

Jacksonville Friends' Spiritual State of the Meeting Report - 2009

Worship sharing for discerning "Spiritual State of the Meeting Report" convened in front of the Geiger farmhouse fireplace after Al Geiger stoked the fire on the evening of Tuesday, January 27th, 2009. Seven Friends and one cat were present along with several written responses to queries.

Themes that threaded through our sharing were: groundedness, loss, presence, critical mass, and commitment.

Groundedness. We feel loss of grounding in the world, so we acknowledge consistently attending meeting is a form of grounding for us. We missed feeling grounded when we did not meet for worship during the Summer of 2008. We sense the importance of just going to meeting to sit with others. We acknowledge the fragility and changing nature of our meeting. However, we recognize that what we sit around is not fragile. We each bring our individual roots, and we trust what we sit around. We are strengthened knowing early Friends knew what they sat around. The fire is burning whether we are close or not. We know it is there!

Loss. We keenly feel the loss of Friend Tacie Renken, of Germany, to death; of Ann Carrigan, to moving from Jacksonville to Orlando; and of the enormous influence of the late Julia O. Geiger. We sense we need more contact with one another in addition to meeting for worship and the following general sharing for a half hour to an hour each First Day morning. We spoke of the need for meetings for learning and meetings for eating. Our vast geographical distances between our homes - and consequently our lack of physical contact with one another during the week - was acknowledged.

Presence. We are so small a group, we operate more as a worship group than a monthly meeting. We so seldom have actual business that necessitates centered discernment that our meetings for business are very informal. However, when there is business, we can center down for the discovery of corporate leadings amongst us.

Critical mass. We are so small a group that we lack critical mass. We average 5-8 members and attenders present each First Day at 10:30 am in a welcoming private school library without traffic noise and with bird chirping. We are "as birds in the wilderness...waiting for the next meal, but all of us prefer a different meal," as one Friend offered with agreement from the whole. The critical mass is not only in regards to numbers but in spiritual weightiness and groundedness in Quaker ways and in approaching meeting for worship with heart and mind prepared to minister to one another. We wondered if we would be consistent in attendance each week if we each possessed part of the key that opens the meeting space door. We acknowledged the ease of staying home from meeting for worship when little "happens" at meeting that registers for us and when we neglect the extra responsibility to keep meeting going, to sustain a Quaker presence in Jacksonville. And, we acknowledged our individual

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reluctance to bring our seemingly overwhelming burdens into the midst of our faltering corporate nurturing of the Light.

Commitment. The old-timers acknowledge the struggles and opportunities as written above. As Ann Carrigan left us, a flock of newcomers alit! Old-timers feel a responsibility to nurture the new attenders and their enthusiasm and rekindle our commitment to Jacksonville Meeting. We acknowledged most new attenders in the past stopped attending sooner or later with little follow-up save for keeping them on mailing lists (for which many are most grateful). We are committed to mustering the energy to keep the new attenders amongst us.

One new attender finds worship nurtures "spiritual growth by allowing me to become more aware of my thoughts and spiritual experiences, and by allowing me to witness the spirit in others...(W)eekly attention to the spirit in myself and others has carried into my daily life and my interactions with those outside meeting...I attended (worship and the Michener Lecture) in Orlando...and the meeting of the (Jacksonville) Interfaith Council...."

A devoted non-resident attender expressed it this way: "(Y)ou manage to convey a sense of ardent search for enlightenment-in-faith and inward peace as basis for practical application of Friends principles."

One aspect of Jacksonville meeting for worship that consistently provides corporate meaning amongst us is our method of ending meeting for worship. Five minutes before the end of the hour, a Friend states: "As we come to the end of our worship time, Friends are invited to participate in a brief period of worship sharing to express thoughts, concerns or ideas which they did not feel led to share in worship. Let us remember that worship sharing is a time of expression. It is not a time for response, discussion, questions or debate."

We acknowledge what we call "worship sharing" is not what is usually considered worship sharing. These five minutes gently ease us out of worship and allow for often profound messages to come forth that otherwise might not have been expressed during worship. It is a time for holding others in the Light or in Tenderness and Wholeness.

Al Geiger brought in a cedar log and a pungent piece of fat light wood to stoke the waning fire. But first, our worship sharing for discerning our "Spiritual State of the Meeting Report" concluded with silence and a traditional wood-sniffing ceremony.