The art of holding the space between us

Philip Gross considers connections between Quaker worship and creative collaboration
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Most of us need from time to time the experience of something spacious or space-making, when Time ceases to be the enemy, goad-in-hand, and becomes our friend. To read good literature, gaze on natural beauty, to follow cultivated pursuits until our spirits are refreshed and expanded, will not unfit us for the up and doing of life, whether of personal or church affairs. Rather will it help us to separate the essential from the unessential, to know where we are really needed and get a sense of proportion. We shall find ourselves giving the effect of leisure even in the midst of a full and busy life. People do not pour their joys or sorrows into the ears of those with an eye on the clock.

Caroline C Graveson, 1937

Quaker faith & practice 21.22
Teach crisis in school, activists tell MPs

Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) has joined education charities, unions and environmental NGOs in signing up to ‘Teach the Future’, a youth-led campaign to put the climate crisis at the heart of the education system. As fifty youth climate strikers took the message to MPs on 26 February at a parliamentary campaign reception, BYM staff tweeted how it was ‘fantastic to hear young people talking about climate justice in the House of Commons.

Activists presented their ideas for teaching the ecological crisis at the crowdfunded reception, hosted by MP Nadia Whittome. Meanwhile, an open letter in support of the campaign attracted 200 signatures within forty-eight hours.

Eighteen-year-old Quaker activist Anya Nanning-Ramamurthy said she supported the campaign as: ‘I feel it is so important that the younger generation is taught about climate change and the crisis we are living through. Primary and secondary education barely covers these topics.

‘My A-level geography course does cover quite a bit on climate change and humans’ impact on the planet… [but] even now it’s not taught as if it’s an emergency, but instead just as something that’s occurring. This is the future we are going to be living and we deserve to be made aware and prepared for it.’

The joint initiative by the UK Student Climate Network (UKSCN) and Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS-UK) is calling for three key demands: a review of how the formal education system in England is preparing students for the climate and ecological crisis; a Climate Emergency Education Act; and an endowment fund for youth-led climate action.

Oliver Robertson, head of witness and worship at BYM, said the ‘Teach the Future’ campaign is much needed. ‘Our vision is of a world where people and nature can thrive, and education should develop young people’s skills and understanding in a way that will help them to build that world.’

DSEI activist’s charges withdrawn amid questions over arrest

The Peace Pledge Union (PPU) has said that the Metropolitan Police and the Crown Prosecution Service face ‘urgent questions’ after the last-minute withdrawal of charges against a pacifist activist, five months after proceedings began.

Symon Hill, campaigns manager of the PPU, was accused of obstructing the road to the Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEI) arms fair in London last September. He was one of over 100 people arrested, including Quakers, while peacefully protesting.

The prosecution dropped the charges as the Christian pacifist was about to stand trial at Stratford Magistrates’ Court in London on 27 February.

Defence barrister Leila Mezoughi pointed out that the road was already obstructed when her client stepped into it and that therefore no case could be made against him.

Symon Hill is now seeking legal advice in regards to challenging the legality of his arrest. Speaking outside the court afterwards, he said: ‘Today’s decision makes clear that I should never have been arrested. My arrest seems to have happened because a police officer became frustrated with my entirely reasonable questions when he accused me, rather than the arms dealers, of breaching the peace.’

The PPU questioned the waste of public money in the five months since the arrest took place, during which Symon Hill has been required to attend court three times while the Crown Prosecution Service pursued the case.

Members and allies of the PPU, the Campaign Against Arms Trade and other groups joined a peaceful demonstration outside the court on 27 February, leafleting passers-by as it snowed.

Call for church action on poverty

Quakers were among nearly 500 church leaders and elders who have called for UK churches to ensure that ‘the deepening crisis of UK poverty is at the centre of national attention’. Nine Friends from Selly Oak, Newcastle, Sittingbourne, Inverness, Beeston, Dorchester and Stocksfield Local Meetings signed the open letter calling on the churches to ‘redouble our efforts not just to alleviate the symptoms of poverty, but to call out the root causes, systems and structures which ensnare so many in poverty today’. The letter was read aloud in many services on 23 February to mark Church Action on Poverty Sunday.

The letter states: ‘Above all, as churches we are compelled to speak truth to power, with and alongside those whose voices are consistently ignored by those in power

WORDS

‘Churches as well as government... need to challenge the poverty that has put people on the street.’

Martin Green, a trustee of Church Action on Poverty.
in corporate, media and public life. Poverty and gross inequality are not acts of God but structural defects that can be corrected. Speaking truth to power is a task for the whole church, and one given greater urgency now, amid political debates that continue to expose the divisions within society.’

Niall Cooper, director of Church Action on Poverty, which coordinated the letter, said: ‘The church must hear the cry of the poor and act. It must step alongside those who have been swept into poverty and work with them to challenge the systems that pull people down. Many churches are doing wonderful work… but we need such action everywhere, and national leaders must prioritise that.’

Martin Green, a trustee of Church Action on Poverty who himself has experienced food poverty, said: ‘Churches as well as government could do more to address poverty. They need to stand up and say they are supporting those who are trying to end poverty, and not hide. Churches are often good at helping people when they are on the street, but they need to challenge the poverty that has put people on the street in the first place.’

