

## ***Young People in the Religious Society of Friends***

*I was not “christened” in a church, but I was sprinkled from morning to night with the dew of religion. We never ate a meal together which did not begin with thanksgiving; we never began a day without “a family gathering” at which my mother read a chapter from the Bible, after which there would follow a hush of weighty silence. . . . My first steps in religion were thus acted. It was a religion that we did together. Almost nothing was said in the way of instructing me. We all joined together to listen for God, and then one of us talked to him for the others. In these simple ways my religious disposition was being unconsciously formed and the roots of my faith in unseen realities were reaching down far below my crude and childish surface thinking.*

*Rufus M. Jones, 1926*

*If the vigor of the meeting lives in its young people, and the wisdom of the meeting lives in its elders, then the strength of the meeting lies in interaction between the two.*

*Todd Swanson, June 2005*

## **Children**

Children of Friends are born into or join their home family first of all, but they also become part of the spiritual family of their meeting. This spiritual family is entrusted with a significant role in their upbringing. Like parents and loving caretakers, the meeting shares responsibility for fostering the emerging spiritual life of its children—recognizing and nurturing their individual gifts, nourishing and guiding them as they experience the world and begin to assume the increasing responsibilities that are part of growing older.

A number of monthly meetings gather to celebrate the birth of a baby or to welcome a child into the fellowship of the spiritual community. Because the first months of a child’s life are sometimes very difficult—including for the new parents—it is important for the meeting to remember that the new family may need and welcome various kinds of help.

As children grow older, as they grow into being themselves, it matters that both parents and Friends in the meeting community try to be aware of changes as they take place, to be receptive to the children’s daily experiences, and to listen attentively to what children attempt to communicate of happiness, need, sadness. It is important that children have a sense that they have value, that they are loved by those around them, and that however young they are, their lives have meaning.

The child’s home family is the environment in which Quaker values can be most strongly fostered early in life, where he or she can learn how to listen for the inner voice that offers guidance in choosing and doing good actions. The home can be the safe place where a child finds out how to seek understanding of truth and to test it, rather than accepting things passively. A Quaker home affirms for a child, long before the realization becomes conscious, that worship and work are parts of the same life and that although outward circumstances of our society and our culture may change with the times, the foundation of our lives in the Spirit remains unchanged.

As a child begins to be aware of the spiritual world beyond the home, both the parents and the meeting need to find ways to talk about the mystery at the core of Quakerism. Because silence is at the heart of the way Quakers worship, it is especially hard to communicate with children about the sometimes difficult and demanding journey of a spirit seeking God. It may make the mystery easier to grasp if we tell stories from our history about how Quakers have tried to live in accordance with their beliefs. In addition, hearing adults’ vocal ministry in meeting for worship may slowly lead children toward understanding.

Most meetings foster Quaker values in their children by providing First Day school classes during all or part of the adult meeting for worship. Although in smaller meetings and worship groups such an arrangement is not always possible, care is taken to give children a sense of comfort, understanding, and safety during the time they are at meeting..

Friends need to be aware that we are just as susceptible as any other group—despite our self-image as peaceful people striving for good—to danger toward our children from those who would take advantage of their young age. Situations of trust can provide openings for abuse. We are responsible for ensuring the

safety of children in our communities. Meetings are encouraged to educate themselves regarding the indicators, prevention, and handling of incidents of abuse.

*Children can and do understand, have trusted and stood strong in their faith. It is heartening to read about the children, ten to twelve years old, who, in the 1600s “kept up their meetings regularly, and with remarkable gravity and composure” when their parents were being held in prison because of what they believed, even suffering beatings and the threat of prison, despite their tender age.*

*Britain Yearly Meeting, Faith and Practice, 19.35*

## Youth

As boys and girls become adolescents, they enter another stage of life. For many of them, this is an especially risky period of transition, during which they work out a degree of independence from their immediate family. When they try on unfamiliar trappings of maturity, their behavior and ideas may challenge those of the adults in their lives. Parents may need to take a step back, to move away from being the center of their child's experience. Yet at the same time it is important that they continue to offer their trust, the comfort of familiar values, and an unfailing sense of loving security that the youth can rely on.

