

Two Yearly Meetings?

By Margaret Slavin

A SMALL MEETING ON VANCOUVER ISLAND sent their clerk to the Representative Meeting in May to suggest again that it is time in Canada for two yearly meetings. The suggestion was seasoned in various ways, including letters to western meetings and a discussion at Western Half-Yearly Meeting. When I heard about the idea from a Friend in Edmonton, the remark was made that it sounded like typical western alienation. "I don't think so," I said, "knowing some of the Friends it is coming from." I am disturbed by it, though, and perhaps my take on it will help your own take, until we come through to *how we are led*.

Although the proposal comes from several roots, the cost of travelling seems near the nub of it, and the impact on the environment. The spectacle of Friends hopping into airplanes and scouring trails of pollutants across the sky as we converge on Nova Scotia strikes some Friends as, at best, blindness and at worst, perhaps (no one has actually said this) hypocrisy. Bob McInnes hands me an article from *The Guardian Weekly*: "With Eyes Wide Shut," by George Monbiot. The author lists the facts as understood by most climatologists: average rise of zero point six degrees Celcius over the past century... water in rivers declining up to four times as fast as the percentage reduction of rainfall... The article concludes: "So we slumber through the crisis. Waking up demands that we dethrone our deep unreason and usurp it with our rational minds. Are we capable of this, or are we destined to sleepwalk to extinction?"

Saanich Peninsula Meeting wants us to wake up, use our God-given reason, and show forth our understanding of the true situation by NOT attending yearly meeting, NOT travelling across the country in the name of Friendship. For them, I think it is like the testimony of wearing plain clothes or, as for John

Woolman, refusal to wear cloth dyed by slaves. Wars are being waged for oil and still we Friends drive our cars, fill in the empty spots on yearly meeting committees and apply for travel assistance. A few Friends have quietly stopped attending Yearly Meeting gathering, at least in part in protest against the consumption of oil and gas. Keith Helmuth will give the Sunderland P. Gardner lecture this year at Canadian Yearly Meeting (CYM), and I wonder whether he would have accepted this invitation if CYM had been held this year outside the Atlantic region, not far from where Keith and Ellen used to live and close enough to where they live now in the States. We may hear more of this — at CYM.

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Committee travel is another sore point for Saanich Peninsula Friends. Solutions I've heard are: committees can meet by email; committees can be eliminated and let's see if there's anything we actually miss; local committees in a Western Yearly Meeting would spend less even if they did travel to meet. Which raises the second compelling reason in favour of this split: if Something is local and affects your own life, you are more likely to feel ownership and to take part. The past split of Pacific Yearly Meeting into a gathering south of the 49th parallel and a gathering north of it, which then became part of CYM, has been beneficial for all concerned. Apparently it led to a significant growth in numbers in both groups.

It depends, of course, on the nature of the split. Saanich Peninsula broke off amicably from its parent meeting, Victoria MM, and both groups thrive. Whereas I am still a little stunned by my tour of Prince Edward County back in Ontario, across the bay bridge from where I grew up, in Belleville. At one end of a street is Wellington Museum, formerly the Meeting House of the Conservative Friends. Just

down the street is, or was, another Meeting House for the Hicksite Friends. Some time not that long ago — 1900? — there were 2200 Friends in Prince Edward County. Now there are NONE. So splits don't always lead to an increase in numbers. Anyway.

All concerned are clear that this split would be friendly — “not a spiritual split.”

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I had a helpful conversation with Saanich Friend Dee Heston, who is in unity with the Saanich proposal for a Western Yearly Meeting. Dee is a seasoned Friend who has been part of Edmonton MM, Argenta, the South Kootenay Worship Group and now Saanich. Interestingly, she is also a longtime Unitarian, and divides her time between the two groups, finding special nurture in both communities. Dee has been very much involved in a process in the local Unitarian Fellowship (more than 200 members and a strong program for children), out of which has come a program of small groups. Most members have now committed themselves to meet with the same group,

once a month, for at least six months, “whatever happens,” to discuss a range of topics of their choice, but beginning with a mandatory topic, “Covenant.” This means that they begin by defining what they will be for one another, their commitment to the larger fellowship and their commitment to the community (and the world, I suppose) outside the fellowship. “This,” said Dee, spreading her hands in the gesture of giving a gift, “is what Friends need.” I sat bewildered, memories of all the small groups with Friends I have attended over the years, worship-sharing with Ottawa Friends, with Victoria Friends and at Quaker gatherings.

But also I remembered the loneliness I felt when I came to Peterborough, and at first was not able to attend the once-a-month discussion group, and there was no mid-week meeting, no deep sharing of journeys. Now the once-a-month discussion has moved to a time when I can be there, and that helps a lot. Also, after silent worship we have “Afterthoughts,” when we often feel ready to share, and not just on the surface either. It is usually all Ruth Hillman can do to persuade us to desist and come and have tea. Sometimes she has to bring it around. And I remembered the afternoon in Guelph with two Friends, saying, “Meeting for Worship is central but — I need Something more.” What we seem to need, in a phrase, is a sense that others are accompanying us on the journey. I doubt we need to split our yearly meeting to get this, since Friends are in unity that our spiritual life and nurture begins in the local group with local Friends. However, aware and experienced Friends at the local level also know that some decisions have to be made — where and when to meet, whether to have a bank account, or a children's program, or a delegate to CYM. Surely spiritual nurture comes both from gathering with Friends and from doing “business.”

