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Editor's Note:

The theme of this issue of the Quaker Heron is Spirit Led Social Action. I appreciate all of those who felt led to respond to this topic.
-Ramona Buck

The Nature of Spirit-Centered Social Action

by Donelda Stayton

I hesitate to write about my “spirit-centered” social action because personal factors seem far more central to my choice of volunteer work. But then how can I know that spiritual urging have not interacted with my personal experiences.

Shock and trauma are the only way to describe my reaction when my youngest daughter became manic and psychotic at the advent of her bipolar illness. She had not been a difficult or overly moody child and the onset of her illness was abrupt. Years working as a clinical psychologist had prepared me intellectually to understand what was happening, but not emotionally. Just like other parents and family members, I found that acceptance of what was happening was often mixed with anger, self pity, and grief. There were not easy solutions, few people in whom to confide, and the slowly emerging understanding that this was the beginning of a life long journey for my daughter and for our family.

But the story does not end here. I found that this personal experience had awakened in me a deepening empathy for individuals with serious mental illness and their families. I have called this my born again experience as a psychologist. Finding

new ways to advocate for people affected by mental illness and to fight stigma against them was an obvious path; work with NAMI (National Association on Mental Illness) was a natural fit. I have taught NAMI's Family to Family educational classes and currently lead a Family Support Group. I am Vice President of the NAMI Howard Board of Directors and chair of NAMI Howard Public Policy Committee. So is my volunteer work because of professional and personal experience or is it spirit centered? Has one enhanced the other?

Spirit Centered Social Action?

by Bill Mitchell

Sorry. I don't think I have a Spirit Centered Social Action. My Leading? I can't say I have one of those either.

When I was a young teenager, I used to work with my Dad on weekends cleaning up Lyon Park, our local community green spot. I liked it because I got to cut down old trees and cut them up with a cross-cut saw. (No chain saws in those days). I guess you could say it was social action for my Dad. He was a shy man, not too good at speaking in front of a big group, but he liked doing physical work. He was the Scout Master and a church usher and on the church board and the local Democrat committee, a lot of “little social actions”. I guess volunteer work is social action.

After getting married and having three daughters, I didn't have much time for volunteer work. But for some reason, I wanted to be a “Big Brother”. My very first “little brother” was Timmy. He was a great

kid and loved fishing. So I got my first fishing license and he taught me how to fish. The funniest part was chopping a hole through the ice on Lake Candlewood so we could go ice fishing. Later we got an ice-auger, which made it much easier. You ought to see the big fish we pulled through that six-inch hole!

Tim and I got a big kick out of bringing the fish home for cooking. My daughters liked to play with Timmy and vice versa. He was almost like a brother to them. The relationship ended quickly when Timmy's mother remarried. That's the way Big Brother is. But, I went on to another "little brother" who also had a little brother that was with us most of the time.

Some years later, my church was looking for a representative for "Churches Concerned for the Homeless (CCH)". They asked me because I had a truck for moving donated furniture. So, I sat in the board meetings (didn't say much) and I helped move donated furniture into the condos we provided to homeless families. The only problem was my basement got filled up with donated furniture waiting for use, which almost led to me being homeless due to the reaction of my then wife.

Later, after I got divorced (not really due to the furniture in the basement), and when I was working to fix up one of the CCH condos, I bumped into Christine Devaney. She was a CCH volunteer too and was trying to clean the shower before I finished calking it. Maybe she bumped into me. About three years later we got married - it took her a long time to say "Yes".

When I volunteered at CCH, Neil Gaffney gave me a lot of jobs. He was one of the founders of CCH (and Christmas in April of Howard County) and was sort of my mentor at CCH. One day Neil said they were trying to start an organization to accept donated cars and fix them for the needy. (We had seen at CCH that transportation

was one of the biggest needs for the homeless and poor). So, that started my volunteer work at "Cars for Careers". We did the repair work ourselves at first. Later Lincoln Tech stepped in and their car repair classes did most of the work. A friend of mine, Bob Buckler, became executive director for a while. All the details and accounting drove us both crazy. It was a tough job for a small non-profit.

Later Cars for Careers folded. By that time, a lot of big organizations – some with their own junk yards, garages and tow trucks – had started up. Still, I made some nice friends and we passed along over a hundred cars to needy families.

