

## Spiritual State of Jacksonville Friends Meeting – January 21, 2007

Jacksonville Friends gathered to discern responses to two queries. How has our meeting for worship nurtured our spiritual growth? And, how has the Spirit been moving among us in this past year?

As to our spiritual state of the meeting, it's not about things we've done or said as a meeting; it's about the emptinesses we've been experiencing the past few years. A few years ago, Jacksonville Monthly Meeting folk were very involved in community organizing and advocacy work. We trace this back to the election of 2004. We were hopeful that if we spoke out publicly we could turn things around. Then we were stunned "they got re-elected." Then in '05-'06, we lost our steam doing outward activist work, because it was not making political changes we thought it would.

Yet we know we can come to meeting, and we're waiting. Many Quaker blogs on the internet attest to the presence of waiting worship - rediscovering that is part of worship: waiting, not doing, though the Spirit is still working. We are sharing in the safety of being with Friends, sitting in that sanctity of the circle of safety among Friends without deep philosophical discussions or semi-therapy sessions.

We're a small group - five to ten usually - seeing each other only on Sundays, though, communicating during the week by phone and e-mail.

We're okay with meeting being a more contemplative, quietist meeting.

The meeting for worship provides a framework so individuals don't go off into La-La-Land. And, we've all looked for and found connections with each other. When meetings did not happen during the Summer, Friends keenly missed worshipping together.

We provide a wonderful, warm, open, welcoming place for folks to experience solid worship and strong spiritual fellowship. Jacksonville Meeting is a touchstone, where Friends can have it as a place of welcome for when they desire it. Though few people attend meeting for worship, many want to be on our mailing list and receive frequent e-mail and sporadic newsletters. In recent weeks, Friends have expressed a desire to study Quakerism 101 and to gather more often.

The view of one new attender and prospective member whose background is with programmed Quaker worship: "My experience has been that as I have asked questions and tried to learn more, everything I need has been provided (materials and books), and I am currently reading the history of Quakerism and its basic philosophy. - I was initially reluctant to travel across town on Sundays to go to meeting...But I felt that the Spirit was definitely pushing me toward the Jacksonville Society of Friends, and so I went. And I keep going...because it feels like home to me."

One seasoned Friend's view: "I believe that during the past year Jacksonville Meeting has been 'lying fallow' during meeting for worship - in the best sense of that phrase. Sometimes I feel a superficial disappointment during worship: that things don't 'feel

more spiritual'; that there is little spoken ministry; that I find it extremely difficult to center down into stillness; that I often feel little gatheredness with other Friends in the circle. However, notice that this is all 'I' stuff.

It's trivial, it's about ego's wishes for a 'religious experience' not being satisfied.

"At a deeper level, I think Jacksonville Meeting has needed to just wait in silence for a year or so, after a mix of traumatic changes and losses that, on the surface, we have said little about to each other. Julia Geiger died, Joanne Herrmann and others moved on. We went through a profoundly discouraging election in 2004, and we have watched in despair as our government escalates its violent crimes and intrigues against people around the world.

"On November 5th, I was led to speak to remind Friends that politics is a human invention and to some extent a human fantasy - a fantasy that we can somehow 'make things right' with our fallible, finite notions both of 'how to make things' and of 'what is right.' Since then, we seem to have been content to just sit together. I believe this is good. In the past few weeks I have kept bringing myself back to just noticing the presence of other Friends in the circle, rather than trying to think, or trying to center, or trying to anything.

"And I finally remembered that delightfully perverse query I posed a few years back. We come together in meeting for worship because we each believe, in a profoundly intimate way, that there is a Something which brings everything together. We know we all share that belief. We sit around in a circle, thinking in our private ways about that Something, but often not knowing how to tell others what we know experimentally about Something's graceful work in our personal lives. In other words, we are waiting for leadings which will help us to answer for each other: Just what is it we are sitting around?"