

## Richard Gush lecture

### **No Other: a journey into oneness**

Dear Friends, it's so good to be back! This yearly meeting feels like my second Quaker home. Each time I've come I've been made so welcome, and when I missed one year it was so moving to receive a card signed by all who were there.

And to be asked to give this lecture! What a privilege to follow such Friends as Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge and the much missed Shelagh Willet. I'm delighted to discover that the British annual lecture, the Swarthmore lecture, is being given this year by two African women, Esther Mombo and Cécile Nyiramana. who will share their wisdom and experience with British Friends. Swapping our territories, making it clear that world-wide Quakers are one, a lovely example of the main theme of this lecture.

This written lecture has been produced in order to enable Friends who weren't able to attend Yearly Meeting to read it. For those who did hear it, they will notice that it is not identical to what was said. I don't in general read a script, preferring to speak from notes, and in a way that responds to the audience and to the present moment. There is a need to enable the Spirit to enter in not only at the moment of writing, but at the moment of delivery.

The subject of this Yearly Meeting is "Spiritual Promptings to a Just, Shared and Sustainable Future", such a vast subject that I wondered at first what the focus of my talk could be. Perish the thought that any European should preach to Africans about sustainability! So I have taken as my subject something that underlies any consideration of justice and sustainability, the subject of our underlying interconnectedness: "oneness": in our relations with each other, with the rest of the created world, in religion and with God. I was asked to speak from personal experience, and I hope that will be acceptable. Given the collective wisdom in the room, little else that I can offer will be new. This is my journey.

I'd like to begin by reading you a poem. Many of you will have heard the line "No man is an island", but even if some of the words are specific to his time and place in seventeenth-century England, I think we would do well to remember John Donne's poem in its entirety.

No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend's

Or of thine own were:  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind,  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.

One of my first memories was of hearing on the news how children were starving in Ethiopia. I turned to my parents in distress: "If people are starving, why can't we put tins of food on a boat and send them to them?" The answer I was given, of course, was that it wasn't as simple as that. The general feeling, as I was growing up, was that poverty and injustice were just too big, that there was nothing that we could do.

### **Quakers**

It was not until I came to Quakers in the mid-1990s that I learned that it was possible to see the world in a different way. I came across a group of people who *were* making a difference, in small, local ways, perhaps, but it showed that it was possible to do something. The discovery of this enabling community was hugely empowering - I began to believe that I too might make a contribution.

In the years since then I have also begun to understand the origins of that call to action, deep at the roots of our Quaker understanding. Because we have no separated priesthood but are "the priesthood of all believers", we have to take responsibility. For our faith, our organisation, our funding, and by extension for what goes on in the world. We do not rely on politicians or "experts". For us, the only approach is: "If not me, then who?" In our worship we are silently waiting on God. We are waiting for guidance for how to be in the world. That doesn't necessarily mean specific guidance about a course of action - it can be much more subtle and long-term than that - but I have known a couple of people who have said that the particular direction of their work, a shift in career, maybe, has occurred because of an insight in a Meeting for Worship.

The point is that, unlike solitary meditation, our spiritual practice is communal. A newcomer once said to me that the more aware he was of others in the room, the deeper he found the worship to be - and, since hearing that, I have found it to be true. I like to think of Meeting for Worship as a triangle - of self, the Divine and the others in the room. Guidance can come directly or through others. And as in worship, so in the world. We take that dynamic out into the world, with a profound consciousness of our fellow human beings, and God in them.

The first thing I was asked to do by my Meeting was to co-ordinate the tea runs for homeless people organised by several London Quaker meetings. I had never volunteered in my life, and knew nothing of homelessness. This process was something that was to be repeated many times: of someone ignoring my lack of experience when asking me to fulfil a role. Someone else's leap of faith

So, to educate myself, I went on a tea run. I was nervous: sure that I would either be sneered at or hit over the head by a bottle-wielding druggie. Of course neither happened.

Instead, as I walked over to a young man in a sleeping bag and asked if he would like a cup of tea or coffee, and whether he took sugar, I found myself forming a relationship with another human being. Instead of passing by a bundle in a doorway with embarrassment and guilt, I was doing something, however small, and my preconceptions fell away. It was an epiphany, and I realised in that moment that that bundle in the doorway could have been me.

I sometimes think that any progress I have made in my spiritual life has been marked by a dashing of preconceptions. We all have them: we all make assumptions about the people we meet, based on superficial factors. Walking down the street, we draw conclusions from people's walk and dress, and the way they speak.

I learned so much that night and in the nights that followed. We are privileged to touch people at a time in their lives when, stripped of everything but the essentials, they often seem more in touch with what matters. We have so much to learn from those who have least. Anything we give is repaid a hundred-fold.

