

To Friends Everywhere:

Lift the veils that obscure the Light of Truth within you. Sink down to the Seed that God sows in your hearts.

From June 17 through June 22, 2016, three hundred and eight Friends gathered at Walker Creek Ranch in Petaluma, California, for the 70th Annual Session of Pacific Yearly Meeting. The theme of our gathering was, “Lifting the Veil,” and during our time together, we sought the tenderness that comes from lifting the veils of everyday life. We felt the kindness that comes with the presence of Spirit.

Our invited guest from the Coast Miwok People, Sky Road Webb, opened our annual session with sacred songs, with tales of the land’s history, and with stories of indigenous peoples today. As the wind swirled forcefully around our gathering, billowing the sides of the large tent in which we held our plenary sessions, we felt the breath of Spirit moving in the world around us, and among us, and within us.

Early in our sessions, we noticed and appreciated the careful preparations that had been made for our gathering, both physical and spiritual. It was clear that our clerk, our assistant clerk, and our Ministry and Oversight committee had designed our plenary sessions to serve both as learning experiences and as times for Spirit to enliven our business. At the start of each plenary, our clerk reminded us of the sacred purpose of our Quaker practices. He reminded us to lift the veils of our egos, to “speak only when spoken *through*,” to drop our preconceptions, and to open ourselves to Mystery. He also took these learning experiences to special sessions with our young Friends. Worship sharing groups, interest groups, and bible study sessions throughout the week were also designed to help us explore the countless implications of “lifting the veil.”

We opened ourselves to experimentation in matters both profound and mundane. Some of our experimentation concerned simple logistical changes that helped clear our way to attend more fully to Spirit and community. We enjoyed the return of our long-lost Information Desk. We experimented with starting our session on Friday instead of Monday, which allowed participation by Friends who were only available for the weekend. We increased the number

of intergenerational plenaries and offered a new evening campfire event for our youngest Friends, which enabled parents to attend evening interest groups. And we tried overall to lessen the number of concurrent offerings in our schedule, to create a greater sense of simplicity and unity among us.

Another new occurrence this year was that our annual session was led by adult Friends who grew up among us. Our presiding clerk, Diego Navarro, and our keynote speakers, Darcy Stanley and Carl Magruder, all had participated in PYM as children. Of course, Friends from countless backgrounds bring us leadership and light, but we felt especially uplifted to find that “our own” leaders are uniquely qualified to speak to our condition as a yearly meeting.

Our condition is one of human imperfection. Although we did feel Spirit working through us frequently during our time together, we also found ourselves stumbling over details in our business, found ourselves tripping over our worldly veils. We found it difficult to come to terms with the need to reduce the operating deficit in our budget. We suffered from confusion as we worked to approve the minutes of our meetings, confusion that diverted our attention from the task at hand and tempted us to reopen previous conversations instead. And throughout the year, between our annual sessions, we struggled to find ways to stay connected with each other – facing dilemmas over right uses of travel and electronic communications.

On a deeper level, we find ourselves falling short of our responsibility to nurture each other’s spiritual growth. Although we can feel inspired by descriptions of traditional, supportive relationships between Quaker ministers and elders, and can even feel inspired to see examples of such relationships in action today, many of us still find it hard to trust each other fully and to support each other effectively. Old memories of past hurts get in the way, which are sometimes hurts that we have caused each other. We struggle to learn ways to speak truth with love, to navigate between the errors of undue harshness and dishonest niceness.

At the same time, we sometimes find that conflict can open our hearts, and we continue to draw inspiration from each other. Our teens and young adults especially serve as models of faithfulness and good order for the rest of us. And we felt moved to see our young Friends

embracing new experiences – from a wiggly baby tooth to the traveling minutes of two young adult Friends preparing to travel in the ministry in Australia.

We feel led to learn better how to reach down to the Seed that God sows in our hearts. We feel led to learn better how to pull away the veils that hide that seed, the veils of our daily worries, of our selfish wants, of our self-recriminations, of our wildest dreams, the countless veils that hide the Seed and Light of Truth. And when we ask whether we will choose to help each other in this work, we have learned to answer, “I hope so.”