

Quakers in Yorkshire  
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A LOW CARBON SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY:  
QUAKER FAITH ... AND PRACTICE?

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**STARTING POINTS:**

**We are all in this together:**

Is anyone of us ready to claim that they have done everything they could to realize this commitment in their own lives and in the wider society?

Who us can say that they have done absolutely nothing to realize it?

Friends, my starting point is this: we are all in this together; we have in common that there are some things we have done and some we have not. We are all both faithful AND unfaithful.

That is true for me.

**Our Circumstances and our Options are not the Same:**

The actions we can really take are affected by circumstance. For example: I have always been physically fit; robust cycling in city traffic is not a problem; Emily was less robust and then was knocked off her bike ... and couldn't get back to cycling again.

So, I do know we are all in this together and we have a common commitment but also that our circumstances are different. But, we need to make sure by deep prayerful reflection, that this is not a cop-out. The only way we can be sure of this is to share with each other in loving truth/ honest love.

**Well then: who am I that I should be speaking to you?**

I am not an expert in any field to do with sustainability or environmental science. Rather, over the years, I have become gripped by a spiritual conviction that I must bring myself into a right relationship with the whole of creation. I was around in the days, 40 or so years ago, of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation. After a spell as Clerk of QSRE I wrote a large part of a book called Faith in Action over 15 years ago, which had a section on the developing testimony to the Environment ... and I continued to encourage Friends to recognise that Testimony, especially during a spell in the Testimonies Committee. Later I served on the Canterbury Commitment Group and on the Economics, Sustainability and Peace Committee of QPSW.

But you need to know *what I have done* and *what I have not done* in relation to our low-carbon community commitment, to know where my words come from. So say, so do ... if only I had the grace to experience that faithful unity more completely.

This isn't the place to focus on my actions and inactions, so I am offering you on paper some brief pointers, which I hope are honest, but which will necessarily be incomplete. They cover four areas of our personal lifestyle that are by far the most important in

reducing our carbon footprint: travel by car, travel by plane, diet and heating/ insulation.  
(Note: even these are hugely affected by government policy – subsidies, laws etc.  
Individual choice can only be a small part the answer in terms of its effects... but it is vital  
spiritually as a marker of our concern and our intent)

## Background 1- Time Perspectives:

Here are two quotations from the Friend in 1972 – 40 years ago!

The first is from Dorothy Lovett on July 7<sup>th</sup>. It appeals for Friends to take a radical stance against the Consumer Society:

*“How many of us can truly say that we use up only as much of the earth's resources as we absolutely must? Is it our concern at all times to obtain the last ounce of usefulness out of everything entrusted to our care? Do we, for the sake of comfort and convenience, make use of products and facilities which would be better left alone? Are we, in other words, a people of simplicity and reverence for life who willingly, and even fiercely, uphold the principle that the things of this world are God-given and to be shared by all?”*

The second is from the two Quaker MPs, Richard Body, a Conservative, and Guy Barnett, Labour. They wrote a joint article in the Friend of 1 December 1972, part of which reads:

*... “Both the main parties, the Trades Union Congress and the Confederation of British Industry regard growth as the yardstick of a nation's economic success.*

*We deny this, and hope fervently that all Friends will share with us the concern we feel about this. If growth is defined as an expansion of the gross domestic product, there is a twofold price to be paid for it. One is pollution, and the other the exhaustion of the world's resources.” [and now clearly more to the point, global warming]*

If I start with these quotations it is because they give us a challenging depth of focus for our consideration this morning. If, in 1972, they could see so far out of their Quaker concern, how much further have we been able to see?– with the benefit of unprecedented exposure of the dangers being created by the global warming we are producing, connected as it is to the huge developments of technology and attendant dramatic rise in inequality of income and wealth.

## Time Perspective 2: The Canterbury Commitment

This was made by Friends in BYM over 5 years ago. What has changed since then?

The rate of increase in carbon emissions globally has slowed. The Paris Summit led to a broad, globally agreed approach to the control of carbon emissions – though Trump has put spanners in the spokes there too. Renewable energy has powered ahead both in the UK and globally. Coal's role is being steadily reduced, especially in China, but also the USA ... and this might continue despite Trump's espousal of coal. The Fossil Fuel divestment campaign has achieved significant public recognition – the role of the Society of Friends in this has been very significant.

