



Friends World Committee
for Consultation

ASIA WEST PACIFIC SECTION INC

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QUONO New York Committee

Abbreviations:

- FRC** : Friends Rural Center, Rasuliya, Hoshangabad
- AIFG** : All India Friends Gathering
- BYM** : Bundelkhand Yearly Meeting, Chhattarpur
- BhYM** : Bhopal Yearly Meeting, Bhopal
- GFCI** : General Friends Conference India
- MIYM** : Mid India Yearly Meeting, Itarasi
- MRMM** : Marble Rock Monthly Meeting
- FWCC** : Friends World Committee for Consultation
- AWPS** : Asia West Pacific Section (FWCC)
- AYM** : Australia Yearly Meeting
- A/NZYM**: Aotearoa/New Zealand Yearly Meeting
- PYM** : Philadelphia Yearly Meeting
- IFWG** : India Friends Working Group (PYM)
- HMMK** : Hariwar Monthly Meeting karnaktaka

Making Friendly Connections

When Friends in the Australia-West Pacific Section spend time together
– in person and online –
we discover more about who we are

We are

Friends in Christ

‘Meeting Friends of different countries is most valuable opportunity in my life. It helped me to deepen my faith and also an encouragement to work for our values.

The most important difference I felt is that in India all the Friends are first Christians and then Quakers. We believe Christ is our saviour. For all our spiritual and practical life, Bible is the only source of spiritual life.

However in other countries many of the Friends are entirely different of this view. Even having such a big difference when ever Friends meet each other we feel that that of God in everyone and instead of spending our time in discussing our differences we share each other how we put our faith in to practice in our daily lives...we always succeeded to understand what we talked and listened.

There is no place for hesitation of any kind with the Friend any where in the world and always feel that we are one.’

Devdas Shrisunder, Bhopal Yearly Meeting, India



We are

Friends in many places

‘I’ve written a few times about the joys of meeting with Friends (some of whom are friends) in the online Meetings for Worship...It’s particularly grounding for me when travelling away from home.

About 6 months ago there were only two of us in Meeting. We had a short social time after meeting, during which I discovered that the other Friend was Hari from Delhi who was at the time in Birmingham. I explained that we were soon going to Birmingham to visit family. So, in early December, Robin and I met with Hari and Cathy in a café there. Hari is now an added friend who is a Friend and who is encouraging us to visit Delhi on a future trip...’

Julie Walpole, Tasmania Regional Meeting, Australia

We are

Friends journeying together

‘...I don’t know what I was hoping to find in meeting new friends in my life’s journey. I’m not even sure if I was even looking for something in the first place. But what I do know is that I am feeling more at peace, more secure, more myself toward Quaker Friends! Each one is a spark of inspiration to me; each one radiates joy and light that causes me to do the same in return; and moments with them is something I will always look back on with so much love and gratitude in my heart.’



Marj Angalot, Bohol Worship Group, Philippines

We are

Friends from different traditions

‘It is really very interesting to think about the Friends I met with. The association with Rasulia Centre gave me opportunity to meet friends from different places.

I remember my visit to Pathnamthita, Kerala in India where Ronald and I attended the Annual gathering of Friends in Kerala in the year 2010. It was a marvellous experience to meet friends from different parts of India. As the Friends in Kerala are Evangelical Friends, most of the participants were pastors not only from Kerala but from Sikkim and Himachal Pradesh also. They presented reports on their ministries in their respective areas. The worship and cultural activities from different groups and states are still in my memory.

I think that the practice may be different but the Faith is common among Friends I met with.’

Nalini Titus, Hoshangabad, Mid-India Yearly Meeting

We are

Friends over time

‘I’m an Australian Friend. In Hong Kong in 2016 I met John, a Hong Kong Friend, during a weekend gathering.

Fast-forward to 2019 when John and I realised we would be in England at the same time. We met in Kent and attended Meeting for Worship at Maidstone, where British Friends welcomed us warmly. Before leaving we signed the old and well-worn visitors’ book, noticing the signatures of visiting Friends from Chengdu in China in the 1930s—an early Meeting

in the AWPS region that had once had close connections with Hong Kong. It was good to feel connected in Spirit with people in other places, and with past and present Friends.’

