

Quakers, learning and education - using the future to rethink the present

Public Lecture by James Nelson, South Belfast Quaker Meeting

Self-Introduction and preliminary remarks:

The first time I was in this school was over 30 years ago when I attended a job interview for the position of a teacher of RE. I was freshly graduated with a Masters degree and secretly believed that any school should feel lucky to get me in their RE department. I was full of 'ignorant courage'.

I knew nothing of the school and, apart from a basic knowledge of George Fox and early Quakers gleaned from a university lecture, had not the first idea about Lisburn Friends or Irish Friends more generally. I remember nothing of the interview questions nor of my specific responses but I do remember how I felt when I left. I had been found out! My ignorance was clear for all to see. Needless to say, I didn't get the job.

So strong was that feeling that all these years later, each time I walk into the hall of Middle House, something of that same feeling goes through me like a shiver.

And now look at what my ignorant courage has got me into!

But this time, let me not pretend to be something I'm not; I do not come as a Friend of longstanding with detailed knowledge of every aspect of Quakers and education. Yes, I may have reasonably long experience as an educator, but I speak as a relatively recent learner of the Quaker way. I speak though with the experience of the religious society of friends as a wonderful learning community in which I have felt my knowledge deepened and spiritual development nurtured.

And I speak out of the conviction that we are all learners and teachers.

In this lecture, therefore, I am not addressing only those who have a formal role in a school or educational institution or on Quaker education committees. The Quaker tradition embodies radical equality where all can be leaders; we are all teachers capable of ministering to the community, leading the learning of young people, and mentoring others through our

committees. As George Fox urges 'Be patterns, be examples...' In Irish Quakerism there are no theologically educated ministers, or specially appointed preachers. For that reason, teaching and mentoring is a shared responsibility for which we all should take some part.

We are also all learners. If we pay heed to the advice from Britain Yearly Meeting *Advices and Queries*, 'Think it possible that you may be mistaken' (Q F&P), then we can never assume we have all the answers, we cannot be complacent in our knowledge. We must remain open to new insights from each other and our Inner teacher. So, reflecting on education and learning is a task for us all.

My wish is that this lecture provides a motivation for us to think deeply upon the theme of education and learning in relation to our meetings, as well as our contributions to education in schools and other spaces – we should be mindful for example that our contribution to prison work also has a significant educational element. But I also want it to provide permission for courageous and creative thinking about what else we might do or achieve together. As you will have understood from the title, I want us to do this by thinking about the future.

I've no doubt though, that being asked to think about the future takes our thoughts in many different directions, for example to politics, technology, climate, family our own mortality or some combination of the above. Some may see the future optimistically through the lens of advancement and the further acceleration of our technological achievements. Others may see a bleaker picture, a future world where there is increased authoritarianism, where fundamental freedoms are rolled back, where climate breakdown has had catastrophic consequences for large parts of the planet and where access to scarce resources has increased national and international conflicts. I'm conscious that even raising these issues will already have evoked a wide range of emotions, some of which might not be altogether easy or positive for us.

The ability to contemplate our future in a world of break-neck change has been recognised as a genuine challenge for the average person and can cause a mental paralysis, or a sense of panic or moral or spiritual despair. For some time now, some educators have been making the case that a core literacy of the future will be the ability to think about the future. It's understandable that you may prefer not to go there but, say Futures Literacy researchers, it is possible to develop the skill of thinking about the future that helps us avoid the panic and despair and can actually engender constructive and creative responses to our present circumstances.

So, this evening I want us to employ this kind of future thinking which allows us to explore the Quaker community's present approach to education and learning. To do this I want to draw on a bit of theory, which I will try to keep as brief as possible.

Futures Literacy

Reil Miller (2018), a scholar of futures literacy, suggests that we need to get better at thinking about the future. In his work on Futures Literacy he distinguishes between two ways of thinking about the future.