Yet global temperatures continue inexorably to rise; arctic ice is reduced in scale and late in formation; towns in the far north of Russia are collapsing as the tundra melts; biodiversity loss shows no sign of slowing and habitat loss is implicated in much of that; when the BBC reported the finding of a huge new oil field in UK waters recently, the news report was entirely celebratory, about the economic benefits, as though the need to keep much of the discovered oil and gas reserves, in the earth had completely passed the supposedly neutral BBC by. The issues scarcely figure in mainstream politics. [ the forthcoming election?] Air travel continues to grow ... and foreign holidays are more and more focused on distant lands.

And what about us Quakers?

Are we approaching the status of a low-carbon sustainable community? It would be surprising if we were, as it is very hard to do everything we know we should when national priorities do not provide an encouraging, a nurturing framework.

A great deal has been done to make our Meeting Houses more energy efficient, though there is still more we should do.

In terms of our homes and lifestyles, there are four areas where our commitment is both harder and more crucial. The energy needed in our homes, the car, air travel and a low carbon diet. We really need a survey to assess progress so far. My judgement is purely anecdotal: for what it's worth here it is:

Friends have done a good deal to make their homes *somewhat* more energy efficient, though internal insulation of solid walls is a problem; a fair number of Friends have solar panels of some sort. Many have double or triple glazing. But as to the thermostat, have we turned it down as far as we can?

In terms of the car, I sense that reduced use has been marginal; where public transport has improved, as with Manchester's Metro, and with free travel for Senior Citizens, a significant shift from car travel to Meeting has been achieved. But the total mileage per individual Friend household?

Air travel: my Meeting has a number of Friends who avoid travelling by air. Travelling in Europe by train needs more money and more time than by air but has much to offer if you can afford both. At the same time, taking holidays by air, in the light of the commitment, should be one of the easiest ways of reducing our carbon footprint. Yet Friends still blithely swap stories of their air holidays as though the commitment didn't exist.

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Cf Gandhi in 1928: "God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. If an entire nation of 300 millions [sic] took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts." [In Amitav Ghosh: *The Great Derangement*, 2016]

Do we see and do we act accordingly? Yes we do, but **how much** further do we see and how much more faithfully do we act? Are we still, after 40 years of enlightenment, waiting for the spirit to lead us? How does our spiritual practice respond to the damage and how does it set about regenerating what we have destroyed? Of course we have the Canterbury Commitment. The question is: how widely and how radically is it felt as a spiritual imperative that must transform our lives? Quaker climate radicals generally have felt that the response has been patchy. In 2009, Meeting for Sufferings may have minuted:

*"As individuals and as a community we are now making the difficult decisions and plans necessary to limit our ecological impact to a sustainable level."* But were we really – making the difficult decisions? And have we since? Do we think the collective carbon footprint of Friends is lower than it was in 1972, 2009, 2011? Do we **know** that it is?

## Background 2 – The Sense of Loss

One of the starting points for a reflection on global warming is to experience the sense of actual and impending loss. Let's share together, reminding ourselves of some aspects of the damage humans have inflicted, are inflicting or are threatening to inflict on the earth, including ourselves, through our collective way of life:

Jonathan's reserve list

Species loss	Habitat loss
Extreme weather	Chemical Pollution
Plastics in the ocean	Species depletion (fishing)
Desertification	Water shortage
Population	Noise pollution
The consumerist frenzy	Waste
Gross inequality	The worship of money - idolatry

*Make sure these are made vividly concrete: e.g the Lark, the Song Thrush*

**The sense of loss is as acute as is a joy that is threatened. It is a true spiritual foundation for action.**

WHY THEN ARE WE SO SLOW?

We make much play about the spiritual basis of our lives. So why do we carry on inflicting this damage as though there is no tomorrow ... indeed that may ultimately be why there may well be no recognisable tomorrow ....