**JRF’s first photography exhibition launched**

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) has launched its first public photography exhibition showing people living on the breadline in Britain. *Picture Britain: Our People, Our Poverty*, which opened in Borough Market in London on 20 February, features twenty portraits by award-winning photographer Jillian Edelstein after she asked participants: ‘What is the one thing you could not live without?’

With the participants’ stories captured by Stephen Armstrong, the exhibition was commissioned by the JRF to celebrate what it describes as ‘the strength and resilience of people swept into poverty’. ‘Many of the stories demonstrate the power of individuals and communities working together to loosen the grip of poverty,’ it says. ‘These are the stories that don’t get told.’

Writing in a blog on the JRF website, Abigail Scott Paul, the deputy director of advocacy and public engagement at JRF, says the idea for the exhibition emerged from the ‘culture wars’ currently raging within the UK and calls for ‘reconnection’.

She says: ‘Through our framing research, we know how to have a more effective conversation about poverty with the public: we need to appeal to people’s sense of compassion and justice, values the British public do hold dear. But we are also going to have to get creative about how we do this. We can’t just tell people what to feel.

‘What better way to halt the culture wars, than by using culture itself? Culture can be a bridge to understanding between factions, often when language fails.’

The exhibition, she says, is an attempt to reframe the conversation about ‘people caught in the riptide of poverty’. ‘Images matter,’ she writes. ‘Unfortunately many of the visual images used in the news or media associated with poverty reinforce a perception of poverty that feels inauthentic and stigmatising.’

The exhibition runs until 7 March, after which it will tour Britain.

**NUMBERS**

100

The approximate number of activists arrested outside the DSEI arms fair in September.

**Friends speak on Happy Baby Community**

Friends from Purley Meeting visited Hammersmith Meeting last month to speak about the work of Happy Baby Community, a charity supporting pregnant asylum seekers and refugees. Quaker Joanna Doherty started the second London branch of the charity in 2018 after a pilot project in November 2017 running as an antenatal and postnatal support group. She said the group assists refugee mothers and mothers-to-be who have suffered incidents of gender-based violence, forced prostitution, modern-day slavery and human trafficking.

Hammersmith Quakers tweeted that they were ‘pleased to learn about this inspiring project which addresses a desperate need’.
Letters

The Friend welcomes your views, to letters@thefriend.org. Please keep letters short. We particularly welcome contributions from children, written or illustrated. Please include your full postal address, even when sending emails, along with your Meeting name or other Quaker affiliation.

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.

Quakers and Europe

It was good to read the account of the work of Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA) within the report of Meeting for Sufferings held on 1 February (7 February). My experience of QCEA’s Study Tour in March 2019 left me deeply thankful for this organisation, which seeks to bring a Quaker vision of peace, justice and equality to Europe and its institutions. Quaker House Brussels offers a safe space in which sensitive discussions can take place in a non-judgemental atmosphere. QCEA’s well-researched reports, such as Child Immigration Detention in Europe, challenge injustices and offer alternatives, providing reliable evidence on which to act.

With Britain no longer part of the EU, the presence of QCEA as an advocate for human rights and peacebuilding at the European level is more vital than ever. QCEA needs our help in the form of money, active supporters, subscribers to Around Europe and awareness raising in Meetings.

British Friends of QCEA is a registered charity that exists to support the work of QCEA, and donations from British Quakers made by cheque or charity voucher can be channelled through this organisation. Full details of this and other ways to donate may be found on the QCEA website: www.qcea.org/home/involved/donate.

Elspeth Wollen
Trustee, British Friends of QCEA

Healing day

Many minds and hearts appear to be working together to make 7 March special as a nationwide ‘Day of Healing’. Certainly the Friend has devoted full-page adverts to it, and local churches and Churches Together are supporting it.

It may not be the customary Quaker way to join with others in a shared spiritual initiative of this kind, and at first sight it may be tempting to think that, if we are personally not in need of healing of any kind (that we are aware of), it is not for us, but consider the state of the community, the nation and the world.

I suggest there has never been a greater and more urgent need for healing and mending of every kind than there is now. So who knows what good may come of engaging with this, both within ourselves and around us.

I look forward to reading in the Friend of how people have been affected and blessed as a result of the Day of Healing.

Roger Seal
Spalding Meeting, Lincolnshire

Safeguarding analogy

The safeguarding law supports our underlying aim as Quakers to ensure all are treated equally with love and care. Children and adults at risk of abuse need to be at the forefront of our concern here.

A (possibly poor) analogy is the law for drivers. For years we drove cars and many of us had no or only minor accidents. But some had awful injuries or were killed in accidents. Developments led to the creation of restraining belts. These seat belts then became compulsory to wear. Some people felt: ‘Why should we wear them?
if we have never had an accident?'
There was a short period of many ignoring the law. Now we accept we have to wear them and this has prevented or at least greatly reduced harm.

