

Being a Good Neighbor Takes Practice

An Interview with 2018 Plenary Speaker Yvette Shipman

Yvette Shipman gave the plenary talk on this topic at LEYM's 2018 Annual Meeting. She is a mother, advocate, social justice facilitator, and mediator. She believes that the transformative power of conversations can create space for genuine engagement and inherent change. She was interviewed by Claire Cohen, clerk of LEYM's Adult Program Committee, on how we create intentional community, building our capacity to be a good neighbor, and seeing our neighbors through a social justice lens.

Claire Cohen: I would like to start off by asking you a question about your upbringing. I'm curious about your religious or spiritual background as a child. Can we start there? What was the religious or spiritual background of your childhood?

Yvette Shipman: My childhood. I can say that I am no stranger to prayer or Jesus Christ. We prayed before every meal and knelt down at night to pray before bed. But this was the extent of it. Jesus was called on frequently during times of challenge. I would hear my mother plead, "Jesus, help me," or "Lawd have mercy on this person on that situation." It wasn't until later that I learned that my sins were forgiven because Jesus died on the cross. This struck me as odd. I may need to check in with my siblings on this but I am almost certain that we, my sister and I in particular, would be taken to Sunday school but I have no memory of attending a church service with either parent as a young child.

My dad is the son of a Pentecostal Baptist preacher, his mother, and my grandfather was a deacon in the church. This could possibly explain his distance. Years later after my parents divorced, I do have memories of my mother searching for a spiritual community, first in the Methodist Church...odd that she didn't move in the direction of her Baptist upbringing... but later she became a fundamental born again Christian.

When I think about my childhood and how religion or spirituality shaped me, the teachings that I was exposed to always confused me and grounded me at the same time. The pictures in the Bible of a white Jesus and all the little children gathered around were also white. There was no me or anyone who looked like me in the picture books about Jesus. And besides, there were just so many rules. One slip and God would punish me. This God felt punitive and judgmental and way too rigid for my spirit. My mom, though was an absolute angel. She was loving and kind and truly walked the walk. Fast forwarding, I found a lot more connection with Eastern philosophy, which led me to nature and Buddhism, and later Quakerism.

Claire Cohen: What paved your way to Quakerism?

Yvette Shipman: I think about that in some small way almost every time I share that I identify as Quaker. I am not a birthright Quaker. My first introduction to Quakerism was in my substandard history classes. However, I would become excited when the lesson turned to John Brown. Teachers would quickly brush over the events, painting a picture of mental illness with the focus falling upon those who were killed and not on those who were willing to die for their freedom, and why! Then I learned he was Quaker! I was like, damn,

Quakers are righteous! It wasn't until many years later when my son was in middle school that I pro-actively sought out a spiritual community that was steeped in social justice, which is how I got here. And the real turning point in my life toward Quakerism is when my son went to George School, a Quaker boarding high school outside of Philly.

Claire Cohen: With regard to your talk about Being a Good Neighbor, will you please define "intentional community?" What does this look like when I look through my social justice lens?

Yvette Shipman: Whether you're in a cohousing community, eco village or a member of your local co-op, on some level you are probably looking to make a positive change socially, culturally, economically, or environmentally. And while I think it's true that folks who are interested in shifting away from the norm of individualism value diversity and inclusivity, they still find difficulty in the practice. The question I ask myself is how can I become more intentional about creating a community that I want to be a part of. The intentional community I'm referring to is your interaction with the physical community you engage in daily. The people in your work community. The cashier at your local grocery store, or your next door neighbors, to your virtual Facebook and Instagram community.

When you add a social justice lens to your practice and outlook you bring humane-ness. This is not the same as being color blind. No one needs that. What I'm saying is that putting on your social justice lens you choose to respect and honor other's cultures from differences in language and dialects spoken to choices in dress and mannerisms. You don't get to set the standard for how someone should speak, look, or behave. You bring empathy and a commitment to acceptance. Isn't that what Quakers do, see the light of God in everyone?