The answers to this question seem to me to lie fairly and squarely in the realm of culture on the one hand and economic structures on the other. In both cases a key issue for us is how we experience the spirit in the world we live in.

### Culture and Spirituality

**I am sure we are aware that our manner of living contains the seeds of environmental destruction ... but do we see it as sacrilegious? An affront to God? Destructive of God's world? Demonic? If we did, our worship would be impossible without a transformation of our lives – at the very least an active grappling towards transformation?**

The question in the end is which are the real forces that shape our lives? Obedience to the leadings of the spirit? Our accustomed security, comfort and convenience? Habit? In which parts of our lives do we follow God and which Mammon.

The absence of a sense of a “beyond” in much contemporary liberal Quakerism can easily leave us in the mire of mere individual preference amongst all the other preferences of others. It is hard for such a limited “authority” to stand up and resist the immense powers that are shaping it. **The great question for Liberal Quakerism seems to me to be: Can it overcome a woolly, tolerant subjectivism and generate a prophetic reflection on the opposition of our testimonies and the powers that dominate our times so that our lives are transformed into embodied testimonies rather than merely blending into prevailing norms?**

Let me take a concrete example, that may be painful to some ... as others would be to me ... flying on holiday. I am taking this example as it seems to many the easiest action to take which has a very significant impact on one's carbon footprint. For people who fly on holiday this would be a very big addition to their carbon footprint. We all know this. Quite a number of Friends, amongst others, have stopped doing this. But others haven't. Why not?

Usually because it is seen as a thoroughly enjoyable experience, because time is too short to use the train, or it is so much more expensive. (The true cost of flying, of course, is not what the individual pays for the flight) However, none of us flew on holiday a generation or two ago ... and we survived ... the world would have us believe that whatever is possible must be experienced. But what does our spiritual insight tell us? That our pleasure may not justify the damage it entails. The melting of the Arctic Ice, extinction of the Polar Bear, opening up of the Arctic to oil production and an intensification of the cycle and ..... Doesn't it? How can we square this with a spirituality that is based upon a commitment to living out right relationships, with God/ our fellow humans/ the earth and all that lives on it?

Yet I need to remember that I am not (yet?) a vegan! Eat dairy/ meat "as long as thou canst?" Fly on holiday "as long as thou canst" .... we are indeed all in this together.

And it is an entirely new phenomenon: economic progress has made the "normal" aspirations of human beings toxic. (Adventure, travel, beauty. Security etc? The recent clear recognition that climate change is an issue also of Eldership, because it raises in an acute form questions about our faith's ability to respond in love to a crisis which threatens so much and so many - humans, animals, plants, insects etc.

### **Opportunity 1. The Sacramental Nature of the Whole of Life**

This core testimony is at the heart of what we believe. Everything we say and see and do points towards the divine or away from it; reveals its presence or its absence. Nothing is merely routine; nothing is merely secular. And so spirituality is not restricted to private modes of being. Rather it affirms that the whole of our activity and our potential impact in the world needs to be understood in relation to our sense of the ultimate, our glimpses of the nature of God. Spirituality is essentially about the quality of relationship and our relationships are both personal and mediated through the complex forces which shape the social, political and economic forces in the world. All of these dimensions form the framework in which the deep, spiritual significance of our lives is made manifest. And the environmental crises we face provide a revealing illustration of this.

I thought I believed the whole of life was sacramental until the truth emerged that I didn't really [ad lib – housing, car ownership and use, flying, fossil fuels], But, if climate change is true, then so much of what I do and don't do becomes a question of "life" and "death", spiritually and in the real world. Even more so if it becomes clear that our existing economic model is at the heart of the crisis. Then, indeed, everything is a sacrament. So, as I have

wrestled with the places I live, how I shop, how I invest, how I travel I have experienced the joy of slowly reclaiming the truth that the whole of life is sacramental. Every aspect of our life is an invitation to a loving communion with our fellow beings everywhere, with the whole of creation, with God ... but that invitation comes through the choices we make about the source of our food and the manner of its production, the decisions we make about travel, the choice about where we live and the impact of that choice on the wider

community. Just everything. Many of those actions had been things that previously I did unconsciously – which means that I was influenced by the normal secular considerations of convenience, preference, comfort, security ... when they came into the light as invitations to a more sensitive and more loving weaving of my life into the lives of others, it has proved a slow-burning, progressively transformative experience. The deep joy that comes from even the partial and stumbling efforts to be faithful to the light far outweighs anything that material well-being can offer.

