

Minute of Exercise: Healing of Rifts within the Faith Community

This minute expresses what happened during a Meeting for Discernment held at Quaker Spring gathering on Sunday evening, June 19, 2011 at The Meeting School, Rindge NH.

The Query: All our meeting communities suffer from rifts. How do we allow and stand with the tears, and mend the tears, moving with God toward forgiveness?

The rift. As members of a meeting, we are co-members of Christ's body, but sometimes a rift develops within the body. When we are in conflict with each other, Christ says to us: "I am not the leader of a faction! I don't want you to act in my name to set yourself against others in my body."

Around issues like bricks & mortar, people easily get caught up in the urgency of the moment. Our wars are often a result of how caught up we are in the world – which will not be healed just by listening to each other. It takes more than forgiveness. It takes a willingness to be taught about that which we do not understand.

Preventing rifts. We can try to avoid labeling each other and to really hear each other as the unique children of God that we are. We need to let go of our personal agendas and projects if we are to be in unity.

A meeting was divided on a major decision with a large majority wanting to take one action and a small minority disagreeing. A member of the majority spoke very critically in Meeting for Business of a member of the minority group in a hurtful way. Seasoned Friends in the meeting who shared the majority viewpoint stood with the member who was attacked to say that we value our diverse viewpoints and need to make sure the meeting is a safe place to express our different understandings of truth freely. They worked to create and maintain a culture of safety to ensure that personal views don't come before our common love and commitment to each other and our sense of that of God in each other.

Parker Palmer has spoken of a monastic vow of "stability" – a commitment to remain in community with each other even when things got tough and not to move into the monastery down the road. Friends often run to another meeting when conflict develops or simply stop going to meeting.

The baptism of translation. We have many refugees amongst us who have held onto the pain of the languages that hurt them before. Some of us have been given the gift of being able to walk with different languages that describe our journey with God – and hear the Spirit speaking through them all. We need to receive Gilead's balm to put on the ears of the injured. We can't be afraid to speak the language that we have been given. Perhaps the kind of Pentecost that is being offered to us in the 21st century is a spiritual baptism that enables us to understand each others' languages of the heart.

Standing in our truth. Sometimes it feels as if we are silenced and will lose our truth if we stay where we are. It is far easier to recover from being yelled at than to recover from avoiding key questions out of the fear of getting angry at each other. To start healing we must stand fearlessly in the truth of what we are, even if that is very hard and painful. Can we stand in our truth and stand with each other in love with God's help?

Sometimes it is right to leave a meeting community, but that doesn't mean our work with that meeting is over.

Healing rifts through listening. Those who need talking to are those who need to be listened to. Ministry and Counsel can meet with the most vociferous Friends on both sides of a rift and just listen.

We need to ask more questions and make fewer statements, to be more curious than threatened, to look at situations as lessons rather than crises. We can turn from fear to trust. I can look at my past as an opening to what was stuck and open up the gate.

Often all we can do is just love the different warring parties.

Too often when we ask someone “how are you?” we want the short version. We want the quick and easy way. Grace and forgiveness aren’t cheap or quick. I want others to say to me: “I really want to listen: how are you today?” Are we willing to take the time to talk about the areas where we’re broken?

One Friend expressed a longing to continue talking with each other in this session in the darkened room until the sun came up.

Recognizing our brokenness. Christ’s commandment to love others as ourselves is rooted in our ability to love ourselves and to recognize God’s true voice within us. It requires embracing the lost and rejected parts of ourselves – asking for God’s grace to love all aspects of ourselves.

It is in our nature as humans to need to be forgiven. We experience God’s forgiveness as we practice yieldedness. As we enter God’s kingdom, we are asked to yield to others, to forgive others and to accept their forgiveness. This is a contradiction to our culture which maintains that each man is his own island. Sondra Cronk taught us that the strength of community is in the power of powerlessness.

Jesus’ experience with abandonment. When Jesus was in anguish and fear and uncertainty, he asked his friends to just stay awake with him. As a human, Jesus experienced human outrage and despair and the sense of betrayal of being abandoned by one’s spiritual community. His ability to live with that sense of betrayal can inspire us to ask for the same grace. Can we bear the unbearable together?

One Friend suggested that Jesus must have loved Judas so much that he tried to follow him out of the Upper Room to reach out to him and be reconciled with him. When we feel abandoned or betrayed or separated from each other, we can love each other and run after each other in the same way.

The rift is over. What underlies peace in the meeting community is trust in God. With that trust there is no need to defend our walls and positions because there is nothing there but God’s power and love. It starts with recognizing our need of God and God’s trustworthiness. If we live in that trust, it spreads out and fills the gaps between us.

A Friend once gave ministry in meeting about the wrongness of walls erected within the faith community and the need to tear them down. A stranger came up to her after meeting and said, “You are wrong about that. The victory is already won.” We don’t have to solve or fix the walls as Christ has already walked through them.

—Clerk: Janet Hough, Elders: Leslie Manning & Susan Smith, Recording Clerk: Peter Blood-Patterson