Some of us have been fortunate to belong in loving communities and have never experienced abuse or witnessed it. However, even today cases are emerging of children being taken advantage of by an adult in a position of trust in a church. We must consider risks and put in place measures to mitigate those risks as much as we can. The safeguarding advice and legislation help us to benefit from the experience of others in seeking to mitigate risk.

This law is, in my opinion, fully in line with the Quaker approach to living. We want to welcome all but, if we have a concern about someone posing a potential risk, we need to take steps to mitigate any risk. The intent of the law is to keep people safe. Though we hope the risk is only slight, just as when we get into a car, we need to take the steps to ensure everyone is safe in our Meetings.

Lynne Richardson
Broad Campden Meeting, Gloucestershire

Building respect
Martin Schweiger’s letter (7 February) reminds me of the old parable of the blind men and the elephant. The men have never come across an elephant before and conceptualise what it’s like by touching it. Each blind man feels a different part of its body, such as the side or the tusk. They then describe the elephant based on their limited experience, and, of course, their descriptions are different from each other. They suspect that the others are dishonest and come to blows. The moral of the parable is that humans tend to claim absolute truth based on their limited, subjective experience as they ignore other people’s limited, subjective experiences, which may be equally true. It follows that if we are to arrive at the highest truth on any subject, we must seek to understand it from many angles.

We may well need to be prepared to let go of our instinctual sense of what the truth ‘ought’ to be, and open ourselves to the greater truth that quietly reveals itself. The situation is further complicated by the realisation that the truth is constantly evolving. This is self-evidently so when we consider scientific truths, but I believe this is equally so with spiritual truths – hence the periodic revisions to Quaker faith & practice.

I would love to see a Friends working group established to study what we mean and understand by the truth, to explore ways of building respect for the truth, and working to uphold it in personal and public life.

David Wright
Newark Meeting, Nottinghamshire

Serious questions
I was interested to read of the Meeting for Sufferings account of Sophie Bevan’s troubling reflections on the second conference on diversity and inclusion held at Woodbrooke (14 February).

But I was astonished to read the pre-set questions for participants of that conference. One was ‘What reservations do you have about accepting a group of black men into your Meeting?’ I thought I had been transported to Alabama in 1953. If this was considered a viable question then serious questions need to be asked about the planning and preparation of such conferences at Woodbrooke and the thinking and values behind them.

Simon Newton
Kirkbymoorside Meeting, North Yorkshire

‘Working for everybody’?
I am glad to have good friends whose political or spiritual viewpoints differ from mine. I well remember, when I was eight, the excitement of entering the 1951 general election results in our Radio Times at home with my mum, who was a lifelong socialist and seeker after tolerance and justice. Newspapers described the latest cabinet changes as ‘brutal.’ What disturbs me now is the lack of probity, respect and competence in our present political system. There is an emphasis on quick-fix populist slogans, such as ‘Get Brexit Done’ and ‘Take Back Control’, but with little or no regard for the small print or the consequences for many people’s livelihoods.

Downing Street seems to emphasise personality and headline-grabbing rather than the constructive, consensual policymaking the country desperately needs. As a teaching assistant in the deprived north east of England, I see the hardship being inflicted on children and their families, and I cannot believe the government’s claim to be ‘working for everybody’.

What do other Friends think?
Ken Veitch
Stocksfield Meeting, Northumberland

Informing all aspects
I’ve been waiting for someone to point out ‘the elephant in the corner’ in respect of this matter but, as so often, Friends are perhaps too careful, too concerned to not be seen to be judgemental. However, our Quakerism should inform all aspects of our lives. As a consequence, our Peace Testimony should inform how we vote and which political party we join.

I would recommend reading Robert Barclay, Quaker faith & practice 24.02, and would contend that to be a member of a party, let alone an MP, supporting the renewal, possession, development and even threatened use of weapons of indiscriminate mass destruction is incompatible with membership of the Religious Society of Friends.

Tim Thompson
Hereford Meeting, Herefordshire
The Book of Discipline Revision Committee has been looking at chapter introductions. Craig Barnett offers a personal attempt at ‘Worship’

‘Worship does not require special techniques or great natural ability, but it does demand our self-discipline and self-surrender.’

Worship is a movement of our whole being towards a spiritual reality that is ultimately mysterious, but that we can know by experience. Quakers name this reality as God, Spirit, Light, or in a range of other ways.

In the practice of Quaker worship, we meet together to turn our attention towards the Inward Light. Quakers have traditionally understood the Inward Light as a divine gift of spiritual perception. It enables us to see our true situation, by uncovering our deepest insights and motivations. This Inward Light also reveals the guidance of the Spirit for us as individuals and communities. In Quaker worship, we ‘wait in the Light.’ We wait in stillness to see what is revealed to us in the depths of our own awareness.

In a Quaker Meeting for Worship the gathered community may encounter a shared depth of stillness and a sense of divine presence. When this experience is shared by those present, there is a profound sense of being united in the Spirit that Quakers refer to as a ‘gathered’ Meeting – ‘a Meeting where the silence is as soft as velvet, as deep as a still pool; a silence where words emerge, only to deepen and enrich that rich silence, and where Presence is as palpable and soft as the skin of a peach; where the membrane separating this moment in time and eternity is filament-fine’ (Gerald Hewitson).