The first he describes as Anticipation for the Future (AfF). For most of us, when looking ahead to what we will say or do we will generally follow this path which involves making predictions or choices based on present or previous experience. You could say this is our natural, everyday way of thinking about the future but, in a way, this is one of our superpowers as human beings. We can make snap decisions and quick judgments which are generally correct because we rely on our previous experiences. If our brain had to weigh up every possible outcome before we make a decision we would never get anything done.

Anticipation for the Future has clear benefits for predicting the future and reaching a goal, but it has obvious limitations in that it tends to constrain us to our range of existing options and is less likely to be open to novelty or creativity or to be able to adapt. In relation to decisions about the future of Quaker education and learning, we may habitually follow our usual response when faced with a challenge. For example: 'If People in our meeting seem to lack interest in borrowing from our meeting library; we might think we should buy more appealing books'. This may, for different times and places, be the best response because it was done in the past with some degree of success, but this response may also be following an instinct that isn't actually helpful if we need to stop and consider alternative forms of learning in our meetings in addition to books. In his book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman shows us that making fast best-guess predictions can contain within them flawed or biased judgments.

So, there are times when it is important to 'think slow', to pause and imagine a range of possibilities. Reil Miller's term for this slow thinking about the future is 'anticipation for emergence'. Anticipation for Emergence, encourages an open mindset and aims to help us imagine and anticipate different futures. Over the last 10 years a lot of work has gone into developing a structured process for anticipation for emergence thinking but this evening I want to simply borrow some elements from their process to help us think about the future.

There are 4 elements I will use, in various places:

1. To consider what are our current expectations of the future – This involves stating our general expectations, the things that arise from our everyday fast thinking.
2. To ask why we expect things will be this way – this is an attempt to slow us down, to examine some of the assumptions and maybe biases or flaws that hide within our thinking which may be unhelpful or inaccurate.
3. To realise we can change our assumptions, envisage alternatives and think creatively about future possibilities
4. To identify our goals and consider what small or big steps we might take in the present to help us reach our alternative future.

Slowing our thinking like this can help us avoid our usual assumptions and reveal new perspectives but can also illuminate current practice on which we can build, put our shoulder to, and invest our time and energy into to reach our future goals. Alternately, it may help identify what to avoid, what dilutes our efforts, or even works against our values.

So, let us imagine a future for Quakers in Ireland specifically in relation to education and learning. This will require us to firstly examine some of our assumptions before widening our horizons to consider future possibilities.

In what follows I want to address two areas:

1. Beyond our meetings, where we are involved in formal and informal education settings
2. Within our meetings, including the education of young people and adults

Formal and Informal Education

Let's suppose our answer to 'what do we expect the future will be for Quaker involvement in formal schooling?' is that there will continue to be positive Quaker support for our schools; and the schools will flourish much in the same way as they currently do. And why do we think this? Well, we can base this on what we know from history and current experience: Friends' involvement in formal schooling in Ireland has persisted since 1677. Our schools are thriving and provide an excellent education for the young people who attend them. They also provide a hugely important outreach to thousands of pupils and their parents who may not otherwise know anything about Quakers. Furthermore, they are served by able governors or patrons who give unsparingly of their time and support to offer advice, sit on committees and attend a wide range of school events. I believe all of this is true, but here is where we need to slow down our

thinking and ask what assumptions might lie underneath the expectation that these things will inevitably continue in the same way. Our thinking about the future can easily be trapped or blocked in different ways. Continuation bias, for example, leads us to assume that our current set of circumstances, institutions or relationships will inevitably exist in their current form into the future. This particular bias may manifest as the assumption that all is well with the current arrangements and there are no issues with things like school governance, or funding arrangements or selection criteria for entry. Alternatively, it could manifest as fatalism, the view that there's no chance of changing any of these things and there's no point in trying. In either case we are likely to brush over important assumptions which need to be acknowledged before we can begin to imagine future possibilities. For example, the assumption that we will continue to find enough governors or patrons to fill Quaker positions on the boards of our school, or the assumption that Quaker education will continue to include academic selection or fee-paying in some of its schools.

