

A Testimony to the grace of God as seen in the life of
Joyce Pickard

20 September 1921 – 8 September 2017

Joyce was born to a tradition of service – her grandfather was a Methodist lay preacher, mother a dressmaker, father a welfare officer – in a family where everyone was engaged in church and community social activities and clubs for the disadvantaged. She enjoyed academic and sporting success at school from whence she went easily on to read languages at university prior to teaching mainly French. Participation in religious activity was in her genes but it was while teaching on the Wirral that she discovered Quakers, finding in the testimonies to peace and equality ‘a blinding light of the obvious’ – why had she not seen this before? She felt clear that she had been ‘led’ and continued to be led in her subsequent choice of life.

She was a classroom teacher in Derby, still in her thirties, when Quakers there urged her to apply for the headship of The Mount, the York Quaker school for girls. The application, which was intended ‘just to shut them up’, resulted in her being appointed. She arrived in post, without management experience or knowledge of boarding school life, but with all the self-confidence which was and remained her hallmark. Her seventeen years at The Mount left an indelible mark. Joyce wanted to know about and be actively involved in all aspects of the school. She used her imagination and vitality to support the expanding building programme including a swimming pool and improved sports facilities. All plans were scrutinised in detail and she suggested improvements to them. Joyce was always one to take absolutely direct leadership, clear about what action was needed and fearless of consequences.

Joyce put a huge emphasis on the spiritual and Quaker life of the school and introduced short unprogrammed meetings for worship. The girls were presented daily with what was important in life and asked: "what sort of person are you?" She provided examples of what the girls should strive to do and become, bringing the political world of the time into the school, through peace work, UNA meetings, talks about the homeless and the like, and she made a point of consulting the girls by setting up a School Council (by no means the norm then) with year group and staff representatives. She could be ready to listen as well as to offer advice. Mount girls saw a strongly principled and firmly moral figurehead, a passionately committed, energetic person who inspired both admiring respect and enduring fear. While some remember gratefully a straightforward relationship with her others were seared by ‘plain speaking’ which they experienced as dismissive judgments that left them devastated. When her absolutist view of things led to uncompromising decisions that were worth questioning, a direct challenge might occasionally effect change, but such resistance was all too rare. If some adult had told Joyce it was wrong to confiscate fur-lined boots from a desperately cold, homesick College girl from the tropics just because they were not on the clothing list, would she have changed her decision? As no one (to our knowledge) did contradict her, we shall never know.

It was during her time as head of The Mount that Joyce became close friends with Mary and Alan Pickard. Mary was another strong woman; when very close to death, she urged Alan to marry Joyce and this duly happened in 1976, with Joyce retiring from the headship in the following year. It was a very happy period of thirteen years for both of them. Alan’s gentle strength and ever-present sense of humour and of proportion brought out a softer side of Joyce. Major changes needed to improve York Meeting House prior to 1981 gave her the chance to volunteer with Alan as an equal. In 1976 Joyce gave a school place to Shane, a teenager in dire need of a refuge from her family situation. When Shane left The Mount

after two years in the sixth form, Alan and Joyce and Shane 'adopted' one another, a warm relationship which was in due course strongly shared by Shane's husband and daughters. The family's affectionate teasing and total informality brought an important new dimension into Joyce's life, allowing a distinctly relaxed element of her personality to blossom when they were together and bringing her a lot of happiness.

During a retirement lasting over forty years, the things she had urged on her pupils became her own priority; these years were simply an extension of her field of activity taking in Quaker work, peace, ecumenical and interfaith work. Joyce's impact in the city of York took many forms. She was the first woman to be invited to occupy the pulpit in the Minster and in her eighties she was made a freeman of the city to mark its "formal recognition of her contribution in promoting social justice in the City." She was well known for her radical campaigning on many issues, not least through the slogans displayed on the bike that she was still riding in her 90s. "The York Press's photographic archive shows that whenever there is a protest about inequality, war, or racism, she's there...not strident or shouting, just calmly and patiently trying to persuade the rest of us to think a little more clearly... In 1992 she is a one-woman campaign against pit closures: 'I'm standing here for: social justice; Britain's future; miners' jobs!' says the hand-lettered placard she's holding. In 2007, she's lying on the pavement to symbolise a casualty of war; in 2009, sitting in York Minster as part of the hunger strike to draw attention to children dying in Gaza."

