

CROYDON FRIENDS NEWSLETTER

January 2021

Dear Friends: We don't normally produce a separate January edition, but on this occasion we invited you to nominate some of your favourite contributions from the entire contents of last year's issues, hoping you may see it as an anthology of the changing world we found ourselves in.

Susan Northrop of Epsom Meeting wrote: I always enjoy reading all of the Croydon Newsletter! So please thank all members of your meeting for their inspirational words. I send greetings and good wishes to you all for this coming year. Whatever it may bring may we have the courage to move into new ways of being kind and compassionate, drawing strength from our inner knowing that love is the way the truth and light. It is the practice of being with our inner stillness that we can balance all that is asked of us and come from this place of love.

Gillian Turner and David Parlett



'This is a marvellous world' - photo by Liz Collins

From Dave Perry: *Viewing all of the 2020 newsletters in one easily accessible file (a brilliant idea) was my first step in looking again for something that stood out for me. Not an easy task in a newsletter that always contains such interesting informative articles, excellent book reviews, reports, photographs, and poems. However, I managed and have picked out two pieces that I would like to nominate, in no particular order. First: As I sat and looked I found this photograph drew me in. Through the overhanging branches I see a clearing with a log bench inviting me to sit. A place to pause and just be. "Sitting quietly, doing nothing, spring comes, and the grass grows by itself." Zenrin Kushu.*

From Eleri Pengelly, Purley Meeting: *I love seeing the Croydon newsletter. Since Lyn and I have been co-clerking we've shared it every month as an attachment to our own Purley weekly news bulletin, with attention drawn to particular highlights, so everyone can have a chance to enjoy it. It's always stuffed with thought provoking and/or inspiring material. I find I am often drawn to the pieces by Barbara Earl. I've also enjoyed the poems by R S Thomas, the circling prayer, and quotes from the lovely Mackesy book. Anyway, all of that leads me up to my selection - Small Kindnesses (in October). Wonderful!*

Small Kindnesses

I've been thinking about the way, when you walk down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs to let you by. Or how strangers still say 'bless you' when someone sneezes, a leftover from the Bubonic plague. 'Don't die,' we are saying. And sometimes, when you spill lemons from your grocery bag, someone else will help you pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other. We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot, and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder, and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass. We have so little of each other, now. So far from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange. What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these

fleeting temples we make together when we say, 'Here, have my seat,' 'Go ahead — you first,' 'I like your hat.'

It's not often that my Twitter feed throws up something so timely and fitting as Danusha Lameris' poem, Small Kindnesses. The beauty of her words as she highlights the deeper meanings behind how we relate and communicate to each other particularly in times when we may be feeling 'so far from tribe and fire' is quite stunning.

The grace behind such lines as 'Mostly, we don't want to harm each other' chime with the response most people have given regarding the need to socially distance and wear masks in public. The driver giving way and the kind stranger who helps to pick up the lemons spilling from our grocery bag are offering valuable acts of consideration and kindness. Such gifts should mean a lot at any time but may unfortunately go unnoticed under usual circumstances. In times of strain and difficulty, however, we may welcome these 'brief moments of exchange'.

*Having so little of each other (I really miss the warm offering of coffee and the 'second Meeting' on Sundays), we may indeed come to see these acts of goodwill as spiritual. These 'fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here, have my seat" may indeed hold the 'true dwelling of the holy'. **Barbara Earl***

Small Kindnesses was also the choice of Dave Perry, who now lives in Winenhoe:

This article is so apt, so relevant in this time. I believe there are lessons in everything that happens to us. One of the lessons that I am learning now (given in both the poem and article) is an acknowledgment of the importance of those little acts of kindness that ease the path upon which we daily walk. Now is the time for a resetting of priorities and renewed hope in this dawning new year. Each time we interact with another we establish a relationship, however brief, with that other. Let us hope and pray that 2021 is indeed a time of kindness, hope and healing in very many ways.

