

Senior Conference Epistle 2013

To all Friends everywhere,

“Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life.”

Quaker Faith and Practice 1.02

This passage, which introduces the Advices and Queries, embodies the theme of this year’s Senior Conference: Darkness and Light. From the 17th-24th August 2013, 83 young Friends aged 15-18 and 14 adult volunteers gathered together at Sibford School in Oxfordshire. Together, we explored darkness and light through speaker sessions, workshops and other fun activities.

At the beginning of the week, we as participants coordinated a variety of chat rooms and creative and spiritual sessions prompting discussion about the diversity of the theme. Many found these “theme stations” thought provoking as well as a good way to commence a spiritually and emotionally stimulating conference.

Our first external speaker, Dr Bob Johnson, talked to us about his work as a consultant psychiatrist at HMP Parkhurst maximum-security prison. He shared with us his belief that everyone is born “lovable, sociable and non-violent”, and described his faith-inspired therapy based on principles of “Truth, Trust and Consent”. He challenged us to confront our preconceptions regarding mental illness and the strength of his convictions stimulated debate throughout the week.

Our second external speaker, local Quaker artist Jill Green, shared with us her spiritual journey beginning with a visit to Palestine in 2000 and culminating with her exhibition (titled “One Unholy Journey”) of a hundred olive tree paintings earlier this year. We felt inspired by her dedication and indomitable spirit to a cause so personal and internationally important. Her description of painting as “a meditation and a prayer of love” led to considerable engagement from the audience.

One of the most moving moments of the week occurred when members of the 22+ team shared with us their experiences of the darkness and light of grief. Kate Bone’s statement that forgiveness is a deeper process than saying “it’s okay, you’re forgiven”, along with Keith Walton’s advice about the importance of “living wide” as opposed to living long, left a lasting impression. Hannah, Ellen and John Rignell saw the light through the darkness in their family member’s passing, reflecting poignantly how a close relationship does not end with death. Participants found the session touching and relatable, and alongside a more informal, optimistic and reassuring ‘Any Questions?’ panel later in the week, it helped to bridge the gap between the conferees and our adult volunteers.

Prologues and Epilogues brought us together in Meeting for Worship twice a day, with much thought-provoking ministry helping us to understand and not simply

dwell on the darkness in our own lives. We were treated to a spellbinding fire-show during one epilogue, and one of the most magical moments of Conference occurred during Prologue on Thursday. On that morning, in the midst of GCSE results and with uncertainty surrounding the future, we were joined by eleven-month-old Lottie Lou Waterhouse, who reminded us of the simple joys of life.

Base groups gave structure to each day. These groups of up to ten young people enabled participants to form close bonds with others they may not have otherwise found the opportunity to befriend. The organisation and skill of the base group facilitators was evident as the base groups became units of support and empathy, as well as places to relax and have fun.

Conferees relaxed during entertaining evenings and had a lot of fun in free time, including a slip-n-slide one afternoon. The themed meal saw zombies, monks and Disney princesses gather together and share an hour of bizarre entrances and performances in character. The futuristic disco allowed us to let loose and embrace our most embarrassing dance moves. Other evening events included train building, the base group challenge, and party games. These concluded with 'Ents', a night filled with music and laughter.

A strong sense of community was predominant throughout the week. This was especially apparent in workshops, which were run each day for the majority of the event. In particular, 'Exploring Life's Journeys', 'Automatic Thoughtbooks' and 'Dark and Light: Roughly Fifty Shades of Identity' provoked relaxed and open discussions between conferees about the theme. Open Mic demonstrated our community spirit perfectly, as the warm, supportive atmosphere encouraged spontaneous performances of music and poetry from our multi-talented participants.

We feel that this has been a conference of new and developed perspectives. With the growing sense of community arose growing confidence in ourselves and how we can confront our own darkness and take steps to understand it. The openings we have created and discovered this week will leave a lasting imprint on our souls and on our minds. We leave with a desire to "live, love and make a difference", appreciating George Fox's examination of this very theme.

"I saw the infinite love of God. I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death; but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. In that also I saw the infinite love of God, and I had great openings...."
- George Fox

Live wide.

Signed in and on behalf of Senior Conference,

Lucy Evenden and Joe Bowness

Clerks