

Epistle to all Friends
From Intermountain Yearly Meeting
June 18-21, 2020

To Friends Everywhere:

Greetings from our virtual gathering! The indigenous people who have lived in our region for many centuries—among them the Ute, Comanche, Apache, Pueblo, and Diné people—teach us that being at home means being attentive to the places we inhabit. This year, we were getting ready to return to Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado after 20 years of meeting at Ghost Ranch near Abiquiu, New Mexico. We were preparing to renew our relationship with this place, but that was before CoVID-19.

The theme of this year's gathering was "Be Here Now...Together," but what if we couldn't "be here" there? Without much time before our gathering date, numerous Friends pitched in and made the technical preparations necessary for us to meet in cyberspace. For some of us, the first day of our gathering was like the very first day of school. Where are we? Where is our homeroom? But in a short period of time, with the help of many patient guides, we became acclimated and we soon found ourselves in the welcoming space that is worship sharing.

What does it mean to come with hearts and minds prepared for this moment when there is so much pain and turmoil in the world? This query led us to engage our concerns and uncertainties about life in the era of CoVID-19. It gave us a chance to share our grief over the recent murders, terrors, and injustices visited upon men and women of color in this country. The occasion of Juneteenth on the second day of our gathering was an invitation to support those who have suffered because of systemic racism. Given the heaviness of our concerns related to current national and global situations, the sense of community available to us, even though we were unable to greet one another in a physical space, offered us great solace and empowered us to carry on.

Despite the unusual circumstances of our gathering, we were able to fully engage one another in many of the ways that we have become accustomed to over the years. Conversations and experiences drawing from the mystical traditions in Quaker practice helped us to be open and tender. We heard about the good work being done by various individuals, meetings, and Quaker organizations in response to issues like the climate crisis, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and the transportation of nuclear waste through our region. We were informed and encouraged to continue working on challenges related to migration as well as racial equity in our meetings. We gathered virtually to write poetry, tell stories, and enjoy music together, activities that remind us, as did a lively discussion on Quakers and the arts, that a flourishing creative spirit continues to bring us together in celebration and community.

In a discussion about sharing resources, we had the opportunity to consider the responsibilities that come with the gifts we have been given and how best to share them. We were encouraged to remember, as Friend Elise Boulding once said, that “enough is as good as a feast,” and to express our gratitude. In this session as well as others, we were given prayers for doing so, one from the Iroquois tradition as well as the following prayer from Anna Mae Suttlerly:

Lord help me to be grateful for what I have
To remember that I don't need most of what I want
And that joy is found in simplicity and generosity.

Quaker theologian C. Wess Daniels, our Friend in virtual residence, who is the director of the Friends Center and Quaker Studies program at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, offered a plenary address entitled “Liturgies of Empire and Liturgies of Resistance.” In his talk and in the discussion that followed, we considered the Book of Revelations as a text that helped empower first century Christians in their resistance against the Roman Empire. His message and the queries that came along with it challenge us to be mindful of the ways in which our Quaker practices can fortify us in these challenging times.

Wess gave us several queries that encouraged us to consider the presence of “empire” in our own time. What do we need in order to help us resist succumbing to the ways of empire and its obsession with death through violence, racism, poverty, and ecological devastation? In what ways can our worship help us resist and center our community in a God of abundance, healing, and reconciliation? How might we stand in solidarity with those who the empire ignores or rejects? To that end, we reminded our monthly meetings that they may request forgiveness of their monetary assessments as they provide support to those in need, particularly First Nations communities who have been hit especially hard by the CoVID-19 pandemic. We also leave our gathering inspired and eager to act in solidarity with the movement against systemic racism in this country.

While we missed the occasion of one another's physical presence at this year's gathering, we were reminded that this is only a temporary separation. As one Friend put it, “we shall hug in the Light again.” Until then, we are reassured by the Spirit which accompanied us here and which carries us forward.

In Faith, Hope, and Friendship,

Gale Toko-Ross and Valerie Ireland

Presiding Co-Clerks

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