Through waiting in the Light, we may come to an encounter with the inward source of life and power – a sense of loving Presence beneath thoughts and concepts. We become receptive to the insights of love and truth that may arise to teach us, and that might lead us to offer spoken ministry.

In Quaker worship new insights may come to anyone in the community, whatever their age or experience, and they will be listened to as potential bearers of divine guidance. Anyone who takes part in a Quaker Meeting for Worship may be led by the Spirit to speak spontaneously to the Meeting, to pass on whatever insights or guidance they have received. This reflects the Quaker emphasis on worship as a source of guidance towards action. The purpose of Quaker worship is to encounter the source of inward transformation that may inspire and lead us to act; to speak in a Meeting for Worship, to make some change in our own lives, or to work for change in our community or society.

The Quaker way of worship is marked by its simplicity. It does not rely on buildings or specially-qualified ministers. It is open to everyone on a basis of complete equality; whatever our gender, sexuality or background. Quaker worship does not require special techniques or great natural ability, but it does demand self-discipline and self-surrender.

‘Give over thine own willing, give over thy own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee and be in thee and breathe in thee and act in thee; and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of Life, which is its portion’ (Isaac Penington).

Craig is from Sheffield & Balby Area Meeting.
Thought for the week: Chris Lawson chases trouble

‘We need to be open to having the habits and traditions in which we feel secure challenged.’

He’s a troublemaker. That's my opening line in the Lewes Passion Play. I’m cast as a Scribe making accusations about Jesus to the Chief Priest. I want to add ‘definitively, still is, and should be for us,’ but it’s not in the script, even if I feel Jesus through his teaching, actions and witness in his life and death is the disturber of everything we get complacent about. Likewise, the Advices & queries are for our discomfort as well as our comfort.

My next line is: ‘He has disrespected our law, he healed on the Sabbath.’ Coming from a religious tradition that started off more than three centuries ago by disrespecting a great many so-called laws that the authorities of the time had put in place, I can support that. If healing is needed, get on with it, even in situations where it may be unpopular. The Friend highlights some current examples of that and we probably all know of people doing similar acts of help to others, within and without our Local Meetings.

As the Scribe, I carry an impressive bundle of scrolls. But they’re only a reminder that however much people like to think they know what God wants, they need to accept our knowledge can only ever be partial and stay humble in respect of defining what God wants or doesn't want. Even Quaker faith & practice and the columns of this magazine are not the last word in our attempts to understand what our faith is about, though they reveal much of ‘work in progress’. We need to be open to having the habits and traditions in which we feel secure challenged.

Next, in my Scribe role, I say: ‘He claimed he could forgive sins.’ By this point the play has re-enacted several episodes about that. Often a physical healing is accompanied by the lifting of intolerable mental stresses. Forgiveness is our need to feel we can cease being tied down by past happenings and move on. Jesus gave that renewal to many in his time and it’s an experience that we still seek. I am grateful that Meeting for Worship gives it to me at times.

The Scribe's final jibe is that: ‘He called God his Father.’ We know that the analogy can be inadequate, but at its best it points to a relationship of closeness – and yet one in which responsible free will is possible and accepted with guidance and not control. ‘If you want to know about God, look at Jesus,’ is often said. But, be ready to find that he’s a troublemaker within you.

Forgiveness is our need to feel we can cease being tied down by past happenings and move on.

Chris is from Lewes Meeting.
Not long ago, I was one of several Americans talking with a sixteen-year-old Palestinian from Gaza. As she answered our questions about her family’s experiences living inside that locked-down territory, she said something I’d never heard from a teenager anywhere: ‘How can we not talk politics? Our life is politics.’

I cannot say that every teenager in Palestine would agree with her. But I checked with her to be sure she was really saying what I thought she was saying: people in her situation did not have the luxury of ignoring politics. Or to put it in contemporary terms, they did not have that privilege.

It was an interesting contrast to our experiences with young people in Russia during the years 2007–2017. Back then I reported the single most popular cliché about politics I heard over all those years: ‘Politics is a dirty business; it’s not for me.’

I noted that the anti-corruption movement in Russia had made inroads among young people, some of whom seemed undaunted by the prospect of being arrested at a demonstration. Their increased awareness seemed connected to their choice of information sources – mostly Internet-based, in contrast to older generations’ preference for broadcast television.

However, those demonstrations, startling as they were in a political scene that had seemed almost dormant, only involved a microscopic percentage of all young people in the country. Our own students were well aware of the anti-corruption movement, and talked about it without fear, but were almost uniformly sceptical about its utility. Few (if any) trusted the government, but almost nobody saw any point in public opposition.

The freelance writer Eilish Hart has offered more recent impressions of youth participation in Russian politics.

Some young people, having known no other Russian leader, are asking: ‘Volodya, aren't you tired?’ I don't doubt that there is potential for more creative pressure from this generation, but it is not obvious how and when they will become a critical factor.