Virginia Jealous, Western Australia Regional Meeting

How can we keep and strengthen these connections?

How can we support small Meetings for Worship and individual Friends scattered across our region?

How can we use our shared faith to know each other better in the Spirit, in spite of our different languages, cultures and traditions?

We’ll look together at some ways to strengthen friendly connections in the next newsletter.

All Friends’ comments, suggestions or experiences are welcome: please email Ronis Chapman ronisc@fwccawps.org

Virginia Jealous

Western Australia Regional Meeting

AWPS: Spreading the Kingdom of God

I LIVE IN an isolated part of Australia called “Northern Rivers” because of the many wide waterways that crisscross this part of New South Wales (NSW). The region is beautiful, and in the summer many tourists enjoy its abundance—beaches, waterfalls, forests, mountains. The Friends’ Meeting here is small yet deeply concerned with the region’s natural environment. We see “Earthcare” as a testimony of our Religious Society.

We know that many of our own concerns here in NSW are mirrored in all countries currently within the Asia-West Pacific Section of FWCC. So what matters in these countries matters to us. We are all inter-connected.

Besides our inter-connectedness within Nature we are, of course, interconnected as humans. Our religious forebears were sure of this. They said that we are all “one of another” because we are all one in the One. What we do, no matter how big or small, will, in some way, impact all other Friends. The Asia-West Pacific Section (AWPS) is one valuable means of knowing what other Friends are up to with God’s help.

Essentially, the AWPS is a service of listening and waiting upon the Spirit. As we know, such practice lies at the core of Quaker worship. But there are many ways to God, many ways to worship and pray etc. For example, we can listen to, and learn from, each other, and thus open our hearts and

minds to what we hear and see. After all, our life is lifting each other up with a tender hand, putting the Love of God into the world, addressing that of our amazing God who is present in each of us, and drawing God out. This is how we spread the Kingdom of God.

The “Kingdom of God” was Jesus’ central concern. As a result, it was the *early Quakers’* central concern as they walked the Earth during the 17th century. This Kingdom is alive and well in the present, and has many names such as the “Inward Light”. The AWPS is valuable, therefore, for answering that of the Light or Kingdom in everyone. It’s a wondrous task because it unites us in all our diversity. It’s like a coloured window: every piece of the window is beautiful in itself but they come together to form the whole image, a single unity. God is *the* Single Unity.

So let us come together in mind and heart in the spirit of this Single Unity. Let us listen ever-more deeply to each other. Let us learn from one other. Let us spread the Kingdom of God together. If we are all conscious of praying this grand task together, right across the Section, the AWPS—and with it our Quaker ways—will prosper and grow. And so it should!

Gerard Guiton

Australia YM

Meeting for Worship On Line

Join Friends from around the section on the second and fourth Thursday of the month.

30 minutes silent worship

30 minutes fellowship

Interested?

Email Michael.searle@iinet.net.au to join the mailing list.

Christchurch 15th March 2019

The impact of the shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand in March were felt all around the world. Lesley Young, Yearly Meeting Clerk writes:

Friends in Aotearoa have felt upheld by the many messages of love and support received from Quakers around the world. Many of us have been involved in vigils and gatherings and are looking at ways to connect more closely with our Muslim communities in future. We have written a

letter to our Prime Minister in support of the quick action taken to change gun legislation and will make a submission on the next stage of this as we work towards preventing a reoccurrence of such a horrific attack.

Here is a copy of the letter that was sent to Dr Mustafa Farouk from The Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand.

Dear Dr Farouk

I write on behalf of Quakers in Aotearoa New Zealand to express our heartfelt sympathy to all members of the Islamic faith at this time of tragic death and injury inflicted on worshippers in the two mosques in Christchurch.

Violence in all its forms is abhorrent to us and we are dismayed that such a level of violence has been perpetrated on Muslim members of our community. We treasure the many faiths that make up the mosaic of our community and when people of one faith suffer, we all suffer. We stand in solidarity with you in denouncing such acts of violence and commit to doing all we can to foster compassion, kindness and peace.