The following story is an illustration.

One cold winter night, we were taking drinks and sandwiches out to people sleeping in the streets. A woman, perhaps in her fifties, in a skimpy cotton dress, asked us for a blanket. We had run out but a young man some yards away called out, "She can have mine."

I called out to him: "But what will you do?"

"She needs it more than I do. What's life about if you can't give a little love?"

A modern parable. Such generosity. Who among us could have done it? .

Of course I wouldn't wish poverty on anybody. We must remember that our Advices & Queries 41, which talks of "A simple lifestyle" being "a source of strength", adds the all-important rider "freely chosen". "A simple lifestyle, *freely chosen*", not enforced by circumstance or outside forces, "is a source of strength".

What I learnt from those encounters with homeless people was something that has remained with me in later work with prisoners, asylum seekers and women in rural Africa. It is something that is easy to know in our heads, but needs to be known viscerally and in our hearts. I now understand how completely we are one in our human predicament. What I learnt on that day was *that there is no such thing as "the other"*.

### **Microcredit**

At much the same time, another person's leap of faith brought me to work for Quaker Social Action, an independent charity that has been combating poverty in the East End of London for nearly 150 years. For them I started up a community centre in one of the poorest areas in the UK, running a variety of programmes for local people, largely from

Bangladesh and Somalia. Again, I came from a place of ignorance. Again, I was shocked. I had not realised that poverty of that sort was to be found in England - I had always supposed it was somewhere "out there".

As time went on, it became apparent that if anything was to change for the women who formed the majority of the centre's clientele some kind of financial intervention would be necessary. From way back in my mind, I dredged a memory of something in a colour supplement that I'd read years before, something called microcredit, started in the 1970s by Professor Mohammad Yunus in Bangladesh. One of the poorest countries in the world showing us the way. His Grameen Bank turned banking practice on its head. It is a bank for the poor, a bank that reaches out, a bank primarily for women for whom it provides microcredit: very small loans to enable those living in poverty to start an enterprise. It does not demand collateral but relies on the formation of borrowing circles through which women support each other and provide peer pressure to guarantee the loans. It has had startling results.

When I read about it all those years before, I had been so struck that I had kept the cutting. I was working in publishing at the time, and had no idea that I would ever be involved in anything like it, or that any such programme could possibly be necessary in a rich country like mine. Ten years later, significantly, it seemed to me, I found the cutting, and started to read up about the Bangladeshi experience, and experiences of using it in the USA and other developed countries.

In 1999 a Churchill Fellowship paid for me to go to learn about the practical application of microcredit, in Poland and France, and first of all in Bangladesh, the land of its inception. At my interview for the fellowship I was asked:

"Have you ever been to a developing country before?"

"No."

"Are you prepared for the culture shock?"

"Well, I hope so. I'm easily upset, but I can't wear blinkers for ever."

I need not have worried. My first response was not of horror but of admiration: at the strength and determination of the people. The dignity of women, barefoot, owning just one sari, who walk with such elegance, and who use their loans to transform their lives.

When I said to Mohammad Yunus, the founder of microcredit, and now a Nobel Peace Laureate, that I had not known what poverty was until I came to Bangladesh, he replied with some irritation, "It is harder to be homeless in a cold country." Poverty is not just "out there".

On my return, we duly set up a microcredit programme in the East End of London, with twenty-one nationalities in our first year, a programme that lasted for ten years and won a number of awards.

It's important to say that microcredit is not primarily about money. The formation of groups, the discipline of attendance and the peer support and pressure are what makes this form of credit succeed where others don't. The skills and common sense lie within the group, the members of which empower themselves and each other by mutual belief and support. The loan fund is recycled; repayments enable others to benefit; the results ripple out into the wider community. Microcredit is aimed at the destitute and believes in the unlimited potential of every human being.

In some ways it is an extraordinarily Quaker programme. Grameen's challenge affirms all the human qualities that our current financial system and much of our response to poverty have lost: hope, trust, belief in the skills of every human being, mutuality, the essential relationship between borrower and lender. Anyone who has seen the hope in a woman's eyes as, affirmed by others, she begins to believe in herself, and has seen the speed of the results, knows that it does work, it is powerful, and when it is done sensitively and appropriately to the local conditions it can transform lives.

Those who misunderstand microcredit - even some working in the sector - continue with a paternalistic attitude - "Oh," said one worker, "you can't give it to the poorest; they'd never be able to repay". A manager in Ghana recently refused to believe that microcredit could be done with disabled people. They are wrong. Those are precisely the people for whom microcredit was created.

