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### Providence Friends Meeting in Times of the Coronavirus

Katayoun Alidadi

Sally Freestone

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# FOCUS ON PROVIDENCE FRIENDS



Sally Freestone holds in her lap the book she helped her late husband write about his childhood.



The current Meeting House was built in 1953. Here too, simplicity is key and even painting the pews was controversial at first.

# MEETING IN TIMES OF THE CORONAVIRUS

**S**ally Freestone grew up in Chester County, Pennsylvania, nestled between Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware. Together with her late husband Tom, an Englishman, she managed a thriving pottery business in Tennessee before relocating back to New England a few years ago.

Dr. Katayoun Alidadi

September 2021

## PLAIN TALK

Sally's grandmother, Bertha, converted to Quakerism.

She felt it was the right thing for her. Early in her marriage, they started using what we call the "plain talk." English is one of few languages which does not have a familiar, tu and vous – tu and usted. English used to have it; thee, thou and thine. We don't use thou because it is very archaic. But my family has always used "thee". So "where are you going" becomes "where is thee going?" It is a matter of emotion. If I fall in love with somebody, I slip and call them thee. It is very telling.

I'm not the simplest Quaker you ever met. In the old days, when Quakerism began everyone wore the simplest dress, women wore bonnets. Grey and white and black. Simplicity of living; don't have three lawn mowers, don't have an ostentatious life, have just what you need. Simplicity is making sure there is enough for everyone, fairness.

Quakers call Sunday First Day. And January is First month, August is Eighth month, etc.

## PRINCIPLES

We believe in several principles; simplicity, truth, gentleness, clarity, non-violence, social justice, and community. Quakers were huge during the civil war, they aided the underground railway which helped slaves get to Canada and freedom. During WWII, my grandparents housed a Japanese family and kept them safe from the camps.

Quakers were founded in England by a man named George Fox [in the mid-seventeenth century]. He disapproved of what was going on with the Church of England. It was corrupt, people were paying to be absolved of their sins. He didn't like that the priests had to be there for you to do anything, that they ran the whole show. He felt strongly that you could have a life with God on your own. Today, some Quakers are not Christians, ... Some Quakers are agnostics. It has gotten loose and that caused a sizzle in the meeting of the Society of Friends in the '40s, but now it is mended. Quakers believe that there is that of God in every person, and that we are all possessed of inner light, if we have the eyes to see it.

## WORSHIP

Is worship an important aspect to being a Quaker?

Worship is definitely an important aspect. We meet every First Day to worship. To worship and listen, to try to hear what God is asking us to do. We believe we should choose the right way to live. Your conscience is part of God talking to you, that little voice, that inside voice that says you should or shouldn't be doing that.

## SILENCE

A Quaker worship is unlike other worship because of its focus on silence and the spontaneous verbal sermons from the friends themselves.

When meeting begins, at 10 am, everyone comes in and becomes silent. It is almost like medication, but it's not. Some people shut their eyes. What you are trying to do is clear your mind, so you can hear God or hear the Holy Spirit and that is what it is all about. If you are moved to speak, then stand and speak about something that you suddenly feel compelled to do. I never thought this would happen to me. ME? Stand up and speak about what? The Holy Spirit is a sneaky person - I think she's feminine (laughter).

Suddenly I found myself on my feet speaking. I don't remember what I said at that time, but it was quite clear. Usually you tell a story about yourself, some kind of a lesson you learned or problem that you have. Everyone listens very quietly to what you have to say. When you are done, you sit down and people think about what you said. We're all together and it is a wonderfully powerful thing. Everyone together is listening and concentrating on getting close to a personal experience with God that you can. Quakers believe that no one stands between you and God. We don't have liturgies nor practice the sacraments. We don't have categories of priests and lay; we are all able to experience God directly. Not just in Church, but every day, in every act.

## COMMUNITY

The value of getting together is the power of community, of family. It is an incredible feeling to be in a room with thirty other people or more, everyone is waiting and listening. The first person who stands – if there is a first person as sometimes there are meetings where no one is moved to speak and that is fine - sets the tone.

## ZOOM

Before the global pandemic, Sally attended Friends meetings almost every First Day.

When the pandemic hit, we decided to do Zoom. Worked fine for some but not for me and I couldn't deny that. I tried Zoom twice. I couldn't feel anything. I couldn't. I felt self-conscious, I couldn't get away from myself. It just seemed mechanical and unconnected. I didn't feel the Holy Spirit was there at all. Maybe it was the visual, looking at these little squares. It is fine for a regular meeting but not for a religious meeting.



Friends meeting in the Grove. Drawing by Napolees Marty.

So I had my own quiet time on First Day, I sat for an hour at 10 o'clock. I missed the community so much. I joined a telephone tree where we call each other on certain days you call this or that person and on each day you call somebody.

As soon as the weather got good (in the Spring), we were able to meet outside in what's called "the grove"; it's grass with beautiful trees around it. We put small flags 6 feet apart in the ground; there is a rock with a list on it to write your name [for contact tracing]. We've been wearing masks except for a short period when things got good, when we didn't have to wear masks [early summer 2021].

Sally has not been inside the meeting house since February 2020. After a brief indoor period, the Friends at the start of August 2021 reverted to Zoom and outdoor meetings.

A few weeks ago (July 2021) the meeting went back inside. Everyone was so excited, we could come to Meeting House again. But I didn't because I felt very anxious. I didn't want to be inside the Meeting House (even) with windows open sitting 6 feet apart with my mask on. I felt uncomfortable, because of the Delta (variant) which was on the horizon. So I went to the outdoor part even if they were meeting inside simultaneously. Even if I was alone, it was ok. You bring your own chair and water to enjoy nature and be close to God.

We hope you enjoyed learning about religious worship in Rhode Island during the COVID-19 pandemic. Feel free to reach out to Professor Alidadi, principal investigator, at [kalidadi@bryant.edu](mailto:kalidadi@bryant.edu)



Friends Meeting sign on the exterior of the Providence Meeting House.