Our prayerful thoughts of support and friendship are with you at this very difficult time.

Yours in Peace and Friendship



Lesley Young

Yearly Meeting Clerk,

Two Quaker Resources to help overcome racism and hate speech

Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA)

In June 2018 QCEA published a report titled *Anti-migrant Hate Speech*.

To mark the launch of the report, Sylvain Mossou, QCEA's Human Right Programme Officer, was interviewed about hate speech and the potential responses to it. You can read the report and see the video via the link below.

<http://www.qcea.org/2018/06/anti-migrant-hate-speech-report-published/>

Violent and dehumanising “hate speech” against migrants and refugees is an ever-increasing problem in Europe, largely made possible by the

internet. The report looks at what is being done in Europe to challenge these worrying narratives.

QCEA plans to use this report as a base for advocacy among both policymakers and media organisations. They hope that their work will facilitate discussions about how to create a more civil public discourse online, as well as inspire others to undertake grassroots initiatives to that end.

American Friends Service Committee

AFSC's *Communities Against Islamophobia* project supports Arab/Muslim-led work by:

- Training potential allies to understand Islamophobia and its harms and develop strategies to stop it.
- Developing a base of allies to speak out against discrimination; advocate for policies that respect the rights and dignity of Muslims; and oppose profiling, surveillance, and state violence against the Muslim community.

Find out about this important project at:

<https://www.afsc.org/key-issues/issue/communities-against-islamophobia>

Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO)

QUNO New York Update

The Quaker United Nations Office in New York (QUNO-NY) represents the concerns of Friends about global peace and justice to the international community. The Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC) is granted “consultative status” with the



Economic and Social Council of the UN and this allows QUNO in Geneva and New York to attend UN conferences and meetings, and engage with diplomats, other civil society actors and UN bodies on concerns related to peacebuilding, the prevention of violent conflict, human rights, disarmament and sustainability through quiet diplomacy, research and creating space for dialogue. QUNO-NY focuses mainly on the areas of peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict.

QUNO-NY is governed by a committee made up of FWCC

representatives, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) representatives (it's major donor) and specialist committee members. The QUNO Committee (QUNC) will hold its annual face to face committee meeting from 28th to 31st March 2019 at Quaker House in New York and Pendle Hill in Philadelphia.

QUNO-NY is currently going through a strategic planning process and committee members will hear an update about and contribute to this progress at the face to face meeting. The process aims to align QUNO values, concerns and mission with the priority areas of work by consulting widely amongst Quaker meetings and institutions about the issues of most concern to them. Consideration will also be given to the recommendations of the past two evaluations of QUNO's work.

There are ongoing discussions between QUNO and AFSC about allocation of funding due to AFSC's budget challenges. QUNO is working to secure other grants and donations to reduce reliance on one source and also negotiate with AFSC about the best use of the funds they do receive.

At a program level, work on peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict continue to be informed by UN policy advancements such as the 2030 Agenda adopted in 2015 and peacebuilding and sustaining peace resolutions in 2016. QUNO continues to facilitate the Civil Society - UN Prevention Platform and to engage strategically with the UNDP/DPA Joint Program for Building Capacities for Conflict Prevention. China-Swiss policy dialogues on the topics of prevention and partnerships for peace have been quite successful. QUNO continues to monitor the political situation in Burundi alongside the Peacebuilding Commission.

The New York Peacebuilding Group (NYPG) conducted two activities in the sidelines of the High Level Event (HLE) on Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace with a particular focus on engaging with the wider civil society community working on this issue. The HLE took place during a week of many high-level meetings held at the UN around the topic of Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace, which resulted in numerous peacebuilding organizations visiting New York to attend and participate in such discussions.

Working collaboratively with the Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), QUNO convened an off the record discussion on the UN Secretary General's recommendations from the Peacebuilding and Sustaining Peace report, bringing together members of the UN's core team for implementing peacebuilding and sustaining peace and civil society representatives. Held

in September, this meeting served as the first coming together of these actors to reflect on the objectives and outputs for the development of such guidelines.

