

Reflections on the experience of being a Quaker in Residence at The Friends' School, 7-10 September 2015

Zélie Gross, member of South Wales Area Meeting, Britain Yearly Meeting

It was a real pleasure for me to spend time with students of different ages, from Kinder through to Clemes, in class settings as well in Gatherings – and finally out in the bush. In just four days I felt I had gained a good sense of the way the school works as a community, and I am impressed!

I was especially struck by the Quaker ethos as such an evident feature of school life. And yet I knew that a small minority of staff were Friends and very few students came from Quaker backgrounds. By Quaker ethos I mean the ways people relate to one another (staff and students alike) and a culture that clearly expresses Quaker testimonies. At first I wondered what on earth I could contribute by way of a 'Quaker presence'. I was in the presence of *Quaker practice* in every situation I found myself, and the questioning around *Quaker faith* was very recognisable as the same kind of questioning I meet in young people at Meeting and at Quaker events – young people who are choosing to identify themselves as Quaker.

So what was the difference? Only that many of the young people I spoke with during my stay seemed to be of the impression that they didn't know much about Quakerism, and that if they did know more they would disagree with it. And I found that puzzling. It was as if they believed that being a Quaker meant signing up for beliefs and practices that would jar with their worldview or their preferred ways of living their lives. And yet as far as I could see they were being wonderfully Quaker in their attitudes, their outlook and their actions. I wanted to say, 'Don't struggle with it, just enjoy and value who you are and go on enjoying and respecting others being themselves. That's it in a nutshell.'

I did say this in conversation with several young people, and also pointed out that their Gatherings *were* meetings for worship (in all but name) – you enter quietly and are greeted at the door, you settle into stillness, someone speaks offering a thought to reflect on, you listen with an open mind and reflect in the stillness and after a while one or more others might be moved to stand and speak, you settle back into the stillness, and the Gathering is closed by the shaking of hands.

"Yes, we do all that, but our Gatherings aren't the same as a meeting for worship – they are always on a theme."

To which I would say, "And so are most children's and young people's meetings in my experience, and adult or all-age meetings for worship are occasionally structured that way too. Having a theme helps us learn – and enjoy – the practice of silent reflection. It's just a way in, and if in the stillness we experience touching something in or beyond ourselves that's deeper than simply thinking, or we feel more connected with the people who are sitting in stillness with us, then we have found something very valuable indeed. But that kind of experience isn't compulsory, or even expected of us, and we aren't failures as Quakers if it doesn't happen."

So went a number of conversations with thoughtful, open-minded students who nevertheless believed there was something to resist here. And I saw no signs that the school was in some way 'forcing' Quakerism on a reluctant community. (I'm trying to imagine how Quakerism and force could be compatible!) I also observed to staff members that I had experienced Quaker Meetings that felt less Quaker than this school, troubled Meetings where Friends struggle to recognise that of God in one another and have few strategies for coping with disappointment or conflict. Most Friends today were not brought up in Quaker families or educated in Quaker schools, but found Friends first as adults and often without the advantage of an early grounding in caring, equal and respectful ways of relating – of the kind that Friends' School students inhabit every day. We all need the life skills that such grounding promotes, and they can be a lot harder to acquire later on.

One example: a group of Year 9 boys misused the opportunity of their Gathering to indulge in some barely restrained silliness that may well have spoiled the experience for other students. They were kept behind for a few minutes at the end and spoken to by teachers who made it quite clear that their actions were unacceptable and pretty selfish. And it could have ended there, but then they were

offered practical suggestions for avoiding it happening in the future, from an assumption that they would naturally choose to behave better if they could find a way of resisting the urge to act as a group rather than as the well-intentioned individuals their teachers knew them to be. I witnessed that approach on several occasions and saw its effects in de-escalating incidents and offering students accessible ways of moving on. The teachers concerned – mostly not Quakers – were putting into practice the principle of meeting 'that of God' in the other and therefore teaching the practice and principle at the same time.

Other practices and behaviours I observed that I felt contributed to the school's Quaker ethos included:

- Asking for a brief silence at the start of class, and ending a class in the same way
- Students meeting up with their tutor at the end of the day in their tutor room (an apparently small but significant practice of care)
- Calling for the class's attention not by raising the voice, but by raising a hand and *lowering* the voice (brilliant!)
- The practice of using first names – equally as staff and students
- Providing small and achievable steps towards completing a task that enabled students of any ability to keep pace
- A policy and structure for consulting students on matters that affect them and truly listening to what they say
- Teachers giving students genuine acknowledgment as well as challenge in their conversations with them about their work
- Students routinely helping each other, consulting each other and taking a real interest in each other's work and achievements
- Classroom walls colourfully alive with reminders of expectations and strategies for achieving them – in the form of invitation rather than instruction
- Students' ease in relating to adults as equals, with respect on both sides
- Students' ease with silence as a brief but regular practice in their daily lives
- Students' ease with the discipline asked of them in their Gatherings (of all ages), including feeling able to speak in a Gathering
- At camp: the practice of silence at the start of meals; the focus on respect, concern and practical care for the environment; the encouragement of social skills and building community (including gentle private reminders to anyone engaging in excluding behaviour)
- Staff regularly praising students' good/cooperative behaviour ('thank you for being awesome')
- Students' ability to empathise with an adult bewilderingly lost on a vast split campus, and without exception asking if I'd like them to accompany me to my destination!

Did I contribute anything to this strongly Quaker culture by my presence? I think I may have helped students to reflect on the possibility that they knew more about Quakerism than they had assumed, and I offered some older students an angle on their art work they might not have considered before, and introduced a useful process of silent brainstorm and reflection to Year 5 teachers and students. Oh, and I may have encouraged a student scared of heights to climb a fire watch tower (apparently made of nothing more than meccano) by quelling my own vertigo to do the same... and then being honest when another student observed 'You were scared, weren't you?'

I came away with a question to reflect on from a serious 4 year old who had sat during the Kinders' Gathering not with my gentle contribution on how helpful children had been when I was lost on campus, but with a puzzle about the practicalities of travelling half way round the world: "How many *different* things did you bring, and *how many* of each different thing did you bring?" And I was given an even more practical thought by a wise 5 year old: "What you needed was a map."

Thank you, Friends, for a lovely, memorable and valuable few days at The Friends' School.