

With You in Spirit – April 6, 2020

Ciara Harrison

Hello, my name is Ciara Harrison. I am a member of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland also known as Quakers. I attend Meetings for Worship in Rathfarnham, Dublin.

We are living through a period that is challenging for many of us, and that challenge is presenting itself in many different ways. We are all concerned about the possibility that loved ones may become ill, and even die, and our previous day to day routines have been greatly disrupted. Some of us have been forced to isolate ourselves and be more idle than usual, while others are working far harder than they ever thought possible.

Although it has brought stress and anxiety, this unusual situation we are dealing with has also given us an opportunity to reflect on our priorities, bringing our relationships with others, with the Earth and with God to the fore. We are relearning how to truly care for each other, to actively think about who is most vulnerable in our community and how we can ensure they are cared for. Quakers, or Friends, do not have priests, ministers or pastors to carry out this work – small groups of our members are assigned the responsibility of pastoral care for all those in our community. These groups of Friends have been reactivated and reenergized, and have been reminded of their purpose in a powerful way. Indeed, we are all reminded of the interconnections between us all, and the importance of helping and supporting one another however we can.

Quakers believe that we are all intrinsically Equal, and should do our best to live together in Peace. The global nature of the pandemic underscores the idea of a global human community, who are working together to get this virus under control. We must try to maintain that vision of a global human community – many branches of a single family – long after the threat posed by the pandemic has passed.

I recently learned that the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres has called for a global ceasefire, pointing out that “the virus does not care about nationality or ethnicity, faction or faith ... meanwhile, armed conflict rages on around the world”. We are reminded that the most vulnerable — women and children, people with disabilities, the marginalised, the displaced, the elderly — pay the highest price in war, and are also at the highest risk of suffering devastating losses from COVID-19. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that health-care systems may have already collapsed in war-ravaged countries, making them completely unable to cope with the added strain imposed by the pandemic. If our experience with Covid-19 helps us to realise the futility of war and the need to live together in Peace, that at least will be a positive outcome of this difficult and painful situation.

Quakers also value Simplicity, and strive to live simply. This can often be a challenge in today's society. Some who have been forced to restrict how much time they spend away from their homes may be rediscovering a variety of simple pleasures – reading books, taking time to cook or bake or craft, spending time in one's garden, and spending time with one's family. Let's try not to forget the importance of these simple pleasures in life once we are able to go freely about our business again.

I mentioned earlier that Quakers have no priests, ministers or pastors. We worship on Sunday morning by gathering together to share an hour of silence. The silence may be broken by someone who feels moved to share a thought, a reflection, a reading or a prayer. All over the world, Quakers have been reminded of the spiritual sustenance that this period of peaceful silence can bring, and which we need especially in periods of stress and anxiety like the current one. This has led many Quakers to spend an hour of silence and stillness together on Sunday morning online – a modern and creative approach to maintaining a 370-year-old tradition. You're very welcome to join us in that virtual space.

There are many ways in which the pandemic is challenging us to find creative solutions to carrying out our daily lives and sustaining ourselves physically, psychologically and spiritually. This is a great opportunity for us to step back and reflect on what is really required for our spiritual health to thrive, and to put our relationships with others and with God – whatever we perceive God to be – to the fore.