

Testimony to the Grace of God in the Life of Bridget Robson

Bridget Robson was born into a Methodist family in Middlesbrough in 1947. She was the eldest child with two younger brothers. The family were part of the thriving Avenue Church community. This was probably the root of Bridget's lifelong commitment to making the world a better place. It was also a very musical background, and at an early age she played the piano and sang. There were family Saturday outings to favourite streams in the local countryside, the moors, and the seaside at Saltburn, Marske and Redcar, which set up a love of nature that stayed with her all her life.

In 1959 they moved to London. After A levels, Bridget did a year of VSO at a girl's boarding school, teaching Latin to African girls so they could access further education in what was then called Rhodesia and now called Zimbabwe. She lived in a hut in the village. This experience honed her strong sense of social justice and rejection of privilege which shaped her life.

After university at Durham, studying English, she took a Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language and got a job which brought her to Leeds.

In the 70s Bridget became an activist and a leader - clear, empowering, enabling, always there - but of course very different from a leader in the patriarchal sense. She exemplified 'the personal is political' chant of the Women's Liberation Movement. Even though she vigorously rejected the Christian teachings of her youth, she still embodied George Fox's words from 1656 'Be Patterns, be example'. She was involved in establishing an alternative school, The Leeds Free School, for children disadvantaged by the education system. She lived in communes as an alternative to the nuclear family. She brought her son up with his father and other people between different households as part of the 'wild tribe'. She supported other women in their lives, in childbirth, relationships and bringing up children. She was also a regular visitor to Laurieston Hall, a commune then housing co-operative in Scotland with a strong spiritual base, often attending the music week.

She was a feminist and a peace activist, helping with the Women Oppose the Nuclear Threat group. They organised the coaches to Greenham Common in 1982, where so many Leeds' women went to Embrace the Base. She brought so much to the meetings - leading on really important issues and pushing gently, or opening up new possibilities. She had an unusual capacity to be fully herself, not hiding important parts of herself but also not needing to 'spill' the different

details of her life into each other. She talked about her experiences in a loving and open way but it was rarely if ever all about her. Peace was central to her life. She achieved an MA in Peace Studies at Bradford University and then worked at the Leeds and York Peace Centres.

When she was forty, Bridget contracted leukaemia and nearly died. It was her love of life and people that gave her the impetus to choose to live despite losing her kidney function and facing partial sight after her retinas were damaged. This meant she had to have dialysis for 16 years, three times and then twice a week. As part of the treatment she was given blood transfusions, which at that time were unscreened by the NHS, from which she contracted Hepatitis C. This lay dormant until she had a kidney transplant, another miraculous moment of her life, which then triggered the liver cancer from which she eventually died. She handled these difficult health issues with acceptance and equanimity on the most part. She didn't see herself as a victim and her health issues did not define her, if anything they strengthened her passion for life. She had a hopeful view of the world. She didn't let obstacles stand in her way or weigh her down. She had a lot of courage. The word comes from the Latin 'cor' for heart, and she was rooted in her heart, her capacity for love.

Her illness was a turning point, when she realised she needed to deepen the spiritual side of her life, which brought her to the Society of Friends and Carlton Hill Meeting in Leeds. Bridget made an important contribution to the meeting over the next thirty years.

Her ministry brought an element of spiritual depth into the meeting for worship that is sometimes lacking. In a few brief sentences she connected us with a loving centre both inside and outside ourselves, the core of our Quaker experience. She often explored an issue without needing all the 'answers' to questions. She had a light touch on the world - she was comfortable in her choices and boundaries and didn't take things too heavily.

Bridget's values were integral to her life. She was well organised, practical and focussed. When she took on a convenor role she was both very competent and yet grounded in Quaker practice. She helped many committees to do their work better. Her heart was in supporting and enabling people. One of her main gifts was to look for and see the good in everybody. She was always part of the pastoral work of the meeting, formally as an 'overseer' and also in her relationships with individual Quakers. She listened well and gave her undivided attention. She noticed if you needed a quiet word and so many of us benefitted from her thoughtfulness, sensitivity and, at times, directness.

She was part of children's meeting for many years, bringing joy, love and respect which helped our children to flourish. She put careful thought into interesting, creative and informative sessions. She often chose songs or music for our all age worship. Music was important to Bridget and she played clarinet and the recorder as well as piano for as long as her sight allowed. She also loved to dance. She sang in several choirs with her strong, tuneful voice - she was a particularly valued member of Cantabile Choir. Singing was part of her spiritual practice.

Ahead of the rest of us, and before the Yearly meeting in 2011, she asked for a meeting for clearness about how she could take forward climate change, sustainability and ecology. She helped to set up the sustainability group which still meets today. Bridget kept her life simple, she was never much into material things and she kept clear priorities.

Even in Bridget's last weeks of life she was helping to change the world, supporting Carlton Hill to respond to the Black Lives Matter challenge. She helped the meeting to set up small discussion groups which could look at their own experience of racism as the starting point for ways of creating bigger change. Bridget was sustained to the end of her life by her relationships with her partner, her son and granddaughter and her friends. As one of her Friend's said: 'I will remember her as like a gentle breeze when she came walking round the corner of my garden in her summer hat or humming to herself as she made a cup of tea.'