It was very encouraging to attend the QUNO New York Committee meeting in March, to deliberate with the rest of the committee, and be ever more inspired by the quiet diplomacy and facilitating work they do.

Aletia Dundas, Australia Yearly Meeting

AWPS Representative on the QUNO-NY Committee

<https://quno.org>

News from India

Nalini Titus writes from Rasulia Friends Centre:

Rasulia Friends Centre is struggling to regain it's past glory on ground level as well as legally. We have filed a case in the High Court of Madhya Pradesh against the decision of the Revenue Board. As usual it will take time to get the result.

We have taken some steps to get some appropriate funds for new Bore wells to help us with our agricultural projects.

Very soon with the cooperation of local NGO'S we will be organising another Bio Sand Water Filter work camp for surrounding villages. This work is supported by A work- cum- study camp for 4-5days was organised by National Youth Organisation (Rashtriya Yuva Sangathan) at the Centre from 11 to 14th January this year. The theme was Gandhi, Youth and continued development (Gandhi, Yuva aur Satat Vikas). There were 40-50 participants from our state.



Nalini Titus

Director, Rasulia Friends Rural Centre Hoshangabad, Madyha Pradesh, India.

Student Strike for Climate Action March 15th 2019

Three Generations Strike for Climate Action

On Friday 15th March there was the Student Strike for Climate Action held around the world, in Canberra it was in Garema Place, Civic.

Laura researched climate change slogans and we made them into banners.



We saw lots of students in uniform walking with their banners all pouring into Garema Place.

There were young people (primary school, high school and uni students), middle aged and old people, people from Canberra, Goulburn and other places out of town. It was very exciting. We saw quite a few other Quaker families in our little area, the Kendons were there as well as the Bray/Bourne family. There was lots of chanting and people holding witty climate change banners. My favourite was “Why go to university

when no one is listening to the experts!”. Thousands of people peacefully but noisily gathered in Garema Place.

A Year 11 student from Narrabundah College gave a speech. She said that at the end of Year 5 it was the hottest summer on record and they talked about it at school in Year 6. At the end of Year 7 it was even hotter and that was the hottest summer on record. Then two more times while she was at high school it was the hottest summer on record. This summer we lived through over 30 days above 30 degrees and that is now the hottest summer on record. She said that she feels like she has to act because it just keeps getting hotter.

A boy from Year 7 Lyneham High School who lived on a farm talked as well. He was saying that instead of getting steady soaking rains we are getting isolated rain showers that are very heavy. One time a big storm came through their farm and it flooded. They raced out and boogy boarded down their drive way in knee deep water. He said in half an hour it was gone. Their dams were full but they had lost all their top soil.

A young Indigenous Australian said that his people care deeply about climate



change and that the elders gave this generation custodianship of the land and they need to hand it on to the next generation in the best shape possible.

Such powerful stories from the lived experience of these young people.

Laura being vertically challenged, couldn't see much in so many people so we left about 1.30.

Laura's Grandma, Mardi stayed and walked with the protesters down to Glebe Park. They chanted things and put in a call to Scott Morrison's office. When his

staff answered the whole crowd yelled their climate action demands. Great fun was had by all!

It was really good to get out and be with so many others who care about climate change and to hear those excellent young people demand action on climate change.

Marka Selmes

Canberra, Australia Yearly Meeting.



Faithful Action on Climate Change

This article originally appeared in the March 2019 issue of *Friends Journal* and is republished here with permission.

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People often don't know how to respond to climate change because the problem is so huge and involves so many aspects of how our societies are organized. Quakers are no exception. A complicating factor for Friends is our long history of activism in movements that addressed vital social issues. We feel we should do something, yet don't know what. Through activism, we have taken Quaker beliefs outside our Quaker meetings. Climate change is an issue that will be solved outside Quakerism, and yet we should do something.