In recent years, it's had some bad press - due mainly to the greed of financial institutions which, drawn by the prospect of hefty profits from even the smallest of loans, have turned it into for-profit programmes, charging interest rates of even a hundred per cent or more. Two such organisations in Ghana have recently been closed down. Microcredit was created to get rid of loan sharks, not to emulate them.

I'm also unhappy with the well-intentioned idea of microcredit as a form of ethical investment. There are many well-regarded organisations that provide a facility for individuals to lend some money to be used for microcredit, either to specific named individuals, or to the organisation as a whole. "Investors" receive an annual dividend, which depends on business performance: characteristically about 2%.

Why is this? Do we lend to or invest our money in charities doing other work: the Red Cross, for instance, or Water Aid? No, we give it to them and trust them to know their job and the communities in which they work through intimate connections with people on the ground. We delegate our human relationship to a charity which represents us in our giving. We trust them to use the money in the ways best suited to the needs of people on the ground. Why should organisations delivering microcredit be treated any differently? This model undermines the power of the group, and any return to the investor adds to the

interest that the woman on the ground has to pay. It's part of a general and unwelcome trend among charities to design funding to suit the donor rather than the recipient.

Which brings me to the subject of **aid**. Increasingly, individuals and governments are beginning to realise that the old forms of aid are outdated and unhelpful. We need to empower people, to enable them to be independent. Simply giving money can actually make people more dependent, more helpless. In an emergency, or when health or children are concerned, then giving is essential, but long-lasting change is wrought by programmes like microcredit or like the *Big Issue*, a magazine sold by homeless people in a number of countries. A hand up not a hand out. We are also beginning to understand that funding needs to be directed not to governments, which can be tempted into corruption, nor to big agencies which often spend too much on overheads, but on small organisations that are close to the ground and know what the real needs are.

What I have learned from microcredit and from working with Quakers is that it is as much about how we work, as what we do. It's about relationship, working alongside, and recognising the mutual benefit. The old notion of "do-gooders" is so far from the truth.

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), for instance - and I know a number of you are deeply involved in it here - is one of the most inclusive programmes I know. Facilitators don't just deliver a programme; in each workshop we learn alongside each other. And in fourteen years of facilitating workshops I have learnt a great deal, from the programme itself, and from the wide variety of participants. Dealing better with conflict is something that we all need to do. In fact, if I have a criticism, at least of how we do it in the UK (it may be different here) it is that we have a patronising attitude to our client base. Apart from those in prison, we invariably target people with other labelled issues - mental health, homelessness, the most disadvantaged. Whereas, if we ask who demonstrates the most adversarial way of dealing with conflict, surely we should be focusing on politicians and lawyers: those whose highly visible ways of working could be transformed, and bring that transformation to others.

### **A divided world**

In 2001 I set off with my then partner for a year's backpacking round the world. It was an extraordinarily revelatory year. My intention for the journey was to build on my experience of Bangladesh, and of working with those who have least in the UK, to go more deeply into an understanding of how others live, and of our essential oneness. In April 2001 I wrote in my journal:

People ask "Where are you going?" then one or two ask "What for?" A good question and hard to answer. To gain a new perspective, from seeing how life is in developing countries, away from the spoilt affluence of this insular part of the world; to learn to be less busy, to respond to the Spirit, to be more spontaneous; to be useful, humble, learning and contributing, to try to live in the present and respond to the needs that present themselves. It will change us - who knows how?

And it did change us. Volunteering in Guatemala and in India, finding in Costa Rica a land without an army, in Mongolia, a country with no private land, on our island in Tonga, a people who live almost without money, in India a land where the very oxygen seems steeped in spiritual consciousness.

The ticket demanded a choice between Latin America and Africa. Largely for family reasons, we chose Latin America, and that part of the trip became significant in the context of 9/11, which occurred just as we left the USA about half way through our journey. Travelling through Southern and then Central America was a salutary experience. The influence of the US was everywhere to be seen, and resentment sometimes expressed. At one café, a man leant over to our table and said, "Why are you Brits always hanging on to the coat-tails of America?"

Soon after our journey I wrote:

It was a strange year in which to travel: a time in which the relation of one country to another, and particularly between those in the developed world and those which are developing, were more acutely focused. I had not wanted to spend time in developed countries, but, on looking back, I can see that it was valuable to experience views from different countries and to carry messages from one to another. We are one world, and we all have responsibilities towards each other.

Everywhere we went, both within and between countries, there was an uncomfortable sense of a divided world, with its coexistent wealth and poverty. It came to a head when we visited my mother's family in Guatemala. After three months' travel in a very basic way, I felt a dis-comfort, an un-ease, of sinking into luxurious living. A life that seemed to belong to my past.

