



The Journal of Patapsco Friends Meeting

June, 2017 – Getting Through Difficult Times

Editor's Note:

The current topic on getting through challenging times is an opportunity to consider our spiritual, emotional, physical and other “helps” that have supported us along the way during difficult periods

Facing Difficulties with Gratitude

By Sam Dixon

I feel I must approach this issue from the perspective of gratitude. Gratitude is fortifying. It also connects us to reality a lot better than negativity does. Life has given me a great deal of experience to draw on about hard times. From the time I was eleven years old, I have been living with chronic Lyme disease. I am now 28. For many years I was extremely debilitated, and I did not get through the years of hardship in my life on my own. I must gratefully honor those who carried me when I could not walk, my mother first among them, and the rest of my family. Thanks are also due to the many friends, teachers, and therapists who happened into my life just when I needed them, to the communities I have found which have sustained me, and to my cat, whose great love protected me and reminded me I was worthy of being loved. In miraculous ways I have been preserved by the benevolence of God, largely through no merit of my own. I could very well have died by my own hand or as the result of addiction, so a fundamental gratitude that I am alive in spite of that is an essential touchstone for me.

In bit of a surprise twist, gratitude for hardship entered into my life. To be grateful is to receive and acknowledge a gift with the heart. All aspects of life may be acknowledged as gifts. Whether or not we wish to attribute them to a “giver” is, for the most part, unimportant, and I’m not writing a discussion about why bad things happen. My experience is that whatever I can receive with my heart -- meaning entirely and without judgement -- becomes a gift.

This winter, I found myself in a particularly hard place. A lot of pain over my illness was surfacing and I was not feeling well physically. In school, I was having a very hard time meeting the demands on me. I had a lot of doubt about whether I could continue as a full time student. For years I had entertained in various forms the hope that there was some kind of magical escape hatch to my problems. If only I became enlightened, if only a healer could touch me, if only my medical treatment could be a swift cure instead of a long slog towards health, *then* my problems would be magically solved. Years of struggle, disappointment, and surrender have largely dismantled that illusion. This winter, in the difficulty and pain I was experiencing, some vestige of these illusions broke. I understood deeply that there was no way out of my hardships. Something shifted and I let the pain and difficulty be. This wasn't despair, it was something more alive than that. Present with the grief was a deep commitment not to

turn away from my life. I felt like I wouldn't change anything about my life if I could, that I would not miss the opportunity to live *this* life. Something of great importance arises when I completely and unconditionally accept life as it actually is: I discover that I am whole. To know that conditions don't take away from wholeness is a precious gift that was given to me through the experience of a chronic illness. The only way I am able to continue receiving the gift of deeply knowing myself to be whole is by engaging persistently in the life I am given, with an open heart. No matter what (it takes practice).

From the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2 v. 31-32:

Know what your duty is
and do it without hesitation.
For a warrior there is nothing better
than a battle which duty enjoins.
Blessed are warriors who are given
the chance of a battle like this,
which calls them to do what is right
and opens the gates of heaven.

HELP!

By Jim Rose

In response to the question of "How to go forward in challenging times," it seems clear to me that I need help in addressing those challenges. Isn't that what community is about? Don't we circle the wagons and gather together to help one another when threats are perceived? No, I'd say, not so much.

I am often hesitant about making generalizations, but here goes. We are a culture of independent individuals who consider themselves self-starters, rugged individualists, self-reliant performers. Rather than ask for help, we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We often would

rather solve our own problems in isolation than ask others for their guidance, their suggestions, their help.

I am a particular example of this syndrome. The faucet leaks, and I take up the challenge! Wrenches are found, pliers are uncovered, washers are purchased, experiments are mounted, screws are unscrewed, mechanisms are revealed, and the faucet still leaks. Here I stand looking failure in the face, defeated by a simple misunderstanding of how the fool thing works. Is this a particular sign of weakness or ignorance? Am I incapable of solving my own problems?

Call the plumber you say? But this is just an example of a wider problem. Who is the right plumber for unsolved problems of life? Who will be of help when the issue is not just a technical fix but correcting an awkward approach to walking the way? And if I start asking others to help solve my problems am I creating a debt? Will I in turn be expected to assist others with their problems whether I am capable of doing something meaningful or not? Do I want to foster a community based on unmet obligations, a network of social debts?