Since then, I spent a couple of years doing some gardening/landscaping with the patients at Springfield Hospital. Now I volunteer as a naturalist at the Howard County Conservancy. We take kids on nature walks. I've met a lot of nice people working there.

Did I mention that for about ten years I helped with Christmas in April as the house captain for my company? Neil Gaffney got me into this one too. It was a lot of fun! The company paid for all the materials and the pizzas. Because of that, Boeing made me "Volunteer of the Year." The reason I got the award was because Chris wrote the recommendation. (She used to be a reporter and writer for the Patuxent Papers - and won a lot of awards for her writing). I got an all-expense paid trip to Seattle out of it with the guest of my choice. I guess you know who the guest was – Chris. There might have been a little monetary award too. Don't tell Chris.

Well, as I look back on it, these volunteer jobs seem to have a pattern. A lot of them had to do with working outside or on cars and houses - things I like to do. Usually I did it with friends and made new friends (like Chris). Maybe I did it for my own ego, like being a "House Captain" for

Christmas in April or “President” of Cars for Careers.

Could you call it “Spirit Centered Social Action” or a “Leading”? That might be stretching it a little bit. But, volunteer jobs are a form of social action. And each of them could have been a “leading” at the time.

If Injustice Exists, What Should I do?

by Gabriel Cannon, South Mountain Friends Fellowship

No matter how trifling or great injustice or a miscarriage of justice occurs, one must – or in my case, I feel compelled – to make it right. Or, on the other hand, simply bringing it to the attention of the party or person who is doing wrong will make a difference.

For example, a police officer who is lying, stealing, and planting evidence to connect a known criminal in the community is no better than that person. He really is simply informing the office that he is breaking the law that he swore an oath on. I believe in his/her heart, that person recognizes that that is injustice and not justice being done.

No matter what the situation may be, if someone is hurting you emotionally, physically, or financially, or simply in need, I feel the urge to do something. As a student of the Bible, I know we are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and shelter the homeless. Doing something like giving an attentive ear to someone who wants to talk about his/her problem is powerful. I truly believe that injustice to one person is injustice to all, and standing up to evil doers is a stand for Christ.

What is my Leading?

by Perry A. Webb, Sr.
South Mountain Friends Fellowship

My leading is to be in accordance with God and to walk in the light, and to

love my fellow brothers and sisters as well as to help them out in their time of need for fellowship.

I also think my leading is to help the younger generation out by testifying to them and being that person they can come to in time of need or just to vent to.

If Injustice Exists, What Should I Do?

by Joe Evans, South Mountain Friends Fellowship

If injustice exists, what should I do? In the words of Martin Luther King, “An injustice anywhere is an injustice everywhere.” From the perspective of a prisoner, I could easily focus my attention on the everyday examples I witness within the confines of the prison. However, as I’ve matured in life, and have been influenced by others in the Quaker community, I see a wider horizon. And so when I choose a course of action, and/or inaction, I do tend to have my choice influenced by recognizing that injustices are everywhere and can be addressed just by treating others as I would like to be treated every day.

Centering has enabled me to live this type of life – caring for others.

Spirit Led Social Action

by Richard Lee Sutton,
South Mountain Friends Fellowship

I have made certain goals (short range) to get me through the days and nights of this prison life (sub-culture) while striving to be an example to others (being Quakerly). I pray and meditate many times throughout the day. I try to avoid any negative behaviors such as sharing any stolen food or crowd mentality going askew. I do not totally remove myself but I try to remain above the fray while practicing what I feel is Quakerism. These short range goals will hopefully lead me to my long range goal of being a person of relevance and a person comfortable in the Universe. What I

learn and discern in prayer/meditation, I strive to bring back to my Meeting and the community. If you want to change the World, then you must change yourself.

Feeling Called to Action by Ramona Buck

When I have felt called to social action, that call has not necessarily felt good. At first, it has often felt quite frightening or overwhelming. When I was in high school, I became concerned that we should take action since we had become aware that the local swimming pool in Waynesville, Ohio, was segregated through the strategy of being a “club.” You had to pay \$1.00 to be a “member” but only white people could join.

