

Being together again: Togetherness and Listening

Switzerland Yearly Meeting's annual gathering brought nearly 30 people physically together with other Friends joining remotely for sessions that reminded us that digital meetings can bring us all together, but our presence lets us all shine.

Friends reflected on some of the best things about our weekend gathering...

- the simple fact that it happened, and we could be together
- well-managed discussions during the business meeting
- successful use of worship sharing for exploring the experience of Corona lockdown and the challenges to pacifism in a time of war
- Herzberg, our beautiful location
- John Woolman's "seeds of war" more broadly applied to the climate, women, and more
- seeing people come together after our first session and hearing the hum of voices
- being a slice of bread in Jeremy's toaster during his Alternative to Violence Project (AVP) session
- Cemi, the cute little white bischon
- candied orange peels
- an afternoon nap with the sounds of the oncoming thunderstorm
- the manifest love between everyone gathered

Friends travelled up the gentle hills north of Aarau on the warm Friday afternoon before the long Pentecost (Whitsun) weekend. This marks our 10th year at the Herzberg; always a wonderful retreat from the hectic world below.

Any good event starts with an apéro, followed by shared meals throughout the weekend and a night cap to punctuate our day's journey through sessions exploring our theme, "Being together again: Togetherness and Listening." We solemnly marked the passing of dear Friends. We missed their presence dearly but cherished their memory as we reflected together on more somber global events, wars, destitution, mass migrations, human-wrought climate change, the pandemic, the mobilization of and expenditures on weapons. Such reflections may leave us feeling helpless, hopeless, and ineffectual but our keynote speakers inspired us that "together, we can create change."

Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge is the new director of the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO). She took over from our good Friend Jonathan Wooley, who entered a well-deserved retirement with his wife Pilar in Mexico. Nozizwe inspired us with stories of her activism as a student in South Africa. She described how, as a political prisoner, the voices of unseen women inmates -- expressing their togetherness in harmonized song -- raised her spirits. Later, as the deputy defence minister in South Africa's post-apartheid government, Nozizwe's initiatives to look at defence through a human security lens -- helped create the necessary conditions to prevent war. Peace is more than preparing for war. Change for the good is possible.

Jeremy Routledge, Nozizwe's companion of more than 30 years, introduced us to the tools of the Alternative to Violence Project (<https://avp.international>). His efforts to raise the awareness of South African prison inmates to resolving conflict without violence, inspired us to consider developing our own programs to help needy communities in Switzerland.

We considered the conflict and violence in Ukraine. We asked what we can as Quakers and global citizens do, to prevent war and ameliorate its consequences? We remembered John Woolman's advice to "look upon our treasures, and the furniture of our houses, and the garments in which we array ourselves, and try whether the seeds of war have any nourishment in these possessions or not". Quakers have always faced probing questions and difficult choices in times of war. We affirmed that individually and corporately there is much we can do before, during, and after war. Yes, we can:

- facilitate deep listening and reconciliation
- monitor disinformation in the media
- advocate for the provision of humanitarian aid
- support conscientious objectors
- advocate for sanctions despite their impact on us
- strengthen our partnerships and
- rehearse the logic and instruments of non-violent conflict resolution just as vigorously as NATO rehearses maneuvers to use weapons to deter war

We engaged with each other in and out of other optional workshops. We learned of James Nayler's example of standing up for what you believe, even if those actions may be considered blasphemous. Nayler's story gave us an opportunity to explore our shadow selves and the shadow of our Quaker organization from a Jungian perspective. Do we always live up to the virtues that we feel define us? Do we always stand up for what we believe?

We joined together to find "That of God in everyone" and ask, "how does God manifest in us", especially in these most trying times. Can we love our enemy as ourself?

The weekend was our first full gathering following the lifting of all COVID lockdown restrictions. We reflected on being together again, asking ourselves how the pandemic impacted our community and worship practices. We acknowledge that meeting online provides opportunities for geographically distant members to join in communion. However, we conceded that meeting in person is an infinitely better, more enriching experience. The energy and connection of joining hands in our circle is hard to describe.

Our annual gathering also provided time for silent retreat and reflection, particularly in the wee hours when we witnessed a powerful storm and lashing rain. Weather did not deter us from silently walking in the verdant forest at dawn, listening to bird song, and opening ourselves to the spirit moving within us. Some Friends more gently came together in movement exercises. Gentle movements together, nature, and the voices of birds at an early hour are all remarkable. They all remind us that we must always listen for God's voice and find the light at all times, not just before and after the maelstrom. What do we do *now* as Quakers to manifest our witness to the essential importance of peace and reconciliation as the means to end war?

But we are Quakers! We cannot simply end with questions... we must end with dance, song, and an affirmation that Yes, We Can!