

Being Generous with One Another's Spiritual Expression

December 5, 2024

The winter tree Resembles me,
Whose sap lies in its root:
The spring draws near
As it, so I Shall bud, I hope, and shoot.
~ *Thomas Ellwood, 1639-1714*



Photo by Mary Ellen Shaw

At the recent Northern Yearly Meeting Interim Session in late October, the Ministry and Nurture Committee led the Friday evening program. The Friday evening program is not a business session, but a chance to connect and refresh in preparation for the Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business the following day. Members of Ministry and Nurture have been in discernment about needs within the yearly meeting, and have been seeking to support the yearly meeting in post-pandemic spiritual nurture. One of the potential needs is bridging spiritual diversity among us.

Earlier this year, in the company of other members of the NYM Anti-Racism Working Group, I attended a multi-week online Friends General Conference (FGC) e-retreat entitled “Weaving a Wider Welcome.” Through this retreat we encountered a number of enriching activities and

writings from the [FGC Spiritual Deepening Library](#). I had expected that the focus of the program would be to challenge practices and systems that might make our local Quaker Meetings unwelcoming. What was really moving to me, however, was the amount of time spent in genuine encounter with each other. In small groups, and within the whole group, the experience of spiritually being with one another was centered, over and over. We were called to go back to the root of our worship, and encouraged to be nourished there for our work on those potential barriers and practices.

As we confront the times we are living in and strive to minister better to one another within our meetings (and out of our meetings), the Spiritual Deepening Library can be an inviting resource. The Spiritual Deepening Library offers a facilitator's guide and is intended as a free and open resource for supporting spiritual nurture among Friends.

During the Friday night Interim Session gathering, we met both in a large group (approximately 40 in person and 10 on Zoom) and small groups of three. Two of us from Ministry and Nurture co-led the activity, one on Zoom and one in the meeting room. We adapted the "[Spiritual Language, Spiritual Metaphor](#)" activity from the [Living into Wholeness](#) section of the Spiritual Deepening Library. During the activity there were several rounds of sharing which were captured on the screen (the activity instructions suggest a flip chart).

Many of us have had the experience that the language we use sometimes divides us, even if we have an experience or hope that beneath the words there is something that unites us. This activity gave us a chance to share and experience spiritual generosity with each other, listening for what is behind the language, punctuated by times of silence and worship so that we could move more deeply into connection as we continued through the activity.

The activity began with a small group sharing of 'wow' moments, as defined and expressed in the language chosen by each person. These moments might be as large as an experience of connecting with the Divine nature in a big way, such as giving birth or witnessing a death, or in a small way, such as watching a leaf fall from a tree. After I shared an example from my own life, we took some time to contemplate a wow experience with this question: "*Have you experienced a 'wow' moment when you have gone below your own thoughts and feelings to a 'something' that connects you to everything?*"

After small groups which provided about five minutes per person to share, we re-connected as a large group and each shared a short phrase, or "handle" for our wow experience. Beautiful and personal spiritual expressions were shared.

We then shared in the large group a phrase or expression for *That which is eternal*, or *God*. These were carefully notated to honor each individual's language. The last prompt of the evening provided an opportunity to share with the large group: "*Have you had experiences of being able to translate spiritual language – that is, someone spoke in a language that was not your natural one - and you were able to 'hear where the words come from'?*"

Reflecting on how the session went, I realize that Friends may have heard this last prompt differently than I hoped it would be interpreted. I did not place this prompt on the screen, and

Friends may have missed that the goal was to share positive moments of spiritual generosity with each other. (Holding interactive sessions on Zoom is still challenging, despite four years of learning.) The sharing in the large group tended to focus on negative rather than positive examples, of instances of having difficulty receiving or being received. The sharing reminded me that some of us have been spiritually wounded in other settings and that we may bring this wounding to Friends experience; if we act out of these wounds it can sometimes take the form of rejection or dismissal of other Friends' language for God. It is possible that some present took the sharing as a rejection of their own chosen language. If we did this activity again, I would want to redirect the conversation toward positive examples of connection to the space beneath the words. For anyone present at our Friday evening, if you had a sense that your own form of spiritual expression was being dismissed, I would very much welcome further dialogue.

Last, I leave us with this query: How can we receive one another's spiritual expressions in a generous way that nurtures wholeness and reduces self-censorship?

~ Caroline Kirchner

Twin Cities Friends Meeting

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