

## Plenary Address

### “What Lies Within This Tree with Many Roots?”

#### Main Points of a Plenary Address for the LEYM

By Christian Acemah

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I would like to thank the Organizing Committee of this year's annual sessions of the Lake Erie Yearly Meeting (LEYM) for inviting me to serve as this year's keynote speaker. Without any expertise in trees, I had no idea how to approach this address, but Greg Mott and Ken Jacobsen provided much-needed encouragement to move forward on FAITH. Let us work together to explore the question of this address.

First, the aspect of "within" struck me as pertinent to our time together. This tree of many roots. What lies within it? We know that a tree can have roots that spread out for meters underneath the ground and still have only the faintest clues as to what happens at its core. And so it is with us, human beings, with our many roots. How do we choose what lies within us? How do we go about choosing wisely? What about organizations (e.g., yearly meetings)? How do we discern what lies at the heart of our organizations? How do we bring together a diversity of people to work together towards this core? At this point, let me share Ken Jacobsen's poem on this issue.

#### Centering

friends,  
the center you choose  
for your life  
will shape you--  
choose carefully.

if you center on hate  
you will become hateful,  
if you center on loss  
you will be forever empty,  
if you center on fear  
you will find reason to fear everything--  
choose carefully.

friends,  
choose a center  
with life in it,  
with birth in it--  
center on beauty  
and you will discover the beauty  
in all things,  
center on truth  
and you will trust its healing power  
even in a storm of lies,  
center on gratitude  
and you will receive each morning,  
each breath, each being  
as a gift from the universe.

friends,  
choose a center,  
choose carefully.

*kpj 5/24/03*

One of the messages from this poem focuses on our agency. We have it within us to choose which ways to interact with others. We can choose the kind of energy we put into the world. And often, what we put into this world comes back to us. I hope we can choose positivity, love, and a warm embrace of all people at the individual, family, organizational, national, regional, and global levels. The Quaker testimonies (SPICES) guide us in this direction. In the timely and timeless ways of the SPICES, we have the possibility to tread lightly in each other's lives and on Earth.

Second, let us talk about cultures and what happens when we meet each other. Observing refugees early on in my career gave me a view of cultures trying to subjugate each other. No books could have demonstrated how refugees from different tribes, clans, or nations mistreated each other based on their external characteristics. Over time, however, I noticed that the more similarities they discovered in each other, the more they cooperated. They would sing, dance, and work together. How amazing! Their shared humanity brought them together, and they chose to uplift that aspect instead of their differences. The humility it takes to set aside such preconceptions allows for a more peaceful and joyful existence, and it comes down to what lies within that tree, within us. We

have it in us to dissolve all forms of artificial boundaries that keep us from getting in touch with other souls, trees, and nations.

Third, how do we know when we are choosing and creating a worthwhile core? I recently attended Ruth Stuckey's memorial service in Wilmington, Ohio. I did not know Ruth, but I learned a lot about Ruth. Every speaker shared a story of Ruth's kindness and love. Ruth touched people through those acts. Though appropriate and worthwhile in certain contexts, it shows that grandiose acts need not preoccupy our beings. A hug, warm greeting, helping hand, and other seemingly small acts showcase our shared humanity. I see no better indicators of a worthwhile core. Through our deeds, we make each other feel welcome. We create a sense of belonging together by practicing our testimonies.

Let us close with the first part of a prayer my wife (Vivienne) and I learned in our primary school in Uganda. Unknown to us, St. Francis of Assisi's prayer pointed us to this very issue of cultivating a Spirit-led core:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
 Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
 where there is injury, pardon;  
 where there is doubt, faith;  
 where there is despair, hope;  
 where there is darkness, light;  
 and where there is sadness, joy.

St. Francis of Assisi

[NB: A video of the plenary address given by Christian Acemah, with transcription, is available on YouTube at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Aw65Hpctj0> ]