I know: Friends have said to me that the hugely problematic nature of choices can just make for anxiety or paralysis and that we cannot all know everything or be equally focused on everything. Just think of the complexity of deciding what food to buy: fair trade is obviously important; so, I believe, is organic, if only because it is associated with much greater biodiversity than conventional industrialised agriculture; but there is the question of food miles and even air freight; there are issues about the companies that are involved in the processing or sale, their attitude to unions, their treatment of workers; there are issues about unnecessary packaging; there are issues about travelling to shop; there are issues about directors' remuneration in the firms making the products; and about how far we want to buy convenience food to save time, but thereby increasing the pressure to increase still further one's income so as to be able to afford it. Yes, it is hugely complex ... so, just take the spirit with you and do your best; the spirit, when we truly listen, supports us; it never paralyses us. Meeting for Worship in the supermarket – or still better the wholefood workers' co-operative – must be the aim.

## **The Economy and Spirituality**

Spiritual response is not exhausted once it has led to lifestyle changes, however deep these are. Right relationship involves all the political, economic and social forces. These are the forces that constrain our lifestyle choices . They need to be right if our individual lives are to be so.

And we are at the exciting time when Quaker testimonies have come to seem more immediately relevant than for generations. The crisis of global warming has enabled us to actually believe, rather than merely assert, that an economic system that fuels extreme inequalities is damaging, an economic system indissolubly bound up with perpetual growth is destructive of the future of the planet, with all its people and living things; that much of the discovered reserves of fossil fuels must be left in the ground; that an economy that fuels insatiable desires and worships money is idolatrous and destructive of the highest aspirations of humanity.

As Alastair McIntosh has written: *“The earth can no longer afford the rich. We need a lot more courage in saying that loud and clear.”*

A letter to the Guardian sums up the challenge succinctly: *“The economic challenge of our times is the design of a system that enables us to gracefully contract while reducing inequality.”* See Tim Jackson, *Prosperity without Growth* and Kate Raworth – *Doughnuts Economics: seven ways to think like a 21<sup>st</sup> century economist*.

At the same time most conventional politics does its best to ignore or minimise the crisis – our speaking out and our public action is more than ever needed – and we Quakers are, at a national level, making progress: In Canterbury in 2011, BYM not only agreed Minute 36 – the Canterbury Commitment – but Minute 23, broadly on the need for a new economic and social direction. Almost every BYM since has continued this theme ... and ESP has been working on the same lines, producing Principles for a New Economy. QPSW is very clear that tackling climate change necessitates also fundamentally changing the ways in which the economy is made to work.

You might say; steady on, isn't one problem as huge as climate change enough to be going on with. But no, let's look at this as another opportunity. What climate change has done is to puncture the credentials of the economic system that is dominant .... and suddenly we find our Testimonies are not just values we try to desperately hold on to in a hostile world, but real guides to a necessary transformation if humankind is to achieve a new sustainable framework of interaction with each other and with nature. One that subordinates the profit motive to the care for the planet; one that is based on a sufficient equality globally and within each society .... without this the copy-cat motivations by which those who have less aspire to the goods and activities of those who have most, will drive production and consumption ever upwards at the expense of the planet as a whole. It is good to be able to speak out with a confident voice, surer than before that our Testimonies are signposts to God and, as such necessary markers for the development of a truly sustainable global society.

The situation is dire: but we have opportunities and, in our different ways, we have work to do. Let's get on with it.