I didn’t know what I should do and talked to my parents about my concern. They encouraged me to bring this matter to our Quaker Meeting for Business. The Meeting encouraged my concern by suggesting that we should visit the ministers of the other churches in the town and ask for their support in writing a letter to the pool. So we divided up the churches and took on the task of contacting them and meeting with the ministers. I vividly remember meeting with the Methodist minister who said, “If I asked my congregation to raise their hands publically as to whether they would swim in an integrated pool, many hands would go up. But if I asked them to answer this anonymously, the number would be far lower.” I also remember going to a minister of an Evangelical Christian Church. They didn’t appear to want to take any action. This was a sobering experience for me.

We didn’t get all of the churches in town on board, but we got a number of them and some letters were written. Meanwhile, I heard about a black family who was filing a lawsuit and I spoke with one of them about their experience and told them what we were doing. I think the lawsuit is what really

closed down the club and opened the pool rather than our letter(s) which, in retrospect, seem fairly inconsequential, although they may have played a part. The important aspect of the experience, for me, was one of following my leading even though it was uncomfortable for me to talk to “weighty” adults, first the Meeting, and then the ministers, who were strangers to me. And at that point in my life, speaking up to adults in positions of power was still somewhat daunting.

I have had other similar experiences in different settings and I am much more comfortable speaking up, but my initial feeling is generally similar to what it was back at that time in Waynesville – “No, I am too busy. This is too scary. I can’t do this.” (In fact, having that feeling might just be a clue that what I am contemplating is a new leading!) And now that I have responsibilities and many scheduled events, the real question for me is, “How do I get myself into a place of readiness to hear and respond to such a leading?” The busyness of life can cut down on the space or openness to hear.

Can I hear the call? And can I find the courage to act?

Responding to Spirit Led Social Action by Brian Smith

Before attending PFM at the time of the Iraq War I was inspired to speak with my inner being about the need for peace and the importance of non-violence and non-war. At this time the “peace symbol” had not returned to popular culture. I searched stores and other venues and could not find the old 60’s style peace symbol. I therefore made my own.

A labor of love, I used wire, Tibetan incense thread and needle nose pliers. I worked meditatively for hours and days making as many as I could. I gave them out as gifts to all who would feel moved to wear

them. It was a moving experience to see a number of colleagues and friends wear this 60's return peace symbol as a social message of peace.

Spirit Led Social Action

by Bethanne Kashkett

My first memory of spirit led social action was in high school. I don't remember how, but I was introduced to the United Farm Workers Union. I attended a film that graphically portrayed the plight of migrant farm workers. It was a window into their lives, poor living conditions, poor health conditions, poor wages. The film also championed Cesar Chavez and his tireless work on behalf of the migrant workers. After the film, I attended rallies and protests. The lettuce and grape boycott was in full force and Joan Baez was singing protest songs that included lyrics about Gallo wine. I distinctly remember not eating lettuce and grapes for the longest time.

I wasn't even eighteen years old, but I paid my dues and became a card carrying member of the United Farm Workers Union. I wrote my own ballad about the farm workers and sang it at a Church gathering in Baltimore as a prelude to the union leader's session on UFW. This was my first experience of feeling compelled to act for a social cause. So while my peers went to school football games and movies...I went picketing grocery stores and markets! I knew I wasn't changing the world...but in the spirit of "doing the next right thing", I was at least accomplishing that.

Since those years, I've found myself attending other protests for farm animal rights, for women's right to choose, and for peace (anti-war rallies). It's always a blessing to be in the company of like-minded souls, doing their thing by "showing up" and speaking out! How effective is it in the long run? I have no idea! But I know

when I follow a spiritual leading, I am always moving in the right direction.

Following the "still, small voice" of God

by Jean Pfefferkorn

The leadings that I have received have been gentle nudges, each a natural outgrowth of my personality, character, and history. Leadings I have received have not been dramatic or startling, though I do believe that these dramatic leadings exist. I believe that God's more everyday leadings have placed me in environments where I have been able to sense something that needs to be done. When I follow this leading, I receive more nudges, in God's feedback loop. I think that this is a natural outgrowth of spending time in Friends' meeting, where the Light and the silence have been teaching me to listen and be more compassionate.