Living simply was at the heart of my vision for the journey. Travelling on local transport, in touch with local conditions, was for me a crucial factor. In my emails to friends I struggled to explain that it was not a rationalised or willed feeling that this way of life was inappropriate but – rather to my surprise – I felt that I was in the wrong place. It was only when we got on a bus to go to a Friends church in Guatemala City, squashed up against breastfeeding mothers and market traders that I felt again at ease, content, at unity with those around me. I had forgotten what I had written on the eve of departure about trying to get away from “the spoilt affluence of this part of the world” but it was obviously a feeling that ran deep.

I have found that listening to that inner discomfort, the inner "niggle", is an important part of spiritual discernment in all aspects of my life. It's the meaning, for me, of that famous story about William Penn, founder of the state of Pennsylvania. Part of his apparel as an aristocrat was to wear a sword. He asked George Fox whether it was all right to wear one. Fox's response was not “Take it off this instant; we are a pacifist organisation” but “Wear it as long as you can.” Eat meat for as long as you can, fly to overseas holidays for as long as you can, drink alcohol for as long as you can; give up when and if the discomfort grows too much. Pay attention to the inner truth. We speak of

having choices and, of course, compared to those who struggle to survive, we do. But to talk of making decisions is to speak from an external perspective. There is an interior imperative, and the way becomes clear.

### **Africa**

In my youth, I was envious of doctors and nurses, longed to have a transferable skill that would be of use in poorer communities. In later life, to my amazement, in microcredit I found one. When we returned from our travels, I was keen to put it into operation, and at last came to Africa.

Although it hadn't featured in my year of travels, Africa had always been in my consciousness. My father worked at the Colonial Office - not an organisation that is easy to mention these days! - and his responsibility was West Africa. In fact when Ghana became independent, he helped write the constitution. For many years, even after he left the civil service, Dad also reviewed all the books on Africa for *The Times Literary Supplement* - I have a book of cuttings from those years.

So, as a child and teenager, Africa was in the background of my life. At last, in 2003, when I went to Madagascar, and then in 2005 came to South Africa, it came into the foreground.

I remember arriving in Eastern Cape with a sense of amazement. Although I knew that everything had changed, there was a hangover in my consciousness of the perception projected by South Africa during apartheid years, that it was a country like Canada or Australia. But no, as I saw from the very first moment, this was *Africa!* And from the first I could see how people fell in love with this continent.

I came as part of a contingent from Oxfordshire County Council which was twinned with Eastern Cape and had received a grant from the Commonwealth local government good practice scheme to give some assistance to a low-performing local council in Amathole by raising the profile of tourism in the area. The group was made up of experts in hotels, hospitality, archaeology, museums and so on, and it was felt that the local people should benefit from the increased tourism, and so I was asked to come to help local women start up businesses in a microcredit programme. (In practice the project was much more about poverty alleviation and empowerment than about tourism.)

On arrival, we were put up at a smart hotel and the others, who were only staying for a week, remained there. I was staying for two months, so needed to find somewhere else, and in any case I was feeling the by now familiar discomfort at being asked to stay somewhere so distant from the living conditions of the women I would be working with. In various parts of the world I have seen staff of large charities put up in expensive hotels, far from the front line of the work they are delivering. These are not charities to which I will give my money, and I couldn't bear to follow their example.

I was lucky enough to be offered a stand-alone room in Alice by a young woman who had got a high-powered job in East London. It was a room that had been built across the



courtyard from her mother's house, self-contained except for cooking facilities. I could hardly expect her mother (Mama X, as she was known) to feed me, especially as I am a vegetarian, so I bought a little stove, and put it on a couple of bricks on top of my cupboard. And there, adopted by Mama X, I remained, very contentedly, for nearly two months.

I was told, right at the beginning, that it would not be safe for me to walk to work on my own, so every day Cynthia, my local colleague, came to collect me. After a couple of weeks, I said, "This is silly. Everyone knows who I am (pointing to my white hair) and what I'm doing here. They call me Sizi (sister) on the streets."

So, from then on I made my own way to work. One day, I came up alongside a young woman, who asked: "Why are you walking on your own?"

"Why are you?"

Somewhat taken aback, she answered, "I'm going to work,."

"So am I," I replied. And we laughed.

However privileged I am in my usual life, I need to live as much as possible like the women I work with. This is working with, not doing something to or for; it's an experience of mutual benefit. Cynthia and I generally hitch-hiked out to the villages unless there was a communal taxi on the route. One day, after a typical journey by taxi, all squashed on top of each other, legs up in the air, Cynthia reported a conversation she heard between two women.

