

Thoughts from a Pilgrimage

By Nori Sinclair

In 2002, I flew to Baltimore, Maryland to join my fellow pilgrims for the Quaker Youth Pilgrimage (QYP). From there, all 25 Young Friends would begin our journey, retracing George Fox's 17th-century footsteps in the United States. While on my pilgrimage, I tried to journal every day to capture what an amazing time I had during that month. Some of my (deeper) journal extracts from that time formed the basis of my reports back to the Canadian Friend and my Meeting. They still speak to me, so I'd like to include them here.

I don't know which thought is scarier: that I'll never be able to return to my old life or that idea that I could, thus forgetting my experiences. (August 14th, 2002)

I've never seen fireflies before- we were catching them my first night here. When you look up at the sky, it's impossible to tell the shooting stars from the fireflies, so I make a wish on both. You can never have too many wishes." (July 12th, 2002/August 8th, 2002) "I think I have mostly figured out why I hesitate to call myself a Christian. The word now has a negative connotation because people have done so many evil things in the name of Christ, quite literally giving Christians a bad name. (August 12th, 2002)

God is that which is good within us all. God is not some grey-haired old man up in the sky watching over us. God is the spirit that prompts right decisions, the space within us filled with love for all the things around us. And God is all around us- in the sunset, the frog and the leaves- all that is beautiful and necessary. But all this is just the tiniest portion of God's power, mercy and love for us all. (July 19th, 2002)

When I wrote my report after the pilgrimage, I described it as "warmth in the pit of my stomach". Like all strongly emotional events, I felt it in my gut. Looking back, the whole month seems to glow with a special light.

I wish I could say, six and a half years later, that I have changed as much as I thought I would. I already knew then that Quakerism was home and that Quakers were my family, but I

have yet to find what I'm looking for in Meeting for Worship (likely because I rarely attend and am therefore still not an official member).

However, I do still talk to some of my fellow pilgrims. We used to keep in touch via an MSN Group website, which we only recently let lapse in favour of Facebook. Each pilgrim stands out clearly in my mind, their energies fuelling a diverse group of people that I was honoured to travel with.

It wasn't just the other pilgrims that made an impression on me. For unprogrammed Young Friends, which we all were except for one semi-programmed North Carolinian pilgrim, it was a real challenge for me to connect with the more "churchy" Friends Meetings. To quote my 2002 report:

I can see that a faith that cannot be questioned or challenged is a faith that is weak. I learned that sometimes we have to accept things without understanding them, but that we should never accept things without question. I learned that Quakerism is much bigger than my former vision of it. Programmed Meetings with much more Christocentric and politically conservative views flourish in the States and challenge me to figure out what it is that links Quakers beyond our roots. I still don't know the answer to that one. I have more clearly defined my perception of God, as well as realized that God defies definition by my limited comprehension. I'm still challenged by the silence - so often I find it filled with my own worries and insecurities instead of the calming presence of God, but I do feel the importance of seeking that presence in my life.

This hasn't changed. I wish I could explore these types of Quaker Meetings again, as I found that discovering what religious practices simply feel wrong to me are often the best way to find out where I fit in our diverse, challenging, wonderful Quaker family. In some ways, I guess the pilgrimage never truly ends: the road simply changes.

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