Having listened to many Friends talk about this, I believe that we also carry some confusion about how Friends have arrived at our historic corporate witnesses. There is a feeling that a few famous Friends (for example, John Woolman, Susan B. Anthony, and Alice Paul) inspired

Friends to come to unity and speak with one voice. In reality, various Friends in different monthly and yearly meetings raised issues using different methods for many decades in ways that were not coordinated. It took a long time for yearly meetings to come into unity on slavery, and even then there remained a wide spread of opinions. Leaders within the Society of Friends were often considered “friendly nuisances,” and their opinions not popular. They were seen as a cause of friction, and sometimes even disowned. Their stock rose after the full Society adopted similar views.

I find that some Friends are waiting for a clear and detailed leading on climate before acting, or waiting for us as a Society to find unity on a way to take action on climate. I don’t think even John Woolman had a clear picture of the path toward successful abolition. He simply took on one piece that he was clear about: getting Friends to stop owning slaves (a huge undertaking in itself). None of the Friends that led inside of Quakerism or outside of Quakerism waited for the Society to first get clear on it. I want to share some thoughts about possible ways for individual Friends to act on climate right now.

What are Friends already doing?

There are a variety of approaches Friends are already taking to hold up the issue of climate change both within and outside of the Society of Friends. In Philadelphia, Friends have created Earth Quaker Action Team (EQAT), which first engaged in a focused five year successful campaign to get PNC Bank to stop funding mountaintop removal. Now they have switched to a carefully crafted campaign to get PECO Energy Company (the local electrical utility) to commit to creating green jobs by transitioning energy generation away from fossil fuels to alternative energy sources. This approach has been based upon the lifelong work of George Lakey and his belief that activists should focus on the impacts that a problem (climate change) has on people, highlight those impacts, and put pressure on the group who is causing that problem. I encourage people to visit EQAT’s website for more information, including videos, and read Lakey’s latest book *How We Win*, which draws lessons for all of us.

Quaker Earthcare Witness, which has worked on many environmental issues, has attempted to network Friends across the country who are working on climate issues. They have produced educational materials on climate change and earthcare, and they produce a monthly newsletter that highlights successes people have had. See their website at quakerearthcare.org.

The Prophetic Climate Action Working Group of New England Yearly Meeting has based its actions in prayerful discernment about how to hold up the crisis of climate change to the public and, in the tradition of prophetic witness, inspire others to act. To that end, they have taken several actions, including civil disobedience, to try to awaken the Light in others.

Friends Committee for National Legislation has worked on lobbying the U.S. Congress, specifically working on building a bipartisan coalition (nicknamed “Noah’s Ark” by some, since members join in pairs of one Republican and one Democrat). The coalition has taken the stance that climate change is real, and is trying to form a basis for nonpartisan action; it also hopes to break the Republican stranglehold on its members speaking the truth on climate change.

Finding myself in a part of the country where none of these activities were happening and where no meeting was taking a specific action on climate change, I founded a local 350.org group. I know many Friends scattered around the country who have joined 350.org or Sierra Club chapters, or other secular groups in order to take action on the climate change.

Positively challenged by a comment from Quaker climate activist Jay O’Hara, I wound up, after leaving 350Seattle.org, accidentally cofounding an ecumenical group working on climate issues. I thought I was convening a one time conversation for people from different faith groups around the question, “How do people of faith have a powerful moral voice on climate?” The discussion led to our creating a conference, and that lead to two and a half years (and counting) of ecumenical action on climate, including civil disobedience. So if you act in faith, you never know what will happen.

One can engage in direct action campaigns, educational campaigns, prophetic witness, lobbying, secular actions, or ecumenical actions. There are many ways to make a difference, and we must each find the way that fits our own style.

What does working on climate change mean?

Most of us start at a personal level in responding to climate change. We do things like change our light bulbs, buy a Prius, and bike more. But fairly quickly one becomes frustrated with that: solo action is not enough. We are trained by U.S. school systems to expect social change to come through the lobbying of Congress, but in this current political climate such a belief is a recipe for despair. Any careful reading of the history of social change would reveal that it actually takes movements of organized people for governments to change laws and policies.

It is true that climate change is huge, with many causes related to the ways we have organized our society. It's affected by energy, transportation, agriculture, buildings, forestry, etc. There is both good news and bad news in this. The bad news is there is no single solution to global warming. The good news is you can start anywhere in whatever sector you understand and start to be part of the solution. This problem is so big that it will take millions of us working on it because it has taken millions to create the problem.