Patapsco Friends have gathered clearness committees and support committees to listen to cries for help, and perhaps to open doors where clearness can be found. It can work. Not only do we generally fail to ask for help, but the other side of the coin is also prevalent. How many times have you said to a friend or relative in need, "Let me know if there's anything I can do to help," and when you didn't hear back, fail to follow-up? And what has been the consequence?

How many times have friends asked me how they can help? And I am at a loss about how to respond. I have been in the situation

where not one, but a hundred people are asking to help. Asking to help, not asking for help. And I am mostly at a loss as to how to respond. But I am learning. I read recently of a guide* for asking: be specific: Meaningful (why you need it), Action-oriented (ask for something to be done), Real (authentic, not made up), and Time-bound (when you need it). It's worth a try.

There are other ways of asking for help. Intercessory prayer is common in religious situations: asking the divine for help either for yourself or for others. Whether or not we have the kind of faith that allows for a deity who intervenes in the events of life, many of us have nevertheless resorted to this kind of prayer. At the end of our ropes, facing a dismal future without choices, who else is there to turn to? And as all prayer has reflective power, often the simple act of giving voice to our despair appears to help us see more clearly the road ahead. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

But without arguing the effectiveness of intercessory prayer I need to point out two other sides of this coin. First God continuously prays to us, asking for our help. Dan Snyder* was greatly affected by an image that spoke to him about the great pain God was witnessing in the world.

"When Phan Thi Kim Phuc ran from her village on June 8, 1972, and Nick Ut took her picture, their lives intersected mine and injected into my soul an image of a child of war, desperately poor, Vietnamese, and now terribly wounded. She was naked and burned, running with arms outstretched, screaming in pain and terror. Nick Ut took the picture that was published around the world and that eventually won him a Pulitzer Prize. Then he took her to a hospital

and probably saved her life. She was nine years old."



For Dan this was not just a child crying out for help; this was the voice of God crying out. And this is just one image that Dan saw over the years. As Quakers are convinced that there is that of God in each person, we need to be prepared to listen to those cries where God in each person is trying to reach us. The din can be overwhelming at times, but listen we must. And act.

But on the other side of the coin, the divine cries of help are offset by the Spirit which is offering continuously to help us without our asking. Whether we know it or not, the voice is there, the offer is there, and God is perplexed to understand why we don't take him up on this offer. Don't we hear him? Quakers have a tradition of expectant waiting, of listening for the still, small, voice of the Spirit. I don't think it's still, nor is it small. There is a power within each of us which wants to help, wants to guide, wants to heal if only we would allow it.

* <https://hbr.org/2014/12/5-ways-to-get-better-at-asking-for-help>

* Daniel O. Snyder, "Quaker Witness as Sacrament", Pendle Hill Pamphlet 397, 2008.

* <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/thumb/d/d4/TrangBang.jpg/375px-TrangB>

How do I deal with the Current Challenges?

By Bethanne Kashkett

Maybe what helps me most is impermanence. I actively remind myself that nothing lasts forever, even and especially, our current President (he who shall not be named!) and political climate. I remember that I am not alone. I think back to the Marches in Washington... the Women's March, The Tax March and the Climate Change March: That sea of others who believe in sanity, science, and taking care of the ones who are most at risk... And I know I am not alone.

I sit in Meeting for Worship, cherishing the fact that I belong to a community of Friends who care. Who look for the Light in others. Who are socially and politically engaged.

How do I stay sane? I attend Quaker Meeting, study the Tao, the Course in Miracles, the Twelve Steps. I practice meditation and prayer daily. Focusing on my breath, a mantra, or a prayer grounds me.

Holding on to "This too shall pass", helps with the panic!

I'd love to share three readings from two of William Martin's beautiful Tao te Ching translations. The first two are from his book -The Caregivers Tao Te Ching. The first one speaks to that feeling of "all alone"- but encourages us that there is nothing we can't face.