If you're white you know you have privilege. You might recognize that getting up in the morning and walking through the world looks different for black and brown folks. Every single day black folks are met with assumptions that are made about us based on skin color. Even if you don't mean to. Starbucks, for example. Whether folks want to believe it or not, changing this narrative is a daily continuous practice. Let me say that again, change requires practice. When you look through a social justice lens, you don't have to be black or brown to see the truth. But you do have to make a decision, a conscious choice to operate from that place of new information.

Claire Cohen: When we talk about justice centered beloved community. Some people might say that we need to move beyond talk and towards action? Most of us agree that we do need to move beyond talk to impact or action. How do we become good or better neighbors and disrupt everyday acts of oppression that continue to benefit the dominant culture?

Yvette Shipman: A beloved community and mindset is rooted in justice and equity. There is no one right answer or one right way. We can do a number of things. We can read and educate ourselves. The Souls of Black Folks, WEB DuBois, Joy DeGruy's Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism by Edward Baptist, Toni Morrison, Beloved, Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God, The Autobiography of Malcolm X, and the list goes on.

Get to know the people you work with, live next door to, and the parents of your children's friends. Create opportunities to talk. This doesn't mean just asking questions. Get to know one another. This takes time. Pay attention to the policies in your workplace, which translate to behavior and practices and how they are used differently based on the person. Advocate for change where needed. Speak up and out. Attend community meetings and forums. And when you're in someone else's "community" refrain from being a spectator. And always remember to be a good guest.

Claire Cohen: We've been taught a revisionist history in this country. What's the impact of teaching the truth about these events on people's abilities to move forward?

Yvette Shipman: Malcolm Gladwell states that each side of history writes its own story and the winner of that story is the one we call the truth. We see this with Ben Carson who referred to enslaved Africans who were involuntarily brought to this country as immigrants. And Kanye West, who stated that slavery was a choice, to Trump's alternative reality about, well, about everything. There are always consequences for not telling the truth.

Trivializing or minimizing the truth to the point of justifying the wrongdoings is perhaps the only way some folks can manage their internal conflict. Although it is not as simple as this next thought, but, choosing to NOT confront the truth of our American history only prolongs the healing and reconciliation. We, as Quakers, as humans have a responsibility to get closer to the truth and share that truth widespread both in our speech and in our actions.

Claire Cohen: I have one final question. What three Quaker values or principles do you live by and draw from when addressing issues of inequity? Can you give us an example in action?

Yvette Shipman: Three values? Although you asked me about three I would like to address your question and speak to several of the Quaker values that I draw upon when addressing issues of inequity. I hope that's ok. I would have to say that love is the core value that lays the foundation for all others, so for me that's a given and we won't count that one. Freedom. I believe we should all have the freedom to move about as we please. This includes the mental freedom of thought. I make every effort to remember this when making decisions for my family, for myself, and when interacting with others even during times of disagreement. Secondly, service. These are in no particular order. There are no limitations to being of service. Service is listening to someone who feels unheard, or ignored and invisible. Or simply being kind. This can look like shoveling a neighbors walkway while you're shoveling your own. The bonus too is that it feels really good to be of service!

My mother would say that sometimes your life is the only Bible a person will ever read. Integrity reminds me to be honorable in all situations and do the best work possible no matter the task. I'm not always successful. When my actions are honorable, I know it. When they're not, I know it. We are living in a time when so many people are openly talking about issues of race. And quite frankly I think most of us are frightened by what we are hearing and seeing. There's nowhere to hide. We are discovering and revealing who we are at our core.

Thank God the values of peace and nonviolence are rooted in my faith, in my daily practice. From the Buddhists I practice ahimsa, do no harm to any living being. From my fellow Quakers I am reminded that there is that of God in every person. I feel strongly that conflict can and should be addressed nonviolently. Nonviolence as a way of social change is both an active and direct way of changing social conditions. We have great examples from both Dr. King and Ghandi. And today we can look at movements such as Black Lives Matters, the Women's March, and several others around the globe.