If you are not familiar with the book *Drawdown*, edited by Paul Hawken, I strongly encourage you to check it out. Finding that none of the big environmental groups had a clear road map of what changes would get us to a safe carbon level, Hawken gathered together a cadre of graduate students to study all kinds of possible solutions to climate change. They examined the specific amount of carbon each solution could draw down and the specific costs. They have three lists, which include what will be most effective and what they see as most immediately achievable. For anyone trying to figure out where to start, you are given both the information about what matters and the chance to notice what actually speaks to you.

But I don't have any time.

People often tell me that they find my activism admirable, but they don't have time. I do realize we all have bills to pay and interpersonal issues at work in our lives. I also understand that climate change is a strange sort of fire burning out of control. It's not the immediate fire that makes you grab your kids, your pets, or your partner and flee the house. It is a fire that will have been burning for decades before reaching its eventual devastation. As a species, we are hard wired to respond to immediate problems rather than to far off ones. That had a survival purpose then, but now we are in a situation where if we do not prioritize this slow moving disaster, it will be too late once things are unlivable. I think we owe it to all future unborn generations to try our darndest to be sure they can be born (if I hear one more person say, "Well, I'm too old; the next generation will have to solve it," I will scream). It is not okay for the generations who have lived their whole lives creating carbon to bow out of the solution. There are even things people housebound and in poor health can do about climate change. I think we literally all have to die trying.

The things we spend time on are the things we prioritize. We prioritize earning a living, time with loved ones, and our health. But there is actually time after those things. Some of us have more time because of the privilege

we have in economic realms. I believe that means we have greater obligation to contribute to solving this problem than do those with less of the privilege of free time. This may mean putting aside some things we have habitually done, or some recreational activities. We cannot just stay in our comfort zone and expect this situation to change.

Begin where you begin.

You can begin anywhere. You don't have to know what will be successful. You don't have to have a clear leading. As Thomas Kelly asked 75 years ago:

He, more powerfully, speaks within you and me, to our truest selves, in our truest moments, and disquiets us with the world's needs. By inner persuasions He draws us to a few very definite tasks, our tasks, God's burdened heart particularizing His burden in us.

Just see what is disquieted in you, what task is particularized in your heart, or tenderized there, and act on that. If you don't feel like you know how to do it, find someone who does seem to know and support them. If you have a good idea, ask others to support you. As a famous Quaker saying goes: Live up to the Light that has been given to you, and more will be given. I did not know where convening an ecumenical group for a discussion would lead, but I knew I should, and it led to more things. Once you are in motion, more will be revealed to you; next steps will become clear. This is what faithfulness looks like.

Lynn Fitz-Hugh is a mother, a climate activist, and a psychotherapist. She is a member of Olympia (Wash.) Meeting in the United States. She was the founder of 350Seattle.org, and is the cofounder of Faith Action Climate Team.

This article and associated comments can be found at this link:

<https://www.friendsjournal.org/faithful-climate-change/>

International Membership of the Religious Society of Friends

Visit to Cambodia worship group by International Membership Clerk

Hazel Shellens is the Clerk of the FWCC International Membership Applications Committee (IMAC). Hazel lives in the U.K. and visited Cambodia in December 2018.

As clerk of IMAC, I try to make contact with local Friends whenever I am travelling. This year my husband and I spent Christmas with our daughter and her family in Cambodia, where she is working for MAG, a

British NGO involved in landmine disposal. December 23rd, therefore, found me joining the small Quaker group in Phnom Penh at their weekly Sunday meeting for worship. Seated in a circle on the top floor of an old Cambodian house, beneath whirling fans under a high pitched ceiling, six of us joined together in silent worship after the manner of Friends. It felt so familiar and so much the 'right' place to be, that I found myself giving thanks for the wonderful gift of being able to join with others 'in that which is eternal.'