I have no doubt that there are different views on these issues amongst us but I must admit that personally I struggle with any assumption that Quaker values align with private or selective education when we know both reinforce social inequalities. In other words, they perpetuate a class system which means the distribution of wealth and access to resources across our societies is far from equal.

Naming assumptions allows us to examine them and can open the door to alternative ways of thinking. If, for example, we assume that the future role of Quakers in education is to *reduce* inequality, what would we imagine that looks like in 20 or 30 years? Admittedly, we cannot change the structural aspects of our education systems overnight, but if we can envisage future possibilities based on assumptions grounded in our testimony for equality we may then be able to see what we *are* called to do now. For some of us, that may mean getting more involved in discussions in relevant Monthly or Quarterly meetings, or finding ways to support our governors or patrons in the important work they do in advocating for Quaker values, including visiting schools.

One other aspect of education that I would like us to reflect on is our assumptions around what a Quaker ethos means to the life of a school. We may well assume that through our collective role on school boards of management, and by supporting various school activities, we are sustaining a Quaker ethos, but what do we assume that means for staff and pupils? For an ethos to be something more than words it needs to mean something in very specific terms. In a previous time, elements of Quaker history, life, values and practice may have been conveyed

naturally by knowledgeable Quaker staff members in their classes, through the pastoral care of pupils or through extra-curricular activities and we may assume that this tradition continues. I know from hearing and reading about our schools that they are extremely attentive to maintaining a Quaker ethos but, in a situation where there are few or no Quaker staff, we may need to question our assumption that teachers or support staff will inevitably know what a Quaker ethos is and what it means for day-to-day interactions or for learning and teaching. There is no judgment here of current staff practice. If we assume that staff come to be in Quaker schools without knowing anything about us and may well appreciate help with knowing more, we may see there is an opportunity for us to provide some support. In this case we may want to envisage a future where teachers and support staff who come to Quaker schools are welcomed with some personal guidance and materials in knowing what Quaker values are and how they are lived out in the school. As a result, we may find important ways to take action in the present which may begin with us clarifying for ourselves the kinds of expectations we have about what our testimonies might mean in practice in schools. Or we may realise the value in growing our influence through investing more in pastoral support roles or education projects about peace and conflict resolution, or developing more spaces for Friends to meet with young people to engage in listening and dialogue or to provide mentoring and sharing their knowledge.

Looking at other churches or sectors with responsibility for schools, they take a very hands-on approach with their input into the curriculum, especially in relation to religious education and relationships and sexuality education as they see these as priority spaces within the curriculum for setting and cultivating values. Schools on our island have very significant latitude over how their ethos can influence the choice of materials taught in RE and RSE. Alongside this we know there have been fundamental problems with these curricular areas in relation to agreed European standards. To take RE in the north, for example, two different court rulings in 2023 and 2024 found that the RE curriculum in Northern Ireland fails to meet the standard set by the European Court of Human Rights, specifically the need to be 'objective, critical and plural'. In other words the statutory RE curriculum is not inclusive and can have the effect of excluding those of different faiths or no faith. The situation in the majority of Irish schools, on the other side of the border, is little different although it has not been subject to legal tests as yet.

If, again, we shift our assumption from thinking 'the curriculum will take care of itself' to 'the curriculum is an area where our values can be reflected' we are prompted to consider how Quakers might support education to be more inclusive, promote equality and peace. What might these values mean for teaching about religious education or relationships and sexuality education. Or we could extend this to thinking about other aspects of the curriculum too such

as History - can we imagine a history curriculum that gives as much prominence to peace as war; or an English curriculum that reflects inclusivity in its gender or racial mix of authors.

This kind of future thinking we have engaged with so far in relation to education is also being undertaken by global educational groups and organisations such as UNESCO, (United Nations organization for education, science and culture) and I feel it is important to mention one vision for the future that might inspire us and others when thinking about the future of education.

In 2023, UNESCO agreed a vision for the future that it hopes will influence the present, the *Recommendation on Education for Peace and Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development*. It superseded a previous version that was drafted in 1974. Those working on it then may not have known that it would still have relevance almost 50 years later, but it had. So, for those drafting the new version, they too were faced with that future responsibility.