I wish I could now go back and discuss with our young Russian acquaintances what that Palestinian teenager said: ‘Our life is politics.’ Specifically, is their definition of the word ‘politics’ the same as hers? If they could all compare understandings, how much overlap might actually exist between her viewpoint and theirs?

For example: if by ‘politics’ you only mean ‘effective participation in an open process of choosing those who will govern us, and then choosing their replacements,’ neither the average Palestinian nor the average Russian is likely to get this kind of experience anytime soon.

In contrast, if ‘politics’ means ‘gaining influence in choice of leaders by whatever means are available,’ then you filter out – in both countries – those who are allergic to the ‘dirty’ reputation of politics. Those available means can include trading on family ties, buying influence, currying favor by joining the right youth groups, patriotic clubs, political parties’ summer camps and seminars, and so on. That’s exactly the sort of definition that many of our students assumed, but perhaps not our friend from Gaza.

Of course, neither the cleanest nor the dirtiest versions of these understandings of politics are all we have in real life. If a company builds chemical warehouses, disobeying laws and polluting the local park near a housing complex (an actual situation not far from Elektrostal, Russia), ordinary people (who had always assumed that politics was not for them) might mobilise in response, and in that process might learn more about the laws, the authorities who are supposed to enforce them, the incentives that bear on those authorities, and – ultimately – how they can be replaced. On a national level, things might look stagnant, but there is local ferment nearly everywhere in Russia; and as the old saying goes: ‘All politics is local.’
It follows, maybe, that the most effective education for learning about politics is also local.

There’s a way of understanding politics that is far more descriptive and analytical than all transaction-based descriptions – and, to my mind, far more helpful. ‘Politics’ simply refers to the social processes by which a community allocates scarce resources. It’s not just limited to the arrangements in place at the moment, it also includes the marketplace of ideas within which we advocate fairer and more transparent processes and learn to do that advocacy more persuasively. There are few forces that can resist the power of an idea whose time has come… thanks perhaps to years of intelligent development and persistent advocacy.

It’s that kind of alertness to the forces at work and readiness to respond knowledgeably, rather than dependence on heroes and villains, that may be one important way of understanding that ‘our life is politics.’ It’s a refusal to resign oneself to a passive acceptance of whatever happens, in favour of awareness of today’s hazards and tomorrow’s possibilities of change. The more hazards you face (such as those in Gaza), the more important it is to stay aware.

Christian discipleship potentially influences all these understandings of politics, but to apply discipleship to political life, we have to think systemically. If we only see politics as transactions among personalities, we will only attract and repel based on our audience’s willingness to engage in those transactions – whether they be abject loyalty at one extreme, or character assassination at the other.

Instead, we need to do the work of building ideas and visions of a biblically-shaped allocation of resources. What that actually means may not be clearly and universally understood, but those kinds of conversations, even passionate debates, can be conducted ethically, with love and respect, within a discipline that bans today’s ever-popular practices of bearing false witness, name-calling, objectifying the ‘other’, and so on. To ask what it means systematically ‘to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God’ is worth all the hard work, active listening, and mutual forbearance we put into it.

Even when we succeed in convincing more people that politics is simply a systemic process of allocating resources, not a fancy euphemism for conniving and mud-slinging, we have work to do. But we don’t each have to do all of the work. We need a division of labour: we need prophets to stick their necks out for advocacy, vision, and for calling out unethical shortcuts. We need evangelists to spread the vision of a Godly rebuke to all bondages, and to invite people into the community that’s building upon that vision. We need caretakers for them all. We need teachers to do the hard work of shaping a common arena where everyone potentially knows the same things, can learn to analyse for themselves, and where none are left out. To paraphrase E Stanley Jones, we need conservatives to protect traditional values, and liberals to expand the reach of those values. Each keeps the other honest.

Maybe all this can be done outside the church as well. I’d like to think we have an advantage: by having Jesus as sole occupant of the centre of our lives as individuals and as community, we can take risks with all other aspects of human diversity. The lion and lamb can be together, as can the liberal and conservative, the prophet and the pastor, the socialist and the capitalist, the sceptical newcomer and the weighty Quaker. Our churches and Meetings can be laboratories and incubators of that capacity for systemic discernment that can start building new visions, new alliances… new politics.

Johan is a recorded minister in Sierra-Cascades Yearly Meeting, USA. He is also a member of Moscow Friends Meeting, Russia. He blogs at https://blog.canyoubelieve.me.
Is there a link between Quaker worship and creative collaboration? Philip Gross on the art of holding the space between us

‘We’re writers; we needed to write.’

It is hard to say this without sounding pretentious or mystical, but we seemed to be hearing voices. Two poets with thirty years of writing experience each, Lesley Saunders and I had all the craft it takes to say what we meant with our poetry, but this was something different. It was the summer of 2016, in the midst of the upheavals of the referendum, daily news of migrants drowning in the Mediterranean, jagged fault lines opening in politics all over the world… The air was full of raw feelings and entrenched opinions on all sides. To add more of our own would have shed no light on the conflict around us. But we’re writers; we needed to write.