Following the meeting we all adjourned to an adjacent cafe for lunch, which enabled me to get to know my fellow worshippers rather better - two from the UK, one from Australia and one from the States, all of whom live in Cambodia and then two visitors - a Friend from America and myself. It was a joyful occasion and I would urge anyone reading this newsletter who is visiting another country or, indeed, another town in their own country, to seek out local Friends and join them in worship. It can be an extremely rich experience.

Hazel Shellens,

Clerk IMAC.

Follow this link to find out more about international membership of the Religious Society of Friends.

<http://fwcc.world/find-friends-around-the-world/international-membership>



Finding Quaker groups in the Asia Pacific Region

Would you like to find Quakers in our section? All Friends meetings and churches that are affiliated with FWCC are listed on the website:

<http://fwccawps.org/churches-and-meetings/>

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Learning to Cope with a Wonky Brain

This article, written by Elizabeth Duke was published in *The Otago Daily Times*, newspaper of Dunedin Aotearoa, New Zealand, in February 2019

“My brain is going wonky.”

How do I cope with odd confusions like reaching for the wrong drawer when I know perfectly well which one I need, or confusing two people whom I meet in similar contexts, or needing to check the calendar each morning to be sure what we’ve planned for the day?

At present where I am is described as mild cognitive impairment, but my GP has advised me that in some years it’s likely to end in dementia.

This was not good news.

It’s not easy to come to terms with what I had always pictured as “the worst” that could happen in later life (I’m just 79).

I have been proud of my brain, and relied on it for my livelihood and for my interests.

It has been a grief to see people I know and care about becoming apparently less themselves, ceasing to be involved with what has mattered to them, becoming more and more dependent, and gradually failing to recognise others.

I have thought I could not endure this prospect for myself, and now I am learning to live with it.

Interestingly and surprisingly, this experience of nearly two years has brought me on to a plateau of happiness.

I owe most to the love and support of my dear life partner.

She has to live with the likelihood that our plans for the rest of our life together will be overturned, that she may have to begin “thinking for two”, that there are all sorts of potential decisions about care and its costs.

We find we are talking far more now about our relationship, increasing our respect for each other’s individuality, and becoming more deeply aware of one another’s needs.

Her great strength increases my love.

Early I made the decision to “come out” about my condition. I didn’t want people to start whispering, “I think Elizabeth’s losing it”.

I didn’t want secret measures to dislodge me from responsibilities.

The openness has been rewarded by generous support from my family and friends, and the strength I find in the Quaker community.

It feels as though people are ready to recognise that I am essentially myself, without worrying if I don’t seem to remember whether they are about to move house, or which one of their children has become a parent.

Being open enabled me to let go of a number of my longer-term voluntary responsibilities.

I am still doing the Quaker work which really matters to me, and for which I feel best suited.

I’ve also learnt from wise people the strategy of saying “no” to ongoing jobs, and choosing carefully which one-off tasks to pick.

Being open has also been a doorway to sources of support.

I encourage everyone who is anxious about how their brain is behaving to consult their GP soon.

Quite early we made contact with Alzheimers Otago; their staff are friendly, caring and knowledgeable.

There is good information in their newsletters, books are available on loan, and each year’s AGM has an interesting speaker.

Last year we took part in the street collection day, and were delighted by the warm generosity of the public.

The annual Memory Walk down George Street in purple T-shirts is quite a celebration.

Alzheimers Otago has coffee mornings in several Otago locations for those living with dementia and their companions, and groups for carers.

What I would really like is a peer support group, without the need for staff involvement, for people like me anticipating dementia, or in the early stages, to swap experiences and give mutual encouragement. Any takers?

RECOGNISING that I have cognition problems has enabled me to take

advantage of public health provision, including the care of my GP.

After a lifetime without regular medication, I am now taking a daily pill to support neurotransmitter function, which is probably helping me to stay on my plateau for a time.

I have undertaken the standard cognitive tests from my GP and the Memory Clinic at Dunedin Hospital, though I'm one of the people who produce unhelpfully high results.

Apparently, if you are used to mental challenges and puzzles you can score high percentages in these tests, masking perhaps what is happening to the brain.

I am somewhere on a waiting list for more subtle neuro-psychiatric tests, though clearly not in an urgent category.

