

# Faith, Practice, and the Trust of Community

## *A Profile of The Meeting School* By Margaret Hawthorn

*Margaret Hawthorn* became involved with the Religious Society of Friends as a teenager after participating in weekend work programs. She is the parent of three daughters, two of whom have attended The Meeting School. Besides working at TMS on special projects, she runs an established community care home for mentally disabled veterans with her husband.

**Editorial introduction:** In our previous issue of *Paths*, we published an article by David Stern concerning his positive struggles to help guide his students on meaningful learning paths while also respecting their need and right to determine their own educational journeys. In his article, entitled “Freedom or Structure: One Teacher’s Journey,” David refers often to the principles and practices of The Meeting School, where he teaches. We were so taken by the spirit and practices of this small, Quaker school, located in the rural town of Rindge, New Hampshire, that we decided to profile the school in this issue. With great delight, we thus present to you, our readers, a profile of this most engaging and soulful place of living and learning.

*On the first deliciously hot day in May, students and faculty at The Meeting School gather at the barn to receive work study assignments for the afternoon. Black flies packing a nasty bite and New Hampshire’s fickle weather notwithstanding, the entire Meeting School community participates in work study. Today as Ross checks on newborn lambs, Anton heads for the office to scan photos for the school website and a crew rounds up equipment to prune the pear trees.*

The Meeting School was founded in 1957 by three Quaker families who wanted to offer their own children and other students a place where they could put Quaker values into practice in the context of a learning community. From the beginning, however, the community has never been limited to members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). In the tradition of Quaker schools, TMS has always sought diversity—including a variety of spiritual paths and sometimes a profession of no spiritual path at all—among its students.

The founders brought previous teaching experience to their venture, which informed many of their ideas about what would set The Meeting School apart, even from other Quaker schools. Faces, fashions, and some of the issues students bring to the community have changed over the years, but the philosophy and purpose of the school have remained consistent (see the end of this article for a full statement of the school’s philosophy and purpose). To foster a close-knit community, the school still limits its size to forty high school-aged students and fourteen faculty members.

The 136-acre campus of woods, fields, and meadows is located in rural Rindge, New Hampshire, within sight of Mount Monadnock. Students and faculty live together in five houses clustered near each other. The original barn still stands, and the animals housed in it are an important part of the school. A passerby may experience a curious time warp. The nineteenth-century houses and the activities that take place around them suggest a simpler time: pressing apple cider, setting out sap buckets to boil maple syrup, plowing with oxen. But the students carrying eggs from the barn may have dreadlocks, blue hair, or an assortment of other trappings that clearly identify them as twenty-first century adolescents.

The Religious Society of Friends has minuted testimonies on subjects ranging from gambling to equality, stewardship to the death penalty, simplicity to slavery. Mindful of our human shortcomings, we regard each testimony as an ideal toward which we strive. As a Quaker institution, The Meeting School embraces all Friends’ testimonies, focusing especially on peace, simplicity, and truthfulness. Friends have long found inspiration and guidance in the writings and practices of earlier Quakers.

## Testimony on Peace

*"We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretense whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world"* (New England Yearly Meeting 1985, 183).

*"So the keeper of the House of Correction was commanded to bring me up before the Commissioners and soldiers in the market place; and there they ... asked me if I would not take up arms for the Commonwealth against the King. But I told them I lived in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars"* (p. 184).<sup>1</sup>

Through the centuries, one of the most powerful Quaker testimonies has been an absolute refusal to commit or threaten to commit physical harm to another human being. Like other Friends schools, ours affirms this testimony and extends it into the non-physical realm as well. We believe, for example, that lying and cheating are forms of psychological violence towards ourselves, and that gossip and slander are oblique forms of psychological violence towards others.

This testimony requires a spirit of cooperation, honesty, and respect for one another's individuality and conscience. It requires that we honor all people, addressing that of God in each person, and that we strive to live in ways which do not harm or oppress others. In turn, it teaches us to see discomfort and conflict as opportunities to listen deeply, to gain new insight and understanding, and to live peacefully together with our differences.

## Testimony on Simplicity

*"Do you regard your possessions as given to you in trust, and do you part with them freely to meet the needs of others? Are you frugal in your personal life and committed to the just distribution of the world's resources?"* (New England Yearly Meeting 1985, 213).<sup>2</sup>

We try to live in simple harmony with the land and its resources, neither taking more than we need nor using irresponsibly what we take. Simply put, we wish to live simply so that others may simply live. We look to the examples of Jesus, Buddha, earlier Quakers like George Fox and John Woolman, and others who caution us not to allow our possessions to rule us.

