

Is Earthcare a Quaker Value?

by Shelley Tanenbaum

I believe that the Society of Friends is going through a transition in our relationship with Earthcare. In the mid-1980's, many Friends felt a strong leading to lives their lives in harmony with nature and to support policies and programs that supported these lifestyles. In addition to thousands of lightbulbs switched to compact fluorescents and now light-emitting diodes (LEDs), and generating tons of recycling and home-grown veggies, we also created Quaker institutions that pushed for broader societal change: Quaker Earthcare Witness, then called "Friends Committee on Unity with Nature," was formed in 1987 to connect Friends with an Earthcare leading and to advocate for a sustainable world. Most yearly meetings and some monthly meetings formed Unity with Nature committees.

However, Quakers did not become leaders in the environmental movement; there was no sea change among the Society of Friends. Since then, the number of Quaker organizations working on environmental issues has increased only slightly. Quaker Institute for the Future was created in 2004 to support research and produce publications on environment and environmental economics and justice. Friends Committee on National Legislation adopted their fourth "We seek" calling for "An Earth Restored." Quaker United Nations Office in Geneva initiated 'quiet diplomacy' on climate change. Most recently, the Earth Quaker Action Team is calling for green energy and jobs in Philadelphia and Friends World Committee on Consultation called upon each of us and each of our Meetings to take two actions in response to our changing climate. These institutions serve Friends as well as they can and Earthcare has started to register as a Quaker value. However, we have not been able to keep up with the pace that is required.

We find ourselves in 2018 facing an existential crisis: Will our civilizations survive climate change and resource depletion? How many people will be at extreme risk from climate weirding, either directly from extreme weather or indirectly through long-term drought? How many generations will suffer due to our lack of awareness and action today? How many species will not be here in 100 years? Those of us doing this work are pedaling faster up steeper and steeper hills. How can the Religious Society of Friends shift into a higher gear to meet this existential challenge?

Friends pride ourselves with being on the forefront of social change. We are rightly pleased to have supported abolition of slavery, as well as women's rights and civil rights, long before these were socially acceptable. When we support something, we do more than mouth the words. We act, whether that is promoting government policies, spreading information or agitating in the streets. With Earthcare, we are woefully behind.

What are Our Quaker Values?

We can all agree that the testimonies on peace and equality, along with respecting all people are values that Friends embrace. But don't these values call on us to fully embrace Earthcare if we are to make significant progress in creating a peaceful, fair and just world?

Most Quaker activists I know share my concern for the environment and find ways in their personal lives to reduce their carbon footprint, yet they do not see Earthcare as part of their peace and justice witness in the world. In my travels among Friends across North America, I have also noticed this disconnect.

We sum up our Peace testimony with the words “Take away the occasion for all war.” Yet ignoring the consequences of resource depletion and climate change would seriously limit how much we actually can take away the occasion for war. The civil war in Syria is a prime example of how climate change triggers violence. Syria was hit with an especially long drought. With failing crops several years running, farmers and their families fled to the cities. More internal refugees led to crowded cities with limited resources to absorb the newcomers. The already-existing authoritarian regime imposed rules that were resisted; political unrest increased and people were jailed. Ultimately, civil war broke out, with the loss of 480,000 lives and 5 million people have fled the country. Climate change is not the only cause of this war, but it served as a trigger in a resource-poor and authoritarian political hierarchy. This is one of several current examples of climate disruption sparking violence. More will surely follow as climate impacts become more severe.

In our Quaker community, we value equality, or even more, we value equity in social situations. We strive to balance our committees by gender and sexual orientation, by diversity, and by age. We search for better ways to fully welcome Friends of Color into the Society of Friends, even though we often fall short. We are examining the role that white privilege has played in all of society, including our faith. We support policies and programs that will create a more equitable world. There is much we can do better, but we all recognize equality/equity as a value.

Yet, how many of us fully understand environmental justice? Friends were outraged to learn about the water crisis in Flint, but do we understand that many communities, mostly communities of color, have similar problems with dirty water, polluted air, and limited food resources? Do we notice that poorer people are most often located next to major sources of pollution, such as the fence-line communities adjacent to petrochemical industries in Louisiana, just to name one example? Do we know that climate-induced sea level rise is already changing the lives of Floridians and other coastal dwellers?

One way we express respect for all individuals is to worship together in a way that allows any person in attendance to minister during a Meeting for Worship. Another way we express this is to listen deeply and respectfully during discernment and decision-making, often holding listening meetings or worship-sharing before making any important decisions. How is this value reflected in Earthcare?

I see Earthcare as a spiritual transformation within the Society of Friends. Quakers acknowledge that we see that of God in everyone. Earthcare calls us to extend that value to see that of God in everything. This is not nature worship; it is more like worship in kinship with nature. Do we live our lives as if we are all connected? Or do we see nature as something to be exploited and used up, and then move on to the next opportunity? Well, it turns out there are no more opportunities. It is time to embrace our spiritual connection to all things, ask for guidance, and live as if we are part of the universe, not as dominators.

How do we Live if we Value Earthcare?

What are our assumptions about environmental concerns? Why isn't this prioritized in our lives as much as our traditional "peace and justice work?" We understand that climate change poses a mortal threat, but when do we start taking action? Why haven't we? What needs to change in our assumptions, lifestyle, worship and in our Meetinghouses to embrace Earthcare as a core part of our faith and practice as a Friend?

Here is the good news. First of all, there is tremendous joy in embracing our oneness with the universe. We are made of stardust and the stars are us – how beautiful is that! Many of us find our deepest connection with spirit when we are in nature. We are facing an existential crisis. We need to embrace as much spiritual guidance as we can get.

Some of you might feel like you are the only one who cares about the environment in your meeting. Well, you are not alone. I have found joy and strength in the network of Friends that is Quaker Earthcare Witness. Alone and reading the news, I can easily feel distraught and frozen. When I travel to Quaker Earthcare Witness' biannual meetings, talk on the phone, read BeFriending Creation, or share stories over our listserv, I am uplifted and empowered. Our organization connects a steadfast group of Friends who have faithfully reoriented their lives and positively impacted their local towns and national politics. I am looking to them for wisdom, insight, and inspiration as the climate crisis worsens. I am also looking toward many younger Friends who are more often taking the lead.

As a Quaker and a scientist, I am also heartened by recent advances in energy technology. Climate change is predominantly caused by using fossil fuel. We now know that it is possible for renewable energy to fill most of our energy needs. The development of those technologies is advancing at an enormous pace. These times have been compared to major technology shifts in the past. For example, in the early decades of the Twentieth Century, transportation in the United States shifted from horses to motor vehicles. In the first 15 years of the 21st century, cell phone usage rose from around 700 million to 7 billion. Many visionaries and scientists see us on the brink of such a change when it comes to energy use.

This is a Quaker wake-up call for all the environmental threats we are facing. In addition to climate weirding, our world is experiencing depleted fisheries, decreasing biodiversity, soil erosion, declining water resources and growing human population. Technology will not solve all these problems. Let us build on our tremendous history of faithful action and amplify our faith to include all that surrounds us. Embracing Earthcare will help us find a way to live in harmony with nature, instead of facing one environmental crisis after another. This is how we remove the occasion for war and inequity, and create a thriving world.

Shelley Tanenbaum is the General Secretary of Quaker Earthcare Witness and a member of Strawberry Creek Meeting in Berkeley, CA (PYM).