Our collaboration grew from a chance remark after a poetry event: ‘I think what I’m feeling is grief,’ said Lesley. ‘What can I do with it?’ Send me a poem, I replied – not trying to say everything, but unfinished, open-ended, and I’ll reply. Three months later we had a book-length manuscript. A Part of the Main is a conversation between poems, rather than between the writers, with different sections picking up voices of histories, angers and hurts that were far from our own.

It need not have been so. If we had believed that the point of poetry was to express our feelings, we’d have ended with a couple of pages of like-minded lament. But something else occurred. We found ourselves imagining a female figure gazing seaward – think of the classical stories of Dido or of Ariadne, abandoned on the shore. So far, so wistful. But suddenly the undergrowth behind her parted, and another face peered out.

The shore, it turned out, was an island; there had been a storm at sea, so who else would the face behind her be but Shakespeare’s Caliban? Some of the things he came to say in the pages that followed were nothing like our own emotions. He had a voice of his own –

…not pretty, for sure.

nor are some of the words
the crowds are chanting, but
it does nail us here, in the heart
of the times.

He was angry, aggrieved. It had been his island; he was feeling dispossessed. There was little question which way he’d have voted in the referendum. Out, out, out.

He was a shape-shifter, too, appearing sometimes as Grendel, the monster in the Anglo-Saxon mire in Beowulf, sometimes as King Lud, mythical founder of London, sometimes as Ned Ludd, the breaker of factory looms, all those dim flickers of history and legend medieval writers called the Matter of Britain. Other wavelengths crackled in – the voice of migrants cast adrift, an underpaid care worker of no settled status, an immigration officer, and, always within earshot, the sound of the sea.

I have never been more aware of the almost-independent life of these voices than when the two of us were reading from the book in Quaker settings – in the Quaker Centre Bookshop in Friends House, London, or in several Meeting houses. Sometimes in discussion afterwards, someone would quote back a line, and I would be genuinely not sure which of us had written it. Nobody owned it; it spoke for itself. There was nothing inherently Quaker in the words we were speaking – often strikingly not. It was the way they were held, in all their difference, by the space between us that gave them such resonance.

In half a lifetime, now, of Quaker worship, I seem to have absorbed the shape of Quaker Meetings into my soul. Looking recently at that Quaker image familiar from the walls of many Meeting houses, James Doyle Penrose’s The Presence in the Midst (considered by Rowena Loverance in the Friend, 15 December 2017), my first
thought was: ‘But where is the space?’

In that painting tight-packed benches face point blank at the elders’ bench. It may be recent that unprogrammed Friends’ practice has tended to the circle, but this is the Quakerism I came into. At best, when a Meeting feels ‘gathered’, there is a tangible sense that we are holding the space between us. Everyone in the circle has a responsibility for the care of it, mostly by a calm, alert, attentive listening. In thirty years of leading writers’ workshops, this has been the shared, productive space I’ve wanted to create. Collaboration between individuals is the same thing par excellence.

I’m not suggesting that collaboration in the arts and worship are the same thing, but each offers a clue to the other.

All performers know a ‘dead’ space when they face one, and so do most of us in ordinary conversation – just as we recognise the opposite, the cared-for quietness that catches every nuance, in which even the speaker comes to hear themselves more clearly than they can in their own head.

Quakers love and use, but do not worship, silence. Silence has as many tones and dialects as speech. When Lesley Saunders and I began exchanging poems, we were stepping into a space we knew and trusted, the shared culture of poetry in which each line is held a little longer in the air – that’s the micro-silence at each line break – so we can catch the echoes, as the layers of its sound and meaning unfold. Centuries of reading, speaking and listening have gone into constructing that relationship, like the acoustics of a building. In the same way, centuries of Quaker worship have built an invisible architecture, in which if we speak (and this can be a daunting thought) we will be specially, particularly heard.

A Part of the Main would have gone nowhere if we had been ‘of one mind’. There needed to be distances between us so that something with its own life could emerge. Friends in Meetings can be disturbed to discover differences, in theology or temperament, between us. Spoken ministry makes use of the equipment we have. The impulse of the spirit in an academic will come out in the language that they have; be careful before you dismiss it as being ‘all in the head’. A singer may sing; a poet will reach for a metaphor... as naturally as a Kenyan Friend might minister in Swahili. If we all thought the same, there would be no space between us into which a new leading could step – and maybe no appetite or need to notice if it did.

The gathered-ness of Meeting is as much to do with how we listen to each other’s ministry, and through it, as in the words being said. That is collaboration – feeling for the new direction, for the freshness of surprise, for the lift of the spirit. And now and then we touch it: something that moves of itself, without moving, as silk flows, its waves of moiré, something of us and between us, made of you and me, yet neither me nor you...

Philip is from Cardiff Meeting. A Part of the Main is available now from Mulfran Press.
Lost for words: Peter Jarman thinks the Society needs an update

‘Other practices, while not being quite so anachronistic, might well deserve reviewing.’

We Friends appear to cherish anachronisms like ‘Meeting for Worship’, ‘elders’ and ‘overseers’, and ‘Meeting for Sufferings’. This does not do our public image much good. I suggest some revisions.