Aware of the implications our actions have on the health of our planet, we look for life-affirming, environmentally sound products when making purchases. When we need to buy items for the school, for example, we consider where goods come from, and to the best of our ability we avoid purchasing items that have been produced in exploitive circumstances.

Simple, of course, doesn't necessarily mean easy. For example, an important aspect of living simply is speaking simply (plainly and honestly) to all people. At first, telling the direct truth may feel frightening, but in the end it is healthier and less complicated than employing a convoluted strategy of evasion.



## Testimony on Truth

*"But above all things, my brethren, swear neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath; but let your yea be yea and your nay, nay"* (James 5:12).

Striving to maintain integrity in word and deed, Friends have traditionally refused to swear oaths. In the belief that all life is sacred at all times, Friends hold that no given moment is more special than another for speaking truth. Practicing consistent honesty is affirmation of one's intention to speak truth in a particular situation.

Because TMS is a community that lives by agreements, a high level of trust and personal integrity is required from each individual. No school or community agreement is to be entered into lightly. No agreement may be arbitrarily discarded or disregarded because it has become annoying or burdensome to an individual. This commitment to honesty that we expect from community members is a cornerstone of the personal growth that takes place in the school.

*A day later the sky is overcast, and people wear wool sweaters again. Jacqueline Stillwell, Head of School, kneels by a flowerbed in front of the office, pulling weeds even though this is not a scheduled work study day. In the summer johnny jump-ups spill cheerfully over the rock border onto the lawn. Currently a clump of phlox has the upper hand.*

*Jackie warns anyone who approaches that she is in a bad mood. This is unusual. An active, lifelong Friend, Jackie has the ability to embrace conflict as an opportunity for growth. Today, however, she is discouraged; it's not conflict that is troubling her, but conflict avoidance. She has decided she needs to spend some time getting her hands dirty.*

*Some community members have proposed an amnesty program for persons who come forward to talk about having broken community agreements. With amnesty, they could tell the whole truth, which would help the community address the problems at hand. Despite her grumpy mood, Jackie smiles: "They want to be able to be honest without being held accountable."*

*She carefully separates the roots of the phlox, setting some aside to be planted elsewhere. Others she studies and places back in the ground, leaving space for the johnny jump-ups. In the Quaker process of seeking clearness, we try to understand what still serves us well and what we no longer need in order to allow room for new growth. After a couple hours in the garden, Jackie wipes her hands and is ready to resume her place in the office.*

## **The Learning Environment at TMS**

As a Quaker school, TMS operates from the belief that there is that of God in everyone. Each person is to be valued, and all life is sacred. Our goal is to create an educational program that nurtures creativity, love of learning, personal growth, and intellectual integrity. By intellectual integrity we mean the ability to think critically and to seek truth.

We are more interested in teaching students to ask probing questions than we are in having them focus on getting right answers. We challenge them to take responsibility for their own education. Helping students shift from being passive recipients of information to being independent, self-motivated thinkers is perhaps the greatest tool we can offer them on their way to becoming lifelong learners.

The school day begins with 8:00 A.M. opening, a time of gathering and reflection. Students who are on barn chores have been up for a few hours already and are wide awake; later risers still rub sleep from their eyes. Ten minutes of singing or other music is followed by ten to fifteen minutes of silent worship, and then announcements.

Morning classes are divided into two long blocks, each lasting an hour and forty-five minutes. These classes are open to all grade levels, with students making selections based on their interests and credit requirements. Some examples of classes offered in the morning are Asian studies, music theory and composition, genetics and evolutionary theory, art history and application, farming and crops, human sexuality, playwriting, pottery, and physics. Morning classes change each trimester, while math and languages, which are offered in the afternoon, run continuously through the school year.

Our credit system for graduation offers students more flexibility and choices than do traditional educational systems. To graduate, a student must complete three credits of English, two credits in science (at least one lab), two credits in social studies, one and one-half credits of algebra, one half credit of geometry, one credit of health, and three credits of electives. Other graduation requirements include researching and writing a senior paper, completion of an intersession project for each year of attendance at the school, and satisfactory participation in the work study program.

A number of students who choose TMS have not had productive experiences in their previous school settings. When given greater choice over what and how they are going to learn, they connect with the material and are more motivated. By offering alternative classes that spark their interest, we can help them hone critical thinking skills in ways that we couldn't in more generic classes, in which many students might be too bored to pay attention.

Whatever the class, we look for real-life examples as the primary focus of study. From art to science to math to social studies, we relate much of the learning to life and to the farm. In chemistry, for example, students do soil testing, both before and after planting. Dissection specimens for biology come

from the reality of farm life (i.e., a stillborn pig) rather than from bottles of formaldehyde. A math student graphs milk production on a computer and analyzes the results.