## HANDS UP: THINGS WE CAN DO

Some money to invest? - Many so-called ethical options .... but increasingly other options to support initiatives we can support wholeheartedly:

- Community hydro schemes
- The Ethical Property Company
- Triodos Renewables/ now Thrift
- The Phone Co-op
- Traidcraft
- Shared Interest
- Ecology Building Society/ Triodos Bank/ the Co-operative Bank?
- Via Abundance, for example

Campaigns to support:

- Fossil fuel divestment: has your Meeting -LM and AM?
- Opposition to fracking
- Fair trade organisations
- The Living Wage
- Tax Justice
- Air Quality

Organisations to support:

- ETA (Environmental Transport Association)
- Phone Co-op
- Workers Co-operatives
- Organic production: Garden Organic/ The Soil Association
- Transition Towns
- Operation Noah
- Wildlife Trusts/ RSPB/ WWF etc
- Greenpeace/ Friends of the Earth

## **Challenge and Precious Opportunity**

It is true that climate change is massively disruptive to almost all the ways in which modern culture has shaped our thought universe. Humankind is projected as incapable of controlling the world in which it lives, at the mercy of forces it has unleashed but which have come to have an unpredictable life of their own. This may have been true in the past in terms of isolated incidents .... but not in terms of the climate as a whole. No wonder we struggle to shift our thinking and our action anything like fast enough to substantially moderate the crisis.

And this can leave us paralysed, in denial, and doubting that anything we can do will make a difference.

But we are Quakers, people of faith, used to looking at reality and cleaving to the truth, and responding to it with an active love.

I have suggested, what I have found from my experience: that there are, quite unexpectedly, precious opportunities for us in this unfolding catastrophe and that this is true, however much or little, collective endeavours manage to limit the degree of and the effects of climate change: the first is that it can force us into seeing every aspect of our lives as an adventure in the spirit; the second is that it makes abundantly clear that Quaker Testimonies are not vague aspirations that cannot be realised but absolutely essential guides to the creation of a truly sustainable economy within a sustaining nature. Thirdly, that the steps we are able to take, if they are truly taken from faith, will be accompanied by a strange sense of joyfulness even in the teeth of our awareness of imminent disaster.

## **Bringing our Canterbury Commitment into our local Quaker Life**

### *Mutual Accountability*

How can we grow in faith unless we risk the dialogue with each other about how our lives destroy God's earth and how we reorganise to repair the damage that we can. That means overcoming our individualism – that is the spirit of the age holding us by the scruff of the neck .... but so all pervasively that we don't even recognise that it is not freedom. It means relearning the mutual accountability that seems to have been there for early Friends.

We need to share our experience of flying or not flying, of eating meat and veganism and find a way to encourage each other – as athletes do! Is that really how we see the different priorities? I need a Friend to dialogue with me and suggest that I don't accept any more invitations to speak until I've got my own house in order! Truth and community, without guilt ... because we recognise that we are indeed all in this together and need each other to grow in faithfulness.

There is nothing, in my view, we need more than this sense of a shared journey in which truth is not a generator of guilt but a motivator for change.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Rowena Loverance concludes her review of 'Hard Rain: Our Headlong Collision with Nature', a photography exhibition, thus: "*Poverty, the wasteful use of resources, habitats and species loss, over-population, climate change, they all require the same demand, that*

*we reinvent the modern world so that it's compatible with nature. We all know what we have to do, the personal change in lifestyle, the public campaigning so that politicians know they have a constituency. What we lack is the will, the blood and bone urgency to do it."*

The urgency can be experienced through the economic crisis. Both because it shows the failings of the system on top of its distorted priorities – but also because it has led to a paradoxical stress on economic growth. This is understandable ... but disastrous.

The urgency may also come from an opening of the spirit, from deep sharing with our Quaker community, or from steps into action that draw us on and in to a deeper sense of being lead.

I end with the concluding lines of John Drinkwater's "Summer's End", quoted by Sewell Harris at a residential Yearly Meeting. This was the moment when, finally, after years of struggle, I knew I had to change my career and came to know that transformation is possible ....

*Grant us the will to fashion as we feel,  
Grant us the strength to labor as we know, grant us the purpose,  
Ribbed and edged with steel  
To strike the blow,  
Knowledge we ask not -- knowledge Thou hast lent,  
Give us to build above the deep intent  
The deed, the deed.*

-- J. Drinkwater

## **If Testimony is what we do, we need, simply, to share**

### **Jonathan's Sharing**

**(It adds up to more than a fair share)**

#### **The car:**

We gave up our car in 2008, but, as I explained, I felt I needed to be able to get Emily around at a time when she had become too frail to manage awkward and cold conditions, after a 3-4 month time of acute chest problems. After her shocking ill-health in that winter of 2015-16 I became clear that this position had to give. Electric? I pondered but didn't as I had macular degeneration and was unsure as to whether my licence would be renewed. Reason or cop-out? I'm lucky with my fitness and so I never have to use the car for myself.