Because I've always been fascinated by science, though not trained in it, I find I want to know more about what is happening in the brain, why things go wrong with its processes, and how it copes by building new mental reserves if given the chance.

I find that my brain is observing itself, trying to work out whether the cognitive and memory slips are the sort of things which are part of the normal ageing process, or markers of connections going wrong.

Now I have an ongoing record of odd occurrences, which my GP has said is useful, though I have stopped trying to record each one, and write occasional summaries of what has been happening, and whether I notice any changes.

There are several reassuring lists of what are normal ageing slip-ups, and what are potential signs of dementia - for example on the Alzheimers New Zealand website (see the references above) - but I haven't yet found anything directly useful for someone in an intermediate state like mild cognitive impairment.

People have wondered whether my record is unhealthy concentration on what is going wrong; on the contrary, I find that once I have recorded something, I can let go of it.

The Wicking Dementia Research Centre at the University of Tasmania has two excellent free online courses, "Understanding Dementia" and "Preventing Dementia", which are repeated annually.

The presenters combine expertise with warm humanity.

Several have a nursing background, others medicine or science research. I benefited greatly from following the courses.

A number of those studying are employed in dementia care or related professions.

Many others are family members or friends of people living with dementia; they are seeking to understand what is happening, and how they can best respond.

Brain troubles, I have learnt, can affect different parts of the brain, and so different brain functions, gradually.

AT present my problems are with memory, confusion between similar people, finding when speaking that the word I want might have slipped away (it usually returns), and a few spatial functions, such as going to the wrong drawer when not concentrating; when typing my fingers have become more inclined to hit keys out of sequence, though the spelling is very clear in my head.

To my great relief, the more directive and reflective parts of the brain appear to be unchanged.

I can think about things in detail, can understand languages I learnt at the same level as in the past, and can follow the arguments I used in my 50-year-old thesis, which I am revising for publication as fast as I can.

If it weren't that all this process is happening to me, it would be fascinating to watch.

But it is happening to me.

The inner heart-grief is usually quiet. I don't live in horrified anticipation of when I may no longer be able to think as I do now, but occasionally the prospect of the "valley of the shadow" is a clear reality.

However, I am finding my present time an opportunity for religious and personal growth.

I have a sense of peace and guidance, and gratitude for the opportunity to live life more fully.

Mild cognitive impairment has made me more aware of how I have failed to recognise the personal wholeness which remains in people who need

help to function effectively, how I have found it difficult to listen and to speak to them as themselves, rather than making conversation by telling them things I guess might divert them.

Late in life I am learning to see others carrying all sorts of inner burdens, and to value their strengths, instead of evaluating what they can no longer do.

I am also becoming aware of how we as a society may be trying, often unsuccessfully, to manage provision for people with all sorts of disadvantages, rather than being open to their preferences and decisions.

There are splendid campaigners for inclusiveness, for full participation in our collective life, but we have a long way to go.

Let's become a physically and socially accessible, welcoming and dementia-friendly community!

Elizabeth Duke settled in Dunedin in 1976. She lectured in classics at the University of Otago, then worked for 7½ years for the Quaker worldwide body Friends World Committee for Consultation. Elizabeth has also served the Asia West Pacific Section in a number of ways and we are very grateful for her contribution.

The future of this newsletter

This newsletter is published twice a year and is always available to read or download on the AWPS website.

The AWPS Committee has decided that the paper (hard copy) version of this newsletter will be circulated once a year from now on.

We also have an Electronic newsletter that is published at least once a month.

Please contact me if want to join the electronic mailing list.

In peace and friendship

Ronis Chapman

Ronis Chapman

AWPS Secretary

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Donate now and support the work of AWPS

To secure the future of a stable Asia West Pacific Section, funding is needed from individuals and local meetings in addition to the funds that come from affiliated yearly meetings.

Please consider supporting AWPS today.

We have made donating easy for you. On the front page of the AWPS website there is a Donate button. You can donate here using a credit card and donations have been received from India, Japan, Australia, the Philippines and Aotearoa/New Zealand.

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