Joyce Trotman chose from our March edition:

Living sustainably on Guernsey

As a Quaker and a lawyer who has worked on a variety of environmental matters I often think about ways of reducing my own carbon footprint. Living on the 24 square mile island of Guernsey makes this easier in some ways and more difficult in others.

It's easy to walk most places and reserve the car for heavy shopping, our subsidised bus service is only £1 a ride, 90% of our energy is now supplied from renewables via the cable from France and we pay per bag of black bag waste we put out for disposal. We also have a surprising cluster of good but expensive vegetarian/vegan, zero waste and ethical clothing shops in town.

The real dilemma though is leaving our rock to visit friends and family. There is no boat in the winter to my mother-in-law's island of Alderney (population 2000) as the currents are too rough so a 12 seater plane is the only option to travel between the islands including for those from Alderney to visit the hospital in Guernsey.

We do have a fast and slow ferry to Poole from Guernsey but the fast ferry is regularly delayed, rescheduled or cancelled in the winter and the slow ferry is an overnight trip with a significant risk of rescheduling sometimes by as much as a day or two to catch a weather window. This year has been particularly difficult for the ferry company given the extended period of windy weather so that the bulk of islanders, including my family, use the plane especially in the winter. For me, it does not seem a real option to not visit family at least a few times a year.

I have been struck recently by a notice in our zero waste shop in town that we don't need a small number of people doing zero waste perfectly but a lot of people doing it imperfectly. I think the same applies to our carbon footprint. Even if some things are difficult for me like travel off island, I should not give up but keep trying to be imperfectly green. I am combining my trips to see relatives, donate to a tree charity and am considering off-setting. I sometimes look wistfully at interesting lectures I am asked to attend in England but I really can't justify a plane journey for a short event.

Friends living in London will have other challenges in trying to live a more sustainable life style but I do hope we can all keep plugging away imperfectly. Sending love and light to all Croydon Friends.

Helen Shorey

This was written before lockdown. Helen tells me that they are able to hold meeting for worship as usual in their meeting house as there is no community seeding in Guernsey, achieved by their location and very strict self-isolation requirements – 14 days self-isolation and 2 Covid tests, on day 1 and day 13. - GT

Chosen by Margie Ashley: *During the last three weeks (published June 2020) I have taken part in a group meditation for forgiveness: forgiveness for others, but also for ourselves. Often we find we are our own worst critics, beating ourselves up mentally about mistakes we have made in the past. To open our hearts and forgive ourselves is just as important as forgiving others.*

In Meeting for Worship this morning (31/5/20) lines from Desiderata – by Max Ehrman, one of my favourite poems - came to mind. It used to be quoted quite a lot in ministry when I first started attending Croydon Meeting way back in 1971. I remember Mark Hayler often ministered something uplifting towards the end of a Meeting for Worship that had seemed a bit gloomy with people ministering about problems in the world. I remember Mark ministering about the sun is still shining and the birds are still singing.

Here are a few lines to give you a taste of it:

To placidly go

Go placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace there there may be in silence.....

Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be.

And whatever your labours and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

Pam Sellman

From Liz Collins: *I have spent the most wonderful morning with the sage words, musings and reflections of friends. Some remembered with a smile, some with new meaning or resonance when read again.*

It has also been fascinating seeing how our thoughts have developed as the events of the year and its impact have unfolded around us.

It is with this in mind that I have made my choice.

From February, nearly a year ago when people were just starting to read about the virus in China and getting concerned about its spread. Another Spring by Christina Rossetti:

Another Spring

If I could see another Spring,
I'd not plant summer flowers and wait;
I'd have my crocuses at once,
My leafless pink mezereons
my chill veined snowdrops choicer yet
my white or azure violet,
leaf-nestled primrose; anything
to grow at once, not late.
If I might see another Spring
I'd listen to the daylight birds
that build their nests and pair and sing
nor wait for mateless nightingales,
I'd listen to the lusty herds,
the ewes with lambs as white as snow,

I'd find out music in the hail
 and all the winds that blow.
 If I might see another Spring
 Oh stinging comment on my past
 that all my past results in 'If'
 If I might see another spring
 I'd laugh today, today is brief;
 I would not wait for anything.
 I'd use today that cannot last,
 Be glad today and Sing.

