

A testimony to the Grace of God in the life of our Friend Joan Hilda Harvey 1/10/1922 – 12/09/2015

Joan Harvey would have scorned a description of herself as a weighty Quaker, but she was the epitome of the term. She read widely and synthesised the spiritual essence of her deep reflection into spoken ministry, which led High Flatts Meeting to depths it might not otherwise have reached. When Friends sought her counsel (which she did not give without being asked), her advice was wise and sound. She mentored those coming newly into meeting. She was very independent and could be formidable, but she was never unapproachable. She cared and thought deeply. Her knowledge of Friends and Quakerism and her wide range of experience in education gave her a wisdom and authority which was widely accepted and cherished by those she knew and worked with.

Joan was born in Paddington in 1922. Her father had been a combatant in the First World War and had lost a leg as a result of wounds received. Joan grew up in Loughton in Essex where she attended the local girls high school. On completion of her high school studies she determined to train as a teacher in a local college. With the onset of the Blitz the course transferred to Doncaster and there she lived in digs with a local family. She enjoyed telling a story of how one winter evening during the blackout she returned by mistake to the house next door and found herself and a friend, both attractive young women, in the midst of a group of soldiers who 'must have thought that Christmas had come early!'

Joan taught English all of her working life, in a range of institutions. She began her teaching career in a Barking school with a class of 52 children. She married her first husband, Leslie, before moving to South Woodford, later to Buckhurst Hill, where they had four children, Madeleine, Linda, Vivien and Roger. After Leslie became blind as a result of chronic diabetes, they moved to a thatched house in the village of Ford End, Essex. Joan had a hard time of it first nursing Leslie (he died in 1958) and then as a young widow, teaching full-time at a school in Dunmow, whilst at the same time tending the chickens, vegetables, flowers and fruit trees on their five-acre smallholding and bringing up four children on her own. Not long after this, the family moved to Cambridge where Joan taught English at Saffron Walden Secondary Modern School, with the 40-mile daily return journey undertaken on her trusty moped, often at what seemed like breakneck speeds for this particular form of transport. Joan's Head of Department at Saffron Walden was Cyril Harvey, whom she was later to marry. Joan went on to teach English at Bassingbourn Village College, a concept unique to Cambridgeshire that was designed to provide an educational and social hub for the local rural community.

Joan and Cyril moved to Yorkshire in 1968, living at first in Wakefield, with Joan teaching at the primary school in the former mining village of Crigglestone, and moving soon after to Ackworth. In 1970 Joan took up a post teaching English at Ackworth School, beginning an association with the school that lasted till her retirement and beyond. It was at Ackworth that Joan and Cyril's interest in Quakerism was aroused and they both became members.

In 1977 Cyril was appointed Head of Brummana Quaker High School in Lebanon, with Joan later joining him there as a member of the English staff at a time of considerable unrest in the region. Joan's experiences from that period of her life informed much of her thinking about spiritual matters and helped nurture her growth in all things Quaker.

On return to the UK in 1982 Joan spent three years as Deputy Head at Friends School Great Ayton, but then returned to finish her teaching career at Ackworth, where she primarily took on the role of housemistress and hence acted in loco parentis for some of the boarders. One example of Joan's practical, caring and thoughtful nature was that, as housemistress there, she persuaded the bursar to install a washing machine in the house, which was more suitable for her teenage charges' needs than the school laundry.

Four years after Joan's retirement and their move to Clayton West near Huddersfield, Cyril died and, finding it difficult to reach Ackworth for meeting, Joan became a worshipper at High Flatts Meeting. She served Friends in most capacities: as local and area meeting clerk; as elder; on Area Meeting Nominations Committee; as representative to Meeting for Sufferings where she worked on the MSC, the Sufferings Committee which did much of the work now undertaken by BYM Trustees. She made a major contribution to her local Churches Together group and rejoiced in bringing periods of silence to ecumenical services and offering a Quaker interpretation of the major Christian festivals. She was for many years a regular member of the Quaker Theology seminar at Woodbrooke where she took part in reflections on Quaker faith and offered discussion papers on topics such as eldership and discernment. She attended Britain Yearly Meeting regularly, where she would offer service as doorkeeper, even in her later years.

She delighted in her visits to her family in London, Birmingham and Denmark, and would relish the visits of her grandchildren to Yorkshire, with whom she had exciting adventures and where all enjoyed fun and games away with Gran, in a spirit of freedom that may not have been completely acceptable back home.

At her local Meeting she is remembered warmly for the depth and insight of her spoken ministry which reflected a mature grasp of the Quaker way and a deep conviction of the need to live our testimonies. An advocate of liberal, inclusive theology, Joan regularly gave spoken ministry in meeting for worship: she could find a way to enrich gatherings with thoughts of great beauty and depth, but also with realism and challenge. Shortly after the appalling abuse and murder of Victoria Climbié came to light, in ministry Joan identified that one of the worst aspects was that the child was not heard as she spoke only French.

Someone challenged Joan once as to whether she had ever faced death and the following Sunday she ministered on a moment at Brummana during a time of extreme community unrest when a member of the militia came to school armed and threatened her. Her instinctive but high risk response was to order him sharply to put the gun down, which (recognising her authority) shamefacedly he did.

Joan never seemed to be at peace: rather she seemed always to be seeking. It was helpful to Friends to learn that someone with the range of Joan's experience could still raise questions (for example, of God's immanence or transcendence, following the God the Trickster course at Woodbrooke).

In her final years she was frightened by the onset of dementia, which acutely affected her memory. It became increasingly difficult for her to live on her own, even with a formal care package in place, and, while her family tried to arrange a residential place, she accepted Friends' daily visits and support with grace, as her fierce independence, notwithstanding her confusion, relaxed into trust. She finally moved nearer her family to a care home in Birmingham, where, surrounded by her familiar furniture and family photographs, she spent her last days in a comfortable, caring atmosphere.