"Why is that white woman travelling in this taxi?"

"Apparently that white woman likes travelling like this." And I did

When visiting the women in their homes, they were embarrassed that the only toilet that they could offer was a communal hole in the ground. Why should they be embarrassed? If it was good enough for them, it was good enough for me. Why should I be treated any differently?

As a white woman and a British one at that, I had been unsure of my welcome in this corner of South Africa, of the appropriateness of my presence. A friend here told me that the work we were doing was karmic, that the seeds of hope were redressing some of the ills of the past. I hoped that was the case. In any case, the culture shock that people mentioned was more apparent on my re-entry into Britain. How much we have. How spoiled we are. And I miss the warmth and generosity of the African women. No one calls me sister on the streets in London! Ever since my first trip to a poorer community I have recognised that I need to return from time to time to remind me of how most people in the world live - to put my life, my privilege, the richness of my choices, in proportion. It is so easy, as I always do, to slip into spoiled, exploitative ways. Old habits die hard.

We live in a divided world. Fear, greed, power-seeking and desperate need turn fellow human beings against each other, create scapegoats, blind us to our common humanity, In the horrors of war and individual slaughter, we know that at the core of the perpetrator is a belief that the intended victim is somehow "other", less than. It is what enables human beings to commit genocide, mass and indiscriminate murder.

What I learned from my experiences with those living different lives, those who have fewer choices than my own, is that separating ourselves, keeping at a distance from others, blinding ourselves to the impact of our lives on others in the world, allows even those of us of good will to lead lives that are destructive to others..

And now I want to talk about two of the major problems - or rather two of the symptoms of a greater malaise in our current world, the first of which is the vast scale of displacement.

### **Refugees**

One of the greatest challenges to the expression of our love of our fellow human beings, to our sense of oneness, is our response to the refugee crisis. At last Europe has been brought face to face with what has been apparent to other continents for a very long time. It is no longer possible to ignore the reality of those millions of threatened lives: the desperation that will lead people to risk their lives to find sanctuary, the conditions in which refugees find themselves once they arrive, and the callousness with which they are often treated, the length that most governments of rich countries will go to shore up their borders to keep them out.

No one wants to be a refugee. Those of us who live settled lives, who have not lived through war or oppression, can have little idea of the turmoil, the violent uprooting, displacement causes. In facing this reality, we are pressed to accept our responsibility as fellow human beings.

About eight years ago, long before the recent violence and civil wars in the Middle East, when I was doing research for my book on home, I discovered that, contrary to popular belief, it is developing countries, with the majority of their own people living in extreme poverty, which are host to the largest number of refugees. In 1999 Africa, with 12% of the world's population, had nearly half of its displaced people. People leaving extreme hardship, war or abuse will move either to the nearest country that will accept them, in the hopes of a quick return, or to countries where there are family ties. The view of many countries that people fleeing their homes, for whatever reason, head for rich countries in the West, is simply not true.

Western countries have a distorted view of their own generosity. Until recently I believed the commonly held myth of Britain's "proud history" in opening its doors to those in danger, that it is only recently that we have closed our hearts and doors. But I discovered that even in the Middle Ages foreigners were discriminated against, having to pay fees before they were allowed to settle in a town and had to pay another fee before they were

allowed to work in certain professions. Some areas discriminated against Catholics, others against Protestants, and almost all discriminated against Jews.

The last few decades have seen an increasingly draconian attitude to those seeking asylum. There has developed a culture of disbelief that has led to acute xenophobia in some quarters, and increased levels of destitution among asylum seekers. A report by the Council of Europe has attributed blame for the increase in racism in the UK to increasingly restrictive asylum and immigration laws. ..

And both the situation and our response to it have deteriorated. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 2015 there were an estimated 59.5 million people displaced worldwide, and 86% of the world's refugees are hosted by developing countries. Once again those who have least are shaming the rest of us; they are showing us the way.

But there are chinks of light. European governments may vary in their responses; the tabloid press and the right wing may want to express suspicion of anyone seeking sanctuary and urge us to hug our riches and freedom to ourselves, but there is a groundswell of good will, of people welcoming refugees, sponsoring their admission, sending donations and volunteering for centres such as the one at Calais in France. The campaigning organisation Citizens UK (started by a Quaker) are asking local councils to sign up to welcome 50 refugees each.

The City of Sanctuary movement, which began in Britain in 2005, aims to build a culture of hospitality for people seeking sanctuary in the UK, to create a network of towns and cities throughout the country which are proud to be places of safety for people seeking sanctuary and helping them integrate into their local communities. Since then, the organisation has supported the development of over 40 City of Sanctuary initiatives in towns and cities across UK and Ireland.