Two students in the same class may fill different subject requirements by emphasizing different areas of study. In Farming and Agriculture, for instance, one student may gain a social studies credit through studying the history of farming in the U.S., while another earns a science credit by focusing on soil samples and sustainable agriculture practices. Both will broaden the scope of the class with reports from their specialized studies.

The five-and-a-half-day school week includes Saturday morning forum, when speakers bring a variety of ideas and challenges to the community. Recent forum topics have included organic farming in Cuba, cheese making, acupuncture, and tracking animals in the snow. Current issues like the meaning of global economy, the sanctions in Iraq, and activism in the United States are also talked about in forums.

We encourage many field trips to expand classrooms to the world beyond our rural enclave. Students studying issues concerning the death penalty, for example, not only read about the problems at stake, but also attend death penalty hearings at the New Hampshire State House. Geology classes hike river valleys and climb mountains to study formations unique to New England. A genetics class visits the Whitehead Lab at MIT to talk with researchers, and has a chance to actually work with genetically modifying material at the Boston Science Museum.

An exciting piece of off-campus learning happens each spring when all students head out for a four-week intersession. Some students connect their projects with previous areas of interest. In 2000, Jeremy's love for marine biology led him to volunteer at the Virgin Island Environmental Research Station. Inspired by a longtime interest in Hinduism, Raquel traveled to India to stay in an Ashram. In other years, students wanted to develop their Spanish have done work projects in Guatemala and Costa Rica.

Students may also decide to use intersession as a time to try something new. Following a very basic set of instructions from a book written in 1910, Luke spent his time building a glider big enough to carry him aloft for a few feet. Eileen traveled with a midwife in upstate New York, assisting with checkups and being privileged to witness the birth of a child. Whatever they choose to do during this time, when they return to campus, each student gives an oral report to the community about her or his project.

## **Farm and Work Study**

At noon the community comes together again for lunch. All students and faculty participate in meal preparation on a rotating basis. They become adept at serving meals that meet the tastes and nutritional needs of meat-eaters, vegetarians, and vegans, while debating the impact of diets and lifestyles on personal health and the well-being of the planet. How does heavy U.S. consumption of meat affect availability of food for the rest of the people in the world? How much physical work can one accomplish on a diet of rice and tofu? If everyone were to eat locally grown food, what would our diet look like? What would the landscape look like?

Work study, meetings, and interest groups are scheduled for later in the afternoon, depending on the day. In keeping with

our belief in the dignity of physical labor and our emphasis on experiential learning, students are expected to put in two-hour blocks of work at least twice a week to help with the running of the school. This may include projects on the farm, in the gardens, and around the physical plant (wood stacking, planting, weeding, and—seasonally determined—either manure or snow shoveling). Jobs might also involve taking care of faculty children, organizing community food, or cleaning the office.

Community members are responsible for housekeeping and plant maintenance campus-wide. While students sometimes resist the relentlessness of chores, in the process of maturing as community members they tend to find that chores lose their negative onus. They discover that the steady rhythm of physical work contributes to a sense of wholeness.

Our working farm is an integral part of daily life at TMS—an ever present reminder of our commitment to simplicity and of our connection to the earth. The farm is home to dairy and beef cattle, oxen, horses, pigs, sheep, chickens, turkeys, guinea fowl, rabbits, and a bumper crop of red worms whose specialty is breaking down compost piles. We have several gardens and greenhouses, which produce the bulk of the community's vegetables. We use organic methods of food production, avoiding pesticides, artificial fertilizers, medicated feeds, and genetically modified organisms.

Through living and working on the farm, we learn about issues involving animal husbandry and land management. We gain firsthand awareness of the worldwide impact genetically modified seeds, bovine growth hormones, and chemical

pesticides have had on the politics and economics of farming. The work required of the entire community to produce most of our own meat, milk and vegetables gives us great appreciation for the bumper sticker, "Don't Criticize Farmers With Your Mouth Full."

In gaining a better understanding of the life cycle, we are brought face to face with ethical concerns. For all of us, dietary choices are more complex than we might have realized. Some people feel right about eating meat, but only from animals they have raised. Others refuse to eat meat from animals they have fed and cared for. Although the latter may decide not to eat any meat, on the farm they discover that milk and eggs are part of the whole life cycle. And as they work in the cold or mud, all the while understanding more and more deeply their connections to the earth and to all beings, many students cannot help but wonder about the production and moral status of their down jackets and leather shoes.

No matter how each individual resolves these sorts of questions, students develop an awareness that will impact their choices involving their and others' lifestyles and consumer habits. Indeed, after living in the TMS community, one finds it difficult to walk into a grocery store and not have questions about what is on the shelves. What does this box contain? What processes have its contents undergone on the way from field to shelf? Where did this plastic-wrapped meat come from? How was the animal it came from treated and fed? What were the working conditions of the people who tended it?