At this stage I need to declare my own involvement, I was part of the UK delegation involved in agreeing this report at a meeting of member countries at UNESCO HQ in Paris.

Looking towards the future, we delegates envisaged education as fundamentally connected to issues of human rights, justice, equality, dignity, peace and respect; an education that assumes humans are inherently interdependent within and across national boundaries, and are deeply connected to ‘natural resources and ecosystems’.

I think you might agree that this is a transformative vision and I can tell you there is much in the UNESCO recommendation that aligns with our values of Equality, Peace, Community, Sustainability. It also places a responsibility on all educators to help their learners to learn to live together with a sense of responsibility to each other and to the world itself. We might think of this as a sharing imperative, and I personally believe that responding to this imperative should be a primary goal for education. I have recently written about what this might mean in relation to shared religious education¹, but I also want to mention the hugely important work undertaken by my colleagues in the Centre for Shared Education at Queen’s² who have done much to promote shared education locally and internationally. Their approach is grounded in challenging the assumption that our education system must inevitably separate us whether by religion, gender, ability or socio-economic background. By assuming that schools can be places of encounter for building positive relations between those who are different has allowed them to

¹ <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/16/3/335>

² <https://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/CentreforSharedEducation/>

imagine many ways in which schools can work together and ways pupils can move between schools even with our current separate structures in Northern Ireland, and this has now been extended across the border in several counties too.

If we assume that a vision of education for the future is grounded in cooperation and sharing, what further steps could Quakers take towards supporting that? What might that mean for hierarchies, behaviour management and conflict management in our schools?

So far, my examples have been focused on formal education in settings outside our Meetings, so I want to turn now to the context of learning in our meetings, and in that context I'm including local meetings right through to our Yearly meeting.

Quaker spiritual learning

In terms of our own Quaker community, what do we expect in the future for religious and spiritual learning? And why?

In my role as the Quaker rep on the Irish Council of Churches I hear a good deal of concern and worry across churches about the future of parish or congregational participation and attendance. With that, some lament that the western church is sinking into an educational crisis. They often mean lack of basic biblical literacy, or poor doctrinal knowledge. In short, their anticipated future is one in which Christianity slides into inevitable decline, because they assume that church attendance and interest in bible reading are relevant measures for assessing the health of their tradition. This way of thinking is evidence of another bias we often fall into when using our fast thinking about the future - declinism, where we see everything that is good to be in the past and therefore the future is all downhill.

When thinking about this for myself I don't share this pessimism about our own tradition because my experience of the Religious Society of Friends as a learning community couldn't be more positive. From having access to a small but rich library of books I have benefited immensely from participation in Quaker Quest events, retreats, a Quaker book group, eco-quaker groups, peace seminars, worship sharing, structured after-meeting conversations, Yearly Meeting sessions, special interest groups and the many instructive informal after-meeting conversations. I must also mention podcasts which I love, and social media, which I don't love, but get occasional benefits from.

But if I think about the future as simply more of the same, then I am blind to the assumptions within my experience, not least the fact that I come to all of these opportunities as a well-

educated, economically stable, white, older man. What if I assume that the future learning in our Quaker communities is less oriented to people like me for whom reading, study and discussion of the kind found in higher education settings feels natural and comfortable, and more oriented towards people not like me, whether younger Friends or those who want to learn in less structured or book-based settings? And what of the voices we learn from – do we assume that they too are like us? Do we include enough minority or alternative perspectives?

In other words, it's important I don't become complacent, but stay alert to what new areas of learning are needed. In that regard I have been reflecting recently on the increasing importance of our meetings as places where we can be helped to learn to discern truth.

