

The City of Remembrance

By Amy Jean Singleton-Polster

When people find out I am a Quaker they always look a little puzzled and say “What, like the oats?”. After 18 years, I have grown accustomed to explaining that Quakerism is a form of Christianity and it is well known for being a fundamental part of the Underground Railroad. In Canada, Quakerism is a very open religion. By open I mean there is no creed, no one will tell you your beliefs are wrong, or you’re going to hell. In fact, a Quaker doesn’t even need to believe in God.

One could say that Quakers have four main testimonies: peace, equality, truth and simplicity. The idea behind equality is that everyone has ‘that of God’ or goodness, or ‘The Light’ within them. Even if the person has done some horrible things in their life, there is still goodness within them that makes everyone equal. Quakers worship in silence, and from that silence anyone who feels led to, can speak because Quakers don’t believe that you need a priest or a preacher to talk to God, or to have words of wisdom. After this long-winded explanation my audience will usually nod, and say that sounds interesting. But for me it is more than interesting, it is a way of life and an integral part of who I am.

The summer after I graduated from high school I didn’t do what most of my friends did, which was get a job and hang around the river.

Instead, I embarked on a journey. Although this journey only lasted a month, the memories will last a lifetime. I went to Europe on the Quaker Youth Pilgrimage with four leaders and twenty-seven other youths, fourteen from North America and fourteen from Europe. I flew to England with my best friend from Kamloops, the only other person I knew on the trip, and nervously wrote in my journal the whole way. I was sure everyone would be insanely religious, the type of people I pitied at school because they couldn’t think past their religion and refused to be open-minded because “it said so in the Bible.” The people on the Pilgrimage were just the opposite. Like myself, they were just average teenagers. But though they were average, the friendships we formed were not. In only a month we achieved an incredible level of understanding and friendship. The trip was filled with laughter and tears, anger and joy, peace and utter uproar and everything in between. We all brought different things to the group and although we certainly did not all agree on how to define God, if he existed, or even when bedtime should be, we respected each other, and each other’s beliefs.

We stayed in England, the birthplace of Quakerism, for a few weeks, and then took a boat over to Amsterdam. We were all full of energy on the trip over, playing in the kid’s colourful ball pens and dancing madly on the five-foot dance floor.

In the Netherlands our activities and outings were focused on various aspects of World War Two. This related to Quakerism as some Quakers helped in hiding Jews. Also, the Dutch Quakers hosting us felt that it was important for us to gain an understanding of what went on during World War Two, so as to hopefully prevent a similar occurrence.

Growing up, I did not have a TV, and thus I read constantly, as though the world would cease to exist if I stopped reading. I read anything I could get my hands on, but I especially enjoyed reading stories. When I was ten until I was fourteen I devoured books about the Underground Railroad and World War Two. I was interested in the Underground Railroad because Quakers were often central characters in these stories. My interest in World War Two came about because my fraternal grandfather was Jewish, and although he had been lucky as he had been born in the United States, his family back in Czechoslovakia had not been so lucky during World War Two. In addition to this my maternal grandparents grew up in war torn England and would occasionally tell me stories about growing up during this era. Thus, I was especially interested in the Kit Pearson series, about war children coming to Canada from England, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, a true story from an Auschwitz survivor who was thirteen. Thus when I arrived in Amsterdam, I was full of anticipation about going to the Anne Frank house. 🐾

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