## ***Routines, Decisions, and Obligations***

Because the days are packed, evenings are less structured. This is when students must develop self-discipline to keep a balance between socializing and keeping up with schoolwork. Completing academic projects in a timely fashion is the responsibility of each student, but a student who is having difficulty managing time may be assigned to evening study hall.

Evenings are a favorite time for playing music—quietly in student common rooms in the houses, or more loudly in the weaving studio, which is set a little apart from the houses. When a theater project is in the works, rehearsals are scheduled for evenings. The art studio and photography lab are always open. On Tuesday nights, an ongoing Dungeons and Dragons group meets to test wits.

Wednesdays have a different flow. Students prepare brunch in individual houses while the faculty meeting takes place. After brunch the community gathers for an hour of traditional Quaker Meeting for Worship. For some, this stillness is a time for prayer. Others use it for disciplined meditation, or quiet contemplation.

Following Meeting for Worship, students and faculty settle into Community Meeting. As TMS's form of governance, Community Meeting patterns its decision-making process after Quaker Meeting for Business. We begin with another brief period of silence, during which we center ourselves for working together on the matters before us.

The concepts of "meetings" and "decisions" have particular meaning and importance in Quaker communities. Over three hundred years ago early members of the Religious Society of Friends established a grass roots structure for decision-making based on the belief that every individual has direct access to inner truth. They found that when they made a corporate effort (meaning a decision by the body of the Meeting) to seek and follow Divine guidance they were led to unity, and they were often given a higher collective insight than they received acting as separate individuals.

Decisions within the Society, arrived at from the bottom up, are based on a sense of unity within the group rather than on majority rule. While this practice can be cumbersome, it is also extremely empowering. Every person brings a unique set of gifts and perspectives, and all are important.

*"This matter of weighing the individual utterances in arriving at the sense of the meeting is quite fundamental to the Quaker method. Several Friends may quite sincerely speak in one direction, and then one Friend may express an insight which carries weight and conviction in the meeting in a different sense. This one acceptable communication may outweigh in significance several more superficial ones"* (Selleck 1985, 116).

A spiritual sense of unity differs from the secular concept of consensus. While consensus may imply looking for the broadest area of common acceptance, Friends seek agreement that is compatible with the consciences of all who participate in the decision-making. To understand this crucial distinction even more clearly, one must keep in mind that, for Quakers, all meetings are grounded in worship, and those who participate in meetings work with the premise that the group's decision is being guided by God. Persons who for one reason or another do not feel that they can take part in the ongoing process of decision-making step aside, not only because they do not want to impede the group's progress, but also because they understand that the decision-making process is Divinely guided.

For Quakers, then, unity goes beyond consensus or compromise. As the following passage intimates, this unity derives from and represents the Divinely inspired mind or spirit of the Meeting, which guides the meeting's outcome.

*"The 'mind of the meeting' may not always reach that clarity which we could have wished, yet we may be satisfied that, having regard to the frailties of human nature, our partial apprehension of the truth, the varying gifts with which we have been endowed, the fallibilities of our judgment, the decision we have reached is for us, in this situation, right and proper, and should do no final violence to the judgment of any members"* (Dunstan 1985, 116).

At TMS there are no student elections, no campaigns for prestigious positions. Rather, a nominating committee gathers names of people willing to serve in various roles, with the understanding that every community member will participate in some capacity of the running of the school. After giving careful consideration to matching interests, skills, and gifts of individuals with the jobs that need to be done, the nominating committee brings a proposed slate to Community Meeting for approval. Students and faculty serve together, rotating positions twice a year.

Nominating Committee looks for leadership, open-mindedness, and familiarity with Quaker practices when recommending someone as Clerk of Community Meeting (always a student). Responsibilities of the Community Meeting Clerk include—and extend beyond—facilitating the weekly gathering for business. The Clerk of Community Meeting confers regularly with the Head of School and sits on Ministry and Counsel Committee.

Clerking a meeting requires the ability and patience to listen well in order to discern the sense of the meeting. The Clerk must be willing to hear more than his/her own preferred opinions. Sometimes discernment comes easily; people are readily in agreement and everything fits together smoothly. Often, however, the Clerk has the task of teasing from a jumble of opinions threads that will eventually lead to unity.

A student with a keen interest in developing stronger clerking skills can gain experience by volunteering to clerk one of the school committees, such as Curriculum, Celebrations, Community Life, Farm, and Physical Plant. In addition, all entering students take an oral communications class, which addresses self-awareness, clerking skills, and conflict resolution.