Christina Rossetti

Seems so prophetic now, and as we head into another Spring with hope, even though the anxiety and uncertainty still with us.

Margaret Skelton chooses:

To Float on the Waters of Existence

Some novelists can often be cynical and cruel about the ageing process (I'm thinking of you, Philip Roth), but I like Mark Twain's jaunty: 'Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter'. Part of life is, of course, a series of transition points all of which encompass ageing in an inescapable way. Preparing to move on starts well before the more advanced stages of life when the need to adopt certain roles may decrease until eventually, in retirement, professional duties and/ or unwaged work are largely, but not wholly, put aside. At this point, it is possible to be so invested and attached to these roles and responsibilities, which seem to confer a perceived sense of worldly control and status that they can be quite difficult to relinquish.

There may be an additional tendency to look back on past accomplishments and either give oneself a self-congratulatory pat on the back or take a little too much pride in having survived the many and varied challenges through which one has lived. Regret may also find a place in passing thoughts as memories of often unconscious, unskilful choices of both self and others drift to the forefront of the mind. Occasions marred by the dead hand of perfectionism, unrealistic expectations and harsh judgements remind me to remember that each of us may be flawed or wounded to some extent and therefore doing our best from our particular level of consciousness. I feel in agreement with Maya Angelou on this issue:

'Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better'.

In *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, a work on the inner lives of women, Clarissa Pinkola Estes suggests that the act of claiming our birthright, which she sees as that of thriving in life, can replace the grim hold of an outworn, perhaps defensive, 'survivor' mentality. She writes that rather than dwelling on past mis-steps or hard-won badges of honour, we put ourselves into the 'lush, the nutritive, the light' in order that we may continue to attain inner growth. Estes recommends many ways of achieving this, including: dance, artwork, being in Nature, words, paper, books and 'tree-leaning peace.' She cites ritual as one way in which humans can think about the past with compassion, accept and even memorialise it and gain renewed perspective on their lives. This may be 'Purim, Advent or drawing down the moon' or, one might add, the taking part in the peace of a Quaker Meeting.

In *The Way Out is the Way In*, the late Quaker writer and mystic Damaris Parker-Rhodes shared her view that the practice of inner silence 'teaches the skills needed to float on the waters of existence'. This beautiful phrase reminds me of the advice from St Francis:

'Wear the world as a loose garment, which touches us in a few places and there lightly'.

Parker-Rhodes goes on to explain that in the silence one is 'borne up and connected with an invisible environment'. This experience of contemplation may help one to see that each deprivation undergone can be likened to a mountain-climber who, on reaching higher altitudes, finds huts and depots for that which must be left behind.

And the irreversible past? This, from C.S. Lewis may provide balm:

'...forgive the inexcusable, for God has forgiven the inexcusable in you'.

Barbara Earl

Anita Bennett's choice:**Seasons**

Ministry in meeting for worship today (29th November) included a reference to a weariness of spirit which I could relate to. In fact before the meeting I had thought about not attending but I'm so glad I did. The following Advice was read which seemed to speak to me:

Advices & Queries: 10 'Come regularly to meeting for worship even when you are angry, depressed, tired or spiritually cold. In the silence ask for and accept the prayerful support of others joined with you in worship. Try to find a spiritual wholeness which encompasses suffering as well as thankfulness and joy. Prayer, springing from a deep place in the heart, may bring healing and unity as nothing else can. Let meeting for worship nourish your whole life.'

During the afterthoughts a reference was made to *Quaker Faith & Practice* 21:12: 'Trouble of soul can teach us things that raptures never could - not only patience and perseverance, but humility and sympathy with others' (Edward Grubb, 1933).

