

The “Holding Earth in the Light” Retreat

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What does it mean to hold Earth in the light and what does it mean for us to be held in the light of Earth? California Friends explored these and other questions at “Holding Earth in the Light,” an Earthcare retreat held in the rolling Sierra foothills as the summer turned to fall¹. Fifty Friends from fourteen meetings within Pacific Yearly Meeting gathered to ponder these questions, share reports from their meetings, and to be challenged and inspired by Friend Keith Helmuth.²

Keith’s thought-provoking keynote address, entitled “First Light or Last Things,”³ questioned whether we are on the eve of an ecological enlightenment, with a rediscovered spiritual and physical connection to the Earth guiding our actions. Alternatively, he wondered if we might be headed for chaos and destruction, because of our disregard for the health and viability of Earth’s ecosystems.

Keith described the spiritual sustenance he experienced from joining several other Quakers in worship together with the Abenaki People at their First Light Ceremony. They welcomed the dawn as the sun’s first light flowed over the hills and valleys in New Brunswick, Canada, in gratitude for this light which gives life to all beings. This ceremony gave him an immediate and visceral experience of light--a central motif in Quakerism--reminding him that spirit connects to humans directly through the natural world. (see accompanying article for the full text of his address.)

The darker side of Keith’s message, the coming of destruction and disruption due to our civilization’s disregard for Earth’s ecosystems, came with a cautionary tale from one of California’s native elders. Not far from where we gathered in the Sierra foothills, a man named Ishi entered the town of Oroville years ago—he was nearly starved, the last surviving member of the Yahi People. The Yahi had been systematically hunted down and killed by the land-hungry American settlers in the rich, “golden hills” of the new state of California. Ishi lived for another five years in the California Museum of San Francisco, under the care of UC Berkeley Professor Alfred Kroeber. Though Ishi understandably fell into short bouts of depression during his remaining years on Earth, for the most part he was remarkably centered and outwardly kind to all who came in contact with him, showing no malice towards the culture that had destroyed his people. Keith encourages us to learn from this example, so that we can also remain centered and kind in whatever future unfolds. Keith believes that Ishi’s world-view, that was centered in relationship with all creation and saw human interaction with the natural world as a way to learn how to behave in it, as a key to his ability to cope with such major traumas in his life.

Friends had many stories of their own to tell, reporting how they and their meetings are witnessing for the Earth. Friends noted that many people in their Meetings are taking steps to make changes toward a more sustainable way of life. We heard reports

about individuals traveling less, using more efficient vehicles or modes of travel, energy conservation in homes, gardening for food and eating locally produced food. We also heard that most Meetings have initiated ways to “green” their meeting houses through energy conservation and other practices. We recognized that while these were important things to do, they constituted first steps toward larger, systemic changes that are required if humans are to live sustainably on Earth.

Ideas for taking that next step include working with interfaith groups to promote sustainability, developing local Friends lobbying groups modeled on FCNL to work on municipal and regional sustainability, introducing ideas such as Strawberry Creek and Chico Meetings’ Dime a Gallon³ project to other meetings, promoting permaculture as a practical path toward sustainability and a dream of developing an eco-village at Sierra Friends Center. A draft Minute on climate change was discussed, and will be considered by several meetings and by Southern California and College Park Quarterly Meetings.³

One of the themes that emerged from our weekend together is that peace, earthcare and social justice work are intertwined, with work on any one of these concerns no longer possible without understanding how it relates to and affects the others. Strawberry Creek Monthly Meeting, a co-sponsor of the retreat along with Pacific Yearly Meeting-Unity with Nature Committee, has recently made this interdependence visible by forming a Peace, Earthcare and Social Witness Committee. Two years ago, Strawberries adopted the Dime a Gallon Project as a response to the war in Iraq and global environmental concerns. The project, overseen by the PE&SW committee, encourages members/attenders to contribute 10 cents for every gallon of gasoline or energy equivalent for their personal consumption of fossil fuels. Most Strawberries participate in the project to some extent, and energy awareness is high throughout the meeting.

First light or last things? The answer may be that both will happen simultaneously in our lifetimes. What can we learn from the past and from each other to bring our light to the world? This retreat highlighted the tension we feel between what Friends are doing now to live in more sustainable ways and the profound changes in worldview and societal functioning that are required if we are to survive and thrive within either future scenario. Will we as spiritual seekers, Quakers and human beings take to heart the vital lessons from nature, tap the wisdom of our ancestors, call on spirit for guidance and do the work required to resolve this tension and move forward toward a new way of being and living. What are we as Quakers called to contribute to this essential and life-affirming work?

¹ The retreat was held at Sierra Friends Center (<http://sierrafriendscenter.org>), September 29-October 1, 2006.

² Keith Helmuth is a member of New Brunswick MM, and a sojourning member of Central Philadelphia MM.

³ First Light or Last Things,” more information about the Dime a Gallon project, and the draft Climate Change Minute can be found at www.dimeagallon.com