*"Friends believe that true leadership consists first and foremost in being led. This conception involves a curious but profound paradox. True leaders are not in any important sense initiators; rather, they are chiefly responders to the Divine Will"* (New England Yearly Meeting 1985, 114).<sup>3</sup>

Ministry and Counsel Committee, consisting of the Head of School, Community Meeting Clerk, Student Clerk, and one person from each of the five houses in a balance of age and gender, is charged with tending to the spiritual and emotional health of the school. This committee meets weekly to address concerns that come up and to consider how they might guide the rest of the school in responding to them. Ministry and Counsel may also suggest that it's time to lighten up and celebrate the arrival of spring with an all-school ice cream outing. They may make a recommendation to Community Meeting regarding some logistical change that they think will improve the school's community life.

Whether it is dealing with a concern that is disciplinary or of another nature (a separate Disciplinary Committee does not

exist at TMS), the community uses a Quaker process of forming an *ad hoc* clearness committee to respond to personal issues that need to be addressed. For Quakers, being clear means more than simply knowing the facts. It implies having the openness in one's heart that promotes an ability to listen and really hear, which in turn leads to clarity of spirit. We work with two types of clearness meetings. One deals with people's relationships; the other deals with minute-breaking or suspected minute-breaking.

A clarification: the term "minute" is commonly used to mean a summary of the proceedings of a meeting. Friends expand the use of the word by referring to a specific agreement the Meeting has come to as an action minute. This can involve coming to unity on a testimony (opposition to the death penalty, for example), or it may refer to a specific action (approving a budget). At TMS, a number of action minutes regarding the use of illegal drugs or alcohol on campus, appropriate sexual behavior, and so on were approved in the first years of the school's existence. These minutes, which remain in place as agreements within the community, are discussed with all prospective community members, who will be expected to abide by them should they choose to join the community.

When two or more individuals (student and student, student and faculty, faculty and student, faculty and faculty) are having a difficult time with one another, each chooses a support person and agrees upon a facilitator who will meet with them and help them to work things out. Sometimes they reach specific behavioral agreements; sometimes they express feelings and listen to each other in an attempt to feel more comfortable together. At times, this same *ad hoc* committee reconvenes to check on how their relationship is developing. Rather than resorting to gossip, community members who are having difficulty are expected to talk directly with each other or have a clearness meeting.

In the case of minute-breaking, the committee consists of the person who has broken the minute, the person who is confronting him or her about the behavior, support people chosen by each of these individuals, and a facilitator agreed upon by both parties. At least one member of a clearness committee regarding minute-breaking must be a faculty member. When a person comes forward voluntarily about her or his having broken a minute, someone is chosen from the community to serve as confronter.

The committee tries to become clear about the facts, and to understand why the person broke a community agreement. They allow the individual and other community members time to listen carefully to each other's feelings about what has happened. They make an effort to determine both the person's intentions for the future and what kind of support is needed for the person to carry out those intentions. They look for ways in which the individual can rebuild the

community's trust in him/herself. Then the group considers what response is appropriate to the behavior and makes a recommendation to the faculty and the Head of School.

This painstaking process, which may admittedly be frustrating to learn, eventually evolves into a deep understanding of the nature of who we are. People who join the TMS community agree to live by the standards of behavior as recorded in the Community Meeting minutes, and the school functions on faith in the good intentions of those who come here. Willingness to work with the clearness process is a baseline requirement; anyone unwilling to do so is asked to leave the community until he or she is ready to meet this expectation. If minute-breaking activity continues after several clearness meetings, it may be an indication that TMS is not the right school for this person.

Training and participation in Quaker meeting and decision-making prepares our students and faculty to participate meaningfully not only in Quaker communities, but also in the world at large. In November 1999, for example, five students and three faculty members went to Seattle to protest the World Trade Organization. In pre-demonstration training on non-violent direct action, TMS students were surprised to discover how familiar they



already were with facilitating or clerking small group discussions. They had skills to carry them beyond simply agreeing to be physically non-violent. Within their small groups they became leaders in helping people listen to each other and work together.

*Lambing season, which was in full swing when the students returned from intersession, has yielded eight woolly critters. Seedlings started indoors back in April are being planted in the garden. With this year's slow, cool spring, the lilacs bloomed and faded quickly. Wrap-up of various academic, farm, and community projects boosts an ordinarily intense pace of life to the point of being borderline frantic.*

*On top of everything else, graduation minutes must be completed. In lieu of a diploma, each graduate receives a minute in the form of a hand-printed, artfully decorated scroll that describes individual qualities and personal vignettes from his or her time at the school. Seniors are banned from the office, where other students and faculty members concentrate on capturing the essences of their beloved friends in calligraphy and water color.*