#### **The Plane:**

As to the plane, we haven't flown for over 15 years ... apart from breaking the vow when we were stuck in Paris with a train strike on our way to a very brief Spanish holiday. We have a son and family in Germany and are lucky to have the time and money to travel there by train or by train and ferry (less good). If we have taken any other holidays abroad, they have been chosen so as to be manageable by train. No hardship there – for those like us with time and money. We enjoy the experience.

#### **Heating and Insulation:**

We live in a solid-walled 1900 terraced property, bought for £30,000 in 1994. Gas central heating. Leaked heat like a sieve. I spent years knowing that it had to be insulated and because of the historical and aesthetic considerations, this had to be internal. (This means, the whole house has to be a a work-site and everything has to be packed up) The thought was horrendous as I have so many papers and books. We had the money; it was the time that was off-putting. The Green Deal had wasted large amounts of our time but we eventually gave the Green Deal up and had it done 18 months ago, at a time when Emily shouldn't have been put through the upheaval; it was only through the family especially our daughter and son-in-law and one of their daughters that we came through in one piece. Thank goodness, as Emily now needs the heat more than she used too and in a more leaky house it wouldn't bear thinking about. It is still not anything like carbon neutral and I am aware I may not have got the best advice. We also have a small Solar PV array on the roof, which is gabled and not suitable for anything bigger.

#### **Diet:**

We have been largely vegetarian plus fish for many years, as well as organic, which is about trying to limit the more sterile, monocultural, industrial agriculture that has been encouraged by the design of modern economic life. But I have begun moving to a more vegan diet in recognition that animal husbandry plays a huge role in global warming; and I needed to find something else I could do; this was the remaining win. I'm far from being a Vegan. But I have substantially reduced the butter and routine cheese and eggs in my diet; meat is almost confined to wild rabbit, on the grounds that it is not deliberately given feed from agricultural land! Interestingly a number of other Friends in my area are going through the same process and the Area Meeting is asking Local Meetings to make Area Meeting teas vegan, with the exception of milk for tea!

## **Where does this leave me?**

**Car:** With the need for vigilance over car use: keep to using it only with E; and, even then, only when it is necessary. Change to electric/hybrid?

**Plane:** With the plane, my only problem would be IF it seemed that E would need a warmer spell in winter, which could not be reasonably managed by car; unlikely ....???

**Heat and Light:** With the heating and lighting: active management of the heating to continue, so that different rooms are heated at appropriate times and the house only heated when Emily is up and about. Need to move to LED lighting much more widely than we have currently, largely as I still have a store of long-life bulbs ... but should this deter me?

**Diet:** The need to keep going with my limited move towards a more vegan diet ... for the rest there is little room to make a difference as almost all our food is grown by us organically, or purchased from a wholefood workers' co-op, that prioritises organic produce, refuses to import by air and sources much of its fresh food from local co-operative market gardens

**It also leaves me with the really big imponderable.** 15 years ago, when social conditions were dire in our estate, the Barracks estate in Ordsall, Salford, Emily and I, with our daughter and son-in-law and their two youngsters bought a rural property on the outer flanks of Pendle Hill. I may have saved us from burn-out and was supposed to be for our retirement. In the end, we found we could stay put after all; and it isn't suitable as our permanent home. And it can't reasonably be sold as my daughter's family are committed to it and she and Seb expect to live there when the children leave home. It is organic and heated from wood for the woodland and is a biodiversity haven .... but, but, but ...

### **It also leaves out three vital questions:**

where we keep, and the uses to which we put our money.

how we use our purchasing to encourage a society which is careful about its use of resources, including its employees.

What we do to campaign against social practices which are destructive of the environment and to campaign for a different society altogether.

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