For me the above brought up thoughts about the seasons, in our lives and those we experience during a calendar year: winter, spring, autumn and summer. I have always loved the different seasons but sometimes winter can be very difficult even though it is necessary for rebirth. Our lowest times can have such depths that allow us to experience awakenings and realise our strengths. There are numerous sayings about seasons which I often find helpful as inspiration for life, a few of which I share below.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 'To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.....'

Albert Camus: 'In the depth of winter I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer....'

Thich Thien-An: 'Each season has its own beauty To practice meditation is to open the mind so that all of them may be enjoyed. When each season comes we should enjoy it, and when it goes we should let it go and open our mind to the next season.'

Nichiren Daishonin: 'Winter always turns to spring. Never from ancient times on has anyone heard or seen of winter turning back to autumn.'

Whatever the season we are experiencing, perhaps it is good to remember advice given by Mother Teresa: 'Love is a fruit in season at all times and within the reach of every hand. Anyone may gather it and no limit is set.'

Pam Sellman

Wilf Hayler chooses, from *September 2020*:

An exploration of the poems of RS Thomas

The unexpected highlight of my summer has been a slow and happy exploration of the poems of RS Thomas. My quest began when I found Thomas cited in Mark Oakley's *The Collage of God* - which is itself a beautiful (and short!) account of Christian faith, organised not according to any systematic or rational framework, but by what Oakley has learned through his own religious experiences. As a warning against imposing our own limited systems onto the Divine, he quotes RS Thomas's poem *Raptor*:

'You have made God small
setting him astride
a pipette or a retort
studying the bubbles
absorbed in an experiment
that will come to nothing.
I think of him rather
as an enormous owl
abroad in the shadows,
brushing me sometimes
with his wing so the blood
in my veins freezes, able
to find his way from one
soul to another because
he can see in the dark.'

Even in these few short lines, there is so much that chimes with Quaker approaches to the Divine. While we do talk of knowing God 'experimentally', it is precisely to reject the narrow 'experiment' Thomas describes here: pained theologising, precision, dogma, the need to be in control. Instead, God is known by personal acquaintance – or, in other words, by revelation. Words make sense of experience, and only if they 'improve the silence', not the other way around.

What words are best? Quakers seem most comfortable with images of 'Light'. And yet, as we still our minds in the silence of a Meeting for Worship, we surely all recognise the sense of fleeting contact and deep mystery that Thomas conveys with the image of 'an enormous owl', moving between us in the dark.

I was pleased to find the same interplay between light and dark – the sense of expectant waiting alongside flashes of something revealed – weaving through many of Thomas's other poems. In 'Folk Tale', for example, he reflects that he would have 'refrained long since' from praying 'but that peering once / through my locked fingers / I thought that I detected / the movement of a curtain.' At the same time, the hours (or perhaps years?) spent watching and praying hold as much meaning as the 'movement of a curtain'. As in the poem 'Kneeling', 'When I speak, though it be [God] who speak / Through me, something is lost. The meaning is in the waiting'. And again, in 'Questions', 'Silence is the message. / The message is... Wait.'

The recognition that the mystery, the silence, and the waiting might express as much of the nature of faith (and even of God) as the ecstasy and excitement of ministry is, to me at least, what makes Thomas's poetry so rich, so honest, and so compelling. I have not found a better expression of what draws me to Meeting each week.

For this reason, I was intrigued to start reading online articles about his work. Many of them explore the 'contradictions' of his faith (he was an Anglican priest for most of his adult life). I kept reading about the 'paradox' of poems that speak both of silence and presence – and indeed, of religious poetry that is so preoccupied by the 'absence' of God. If I had not already read his poems, I would be expecting something totally different: doubt, melancholy, and disappoint. Instead, I just read them as so clearly expressing something true and meaningful about spiritual experience: hope, leading to revelation. It never occurred to me to read them as paradoxical.