*Shortly before the big day, a Gloucester Old Spot sow delivers twelve healthy piglets. On a sunny Sunday in June, mother and offspring grunt contentedly from their shed as community and family members gather for the graduation celebration in the barn, where it has been held traditionally for over forty years. Loft beams are festooned with flowers. The calves and horses have given up their stalls, which have been rearranged to make room for wooden benches from the local Quaker Meetinghouse. As we settle into worship, hens and even the ever-loquacious guinea fowl honor the quiet. Only the barn swallows continue their discussion about the unusual number of people packed into their peaceful home, but in the end they decide it is okay and fall silent.*

*Following a period of worship, the minute for each senior is read aloud. These collections of catch phrases and memories are skillfully woven into poems, a rap song with drum and guitar accompaniment, a stream of conscious images, all blended with the personalities of the graduates. At the end, guests sing a simple*

*round of love and appreciation, while those who have lived, worked, and worshipped together for the past year make a procession into the field behind the barn for a closing circle.*

The Meeting School is well named. People gather frequently in a variety of contexts throughout the day to seek greater understanding of themselves and the world around them. In a pamphlet titled "Meeting for Learning: Education in a Quaker Context," Quaker educator Parker Palmer, (1985), writing on Quaker education more generally, sums up well and poignantly the essence of what this school, this community, is about:

*As my understanding of meeting enlarges, it becomes clear that one may speak of another kind of meeting: meeting for learning. Where else should the search for truth have greater prominence than in the process of education? Of course, for many of us "education" has come to mean a scramble for information, which leads to grades, which lead to a diploma, which leads to a job. There are too many educational institutions where truth is not the point. Perhaps the image of a "meeting for learning" will remind us of forgotten depths in the educational process, just as the silent meeting for worship once stood as a rebuke to ways of worship which put the human before the divine.*

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**Editorial introduction:** In June 2000 Margaret Hawthorn, author of the profile article on The Meeting School, met with Jacqueline Stillwell, Head of School at The Meeting School, to elaborate on clearness, boundaries, and transformations.

*A few days after graduation, the campus is quiet. While the faculty spend the morning hiking a local mountain, Curly, the four-hundred-pound boar, seizes the moment to go on an adventure. With an extra helping of grain, the office staff lure him back to his comfy pen in the bottom of the barn. Mama Hen parades her brood through the manure pile, teaching them to scratch below the surface to find red worms. The fields will be hayed as soon as New Hampshire receives three consecutive days without rain. Back from hiking, Jackie sits down to talk about the school.*

**M:** The clearness process is a big part of the education that happens here, but it must be repetitive and time-consuming. Do you ever feel like you are reinventing the wheel?

**J:** It's a matter of recognizing this is the journey of the human condition. We have things we need to face and grow through. There are definitely characteristics inherent in the teen years, so we just keep working on them, over and over again.

The community has a rhythm of its own that we go through every year. It has a different pace each year, special to each group of people. We all come with this beautiful vision. Then we go through disillusionment when minutes are broken, and we struggle with the sense of betrayal and not being able to trust each other. When we face all of that together honestly, we grow into another place where we have a renewed sense of vision that is more real, unlike the first one that was sort of idealistic.

For a while it's truly workable, and the agreements hold up. Then we have the next stage where we are living with the minutes and we discover that just because we agreed doesn't make it easy. It's still hard, and we learn how to do the hard work. Without following that rhythm, no real solid learning would happen. Until we experience the disillusionment of

broken minutes, we can't get to the place where we fully own the solution.

**M:** But after the first disruption of the idealism, followed by the hard work, there are still episodes of minute-breaking sprinkled throughout the year.

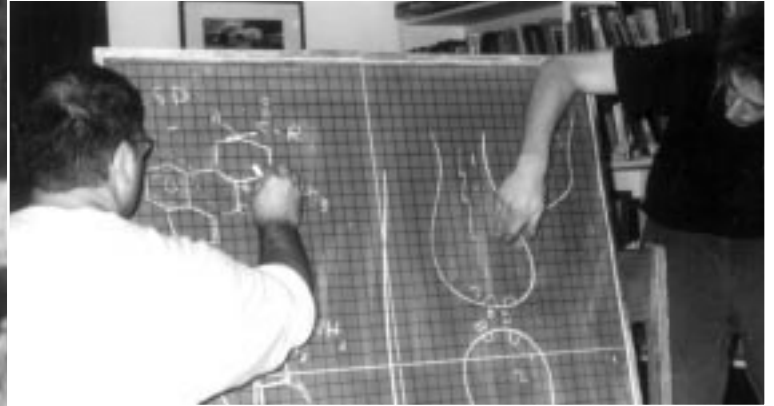
**J:** Yes. Part of the developmental stage of teenagers is testing the limits. They'll push the edges. That's the learning tool. One who naturally pushes finds out what the limits are. But those who tend to observe somebody else pushing also learn. They learn how the rest of the community can deal with limit testing by looking at certain questions. How do we respond to someone pushing? How do we honestly name what's going on so we can come together about it as opposed to just divorcing ourselves from that person?

