

Unity

By Margaret Slavin

It was approximately twenty-two and one-half years ago that I rose to offer vocal ministry (this was in Ottawa Meeting,) during which I uttered the word “consensus.” A kind but firm Friend approached me after Meeting to say that Friends do not use consensus, but instead we seek unity. We “unite.” We wait on the Spirit until the group feels unity, this is discerned by the clerk, recorded in a minute, read back and approved. It is a solemn matter as we record the best Light we have at that moment. More Light may well appear, as revelation continues. We dive deep into the expectant silence, and come back with treasures we share, including a sense of how to proceed, of “way forward.”

In those days there was one Friend who nearly always perceived the Light from a different angle than I did. Often in Meeting for Worship for Business he would state one thing and I would state the opposite. Years later he was driving me back to Ontario from Canadian Yearly Meeting gathering in the Atlantic region, and we spoke of that long time of not agreeing with one another, of so often not being in unity. Okay, it was Philip Martin. What Philip said was something like, “What we had in common was a belief that we both were attempting to find the will of God.” That was true. I had never doubted that Philip was in that process, seeking to discern the will of God. And I felt that same trust from him. I cherish that moment, driving along through Quebec, when we recognised it.

Many Friends then, as now, could not unite with that expression, “will of God.” They have to “listen in tongues.” For them the will of God evokes a patriarchal figure, moving us about like chess pieces. For these Friends and indeed for most of us, the Inner Light or Spirit moves from within, is discovered in the silence, a pull or nudge or opening.

By the time you read this, I expect to have been travelling among Friends for twenty months, not

counting a few weeks at home. I will have visited most of our 58 or so groups. Barbara Smith of Pelham Executive Meeting has asked where we are in unity, in what do we unite. It can be seen as a very serious question, the sort of thing that Friends disunited over in the past. It can also be seen as a joyous question, an opportunity to celebrate this mysterious experience of unity.

We unite about the importance of meeting in expectant silence.

Whether we believe we are listening for the will of the living God, or whether we believe that in meditative silence we listen to the wisdom of our own beating heart, we Friends will travel, in some cases for hundreds of miles, just to sit in a circle in somebody’s living room in expectant silence.

We unite in living the examined life.

I had not been many weeks on the road before I exclaimed to a Friend, “I have never before met so many people in a row who are so self-aware!” We Friends have as many life problems as the next person, but at least we are thinking about them. We hold in the Light our sadness about family rifts and Meeting conflicts. We shift around uneasily as we think about how much gas and oil we still use, and which brand of coffee. We worry too much, but we’re also good at laying aside a lot of rules along with a long list of beliefs, and opening ourselves to the Light we’re given, right now. We’re impressed and touched and proud at the news that Ken and Martha Laing basically stopped driving their car during the first Gulf War, as a testimony against the seed of war in the use of oil, and we also recognise that Ken and Martha had already been led to make commitments to organic farming, and already had horses. Their testimony moves Friends, and it is recognised that

something else may be landing on your doorstep, a different opening. For example, an AWOL soldier.

The testimonies of peace, simplicity, integrity and care for the environment

These testimonies are embraced by nearly every Friend in the country, in one way or another. Our lives do speak. I went out on the Bay of Fundy with a Friend who is assisting in a citizens' monitoring of environmental degradation. I spoke with a forester in north Vancouver Island who brings school children into his forest to teach them about sustainable forestry. In Calgary a biologist Friend left our retreat for a few hours to meet with citizens she is teaching to identify certain endangered species.

And we unite in our intention to be a loving community for one another.

The worship group in Thunder Bay meets at the bedside of Nancy Clarke, who is facing down several diminishments. In Lucknow Worship Group, a toddler kept coming in during the silent worship, bringing gifts of oranges. We set up committees of care and committees for clearness, and the lives in our Meetings grow steady, and blossom.

At times we seem to come to unity and then decide we're not. It is saddening when this happens, particularly when you had supposed that coming to unity meant the Meeting had landed at some bedrock of Truth. I am glad to have that new pamphlet by Keith Maddock, *A Rainbow of Opportunity*, with a new-to-me way of thinking about unity. Keith explains that, to early Friends, "unity in the Spirit" did not mean that we necessarily did the same things "united in form," but that we all "acknowledge the subordination of all institutions and forms to direct revelation in the lives of ordinary people."

Maybe you don't buy Nescafé and I do, but maybe I've devoted my life and income to work with return-

ing prisoners. I don't eat red meat but I still buy bananas; you happily eat red meat, but purchase only food that grows locally, and you educate your community about the environmental impact of shipping food in from the ends of the earth. It doesn't mean that there is ultimately no right or wrong about these decisions, but that our faith is experiential. Keith also quotes an English Quaker named Thomas Story from 1737: "The unity of Christians never did nor ever will or can stand in uniformity of thought and opinion, but in Christian love only."

I feel I can go forward in the idea of unity as love.

I am visiting Thousand Islands Meeting as I write this, and in midweek Meeting for Worship yesterday, Bert Horwood quoted from First Corinthians: "Love is patient, love is kind." I looked it up and was pleased to rediscover this bit: "Love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." As we persevere in love, we Friends stumble into unity. ☺

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"Crafting a minute" at the fall 2004 session of Representative Meeting
Left to right: Recording Clerks Hilary Hellum (Edmonton MM) and Marilyn Manzer (Wolfville MM), and Presiding Clerk Beverly Shepherd (Hamilton MM)
(Photo by Maida Follini of New Brunswick Monthly Meeting)