In the past Quakers were known as Publishers of the Truth; what if we assume that will be a future role again? If so, we need to consider the extent to which we are sufficiently robust in our ability to handle potential misinformation, disinformation, and manipulation of truth that might be directed to us personally or as a community. AI is already providing individuals with personal values-based advice and guidance about everything from relationships, career choices to ethical dilemmas. I have no doubt that some people will be genuinely helped by verbalising their thoughts and having an interaction around that, but we also know that these advanced AI technologies are considered to be fundamentally distorted by existing prejudices and stereotypes. Beth Singler, an anthropologist of religion, has found that religious communities are already positioning themselves in one of three camps in relation to these new disruptive technologies – the adopters, the resisters and the accommodationists. An example of some adopters are members of a Catholic diocese in Switzerland who have experimented with an AI Jesus, whose avatar image and AI speech were able to provide responses to parishioners after hearing their confessions. I personally would wish to resist this direction of travel and prefer to see our future meetings as preserving spaces where truths and insights emerge from human-mediated spiritual experience and spirit-led collective decision making.

If we assume our future is one of learning through personal encounter, and of revealing truth through our practices of collective discernment then how might we work towards securing and sustaining these in the present? It is likely that there is not one big way to do this but many small ways that we can create a climate or culture of collective learning and discernment. As I've said, in terms of learning we have lots of good practice to build on: book groups, children and young people's groups, poetry groups, Quaker Quest events, crafting workshops, anti-violence training. So, we might ask ourselves: are these present enough across our meetings? And what

are other possible ideas? (Here is where I need to check my instinct to suggest a Yearly Meeting book month or more books for our libraries and consider other forms).

In Britain Yearly Meeting Local development workers are employing a range of interesting practices including open-air gatherings and other Quakers such as Emma Roberts are experimenting with alternative forms of structured worship.³ We shouldn't be shy about bringing forward ideas, though when we do it is important that they are considered in light of our future goals. This is where we can benefit from our culture of discernment both individually and collectively. And if we decide our ideas are unsuitable then we will at least have the benefit of having reaffirmed and refocused ourselves on what we hold as our future goals.

A further assumption that I have been musing on relates to our Meetings for Worship. Let us assume, in the next 50 years, we are keepers of a flame that is made from two spiritual embers which when experienced can be transformative for individuals and communities, these are mystery and wisdom. I believe these are our inheritance and I strongly wish that they will be our legacy to future generations.

Marilynne Robinson, the American novelist and theologian, defines mystery as 'a vision of reality that incorporates into the nature of things the intuition that Being has a greater life than we see with our eyes and touch with our hands.' In coming into silence, we step into this awareness; Rufus Jones calls it 'the Beyond within'. This is how William Taber, an American Quaker minister, expresses it:

*Entering into worship often feels to me somewhat like entering into a stream, which, though invisible to our outward eye, feels just as real as does a stream of water when we step into it. Just as bathing in a real stream of pure flowing water needs no justification to the one who has experienced the vitality it brings, so entering into the stream of worship needs no justification to one who has experienced the healing, the peace, the renewal, the expansion which accompanies this altered state of consciousness.*⁴

However, another Quaker, Thomas Kelly is at pains to point out that this stepping into mystery is not only reserved for times when we meet together but, when cultivated there, can go with us and continue to be cultivated in our interaction with the people and world around us. This requires a special kind of attention to the Beyond within ourselves, in other people and the natural world. But our attention is under constant assault. We might assume that 'giving our

³ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCh_-AUZtYVCowCfiwOC8Hqw

⁴ <https://dailyquaker.com/2024/05/four-doors-to-meeting-for-worship/>

attention' is an easy or obvious thing to do, but our experience also tells us that it is more often 'taken' than 'given'. Let's assume that we have something particular to offer in this regard, the ability to centre, to attune to mystery, to be in control of who we give our attention to. How do we kindle this flame in the present to ensure we preserve and pass on our ability to listen deeply and give our attention to 'the things that are eternal'⁵?

Briefly, let me touch on the second ember, wisdom. Many religious traditions have a wisdom literature, those sayings and teachings that contain deep truths. The wisdom literature in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures asks its readers to see themselves from different perspectives, as a grain of sand in a vast universe, or to take moral positions that are often counter-intuitive to our experience – forgive those who curse you, turn the other cheek. Quakers have our own 'wisdom writings', special phrases and quotations as well as our advices and queries, and through vocal ministry we also listen for wisdom that arises from that deep experience of mystery.