Youths, meanwhile, are engaged in the difficult job of adjusting to the world beyond their own home, where values, standards, and expectations are often quite unlike those they've grown up with. Yet it is precisely at the same time as young people are confronting life-affecting decisions about education and occupation that our society lays upon them the burden of making important choices about fundamental social issues. Chief among these is the question of registration for or enlistment in the military. It is important that the meeting counter the recruitment efforts and claims of the military, assist individual young Friends in documenting their conscientious objection to war, and make known to our young people the full range of options open to them. Clearness committees may help them find clarity about and security in their own deeply held values during this critical time of special vulnerability to society's expectations.

It is no easy task for adolescents to live up to their ideals while trying to find a place in the world among people of their own age group who do not share those ideals. Family meetings that engage everyone in the household and during which issues important to youth are openly and honestly discussed can be a source of mutual inquiry, support, and learning. It is important that young and old listen to each other. What matters most at these times is keeping the lines of communication open so that the young person does not feel lost and isolated as he or she goes through the changes—intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual. It is also important to remember that growing up does not happen at the same age and in the same way for all adolescents. Some young people at the age of sixteen may be more mature than others who are twenty.

Friends from the meeting, as well as parents, may be able to offer support, guidance, and sympathy to adolescents. The meeting can express its trust in the gifts of its young people by asking them to join in the work of meeting committees and thereby to take on some of the responsibilities of being a Friend. This is not difficult if the meeting has made a practice over the preceding years of clarifying for their younger members the various ways of contributing to the meeting. It is an especially easy transition if young people and elders have shared intergenerational activities in the past. When younger and older Friends are comfortable with one another, the elders can serve as role models or mentors that the young people may feel they need, to counterpoise the pressure from their peers at school. The meeting's elders have “been there, done that.” If they are true friends of the young, they can be a great help. Likewise, it stands to reason that if the young are true friends of those who are older, they too can be a great help. It's a two-way street.

It is important that meetings recognize that the needs of all age groups deserve consideration. Intergenerational activities, including worship sharing, may help ease the tentativeness that accompanies differences of age when such activities are the product of mutual consultation and are entered into willingly. Young people become aware of themselves as Friends not only through attending meeting for worship and receiving religious instruction, but also through friendships within their own age group and participation in the meeting. They need to be included in the structure of the meeting, and the meeting needs what they can offer. Such considerations add up to what is most important of all—a sense of belonging, which makes young people feel they are an integral spiritual part of meeting.

# The Voice of Young Friends

*This is a time of life when we can actually follow our dreams, be idealistic, explore our future, and shape our destiny as individuals and members of our generation.*

*It's hard to find a balance in our lives with so much going on.*

*For the first time, decisions we make in our lives may have large consequences.*

Bearing in mind the usefulness of intergenerational communication, two youthful elders attempted to gain a sense of the concerns of Senior Young Friends at the 2005 gathering of Intermountain Yearly Meeting. They did not have much time for their work, but the Senior Young Friends did offer genuine responses to the questions posed. Among other things, they expressed a need for "healthy meetings," a concern about questions relating to gender, and gratitude for the comfort and support that their parents had given them.

The Senior Young Friends selected a number of individual statements as reflective of their common concerns. These selected comments, quoted directly and slightly edited, appear below and in the lines above.

*To be a Quaker means to be constantly searching.*

*We want to change things but feel we are not old enough to have much of an effect.*

*It's hard to love someone when you genuinely dislike him or her.*

*When you are uncentered, it's easy to become angry.*

*We are not taught how to deal with anger.*

*Sometimes it's hard to remain nonviolent.*

*What about Hitler? What about terrorism?*

*It is important to listen to us, to get our opinions, and to include us in decisions.*

*We need room to grow, while knowing adults are there for us.*

*It's hard to know when to bring things to meetings of the adults when they're all over the map themselves.*

*We need more volunteers for our programs. It's hard when adults criticize youth and youth programs but are unwilling to invest their time.*

*Adults feel they should let you go, but they don't trust you.*

*There are occasions when we have a consensus that the adult meeting lacks or that they are not yet ready to accept.*

*It's hard to find adult mentors when things go wrong.*

*Adults in meetings need to be "healthy," to be centered, to know what they are looking for in order to help us in our search.*

*Sometimes we feel isolated when we can't find other Quakers our age.*

*Adults often treat you as equals in the spiritual journey, though they may need reminding every few years.*

*We're not told what to think; we're allowed self-discovery.*