Within the Quaker community Joyce's vocal ministry was valued. She never brought her campaigning or political side into worship; her angle was reflective, a teaching ministry with a christocentric slant and grounded in biblical knowledge and a store of Methodist hymns. Her Quaker service included the clerkship of Quakers in Yorkshire; at different times she was an elder and overseer in York Area Meeting and 'Quaker hospital chaplain' in York. This last was an entirely unofficial self-designation which, combined as it was with her supremely confident air of authority, took her into many wards on many occasions regardless of stated visiting times. One patient thus visited recalls: 'I was long term in York hospital [a survivor of road accident that killed all four others involved] and far from family. She came without fail three times a week...That Quaker presence and silent worship supported me in a very dark place.' She was an equally committed visitor to patients at the Retreat and the meeting for worship there.

She served from 1962-1988 on the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and, in retirement, on the Mount School Social Service Training Endowment Trust and the Breckenbrough School governing body. Committee work in general however, including that needed for central Quaker activity, was not her forte, so though her focus was often worldwide, her many actual commitments remained regional. She found slow process hard to bear and had no patience with deeds or regulations that might prevent her going full steam ahead with what she perceived to be useful practical and visible action. (Characteristically she could not understand that a retired ex-colleague chose to put academic study of early Quaker worship ahead of concentrating full time on a project for today.) A prime example would be her commitment to the small group of Quakers which, every other month, holds a meeting for worship near the main gates of Menwith Hill, the world's largest monitoring communications station, situated on the moors above Harrogate. Well into her 90s, Joyce remained a faithful worshipper there. She was a powerful grounding presence as she sat on (except when occasionally blown right off) her folding stool or gave clear thoughtful ministry. She seemed impervious to blizzards, teeming rain or freezing cold, and was usually inadequately dressed by ordinary standards; her idea of wet or cold weather gear was a plastic mac and summer-weight stockings. The indomitable Joyce was inspirational to many

members of small and perhaps struggling causes including York Against the War, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, York Interfaith Group. She was a founder member of York Voluntary Euthanasia Society.

Three things - her diary, her bike and her extreme environmental approach - will for many people always symbolise Joyce. The well-thumbed diary was kept to hand, so that whenever she heard of another cause or meeting, she could check the possibility of being there in the action, lending support against injustice. Until her last two years Joyce was rarely separated from her bike. She could still use it when walking had become very difficult and would always (not just in later years) ride it the wrong way down a one-way street to shorten her journey to worship. Attached to the bike's rear there was invariably a prominent and very home-made placard ensuring that everyone in its wake read something useful to rouse them to action: "For a better world let's practise Truth, Fairness, Caring, Sharing and Respect for all (It Works)." Joyce was renowned for a utilitarian 'waste not, want not' approach to everything from her own clothes to furnishing and furniture in Friargate Meeting House. The meeting's plan to replace old curtains was thwarted for some years by Joyce's unilateral action in climbing a very high ladder [with no one to check or support or warn], then taking down the offending curtains for relining and running repairs before reinstating them. Many such actions elicited a wry mix of admiration for her spirit and frustration at a one-person decision taken for the community.

Joyce was no plaster saint. Her gifts could make her exhausting and over-convinced of the rightness of her views. They could also be energising and a spur to others to think through and articulate something different. All her views and actions were strong: on the one hand, she was generously willing to share money freely – wisely or unwisely - with all and sundry; on the other, she was equally ready to share her firm opinions on situations, people, and individuals regardless of how much or little she might know of underlying circumstances. Seen at its best, as in interfaith work among equals, it showed as energy, crispness and the ability to look directly into people's eyes and listen – even if she often promptly and animatedly disagreed with them! Where it emerged in unequal relationships, the wounds could be profound and lasting. She did not temper the wind to the shorn lamb and perhaps did not appreciate the impact of her actions and words on others, expecting everyone else to be able to match her ability to stand up to any gale. Even so, many have been grateful to her for down to earth and unflinchingly honest advice which they did not want to hear but knew, if not at the time, was just what they needed.

In a brief account written for Shane and Shane's family, Joyce recorded her deep gratitude that her parents had blessed her "with a temperament combining practicality with freedom from fear or anxiety for the future, self-reliance yet a liking for people," We might add - the very good fortune of over ninety years of great energy and robust health. A photo of her campaigning for York Against the [Iraq] War is typical: the eldest person present, she has turned herself into a placard, is wearing less protective clothing than anyone else, and is clearly the only one who is not even feeling the cold. One of life's originals, Joyce saw every day as an opportunity to do something worthwhile to express what she believed to be that of God within. She has been the public embodiment in York of what it means to be a Quaker and let your life speak.

Signed on behalf of York Area Meeting

Barbara Windle clerk

11th July 2018