### **Only Us**

Last year, a friend of mine, an Anglican chaplain in a psychiatric hospital, set up a mental health campaign called Only Us; there is no "they"; there is only us. But the concept is not restricted to mental health issues. The same phrase, the same principle, applies to all aspects of our existence - there is no such thing as the other - whatever labels we try to attach to people: in terms of nationality, ability, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, whether housed or homeless, indigenous or a refugee. There is only us. And God in us.

As John O'Donohue says, "We are a family of the one presence".

And "only us" includes more than people. When we are grounded in the Spirit, we can have a sense of the utter oneness and mutuality of the universe, of all that is: the animals, plants, the Earth itself. In *Journey Home*, I wrote,

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ecology is the study of "the mutual relations of organisms with their environment". We are one of those organisms: we

are part of the object of our study; it is our relation with our environment that we are looking at. As [the Jewish writer] Martin Buber says (20), "We live our lives inscrutably included within the streaming mutual life of the universe... The mutuality, the interdependence, of species has long been evident in every tiny detail of the lives of millions of plants and animals. Insects feed on nectar and carry pollen from one flower to another... We need plants in order to breathe in; they need us to breathe out.

And of course our interconnectedness does not end with our own planet... We belong to something on an unimaginably vast scale: one trillion galaxies with an eighteen-billion-year history. ..It is breathtaking to remember that, as a speaker on BBC radio's Cosmic Quest said, "To let us live, millions of stars have had to die." (102)

So, what are we doing in recognition of that mutuality?

Some seven years ago, I wrote:

There are signs that climate change, holes in the ozone layer and the melting of Arctic ice are bringing us to our senses. As we become more aware of the effects nature and man have on each other, we appear to be moving towards a more co-operative view. We need to move still further to an understanding of our shared creatureliness; co-creation. Stewardship is a word often used to express our responsibility to the earth, but even stewardship implies that we are in charge. All we can do, perhaps, is heal some of the damage that we have done, and guard against doing more.

We do not own the earth. We cannot actually own land, though we think we do. The inhabitants of countries like Mongolia ...live in recognition of that, as do the indigenous peoples of the world. The earth is precious and, in a desperate irony, it is those who treasure it most who have had it taken away. (107)

So, this is the other major crisis which I referred to - that of climate change. In this, as in other matters, it is easy, as we experience drought in some countries, floods in others, hear of the melting of the ice-caps, the danger to animal life because of change in habitat and shortage of foodstuff - it is easy to be swamped by the magnitude of the problem.

I believe that any consideration of our testimony to the earth should begin in celebration. If we glory in the fullness of the magnificent gift of life in all its forms, how could we not want to protect it? Some years ago I went to a course on Recovering our Social Testimonies and, feeling that I needed to be challenged, I went to a workshop on "lifestyle". As we went round the table, each contribution was gloomier than the last, ending with "well, maybe we should just stop breathing". Then, at last, a wonderful young Friend in dreadlocks spoke passionately about the beauty of the created world, the glory of what we had been given, and the energy in the room lifted.

Although I am a city woman, born and bred, the natural world has always been important to me - the birds, the stars, the elemental landscapes of mountains and the sea. During our year's travel, as I spent time in the desert and in rain forests, in snow and in tropical heat, it became a more and more important part of my reality. To unite with that of God in all creation was an irresistible pull. In Peru, we stayed in a three-sided house, one side open to the natural world. The sight of the Andes dominated my waking every morning, and penetrated my being. It was not a dualistic admiration of something external but a call to something within me. I had felt it in the desert, and now it was as if a magnet had entered my soul.

The scale and scope, the sheer diversity of the created world, is the context of our life. Awe and wonder and celebration of our earthly home are a natural response. We have been given life. It behoves us to take notice!

Instead of fouling our nest, of polluting the earth, the sea, the air and even space, instead of planting flags at the North Pole, and fighting over mineral deposits at the bottom of the sea, we need to cherish the earth as the source of life, nurturing and sustaining humankind and the rest of creation, fostering growth and fertility. Mother Earth is a concept deep in folk history and common to the traditional peoples all over the world.

All the richness and variety of the natural world is an expression of God. As the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart said, "Every creature is a word of God." The Divine, manifest in both the most minute individual cell and the massive scale of the universe or even multiverses, is one: the unifying and connecting principle between and within all creation. As Satish Kumar wrote,

Existence is an intricately interconnected web of relationships. We share the breath of life and thus we are connected. Whether we are rich or poor, black or white, young or old, humans or animals, fish or fowl, trees or rocks, everything is sustained by the same air, the same sunshine, the same water, the same soil. There are no boundaries, no separation, no division, no duality; it is all the dance of eternal life where spirit and matter dance together...The process of the universe is embedded in the life support system of mutuality.