Quakers are renowned for great Friends who have followed their leadings, changing the world in wonderful ways--helping to end slavery, give women the vote, care for people in warring countries, bringing peace to nations in conflict. Truly wonderful things. These great accomplishments have been initiated and motivated by the listening, tendered hearts, and fearless following learned with Friends. Like Elijah they heard--after the wind, the earthquake, and the fire--a still, small voice.

Involvement with PATH by John Farrell

Oakland Mills Uniting Church (now known as Columbia Christian United Church) began waking up the Quaker in me in 1975. There, I met regularly with people who I quickly came to recognize as what I now call true Christians, people who are willing to risk understanding and practicing the teachings of Jesus. There I encountered a deeper experience of service, love and compassion. There I learned what it means to be a conscientious objector (CO) and for

the first time met a person who chose to be CO during WWII, the 'just' war if there ever was one. I came to understand how that choice was possible and today I truly see no alternative.

One of the consequences of divorce is that I lost contact with many of members of that church, the church whose values and practices I so appreciated, the church which eventually led me to Quakerism.

What a gift it was for me to reconnect with many of my former fellow seekers when Columbia Christian United Church and Patapsco Friends Meeting became affiliated with People Acting Together in Howard (PATH)...in fact we were two of the initial groups to organize what has become over the past 5 years the most influential ecumenical organization working for social justice in Howard County.

The spirit of love and belief in ecumenical social action brought me to PATH.

Spirit Centered Social Action in PATH by Rosemary Davis

What led me to work with PATH? When I attended my first PATH (People Acting Together in Howard) Action Night and saw a multi-racial, multi-ethnic group of my Howard County neighbors from very diverse faith communities working together on critical local issues, I was moved to join them. With a very low annual budget of \$135,000 and sometimes up to 300 volunteers, PATH has been able to celebrate the following victories in the past five years:

PATH was instrumental in securing an additional \$13 million in the 2013 Maryland State Budget to expand the Medicaid Waiver for Older Adults as part of its Aging in Place initiative.

PATH helped secure over \$400,000 in the 2012 Howard County Budget to initiate a youth conservation corps, READY

(Restoring the Environment and Developing Youth). READY provided over 30 summer jobs for young adults in the community installing rain gardens in churches, schools, and apartments..

PATH volunteers went door to door one summer and spoke to 4,380 residents signing up 395 people who did not have health care coverage for the Healthy Howard Plan or other health coverage programs for which they were eligible. This brought about \$2.4 million in benefits to Howard County residents.

PATH helped mobile home owners in Maryland secure "safety net" legislation should mobile park owners decide to sell the land under their homes.

PATH worked to improve public transportation in Howard County. Waiting time for Howard Transit buses has been reduced from 60 to 30 minutes and commuter bus service to Baltimore has not been cut. (Information from the PATH brochure, *Change You Can See*).

When I feel overwhelmed by national and world events, I am encouraged by the tangible results I see in our community and moved by the grass roots decision making and cooperation among many faiths. This is in stark contrast to the pictures promoted in the media which pit one religious group against another.

My Involvement in PATH by Sam Stayton

All the PATH projects that I recall were led by the staff of PATH, not by the leadings of the individuals participating. Of course, it is possible that some have given the staff of PATH ideas that have ended up in projects. Those in the community who have asked PATH for help may have had leadings inspired by the spirit

Perhaps the PATH staff itself has been led by the spirit, if it is judged by the fruits of its actions. The successes have helped many in the county, particularly

those in greater need. The flier for the recent fundraiser lists "PATH Victories" in working with the county, state, and other organizations in providing for in-home nursing care for seniors, jobs for teenagers, in making rain gardens to preserve the natural environment, funding for Head Start, lower cost for health care for those with limited income, maintaining affordable housing for those living in mobile homes, and more frequent bus service, which helps those who cannot drive or afford a car. .

I have enjoyed working with PATH and its volunteers. It has given me a chance to be with members of other denominations and faiths. Perhaps this good feeling is spiritual in a sense.

My strongest individual leadings, perhaps led by the spirit, have been in efforts for death penalty repeal and greater justice for the Palestinians. These leadings, or feelings, have been present for half of a century or more, and are not the product of membership in a group. For example, since childhood I have had a sick feeling when I learned about an execution.