This has got me thinking about what it means to grow up a Quaker (as I did), and so to have your spiritual instincts incubated in silent worship, rather than a more conventional faith setting. At the very least, silence doesn't need to mean absence. Perhaps we become so comfortable with the paradoxes that we stop noticing them? It also encourages me that Quakers have something valuable to offer a world which is so often noisy, confused, and over-stimulated. Ours is a message that the world needs to hear – though perhaps without words. **Maddy Pennington**

Kay Papadopoulos *chooses one of Cecily Taylor's poems, from the February issue:*

Words like birds

Words like birds
 come settle on my branches
 to spell the recurring
 mystery of leaves -
 returning leaves -
 and blossoms
 wrought in paradise.
 For in a world of restless din
 where war and earthquake
 wreak their worst
 and tragedies run riot,
 I need those reassuring words,
 those silent words
 from depths of peace and quiet -
 that still small voice within. **Cecily Tayler**

Barbara Cairns (*Epsom meeting*) chooses one by **Joyce Trotman**:

My Covid-19 Lockdown Blessing

On Easter Saturday I was in mourning.

News of my American cousins was not good. One was spending his birthday in isolation having succumbed to the effects of Covid-19, the other after a long illness had died just at the time that I had been asking about him. A subsequent phone call confirmed this. Sunday came and I was still feeling very low. Then there was a change. Steve, my neighbour at Number 19 brought me some handmade sweets and an A5 envelope, not the usual size for an Easter card. In it was a hand written letter written in green ink. It was from his daughter. It read, 'Dear Joyce. Hello. I am Lilyanne. I'm 9 years old and I live at number 19. As we are in Lockdown I thought I would write you this little letter.' She then told about school, and her best friend Gabi whom she misses, and about what she is doing in lockdown time, 'a lot of painting when I`m not doing school work.' She also told about her five year old brother, James, and his best friend Ryan whom he too misses. As I read I felt that for Lilyanne, friendship was very important.

At the bottom of the page was a beautifully painted rainbow with the Happy Easter Greeting in purple. The mere receipt of a friendly letter from a nine-year-old and which was decorated for Easter really lifted my spirits no end especially when I was enjoying not only the letter but also the sweets that had come with it. In my reply I told Lilyanne how on Saturday my spirits had died and how her friendly Easter letter had made them rise again. I also told her how her rainbow had reminded me of the second stanza of a poem written by Christina Rossetti, which at age nine I had learned, and I wrote it out for her. There are bridges on the rivers/As pretty as you please/But the bow that bridges heaven/And overtops the trees/And builds a road from earth to sky/Is prettier far than these.

On the following Saturday I had another letter from Lilyanne, this time written in purple ink, and decorated with the drawing of a unicorn in colours. In it, she told me about her 'poem book for every night' and that her favourite poem was the one for the 30th March which was her birthday, and that it is called *Against Idleness and Mischief* written by Isaacs Watts. It was How doth the little busy bee/Improve each shining hour,/And gather honey all the day/From every opening flower! Was it coincidence/God-incidence that this poem also revived my childhood memory? Lilyanne wrote the whole poem, all four stanzas. Well, at just about Lilyanne's age, at nine years, I was made to learn the same poem which is in my West Indian Reader, Book 1. I had to refer to my reading book to confirm that the poem was really written by Isaac Watts. In the 1930's in British Guiana learning was by rote, and if maybe we knew that what we leaning was a poem, no one told us about the poet; indeed, as I remember it, when we were reciting *The Naughty Boy* by John Keats, we would end: 'He stood in his shoes and he wondered, he wondered/ He stood in his shoes and he wondered, John Keats'. It was not until I had to study his poetry in the sixth form that I realised that the poet who had written *A thing of beauty is a joy forever* was the same poet who had written *The Naughty Boy*. The name Isaac Watts at the end of the poem had no significance.

