

Getting Out Quaker News Long Before *The Canadian Friend*

By Kyle Jolliffe

An epistle is sent to other friends from each annual session of Canadian Yearly Meeting. Few Friends realise that this tradition dates back centuries, and that early Friends modeled their epistles after the pastoral epistles issued by the early Christian Church. An example of their widespread early use is in the library of Friends House in London, England. It has two hand-written volumes containing epistles received by London Yearly Meeting (now Britain Yearly Meeting) between 1683 and 1738. Besides being from large yearly meetings such as Philadelphia and New York, these letters also came from distant places like South Africa, South Carolina, Barbados and Bermuda.

The epistles sent out by London Yearly Meeting had the most prestige. Britain was a central part of the transatlantic community of Friends (which endures in this country as this year's Sunderland P. Gardner lecturer, Helen Rowlands, who is from England), the birthplace of Quakerism, and the ancestral home of many Canadian and American Friends. These epistles combined religious exhortation with practical advice to other yearly meetings on moral issues. The London epistles were reprinted in the United States, for distribution there and in Canada. It is remarkable but not surprising that in 1814, when wartime conditions prevented copies of the 1813 London epistle being shipped from New York City to Upper Canada, Canadian Friends (then part of New York Yearly Meeting) arranged for a Kingston, Ontario, printer to print 300 copies. Thus was created what is probably the earliest Canadian Quaker imprint. It is also worth noting that even as late as 1956 *The Canadian Friend* reprinted that year's epistle from London Yearly Meeting.

In 1783 London Yearly Meeting published its first

Discipline. This volume included excerpts from many of these epistles. Even today, centuries later, the language used in some of these excerpts remains lucid and heartfelt:

(1688) On Trade – “Advised that none launch into trading and worldly business beyond what they can manage honourably and with reputation; so that they may keep their words with all men, that their yea may prove yea indeed, and their nay, nay; for whatsoever is otherwise cometh of evil; and that they use few words in their dealings, lest they bring dishonour to the truth of God through their forwardness; and such who make

themselves guilty by thus dishonouring God, and the holy profession of his name and truth are for judgment, and the judgment of truth ought to be set over them, that those who abide and walk in the truth may be clear of their iniquities.”

(1691) On Marriage – “And that friends be reminded of this meeting's former advice against marriage with near kindred, and against marrying by priests, and with persons of the world,

unequally yoking with unbelievers, and against too early and unsavoury proceedings in second marriages after the death of husband or wife, contrary to the due method and practice of faithful friends in truth, and tending to the dishonour and reproach thereof.”

(1710) On Convinced Persons – “We esteem it very necessary and requisite, that young convinced and well inclined persons and friends, be early visited in the love of God, by faithful friends, for their encouragement, help and furtherance in the truth.”

(1763) On Slavery – “We renew our exhortation, that friends every where be especially careful to keep their hands clear of giving encouragement in any shape to the slave-trade, it being evidently destructive of the

**A caring and
tender spirit could
come out of that
long ago process
of group
discernment.**

natural rights of mankind, who are all ransomed by one Saviour, and visited by one divine light, in order to salvation; a traffic calculated to enrich and aggrandise some upon the misery of others, in its nature abhorrent to every just and tender sentiment, and contrary to the whole tenor of the gospel.”

The disciplinary advice contained in each of these epistles epitomises the world of Quakerism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was a group that sought to maintain a careful distance from the world as it developed a disciplined Christian character. And, of course, the Discipline provided for excluding or labouring with those Friends who were seen as not following these rules. Yet at the same time, there was a counterbalance to these rules and their sternness. That opposite pull was the desire to enforce these rules fairly and consistently in a spirit of love and charity. As well, yearly meetings amended their disciplines as society and local conditions changed and new concerns arose. A caring and tender spirit could come out of that long ago process of group discernment. I particularly marvel at the elegant and spiritual language in the above-quoted epistle on slavery.

As *The Canadian Friend* enters its second century of publication and Canadian Yearly Meeting passes its fiftieth anniversary, there will continue to be news of all kinds that will shape the character of Canadian Friends. Given that this is a year of anniversaries, it is appropriate to conclude this article with the approved minute of union from June 24, 1955. It *really* was news at the joint 1955 yearly meeting sessions of the three branches of Friends then in Canada:

“Careful consideration was given to the interim report of the Committee on Closer Affiliation and Friends approved of the establishment of one Yearly Meeting as of today, composed of the present Canada Yearly Meeting (Conservative), Canada Yearly Meeting (Five Years Meeting), and Genesee Yearly Meeting (Friends General Conference). The report was accepted and approved in spirit, as a preliminary working basis for the Canadian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. We unite in seeking together the way forward under Divine Guidance.” 🌿

Kyle Jolliffe is a member of Yonge Street Monthly Meeting.