A gathering is a corporate act in which Friends grow together in a deepening exercise of silence, stillness and awareness of what may be called the presence in the midst of the divine, or even the power of goodness. This practice is quite different to a Christian service of worship with its liturgy, eucharist and adoration of Jesus Christ. Worshipping in religious practice is to show profound religious devotion and respect, adore or venerate (God or any person or thing considered divine). Is this really what Friends do?

Gathering is a centripetal activity in which we are drawn towards the bedrock of our faith and hope. When gathered, with hearts and minds prepared, it is a singularly enriching experience. This is more than an ordinary meeting. A Quaker Meeting for Worship is a gathering for enlightenment and awareness, from which collective promptings arise, akin to well-trodden Buddhist practices. It seems that nothing or nobody is being worshipped.

When I was in Australia, Friends felt that ‘elders’ and ‘overseers’ belonged to a colonial past. There was a nurturing and a pastoral group. The former was open to all Friends who sought to nurture and uphold their faith and practice. The latter, with concerns for confidentiality, was more selective. It was composed of pastors rather than overseers.

Other practices, while not being quite so anachronistic, might well deserve reviewing – like that of placing a Bible on the Meeting’s table. Often it gathers the dust nowadays as Friends are either not familiar with it or are reluctant to refer to it. Some verses in it are enlightening and of distinct value, pearls in an obscure ocean of mumbo jumbo, and others are myth that can be mistaken for reality. Parts of the Old Testament can appear racist, as God appears to be solely on the side of the Jews, and, it could be argued, other races were ethnically cleansed. A way out of this dilemma is to use the Revised New Jerusalem Bible. This Catholic translation has the merit of using inclusive language, less male gendering, and of using italics in the gospels for quotations from the prophets that clarify the Christmas and Easter myths.

As for Meeting for Sufferings, let us use the language of the twenty-first rather than the seventeenth century: it is the Business Meeting of Britain Yearly Meeting.

In the end, though, it is not so much the words that we cherish but the Spirit from which they come. John Woolman heard that from the native American chief Papunahung; we would do well to hear it now.

‘Let us use the language of the twenty-first rather than the seventeenth century.’

Peter is from York Area Meeting.
‘There are alternatives but they need planning.’

There will be those who wish that assisted dying was legal. Dutch friends assure us that their system works satisfactorily and with a minimum of abuse. Until such time as we follow suit, it may be that some Friends might wish to consider making it clear that they do not wish to be unnecessarily kept alive. We know of Friends who have a clearly-worded declaration in open view for paramedics and others to see.

Another consideration concerns the donation of vital organs. This, apparently, is a straightforward process.

A much more radical suggestion is the donation of one’s body for medical research. Details of how this can be set up (under the Human Tissue Act 2004) are available. The body of the deceased is delivered to a university’s faculty of biological science, with which an agreement would already have been made. The donor would know that their body was useful for the training of medical students, and so for the benefit of future generations. (It should be emphasised in advance that in certain cases the body may not be acceptable.)

What to do then? There is the possibility of arranging a cremation without any ceremony or service whatsoever. The body is delivered to the crematorium, which cremates the body at a convenient time (for example, when no other body was due to be cremated in the more usual way). The cost of this is far less than for traditional cremation with all its trappings. The body, when delivered by an undertaker, friend or relative, can be in a very basic cardboard coffin, further reducing the financial and environmental cost. I remember many years ago beingshown by a Dutch undertaker friend a cardboard coffin-shaped bookcase where the shelves could be removed to become the lid of a coffin!

For those Friends worried about the environmental damage of the process of cremation, might it be worth considering the purchase of sufficient trees to be planted to balance it out? Better still, purchasing of trees could be done in advance as an individual (bearing in mind how long it might be before even elderly Friends reach their life’s end). Might this, in some cases, become a Local or Area Meeting concern? Contacting The Woodland Trust now might be a good place to start. ●

Michael is from Settle Meeting.
David Harries reports from Meeting of Friends in Wales in Lampeter, last month

‘Wales, Peter said, is invisible. Quakers don’t see Wales.’

What happens when thirty-five or so Friends from Wales and neighbouring counties get together, for the three-times-a-year Meeting of Friends in Wales (MFW)? Fellowship, mutual aid and discernment.

(Mutual aid has to do with cooperation across our Area Meetings, work on a new website to cater for our needs, and attention to the simplification of our structures.)

There was a buzz in the Meeting about building our movement, and enhancing our relationship both with the wider Quaker movement and also the wider world.

Stating that the absence of a regular Children’s Meeting can become a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’, Chris Holmquist, of Penarth Meeting, recommended that: ‘Each of the Area Meetings in MFW should appoint at least one Children and Young People’s (CYP) work advocate.’ There is plenty to do! He noted that while this CYP role has been laid down by Quaker Life, it has been continued in Wales and Scotland.

Gethin Evans, of Aberystwyth Meeting, reported on his work as MFW representative with Meeting for Sufferings, Cytûn (Churches Together in Wales) and the Quaker Committee for Christian and Interfaith Relationships (QCCIR). He noted the activities of Cytûn’s Laser Group, where denominational officers and representatives come together to examine bills and policies: ‘Their substantial work,’ Gethin said, ‘is particularly impressive.’ Friends’ link with Laser is through MFW’s Focus Group.