For my visit, Saanich Peninsula arranged a potluck and sharing early in the week. We met in the home of Pierre and Elizabeth Béguin, who give a gracious European flair to an otherwise normal Quaker potluck. I think it's that tea-tray on wheels beside the table, ready to bring food or cart dirty dishes away. Really, it is Elizabeth and Pierre themselves, and the intermingling of English and French. I always love too the formal portrait on the wall of Elizabeth as a young girl, being raised protected by kind servants and a loving family. The war changed all that. Elizabeth became a nurse and practised her profession under the most rugged conditions, in the interior of B.C.. Pierre took on the role of driving Elizabeth over the treacherous mountain roads. Pierre is a respected visual artist, and Elizabeth, the author of a number of books, including her engaging autobiography and a new one which is fragments from her journals, tracing her spiritual journey. She writes as Elizabeth Resford, and seems most proud

of a book she wrote on multi-faith issues, at a time when, as she says, “there was a lot of silliness about people wearing turbans and carrying knives.”

People had come to this gathering prepared to talk about creative journeys but the word hadn't gone out to actually bring something to show and share. So there were no quilts or books or paintings, but the queries I'd prepared were handed around, and people responded with challenging conversation around creativity and spirituality.

“Margaret, is it ever right,” asked Elizabeth forthrightly, “to choose one's duty over one's art, or one's art instead of one's duty?” “Elizabeth,” I said, “you will not hear the answer to that from me.” I referred everyone to Corder Catchpool in the blue *Faith and Practice* book — the part in italics just before #109. The gist of it is that none of the signs that we all look for — “a feeling of certainty and joy in making critical decisions” mean that Corder or anyone else has truth by the tail. The nearest we can come to certainty is through what he describes as “Divine Guidance sought daily in the smallest concerns of life,” so that the larger decisions come from a centred place. Pierre had been examining the queries. “Chérie,” he said, and asked Elizabeth whether, when she is writing her books, she experiences joy. Elizabeth said that she did, really, because she loves words; she does love working with words. Pierre does too, which I know from the experience of working with him at CYM — we were on the epistle committee together for several years running, many years ago.

A few Friends couldn't make it that evening, and on the Sunday I met other members of Saanich Peninsula Meeting. In addition to older Friends I remember from Victoria, the parent Meeting, Saanich now attracts a few new attenders. The clerk of Saanich Peninsula Meeting is Muriel Sibley, and Muriel and I have been dear friends now for quite a few years. We went out for dinner together before she flew off to Representative Meeting to present their proposal. She and I were not in unity about this. I don't want CYM to split. I want us to preserve the opportunity for a national voice, and I want to continue to include the expertise and energy of western Friends. It's fine with

me if we lay down CYM gathering every other year, and devolve more decision-making to local groups, regional gatherings and half-yearly meetings.

Saanich feels the national voice will still be there through Canadian Friends Service Committee, as it is with the arm's-length organization of American Friends Service Committee in the United States. There is unity, too, about keeping an annual gathering for Young Friends and children. There was no mention made, at Saanich or at the Representative Meeting sharing, of the fact that as a Yearly Meeting we have established an international office in our nation's capital, which is doing exciting and significant work around resisting the patenting of life forms. We have a broad country, stretched thin in the prairies, and the sprinkling of prairie Quaker families have worked hard to maintain connections. No one wants to abandon those tenuous small meetings to uncertain support. Yet our consumption of gas and oil is a seed of war and of global warming.

Muriel and I face each other over the delicious East Indian meal she insists on buying for me. It is so good to see one another again, but this Saanich proposal leaves both of us shaking our heads — me, because I don't understand it, and Muriel, because she passionately believes it is inevitable but does not want to get on the plane and expend herself on the trip east. We are both women who know what it is to be in the grip of a leading. Mine right now is to visit all these precious groups in our country and through internet journals perhaps to reveal us a little, one to another. Muriel's leading before the first Gulf War was to put her life on the line, literally, as she travelled to take part in

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an international peace camp on the border of Iraq. From their desert camp they saw the first missiles of that war streak through the night sky. It is from Muriel that I first heard and understood about the United Nations-supported sanctions against Iraq. We Canadians took part in a holocaust directed at children under five, and the very old. We continued with them for more than ten years, and only stopped when the west again rained down bombs. It is far too easy to say that Canada did not invade Iraq. We did the first time. We did attack Afghanistan. We would have gone into Iraq if the United Nations had agreed. Our Prime Minister is now promoting a different way of making these decisions, so that we won't get so far out of line again with "our most powerful ally." Muriel has mothered five children. We both know that the obscene race, to keep supplying oil and gas, kills. I remember how real and personal that first Gulf War became for those of us here on Vancouver Island, knowing that our Friend Muriel was there. Now it is

other Friends who go forth, including Jane MacKay Wright and Laurel Dee Gugler.

I waited to finish this report until Muriel returned from Representative Meeting. It turned out that she had not felt the need to mention the Saanich proposal until near the end of a worship-sharing session in which other voices spontaneously presented the possibility of splitting into two yearly meetings. The reasons were financial and environmental. The committee on "restructuring and revitalization" has been instructed to continue its work, without, I gather, any clear direction yet. "We'll still be Canadian Friends," Muriel reassures me. "That doesn't change." Saanich Peninsula Meeting seems clear about the future of our Canadian Society of Friends. Better listen, Friends. Listen expectantly. ☞

Margaret Slavin is a member of Peterborough Allowed Meeting.

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