeriac for the first time, with a face like Les Dawson; a city trader moving to Cornwall to manage goats; extending the Meeting community to all who hire rooms.

Many of us resonated with Gregory Norminton's statement that we are not motivated with facts and figures. Stories flowed. Siobhan Grimes told us of a time when the corridor filled with smoke, but the class who were informed calmly about the fire just carried on their conversations. We heard of the Bangladeshi woman (on the Christian Aid website), her floor covered in water, carrying her babies. Are we committed to her and those like her? We heard the myth of the Fisher King whose wound could only begin to heal when acknowledged by Parsifal's compassionate enquiry.

What are the social norms that prevent us talking about climate change? Jessica Metheringham's workshop encouraged us to start by finding common ground and prepare thoroughly before meeting with those we hope to persuade.

We were reminded not to underestimate the strength of social norms in enabling low carbon living. In a caring community we can support one another with ways of living which, like the early Quakers and early Christians are distinctively different from the world around us.

It seemed a relief to hear spoken the feeling that our commitment to low carbon living is not fully owned by the whole Yearly Meeting. Creating community around our commitment is crucial to prevent the burden falling on a few, sometimes one or two people in a meeting:

a community based not on fear, but acknowledging feelings of despair, grief and loss; created with trust in the guidance of our corporate discernment and with new stories, enjoyment and a sense of adventure. Rachel Howell reminded us that decisions, beforehand, can look very difficult, but afterwards can become much easier. “It is not for our individual consciences to be overruled by our collective discernment, but challenged and shaped by our life as a body”.

We thought about how staying in touch with distant families could be achieved without flights, or with deeper sacrifices by some so that others could travel. We thought about the potential of a General Strike for, e.g., action on sustainability, the NHS and public services.

Our testimony to truth requires that we live our lives so that they reflect our reality on earth. The possibility of remaining below a 2°C temperature rise – already disastrous for some – depends on cutting consumption of the high emitters (i.e. anyone who makes one or two long haul flights a year). Our fair share is 1-2 tonnes CO₂ (though UK infrastructure makes this impossible at present) – anything else is stealing. We explored approaches to bringing change – by direct action, by disinvestment of pension funds from fossil fuels, by using the commitments made at the Paris Summit to strengthen grassroots and commercial action, both necessary to promote political movement. We explored the Principles for a New Economy, as a vision promoting discussion of how these could be achieved. We can have confidence contradicting the assumptions on which some economists and politicians promote market solutions for everything. Our testimonies lead us to value the natural world, the gift economy, health and well-being and greater equality, more than any increase in GDP. We need not demonise either business or economists to voice clear alternative perspectives.

The need for change that is facing us can seem overwhelming. Many of us feel a need for ongoing links and support within the Society for this work.

Some lines from a poem written on this event:

Don't talk to me about
that which we must do
the terrible debris of progress

Don't talk to me about
the nails that pin us and wound us
the numbers that pin us and wound us

Talk to me about the feeling of leaves brushing your face
up there where the breezes anoint you

Talk to me about gathering in small good places
sharing laughter, food and wisdom.

Talk to me about love
and adventure.