Peter Hussey, of Llandrindod Wells Meeting, gave a stimulating, illustrated talk on the cultural differences between England and Wales, which was well received. Wales, Peter said, is invisible. Quakers don’t see Wales, nor what has changed in Wales since the inception of devolution. Wales is a global leader in bilingual culture, is politically progressive, and is confident in its achievements. In particular, he praised The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, as it aims at the prevention of persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change. The Welsh government has good ideas about health, education (a new schools curriculum), transport and sustainability. He warned, however, that with the election of a much stronger Conservative UK government, our achievements could be ‘sniped at’, and devolution undermined. Turning to our Quaker world, Peter questioned whether Friends in Wales are heard at Friends House and throughout the Yearly Meeting. But we too have a responsibility. Have we anything to say? Yes we have, for example, about peace work in schools.

Peter challenged us as Friends: say your piece; be heard; get the support of your Meeting; proclaim ‘Local Quakers say…’; be informed (for example, through the House of Commons online library); communicate with your elected representatives; and let us communicate with each other, using new electronic media. The buzz continued to the end of our Meeting, when it was time for tea.

David is from Bridgend Meeting.
Deaths

Michael Alwyn JOHNSON
18 February at Neville Williams House. Twin brother of Christine. Member of Central England AM and Bootham Old Scholar. Aged 83. Memorial Meeting 2.30pm Tuesday 17 March at Woodbrooke. Enquiries: greysuitsaviemore@btinternet.com

Hermione (Hemmy) LEGG
21 February. Mother of Matthew and Charlotte, grandmother of Lauren, Joseph, Jasmine and Ned, great-grandmother of Josie and Ivy. Member of Redland Meeting, Bristol, formerly Horfield. Aged 78. Memorial Meeting 2pm Friday 13 March at Bradbury Hall, Waterford Road, Bristol BS9 4BT, following private committal. Colourful dress please. Enquiries: charlottegunninglegg@yahoo.co.uk

Diary

HUMAN SECURITY - IS IT POSSIBLE? Bristol Quaker Peace Lecture 2020. Saturday 14 March, 11am-12.30pm. Peel Lecture Theatre, Geography School, Bristol BS8 1RL. Diana Francis, lifelong peace activist. All welcome. Admission free, see Eventbrite.

MIDDAY WORSHIP IN THE CITY
Bunhill Fields Meeting House, Banner St, London ECI, Wednesday 15 January and 3rd Wednesday of every month. Meeting for Worship 12.45-1.15pm followed by a light shared lunch. Visitors welcome.

SHAFTESBURY QUAKER MEETING
Date for your diary: Saturday 15 August. Ten-yearly Pilgrimage to Ashcombe Burial Ground, Tollard Royal, near Shaftesbury SP5 5AW. Grid Ref: ST918194. Meeting for Worship 3pm – access from 2pm. Further details later.


Friends & Meetings

Personal entries (births, marriages, deaths, anniversaries, changes of address, Meeting up, etc.) charged at £40 incl. vat for up to 35 words and includes a copy of the magazine. Meeting and charity notices, (Changes of clerk, new warden, new Members, changes to meeting, etc.) £33.33 zero rated for vat. Max. 35 words. Three entries £80 (£66.66 if zero rated); six entries £120 (£100 zero rated). DIARY NOTICES: £36 incl vat for up to 35 words, £50 zero-rated. Three entries £72 incl vat, £60 zero-rated. 6 entries £108 incl. vat £90 zero-rated. Deadline usually 12 noon Monday. Entries accepted at the editor's discretion in a standard house style. A gentle discipline will be exerted to maintain a simplicity of style and wording that excludes terms of endearment and words of tribute. Guidelines on request.

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Open to non members. Enquiries: rodkharper@gmail.com

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Arranged by Quaker Quest and Charney Manor. www.findingoutaboutquakers.weebly.com

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Trustees needed

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Quaker International Educational Trust (QuIET) is the UK registered charity which owns BHS and is responsible for the advancement of education in accordance with the values of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers).

The school is going through a period of growth and rapid change following the appointment of a new Principal in 2019. To support these developments we are looking for additional trustees in 2020 to join our 10-strong Board of Trustees (6 from UK, 1 from USA and 3 in Lebanon).

We are seeking individuals who are actively involved with Quakers and we are particularly interested in those with experience of finance, (we will need to find a new Treasurer during this year), communication, fundraising, marketing with an interest in education and Middle Eastern affairs. Our aim is to make the Board of Trustees as diverse as possible in terms of age, ethnicity and social background.

Trustees are expected to attend two meetings a year, at least one of which will be in Lebanon, and be available for QuIET business between meetings. Expenses incurred on QuIET business are reimbursed.

For further information about QuIET or to submit an expression of interest please email: secretary@quietcharity.co.uk by 20 March 2020. (Note corrected email address and extended date).

QuIET is a Quaker Recognised Body and Registered Charity 1072250 (in England and Wales).