

## **Senior Conference 2012 Epistle**

To all Friends everywhere,

From the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 2012, 86 young Friends and a team of 14 volunteers of over 22s gathered at Sibford School in Oxfordshire for a week of unexpected sunshine. Together we explored our theme 'Think it Possible...' through speaker sessions, discussions in base groups, and during further reflection in Prologues and Epilogues.

By allowing ourselves to think it possible we were encouraged to distinguish between our prejudices and our deep convictions. This reinforced our Quaker values as we considered Advices and Queries #17, which encouraged participants to gain a greater understanding and acceptance of what it is to be mistaken.

Throughout the week we developed an appreciation of the link between individuals confronting their assumptions and radical action. Peter Tatchell's talk, 'People Power and Economic Democracy', inspired us to believe that we do not have to be constricted by our circumstances. By sharing his personal experiences with us, he demonstrated that, if individuals 'think it possible...' and abandon social apathy, we have the potential to achieve fundamental change. By ending on the simple yet powerful sentiment 'we have to do something' he established a mentality of positive activism that participants sustained as the week developed.

Methodist Minister Val Reid shared her own experiences with participants in her speaker session; she discussed how her Methodist ideologies were put under scrutiny when she explored the similarities and differences between denominations as part of her spiritual journey with the Quaker community. Participants acquired an understanding of the potent dichotomy between change and stability through an enlightening exercise involving standing on a line which represented our attitudes towards these notions. The session highlighted the difficulties associated with making decisions, and allowed participants to accept that there is no shame in being mistaken.

Conferees felt deeply moved by local Quaker Judith Weeks who identified with our theme on a particularly personal level. She showed us a 'normal' photo from her daughter's wedding which shocked participants when she later revealed the hidden sufferings of those members of her family. The unambiguous strength of the speaker enhanced the message that was put to us: we were pushed to 'think it possible that we may be mistaken' in our judgements of those deemed abnormal or disgusting by society.

Three of our over 22s, Wendy Sender, Marguerite Page and Rob Johnson, revealed their individual understandings of the theme as part of their speaker session. Despite their diverse perspectives, they all seemed to communicate the same central message: although the guidance of others is valuable, one does not have to subscribe to their advice, nor should one feel limited by social conventions. The over 22s gave us profound insights concerning our theme; this demonstrated the caring and safe community in which everyone felt able to share their intimate feelings.

The Recording Clerk for Quakers in Britain, Paul Parker, explained his 'WHOOSH' hypothesis as part of his speaker session. This is based on us, as a Quaker community, thinking it possible, both in terms of our beliefs being something to feel excited about and on positively exposing our faith. He highlighted the diversity of experiences among those gathered via a straightforward show of hands exercise, which unified our community further.

Beyond the speaker sessions, base groups of up to ten young people gave us time to play silly games such as 'belly laughs', which contrasted with 'gentle jigsawing', allowing base groups to relax, while the bouncy castle offered an opportunity to let off steam. These regular sessions enhanced the unifying atmosphere of Senior Conference, and, as well as providing light-hearted entertainment, gave us an opportunity to explore personal feelings that the theme had evoked.

We were treated to a spectacular assortment of unique and comical entertainments, including an 'extreme' den-building challenge, a wacky quiz, complete with a 'Lord of the Rings' round, and a dazzling disco where participants appeared as 'under-credited public sector workers'. A more mellow entertainment was the marvellous open mic night, where participants of all ages shared their creative talents with each other.

On our excursion to Oxford, an entertaining 'flash mob' was organised by participants; the public were baffled by an apparently amazing, yet invisible, spectacle in the sky. At the themed meal, base groups donned bizarre costumes ranging from portable music devices to iconic cereal box mascots. A variety of workshops, including a Senior Conference publication, sports, and junk jewellery, created an environment where participants could express their individuality.

To open and conclude each day, we gathered for refreshing and spiritually enriching Prologues and Epilogues, where we were able to reflect peacefully on the otherwise intense week. Our worship was aided by calming music, plasticine modelling, and atmospheric candles and glow sticks. The thoughtful ministry echoed our ever increasing sense of community.

We leave Senior Conference with a sense of achievement and a desire to do more, longing for our own beds, while simultaneously hoping to keep hold of the sense of consciousness that the week has evoked. We have felt sustained by our past and inspired by the potential our future holds, and we hope to continue to live by the sentiment of 'Think it Possible...' and actively assert our faith through our actions wherever we go.

*Don't get discouraged*

*Wait*

*Wait years if necessary*

(Extract from 'To Paint the Portrait of a Bird' by Jacques Prévert, as cited by Paul Parker)

Signed in and on behalf of Senior Conference,  
James Fox and Tilly Goodwin  
Clerks