**Report on the Quaker Life Representative Council weekend, April 2018**

April's Council weekend had been given the title ‘Small steps, big changes – how can Quaker Life help you and your meeting to make change happen?’ The pace was deliberately slow. Yes, the weekend was aimed partly at giving us, as area meeting representatives, a resource or two for enlivening our area meetings and, if need be, simplifying our way of doing things; but we were viewed as resources in ourselves, and one aim was to afford us a quiet space for taking stock both of ourselves as Friends and attenders and of the ways in which we organise ourselves back home as quaker communities

We were reminded of the words of William Charles Braithwaite, written in 1905 and recorded in the 1959 Christian Faith and Practice (section 317): “Organisation is a good servant but a bad master; the living fellowship within the Church must remain free to mould organisation into the fresh forms demanded by its own growth and the changing needs of the time.”

Representatives were allocated to ‘home groups’, each with about 10 participants. The idea was that stories and insights, as well as ideas for supporting our meetings, could more easily be shared in these smaller groups. In addition, there were plenary sessions, which included opportunities for worship. Representatives were also shown a tempting menu of eight workshops to choose from. I attended two of these on your behalf: ‘Mental health – for ourselves, our meetings and across Quakers’, given by Alison Mitchell, Mental Health Development Officer, and including a thought-provoking variation on the game of snakes and ladders; and ‘Nurturing our meeting; nourishing ourselves’, given by Alistair Fuller, Head of Ministry and Outreach. I'll tell you a bit about the second of these.

Alistair introduced his workshop by saying that the deepening and nourishing of our spiritual lives, both individually and as communities, was at the heart of our life together as quakers. We were invited to share our own experiences of what nourishes and nurtures us and to explore ways in which our area and local meetings might benefit from this kind of sharing. Who are the people, and what are the practices and experiences, that help us feel ‘grounded, connected and whole’? I have to say that I liked that little trinity of adjectives.

Learning about each other's journeys – the blessings and struggles that have shaped us – can enrich our worship and our life together. Sharing stories, said Alistair, is also a way of bypassing anxieties about language and the use of particular words, and it allows people to talk about faith in ways that are natural and meaningful for them. With this in mind, I'll be introducing a light-hearted little exercise at our area meeting on Sunday.

I came away from the Council weekend wondering how not only our quaker life in general but also our worship in particular might benefit from the selective and unanxious sharing of our own stories. What are the things that have given us a lift and stopped us from getting down? Stories are already what religion usually fails to be: porous and leaky. It is perhaps through stories, more readily than through a common language of abstractions (evermore elusive as this is), that we can not only build our communities but also rediscover the gathered meeting. Who's for a game of quakerly snakes and ladders?

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