



NEW ENGLAND  
YEARLY MEETING  
OF FRIENDS  
QUAKERS

## 2017 Epistle from New England Yearly Meeting

*“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to discern what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will.”*  
—Romans 12:2

To all Friends everywhere:

We who gathered for the 357th sessions of New England Yearly Meeting at Castleton, Vermont, August 5 - 10, 2017, have joyful news to share with you, of ways the Spirit has been moving among us and of possibilities for personal and social transformation that were opened to us this week.

Many of us arrived at Sessions burdened by grief, fear, and worry about the multiple crises that are threatening the world, and we were happy to find that this year’s theme, “Living into Transformation,” spoke to our troubled condition. Through our plenary session and Bible Half-hours, workshops, interest groups, and other programs, we were helped to understand more clearly why the promised coming of God’s blessed community of peace and justice on Earth calls for nothing less than a radical makeover of our racist, classist, economically unjust, and violence-driven culture.

Although the ethnic, racial, and economic diversity among New England Friends is not as great as in many other yearly meetings, we are still a microcosm of the larger culture, and we struggle with many of the same internal tensions and conflicts that can hinder the Spirit from acting through us. Many of us come from privileged backgrounds of which we are largely unconscious, making it difficult to see how others among us are being harmed by the workings of the same dominant culture that benefits us.

Transformation of the dominant culture thus requires embarking on our personal transformation and learning to continually question our basic assumptions, imagine new possibilities, and model new values. But the renewal of our minds means more than being inspired by messages that people presented to us at Yearly Meeting, which may leave us sitting on the fence, unable or unwilling to commit ourselves to action because we have not yet undergone the necessary inward transformation.

There are many barriers to transformation—feelings of despair and helplessness, social pressures, unwillingness to venture outside of our comfort zones, and plain old middle-class comfort—that need to be overcome. This can occur only when we allow the Spirit to break open our hearts, illuminate our shortcomings, and galvanize us into life-changing action.

Our good news is that we have in fact witnessed many instances of such movement of the Spirit within our yearly meeting over the past year, all emerging from deep waiting worship and corporate discernment of God's will. Some Friends felt the Spirit leading them to put their bodies on the line in radical climate action. Some moved ahead with key decisions relating to peace, economic justice, and ecological integrity that had been under corporate discernment for years, waiting for unity and clarity among Friends coming from very different points of view. Way has opened for others to significantly realign organizational structures and policies with the yearly meeting's mission as it is currently understood.

Movement of the spirit within our yearly meeting also has been seen in recent gains in attendance, improvements in our financial health, the emergence of dedicated leadership, and the development of programs that reach out to and nurture our monthly meetings. Spiritual discernment has been evident when in many discussions the primary question was not whether the yearly meeting could afford to take a certain step but whether in the Light of the Spirit it was the right thing to do.

Our Bible Half-hour speaker, Marty Grundy, noted the parallel between the transformation we have seen within our yearly meeting and the process of healing and reconciliation followed in 12-step recovery programs. After admitting our utter helplessness and turning our will over to a higher power, we form or seek out supportive communities in which more experienced seekers illuminate the path ahead and provide a steady hand to those who falter.

We are most afraid of being known for what we are. Letting go of that fear allows our hearts to be broken open, for alienation to be healed, for damaged relationships to be restored, for conventional notions to be displaced by divine wisdom, and for our convictions to be translated into action.

Finding strength in our common humanity was the essential aim of the early Jesus movement. The vision of Jesus challenged prevailing social rules based on control, domination, and competition that resulted in great inequality and injustice. It offered new models for relationships based on sharing and cooperation. This was the vision that animated the social witness of early Friends, which in turn inspired many of the social and economic experiments of the past three centuries.

Our plenary speaker, Ruby Sales, focused on one of today's most serious barriers to a just and peaceful society—the persistence of white supremacy, a spiritual malformation that evolved from old social structures, empires determined to maintain their power, wealth, and dominance. It has encouraged privileged whites to stay in a womb-like ignorance, where they maintain the illusion of safety and comfort while racial tensions continue to worsen. Both oppressors and oppressed are indoctrinated with the false belief that these patterns and structures are natural, inevitable, and unalterable. There is little hope for changing the system of domination directly, given the tools that the powers have at their disposal. Thus we begin the great transformation from within.

Climate change is another crisis, also rooted in spiritual malformation, that resists anything more than token regulation because of its deep roots in empire and the culture of dominance over people and planet. However, possibilities for change may be greatest when the Empire seems strongest, yet fatally weakened by internal contradictions and disconnection from reality.

There are no shortcuts to healing and redemption. One Friend at this year's Sessions, Xinef Afriam, offered this thought-provoking parable: he compared the struggle for personal and societal transformation to the radical changes that take place when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. A major crisis occurs whenever any organism reaches the point where it cannot continue in its present state; it must either transform into something else or collapse and die. The caterpillar's structure dissolves inside its chrysalis, but some "imaginal" cells remain. They pass on a kind of blueprint for a new structure and orchestrate its miraculous unfolding.

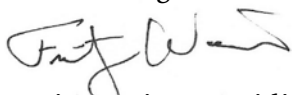
Friends are called to be the imaginal cells in a similar process of social metamorphosis, as the present social order is becoming increasingly unstable and self-destructive. We carry a vision to the world of other possibilities for the future than those of collapse and death. We bring hope to the millions of people rejecting the idolatries and absurdities of empire and yearning for new ways of living together based on mutual caring and sharing.

It is in this sense that, in a quote shared by one Friend, "Imagination is sometimes more real than reality, and reality is less real than it seems." Transformation can be both messy and threatening, and only our love for the Light of Truth can take us past the point of feeling, as another Friend put it frankly, "I want to be transformed, but I don't want to change."

Many of us were blessed by experiences of life-giving personal and community transformation. We embark on the renewing of our minds and return to our home Meetings and communities with lighter hearts, better prepared to engage the powers with a greater sense of urgency and hope.

In the Light,

New England Yearly Meeting  
of the Religious Society of Friends

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fritz Weiss", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Fritz Weiss, presiding clerk