(#44: William Martin)

***Peace awaits us in the midst of trouble.
Hidden in all that we don't want lies that which we most desire.
We sometimes feel alone and helpless,***

***but our deepest needs are being met.
There is nothing we need to avoid,
and nothing we cannot face.
Amid the chaos we realize that
We are strong and capable.
Living in uncertainty, we discover
That we can be content.
Even in the midst of loss we find
That the whole world belongs to us.***

The next verse speaks to me about meditation. Silence. Coming back home to yourself. Some very solid advice! So I sit every day and practice. And when I'm lucky, the restless energy settles.

(#26 : William Martin)

***Restless energy keeps saying,
"Not this, something else."
It keeps us looking for an escape,
a return to something called
"normal".
The Tao is never restless.
If we walk along its Way
we see the ever-changing sights
But do not lose ourselves in them.
We always remain at home within
ourselves,
and our restless energy
settles of its own accord.***

This last verse reminds me to keep my protest signs positive! To try not to celebrate the latest "Breaking News on CNN" that details the unraveling of lies. And to remind myself not go negative. Generally, it helps that I really do believe the Light will prevail.

From The Activist's Tao Te Ching, William Martin writes #43

***Stillness brings results
That action cannot achieve.
Quietness can accomplish more
Than angry words.
In a noisy, restless, raging world,***

*Such qualities are rare,
Yet they are the only path to lasting
transformation.*

Getting Through Difficult Times

By Ramona Buck

An image that I call to mind in time of need and that helps me: Standing on a ridge above a creek out in the rain; with my hands out, palms up, in front of me; letting the rain fall on my head, my arms, and all of me, and fill me with spiritual strength.

People from the past who inspire me with their responses to challenges:

Jane Addams

Responding to all, including a burglar who climbed a ladder into her bedroom, with care, attention and calm.

Nelson Mandela

Maintaining his spiritual centeredness even in prison, and re-casting his guards into his “honor guard.”

Martin Luther King

Inspiring others with his beliefs in the positive possibilities for the future in spite of his jailings, hardships and challenges.

Helen Keller

Appreciating beauty even though her ability to experience it was much less than most people’s due to her lack of sight or hearing, and using the abilities she did have to the fullest extent.

William Bacon Evans

Diminutive Quaker and teacher at Westtown Friends School, connecting with others who were dealing with challenges, and coming across as approachable and accepting.

Beliefs/Ideas that support me:

I firmly believe that we always have the choice of how to respond even though we don’t have control over what happens to us. I try to follow the Quaker belief that there is that of God in each person even though some may initially come across to me as filled with negative qualities. As a mediator, I have learned experientially that there is always more than one perspective on any situation. I can learn something from everything that happens to me, even if it is a very negative situation with very negative consequences. There is a part of me, my spiritual essence, which is not damaged by what happens to me, but which remains fresh, young and vibrant.

An excerpt from a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier:

*Success is failure turned inside out;
The silver tint of the clouds of doubt. . . .
So stick to the fight when you’re hardest hit,
It’s when things seem worst,
That you must not quit.*

John Buck writes:

Emily Dickinson had some memorable things to say about getting through difficult times:

*There is strength in proving that it can be
borne
Although it tear —
What are the sinews of such cordage for
Except to bear
The ship might be of satin
had it not to fight -
To walk on seas requires cedar Feet*

And another of her poems:

*Hope is the thing with feathers
That perches in the soul,
And sings the tune without the words,
And never stops at all,*

*And sweetest in the gale is heard;
And sore must be the storm
That could abash the little bird
That kept so many warm.*

*I've heard it in the chillest land,
And on the strangest sea;
Yet, never, in extremity,
It asked a crumb of me.*

**How we get through difficult or
challenging times - what sustains us,
what have we learned, etc.**

by Beatrice Kondo

I have been interested in Quakers since reading [The Friendly Persuasion](#) as a child, and when I found that there are non-Christian, even non-theist Quakers, I wanted to find a Meeting that was liberal and unprogrammed, to see if I would fit in with such a community. However, it was not until this year, when I found myself overwhelmed with a sense of problems too big for me to tackle, things I had to learn to live with and still have grace and positivity, that I felt pushed to a new level, to search for spiritual community. So, what I am working on, which I feel the Meeting brings, is the sense that one can live with grace in difficult times. I have found that what I have faith in is that there is a higher truth, a light that is unaltering, and sharing that faith with others in silent worship, even if we have different names and conceptions for it, brings that light more into my consciousness.