There is no end to the words we can read, the podcasts we can hear, the social media posts we can consume but let us assume that in coming years the contribution we and other communities like us can make is to be attentive keepers of the precious embers of wisdom. Rather than letting ourselves get entirely caught up in the mass consumption and production of more words, more information, what if we assume that our task is to preserve and cultivate wisdom. If that is the case, how can we kindle those ways which enrich wise ministry in all its forms and how can we actively gather that wisdom as it arises amongst our generation?

Conclusion - A Future vision for Quakers in Ireland.

To conclude, I want to draw attention to a word that I have mentioned several times but not yet explained – 'transformative'. It's a word regularly used by UNESCO and educational policy writers in describing the power of education to make a difference in people and communities, and it was a word used by our late Friend, Simon Lamb, FWCC clerk, who passed away earlier this year. I last saw Simon at the meeting for worship in Friends' School in September with which the 250th celebrations began. On that occasion he offered ministry on transformative education. Simon was aware that not all education is inevitably of quality or capable of being transformative but he challenged us to make this our aim whether in Quaker meetings, or in our contribution to schools or other settings.

⁵ Britain Yearly Meeting's [Advices and queries](#), number 18

But what might he have meant when saying learning should be transformative? What, for example, are its characteristics?

Well, many Quakers, including George Fox, provide us with case studies of transformatory learning.

Fox, for example, realises that what had previously been told to him, and how he understood the nature of Christianity and of the Divine, was a misunderstanding. His insights, that there is that of God in everyone, that the kingdom of God is not off in the distance but has already arrived were fundamentally transformative. Transformatory experiences don't just happen to the founders of religions or great spiritual teachers. In the twentieth century Peggy Senger Morrison, a Friends' minister, described a moment of transformation after several academic terms studying Greek classics and Biblical studies: 'And I found that the truth wasn't in the book or in other people... and it wasn't in the discussion or the dogma or the reading, it was inside me and I recognised it and began to live.' Afterwards she says '...nothing changed and everything changed. But a conversation started that night that has never really stopped. I accepted life on life's terms.'⁶

These moments of change are actually experienced by most of us. We may use language that may be less dramatic, but the experiences are nonetheless deeply meaningful, life-changing or life-enhancing. Indeed, it may be a question that you take with you in your conversations with each other during our Yearly Meeting – was there a time when you learned a new way of seeing things that was transformative? What happened?

If you do find someone who will share their story with you my guess is that you will hear some themes that are common in transformative learning. People generally describe transformations as a new way of seeing, a moment of realisation or a period of time when we understand things differently. These could be described as moments of enlightenment, awareness, or a shift in perception. Furthermore, these transformatory moments have consequences for who we are or what we do. It is likely to motivate us to change our behaviour and how we see ourselves. And, thirdly, when once perceived our new insight can't be unseen. Some people, therefore, regard transformatory learning as crossing a threshold. A door is opened and we step through into a new way of being. We are released from our previous assumptions and liberated to think and act differently.

⁶ Marcelle Martin, *Our Life is Love*, p.51

Further, Fox showed that transformation can happen amongst a group as well as individuals. Quakers collectively came to the conclusion that the way of thinking about the religious life they had previously experienced was flawed. And this collective transformation of thought also created a powerful set of actions. They changed church structures, theology, devotional practice, religious language, everything was reconsidered.

Thinking about the future in an emergent way is not attempting to prophesy the future as accurately as possible. It is an effort to disrupt our current way of thinking and challenge our assumptions. This, however, may generate a range of responses: resistance, anxiety, a frustration that this is a worthless exercise, but learning to understand these emotions and engaging in the process in a playful, imaginative or creative way is what it means to develop a 'futures literacy' through which we can perceive things differently and be opened to transformative learning. This weekend we have been provided with an opportunity to pause and reflect on these things, and perhaps we will see things differently as a result. Let us pray for discernment to help us understand what we are being called to do.