Lilyanne's letter made me do my own lockdown homework. It is no wonder that Isaac Watts (1674-1748) named the poem *Against Idleness and Mischief*, because in researching him I learned that he was a devout Christian, a Non-Conformist, and that many of the hymns that I was singing for most of my adult life, the words were written by him, for example *When I survey the wondrous cross* and *O God our help in ages past*. For most of that Saturday I spent going through an old edition of an Anglican Hymn Book and counted nineteen entries by Isaac Watts. But then I noticed something special about this edition – every hymn was introduced by a verse from the Bible, including those by Isaac Watts. I had made a discovery, namely that a hymn book is in fact an anthology of Christian verse/poetry. Very often we are so carried away by the tunes that we do not stop long enough to pay attention to the words. So often I find modern poetry so unsatisfying, having no rhythm or rhyme you can easily memorise. Not so my poems in my hymn book. Now I read them even though sometimes I do not know the tune. I find the words uplifting.

Thank you, Lilyanne, my Covid-19 Lockdown Blessing.

Joyce Trotman

David Parlett's choice: *'Be aware', says Advices & Queries (#7) 'of the spirit of God at work in the ordinary activities and experience of your daily life. Spiritual learning continues throughout life, and often in unexpected ways. There is inspiration to be found all around us, in the natural world, in the sciences and arts, in our work and friendships, in our sorrows as well as in our joys'. It's an advice exemplified in all Helen Johnson's pieces. She could write about putting out the dustbins and it would be spiritually uplifting. Here's one from April.*

Helen's dilemma – to Zoom or not to Zoom

I know I belong to an ancient generation; after all, my favourite singer by a country mile is Ella Fitzgerald. Furthermore, this period of social isolation has given time to explore the lives and work of Miles Davies and Bill Evans. So, we're talking about a focus on the late 1950s, which is a long time ago, even for me. And a lot of things have happened between then and now. Apart from musical tastes, one of the symptoms of being such an age is that I'm starting to choose whether or not I bother to keep up. My bank is clearly annoyed that I don't use online banking because of what I regard as legitimate security issues. Additionally, I have been known to even write the occasional cheque. However, recently, I've giving in to the expectations of friends to use bank transfers to pay for theatre and other shared expenses.

Clearly the reluctance to change, with all its rationalisations, is a sign of age but sometimes there is a wider discussion to engage in. I'm afraid my first reaction to the idea of Quaker meetings on Zoom was to be somewhat bemused. All these individuals sitting alone at home and sitting in (almost) silence. In many ways, after the reluctance to join any group is got over, it does seem the total introvert experience. You don't even have to leave the house. Hands up, to be honest, I was more than slightly intimidated by the technical and experiential issues – how does it work, how can I get in and participate – and what will the meeting be like? There is something about sitting with others together in a circle in the meeting-house. Something does happen. Will a Zoom meeting be remotely the same?

However, I'd enjoyed the What's App group. So amazingly enough, I gave the Zoom meeting a go. Laura kindly helped me get in and, after that, it was a piece of cake (the only piece of cake I was going to get - though Cathy did give a wave on screen from her house). Was it a deep spiritual experience? No, it wasn't for me as a first-timer but, somehow, I realised that this new type of meeting cannot be dismissed and ignored. (A step-by-step handout – perhaps even written on a piece of paper - explaining quite how to get in and what to do might be helpful). Perhaps, the Zoom meeting is not the entire future but it is certainly going to be part of it. It was the first meeting of this type, I guess, that many of us had experienced. I realised that this is a change – out of pure necessity and technological advance – that has to be supported and given time to develop spiritually. After all, we do have to keep in touch and in sight of each other.

Helen Johnson

Post-script

A big thank you to all our contributors – not only those whose work over the past year appears in this edition but also to all who took the trouble to reread them and send us their selections.

A reminder of principal office-holders of Croydon meeting, effective from 1 January 2021:

Clerk: Pam Sellman **Assistant clerk** Liz Collins
Elders: Michelle Dumont, Helen Johnson, Maddy Pennington, Pam Sellman
Overseers: Julia Abley, Margie Ashley, Blair Hunwick, Brian Skeet
Treasurer: Roger Haworth

The deadline for the December/January edition is Sunday 24 January 2021
Please give, send or email contributions (no longer than 500 words, please) to
Gillian Turner Tel 07805087981 email gillianturner033@gmail.com

Test your memory...

