

Being Turned and Being Faithful: What Our Meetings Say

Each year the Ministry and Nurture Committee of Lake Erie Yearly Meeting recommends a set of queries to the Monthly Meetings for their reflection, and requests that a minute or statement from the Meeting be developed and sent back to the committee. These statements from the monthly meetings then become part of a summary statement to the Yearly Meeting. In 2005, 11 meetings responded to the following queries:

***In what ways has the Living Presence awakened my faith and turned me around?
As a Meeting how do we support each other in being faithful?***

Although there were some common themes in the responses, there seemed also to be a good deal of variation between and within the meetings.

We referred to the Divine in several of our responses, variously describing the Divine as “God’s Love,” “Holy Spirit,” “Spirit,” “Divine stirring,” “Living presence,” “Seed of Christ,” and “Light.” In many of our responses, however, there was no reference at all to the role of divine guidance in the process of spiritual transformation.

Within our meetings we experience both discomfort with the terminology “being turned around” and appreciation of the experience of “turning.” Many Friends are critical of the words, associating the phrase with the evangelical experience of being born again, which is alien to their own condition. “Being turned around,” was an experience commonly described by early Friends in their journals. Today, however, we variously describe our experience of “turning” as more gradual, using other words to describe the experience: “maturing,” “transformation beginning with a Divine stirring in the soul,” “adjusting or modifying one’s course of action,” “gaining new awareness,” “looking back from the vantage point of years and seeing the change,” “a flower unfolding,” and “experiencing grace-filled moments.” One Friend offered the metaphor of walking backwards in the right direction, and needing to turn around in order to walk forward. There is great respect among us for this gradual experience of spiritual transformation.

However, it is well to note that while the process is gradual for most of us, some Friends admit or hint at powerful mystical experiences, or sudden experiences of love which have moved them to a state of grace. These experiences have, indeed, “turned them around;” but some Friends have not spoken openly of their experiences for fear of being met with skepticism. In fact, our responses to the queries indicate that some among us openly – and perhaps regularly – communicate skepticism about such experiences. We need to find a better way of creating safety for those Friends among us who have experienced sudden, as well as gradual, turnings so that we may learn more fully from each other about the many ways that the Spirit moves among us.

“Faithful” was also a term that proved challenging for many Friends. The question seeming to be asked by many of our meetings was “faithful to whom or to what?” We addressed this challenge by confirming that faith is a very personal thing, that a person’s spiritual journey is a sacred one, and that faith includes a sense of trust that we are not alone, that the Living Presence is, indeed, present. We have a deeply-felt respect for the importance of authentic personal experience on the spiritual journey.

We are quite clear about the ways we provide care and support to each other. We try to be examples for each other, to hold each other in the Light, to listen deeply to each other, and to offer opportunities for clearness. We join together in actions for peace and social justice. We are very appreciative of the caring we find in our meetings. We find it growth-producing to be vulnerable to each other, to be of service to others, to be accepted and accepting in ways that may not be possible in other corners of the world, to be free to develop a personal understanding of faith, and to be in regular attendance at Meeting for Worship. We sometimes struggle with reaching out to each other when there is need, for fear of meddling; but others among us encourage us to risk making a mistake, rather than leaving a Friend to suffer alone. We also wonder if we are providing enough support for marriages that take place under our care. We are eager to find ways of being more connected to each other, through friendly gatherings of small numbers of Friends for meals, study, or discussion.

However, we may not be clear about how it is that we support each other in being faithful. Perhaps we should first consider more deeply the role of divine guidance in discerning just what it is we are being called, as Friends, to do or to be in the world. What is our gift to the world? And are we being faithful to the giving of that gift?

Lake Erie Yearly Meeting Ministry and Nurture Committee