This way of being is central to our Quaker concept of testimony. In his definition of testimony, The British Quaker Harvey Gilman writes:

The word "testimony" is used by Quakers to describe a witness to the living truth within the human heart as it is acted out in everyday life. It is not a form of words, but a mode of life based on the realisation that there is that of God in everybody, that all human beings are equal, that all life is interconnected (*Quaker Faith & Practice*, 23.12)

### **Sustainability**

In Britain Yearly Meeting 2012, Minute 36 was a call to action to British Quakers nationally, in our meetings, and as individuals. The minute asked us to consider the effect

of our lives on the world's limited resources and in particular on our carbon usage, but it also recognised that "the environmental crisis is enmeshed with global economic injustice and we must face our responsibility as one of the nations which has unfairly benefited at others' expense, to redress inequalities which, in William Penn's words, are 'wretched and blasphemous' ."

The matter is huge, and complex. We need to recognise that everything we do, every small thing, affects others, affects the universe, that it is in those small everyday choices in our shopping, in the way we live our lives, that we express our faithfulness, and an understanding of our interconnectedness. There needs to be an incremental change in our own behaviour - including an acceptance that we are part of the problem.

At the recent world gathering of Quakers in Peru, we were called to individual and collective action.

We see that our misuse of the Earth's resources creates inequality, destroys community, affects health and well-being, leads to war and erodes our integrity.... We love this world as God's gift to us all. Our hearts are crying for our beloved mother Earth, who is sick and in need of our care.

Detailed suggestions were given that I know will be followed up elsewhere. But we are surrounded by difficult choices. Take, for instance, the advice to eat locally sourced food. On our visits to countries such as Costa Rica and Nicaragua, I saw how local people depended on markets created by Europe and the USA. If we stopped buying their bananas or coffee, many small farmers would be ruined. A change in our shopping habits is not enough; it needs to be accompanied by a radical re-alignment of world markets. What is needed is not a tinkering at the edges, but a fundamental shift in human behaviour. The Kingdom of Heaven or Republic of the Spirit is not made up of consumerism, competition and money-driven priorities, but of love, co-operation and community.

It's easy to sink into the despair of those who gave me advice as a child - that the problems of the world - the poverty, the injustice - are all too big. I believe that many would like to make a difference, but most have succumbed to the prevalent hopelessness. They simply don't know where to start or what to do.

So, faced with all the poverty, all the injustice in the world, what can we do? The first thing is to recognise that, as Mother Teresa said, there is no such thing as a small piece of work. "The moment you give it to God, it becomes infinite." And we never know what seeds we sow.

All we can do and are, I believe, asked to do, is inform ourselves and to foster love in our hearts and actions. Become the person we are meant to be and fulfil our unique role in the world. What that call is is for each of us to find out, to devote enough time listening to the inner voice. No individual can do it all. Each of us will be drawn to different ways of working, different causes and groups. For some it will be mainly in prayer, for others in political campaigning or front-line action. Areas of work might include. mental health,

animals, children, old age, marginalised groups such as prisoners or asylum seekers or our own neighbourhood. As Frederick Buechner says: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Not duty, performed with a sigh, but something that speaks to and from our deepest self.

Let me read something from *From the Bottom of the Pond*, by the former Anglican priest, Simon Small. He quotes first from Corinthians.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ...If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing where would the sense of smell be? (I Corinthians 12: vv 12 and 17)

He goes on:

We have been given the gift of individuality. We are not called to be all the same...The flow of creation is an expansion from oneness to multiplicity, from uniformity to variety. Yet, this is not a random individuality, for each part is an essential part of a wholeness - and it is the whole which gives each part its meaning.

Imagine an orchestra made up from many different kinds of musical instruments. An orchestra comprising only violins or clarinets would be incapable of all but the simplest music. A great symphony requires the different instruments of the orchestra to be different, fully, without holding back. It requires the musicians to bring their unique talents to bear in the service of the whole. Uniqueness and difference are shaped into something bigger than the sum of their parts...So it is with the spiritual life. (35)

## **Religion**

There may be diversity in our work and in the manner of its delivery and application, but in the roots of our concerns there is a profound commonality.