Journey of a Pagan Quaker

By Susan Dew-Jones

It is critical for me as a Quaker to listen to the Inner Spirit and be open to explore, seek, act with that voice. Probably that rings true for most Canadian Friends. The manner in which I view the Spirit, listen to Her and respond, however, can seem to be “diverse.” I left the Christian faith partly because I could never decide: did I or did I not believe in God. After having no faith community for several years, I was excited by reading Pagan literature, which stated the importance of spiritual experiences in our lives over what we believe in our heads.

Life itself is sacred and a myriad of holy mysteries!

I have come to believe (as a bottom line) that all parts of our universe are sacred and that between them there are sacred connections and influences. God is not separate from any part, connection or influence, but is immanent in all. I also believe that we create the sacred in our lives as much as the sacred universe creates us.

Despite and because of these bottom lines, I see my Goddess

more as a dancing-life partner than either an omnipotent figure, external and forgiving, or a spirit so perfect-loving that she is static. She seems to have a personality — sometimes wondrous, other times difficult. In a sense, we create each other (in my life); so it is not just me that has to mould to Her — we learn to work together.

Perhaps the most difficult part for me is anger with the God or Goddess; feeling a victim of life circumstances without the skills

or resources to manage them. Loneliness and not fitting in have traditionally struck a hard chord here. In the last five years, it feels as if the universe and I have learned to dance a song around my difficult parts. I can more graciously hear what Life is offering me and am more open to creating my own path — and She is a little nicer to me. I have found good communities (like Friends), an appropriate job, a sunny home, other queer folk, pridelful personal pursuits ... The Goddess has shown me people, skills, opportunities. I am most grateful, but still sometimes struggle to forgive Her.

I listen for the voice of the Inner Spirit each day. I have to tune in again and again. I stretch, sing, cycle, yap to the goddess, phone trusted friends, create Sacred Space, do rituals — but my God radio station still flits in and out. This week I realised it would make more sense to ask Her, point blank, to turn up the volume, PLEASE.

Sometimes hearing the Inner One talk really comes from knowing the right question to ask (a Quaker and Wiccan favourite). Although I listen in many ways, I often return to this question: “What is your heart’s desire?” When I was a teen, my Anglican Father told us that Christians prayed for centuries that God’s word be written on their hearts; hence our consciences developed. Over the last five summers, I have deeply learned to use this ques-

tion — or hearing aid — from B.C. Witchcamp. No matter the ritual, external story, dance or song; we come back again and again to listening for our heart’s desire. In response from Her, Camp has been a powerful place where I do hear that Inner Voice.

After listening, hopefully “speaking out” follows. At Meeting, we focus on the verbal; but my favourite way to “speak out of the silence” is well-led Sacred Circle Dance. We centre down and dance with the Spirit flowing one to another. Between pieces, we hold the energy and wait joyously, thankfully or expectantly.

My real challenge is to integrate “speaking out” into my working life. Here is where discernment becomes vital. I hang “Bruce,” my red penknife, at my altar for a daily reminder: I will strive to cut out all my voices and actions clearly in order to shape good personal boundaries, bold or ethical actions, a strong self.

I agree, She changes everything She touches! Ultimately, my listening and discerning is about creating and re-creating my life, thought by thought, word by word, action by action. This has become what I call my Religious Story, a contrast to allowing life to just happen or to overtake me. It challenges me to live graciously with myself, others, and Life Herself.

This summer as part of a Bard and Warrior journey (viewed as Truth Teller and Protector of

Truth), I sewed myself a beautiful badge stating: Most Improved By the Grace of the Goddess. It is a sewn spell or prayer of rejoicing and thankfulness. It celebrates not only myself and the Goddess but also our ever-changing dance of life together.

I will close with part of a well-loved Pagan writing from Starhawk’s book, *The Spiral Dance*:

... I who am the beauty of the green earth and the white moon among the stars and the mysteries of the waters, I call upon your soul to arise and come unto me. For I am the soul of nature that gives life to the universe. From Me all things proceed and unto Me they must return. Let My worship be in the heart that rejoices, for behold — all acts of love and pleasure are My rituals. Let there be beauty and strength, power and compassion, honour and humility, mirth and reverence within you. And you who seek to know Me, know that your seeking and yearning will avail you not, unless you know the Mystery: for if that which you seek, you find not within yourself, you will never find it without. For behold, I have been with you from the beginning, and I am that which is obtained at the end of desire.

- Doreen Valiente 🌸

Susan Dew-Jones is a member of Victoria Monthly Meeting. Her article is reprinted from the November-December 1997 edition of The Canadian Friend. Susan realises that, since that time, she has had a prayer to “Live life adventurously.” She adds that the Goddess must have been listening, for she does now have more resources to manage Life — and is constantly busy!