There is a difference between working a situation out so you can rebuild trust, and sending the person who has broken the agreement away so you can pretend you are no longer in relationship with them. In many schools, if you break this or that rule once, you're gone. You definitely learn something. You learn you can't step over that line. Here, too, one would hope that you're learning that, but you're also learning it is possible to help work with a person who has stepped over the line so that better choices can be made in the future.

Children begin with external boundaries. When they cross them, there are external consequences. We try to teach our students to internalize and understand a boundary so that it makes sense to them. Then they choose it as their own boundary.

**M:** What kinds of kids tend to choose TMS?

**J:** Students who like planning for themselves, who appreciate having independence and freedom. The school works well for kids who are able to use this independence responsibly. It can work especially well for homeschoolers who want to be learning in conjunction with others and to have more social interaction for their high school years.



It is true that some students don't have the ability to learn within the TMS framework because they need things clearly defined in black and white. Kids who are successful here are ones who can work well with the clearness process.

**M:** Students here appear to have optimism. Something in them says, "I can dream and make it happen."

**J:** Yes, they do. And they're usually fairly realistic about how far they can dream. They tend to know what they can make happen by themselves, and what they need to invite others to help with in order to realize their goals. It's a return of hope. The "can do" part is where the hope comes from.

People get discouraged when they don't feel they have any power to make something happen. As soon as they feel they have something to contribute to make it happen, they begin to believe things are possible. I think a lot of kids grow up today in situations where they don't feel like they have a sense of purpose or of being able to effect change.

TMS kids know they can effect change. They watch it happen, and they actively participate. While they're here they create changes. It's not an abstract idea; it's a tangible thing that's going on all the time. In a clearness meeting, if you work through a disagreement with someone, a change happens. You've participated in making that change.

**M:** What do you see TMS graduates taking into the world with them?

**J:** They leave here with an understanding of how to ask for what they need, and an awareness of what gifts they have to offer. They know both their shortcomings and their strengths, and how to work with them. At TMS they learn about the hard work that comes between holding a vision and actually achieving the reality. Much of that has to do with knowing how to work with people.

Older alumni talk about a transformation in their lives that has empowered them to live more fully. It usually has to do

with understanding themselves better, and understanding themselves in relationship with others. This transformation has helped them be whole, to dare to dream, and go after it. Not in a naïve way, but with some real understanding of what they can accomplish. In fact, that's one of the goals mentioned in our statement of philosophy and purpose: *to empower people to live joyfully with spiritual, emotional and physical integrity.*

Our alumni reflect that, as unhappy as they may have been sitting in all those committee meetings and dealing with all that Quaker process, it works. And it works outside of here, without the Quaker backdrop. In your job, you may work with five other people on a team. You can take the process that you've learned here and ask others to join with you in working together. It's useful and successful because it involves a win/win approach. Some of the strategies taught in college level business management classes are things that TMS students witness and practice over and over until they become second nature by the time they graduate.

Here are some comments made by departing seniors in the final Community Meeting of this year:

"I learned how to say no—how not to be used by others."

"Life at TMS is probably one of the toughest things I'll ever face. To embrace confusion, to be creative amidst tragedy. I learned a whole lot I didn't expect to learn."

"I learned who I am. I couldn't be more thankful for that."

"I learned both sides of an issue are truths—no matter how open you are, you are biased. Also, manners work well. They help things go smoothly."

"Coming from war-torn Yugoslavia, and then spending a year in Prague where I felt unwelcome, I doubted my ability to make good choices. I learned confidence again, and felt respected."

"I learned how to love here. TMS was a safe place to do that."

## The Meeting School Philosophy and Purpose

The Meeting School exists to give young people and adults the opportunity to live and learn in a community based on the principles and practices of the Religious Society of Friends.

We are called to seek and to live with Divine guidance both individually and collectively.

The community provides secondary education and undertakes to empower people to live joyfully with spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and physical integrity.

We depend on each person to accept responsibility for his or her own growth, and to participate fully in the life of the community. We acknowledge and nurture the unique worth and insight of each person in our daily living, learning and decision-making.

We emphasize simplicity, honesty, the peaceful resolution of conflict, the dignity of physical labor, mutual trust and respect, and care for each other and the earth.

In all we do at TMS and in the wider world we strive to exemplify a deep sense of compassion and justice.