We talk about Quakerism as having its roots in Christianity but being open to new light. Although we are now more aware of other faiths, so there is more "new light" to be open to, even at the beginning Quakers were aware of the unity at the source of all religion. In a passage with an extraordinarily modern consciousness, in 1693 William Penn wrote:

The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers. (*Quaker Faith & Practice*, 19.28)

I am what might be called a universalist Quaker. Given my background, maybe that isn't surprising. My mother, a Russian Jew, became a Kabbalist in her fifties, and my father converted from Anglicanism to the Catholic church when I was five. Later in life he was

much drawn to a monastic way of life, although he was never accepted into an order. His deep exploration and occasional practice of other religions was evidenced by the large folder of cuttings on all faiths that we found on his death. As I found my way to my own faith, I found to my surprise and delight that, despite our different labels, my father, my mother and I were in the same place. The commonality of faiths at the mystic level has always been apparent to me. It's not particular to Quakers, and has been expressed by many spiritual writers.

F.C. Happold's *Mysticism* brings together writings from all traditions; Aldous Huxley gave a name to this common core in the title of his seminal *The Perennial Philosophy*. The Benedictine Bede Griffiths echoes William Penn when he asks:

Where, then is this eternal religion...to be found? It is to be found in every religion as its ground or source, but it is beyond all formulation. It is the reality behind all rites, the truth behind all dogmas, the justice behind all laws. But it is also to be found in the heart of every man... It is not known by sense or reason but by the experience of the soul in its depths (98).

Elsewhere he writes that "all meditation should lead into silence, into the world of 'non-duality', when all the differences - and conflicts - in this world are transcended - not... simply annulled." He likens the deeper unity of being to "colours being absorbed into pure white light, which *contains* all the colours but resolves their differences." (Letter to Nigel Bruce, 1981)

How do we experience this oneness? How do we express it? Can we extend the collective consciousness that we experience in Meeting for Worship to how we are in the world? Can we tune into the Presence? In seeing that of God in everyone, can we make that connection? In just meeting someone's eyes we can both experience and express it. We can recognise then answer that of God in another. Not just acknowledging that there is that of God in each of us, but experiencing the connection and responding to it. We have an impact on the world not only by what we do but in how we are, not only in doing, but in being. Even alone, in prayer, there is power in our intention.

### **Unity**

As I got to this point in my thoughts, I found myself humming:

I'll sing you one, Ho  
Green grow the rushes, Ho  
What is your one, Ho?  
One is one and all alone  
And evermore shall be so.

When I looked it up, I discovered that the "one" in this ancient rhyme refers to God, the ultimate Oneness.

Most of us live an active life largely unconscious of the transcendental dimension. In general our attention is focused on the preoccupations of daily life, our consciousness



punctuated only occasionally by withdrawal, a retreat, or a moment of self-remembrance. In periods of spiritual practice we may catch the occasional glimpse of something beyond, may even have what is referred to as a "peak experience", an enhanced perception of reality, when the boundaries between ourselves and the outside world are blurred, merged, when time vanishes and we feel the presence of the eternal in that moment, the infinite in that place.

One such experience came to me during a workshop in Kent. It was when we were discussing the breaking down of boundaries between the viewer and the viewed, the merging of sensibilities, that I felt an overpowering recognition. The workshop leader said that when someone is asked to draw a tree, they usually begin by drawing their remembered concept of a tree, starting with the outline of a trunk, leaves and so on. But if they actually see clearly, feel one with the tree, they will indicate shade and colour quite differently, without boundaries. As he spoke of merging our sensibility with the tree, I felt such a merging quite powerfully. Drawn to the tree outside, I felt myself a part of it, at one. I at last understood why it is that I feel as I do in the desert: my soul *is* expanding into the space, out to touch the horizon. I am part of that space, one with it.

This feeling of unity was so powerful that I was quite overcome. Knowing that tears were about to burst from me, I had to leave the room and lie down on the grass outside. I did indeed weep, sobbing with the intensity of the experience and with gratitude.

For most of us such an experience will be a rare and fleeting occurrence, but in his book on mysticism, F.C. Happold distinguishes a rare breed of human who have both the spiritual gifts and the complete commitment, who are not content with practising contemplation, but enter into a *state* of contemplation. In that state is found, he says, "a self-forgetting attention, a humble receptiveness, a still and steady gazing, an intense concentration, so that emotion, will, and thought are all fused and then lost in something that is none of them, but which embraces them all" (69-70).

Separation and division are human distortions. The more we can recognise the oneness of all, the closer we will draw to the One from whom all emerges and in whom all meets. Oneness, unity, brings together all human beings, all of the created world, all religions, and, in those rare moments of revelation, can be experienced in the oneness of the Divine.

Quakers are known as practical mystics. Harvey Gilman calls for "a radical mysticism beginning in contemplation and finding its expression in action in the pursuit of peace, justice, and care for the planet." That, Friends, is our mission.

Ubuntu.

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