## Notes

1. Both passages, from a declaration presented to King Charles II, originally appeared in *George Fox: Journal*, edited by John L. Nickalls (1952).
2. *Faith and Practice*, Part III—Advices and Queries.
3. From a report on a workshop at Pendle Hill.

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## Now What?

Reflections by Robin Martin

Would you like to learn more about TMS, Quaker education, other farming schools, or school community building outside the framework of Quaker education? Here are some places you might want to begin...

### A Visit to The Meeting School

The school's website provides many colorful photos and brief descriptions of all its core programs at <http://www.mv.com/ipusers/tms/>. Or better than visiting a website, visit the school itself. It is located in southern New Hampshire at 56 Thomas Road, Rindge, New Hampshire 03461. Telephone: 603-899-3366. Fax: 603-899-6216.

### Quaker Schools and Quaker Education

For an alphabetical listing of over 30 Quaker schools worldwide and links to their websites, visit <http://www.quaker.org/schools.html>.

Friends Council on Education (FCE) is the central organizing force for Quaker K-12 schools. Their website includes a plethora of information and ways to get in touch with Quaker educators. <http://mathforum.com/fce/>

For a complete list of Quaker bookstores, with educational books and much more, located both online and offline, visit <http://www.quaker.org/bookstores.html>.

### Other Farming Schools

The Farm School (Summertown, Tennessee)—“Farm people want students to understand the relationship of everything they do to consequences in the outside world. Simple things like eating and going to the bathroom may have global consequences, and the actions of each of us affect the whole. This is the essence of instruction at The Farm School today: learning locally, thinking globally.” <http://www.thefarm.org/lifestyle/fs.html>

Scattergood Friends School (West Branch, Iowa)—“Comprising 80 acres of land ... the farm operates as a vital learning center of Scattergood Friends School. Its mission is to teach people how to produce healthy foods through the caring for plants, animals, and the soil; to impart a respect, understanding, and appreciation of nature; and to share the farming way of life as an important component of a complete education.” <http://www.scattergood.org/pages/home.html>

### Sustainability in Education

In a little known book called *Adventures on Arnold's Island and Other Essays on Education*, Arnold Greenberg (1994) writes an essay that highlights issues concerning the integration of farming as playing a significant role in meaningful learning experiences for youth, not unlike some of the core philosophies of TMS. This essay, “Homesteading: Stepping Back Towards the Future” (pp. 163-187), begins with personal concerns about the environment and then illustrates a four-year experiment that Greenberg tried to create called “The Deep Run School of Homesteading and Organic Agriculture.” This essay depicts with great clarity the philosophic and practical importance that farming can play in the education of teenage youth as they move into adulthood. This book is available from the Left Bank Press, P.O. Box 981, Blue Hill, ME 04614, USA.

In addition, Andrew Faust, staff at Upattinas School (in Glenmoore, Pennsylvania) and board member of the National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools (<http://www.ncacs.org>), is coordinating a “Resource Center for Bioregional Living.” This is an ongoing sustainability program and an exchange between schools that are wishing to learn more about building school campuses that actively nurture the relationships between young people and nature. Andrew offers classes on permaculture design, restoration ecology, natural building techniques, and the history of the ecological crisis in modern times. Next year he will focus on field projects in streambank restoration, organic farming techniques and “regreening” Philadelphia. He takes many trips to visit and work with the folks all up and down the East Coast who are doing this kind of work and who are practicing off-the-grid ways of living. For more information, contact Andrew at Upattinas, phone 610-458-5138, or e-mail [KarlinaJ@aol.com](mailto:KarlinaJ@aol.com).

### About Community Building

“The Quaker Decision-Making Process: What is it? How Can We Use It in a Friends School?” an article by Barbara Rose Caldwell, online in the “Literature on the Web” of the FCE website.

*The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* by M. Scott Peck, 1987 (reprinted in 1998), explores the more spiritual and subtle powers of individuals who gather together in real communities. Among other concepts, the idea of “inclusivity” has direct implications on how to build learning communities that are more appreciative of diversity. Several times throughout the book, Peck uses the example of his own Quaker school experience to build his case about the impact of community on learning and personal growth.

In addition to TMS and Quaker schools, many alternative schools offer variations on school meetings, conflict resolution programs, or other practices that bring about the kind of deep sense of community not found in most traditional schools. To learn more about various kinds of alternative schools, click on the “learning options” resources in the Thematic Search section of the Paths of Learning Resource Center, <http://www.PathsOfLearning.net>, or browse NCACS school members' websites, <http://www.ncacs.org>.

If you would like more reflections on and descriptions of Quaker and alternative community education resources, we invite you to visit our Online Action Guides at <http://www.great-ideas.org/guides.htm>, where you can more easily link to these and other books and websites. Or, for a printed version of this Online Action Guide, call 1-800-639-4122.