

Quaker life Representative Council  
Woodbrooke, 15-17 April 2016-05-08

Sharing our End of Life Stories- discovering Quaker understandings of dying and death.

This weekend was an exploration and sharing of experience, a giving of permission and an expression of emotion. It was not a series of instructions, but a looking at how our Quaker way will inform and accommodate these things. It was a journey which encompassed love, tenderness and holding. A time which contained comfort, searing anger, acceptance, letting go and more. Each session was held in and punctuated with worship.

Some fragments which will give a flavour:

*Bloody hell*

*Nothing is wasted*

*Isolation in the face of others' joy.*

*Huge resentment*

*Why should this 'worse' not happen again?*

*I bought this shirt the day he died.*

*It's expensive- car parks are expensive. No one thinks of that.*

*It is quite different inside the experience*

*I am happy*

The stories took us from those who could prepare themselves and others for their dying to suicide crashing into a life, to death from AIDS in the 70s and the crushing stigma attached to it. These were told in plenary sessions, in workshops and in the Home Groups.

The workshops were various- nine to chose. Not easy! I chose Medically Assisted Dying and Spiritual Experience. The latter was a slight disappointment, but I but perhaps my expectations were too high. We listened to two more friends sharing their stories, but there was no time for others to participate. The former was different, and, for me, had more of a spiritual dimension. The acronym is M.A.D, which it is for some, but there were tender stories of challenges, thoughtful offerings from a broad spectrum of consideration, and tears from a doctor who felt he had let down some of his patients. This session- also a short 45 minutes-was held in the seminar room of the library. We were surrounded by books on Peace.

On Saturday evening we were treated to a film- 'What we did on our Holiday'. Apart from the unlikely launching of Billy Connolly into a loch on a makeshift burning Viking longboat by his grandchildren, the film did raise some issues- and laughs- around openness and family divisions... Friends will have to see what they think!

It was the Home Groups which were the core of the weekend for me. The trust and the permission were palpable after a short introduction to each other as we mentioned 3 things from our meetings. The depth of sharing and of opening and of going to places not visited before- or for some time- took us to a place which demanded a response, not in part, but with our whole being. There was an urgent honesty in those times which took us to the heart of the matter, to tears and anger, to our own vulnerabilities, to the inexpressible. It was good to stop, to be silent and to recognise that place which 'brings men to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter'.

It was the place where a Friend had said to me at break time 'But I never cry, never, but this is a Tsunami and I don't know what to do with it'. It was the place where a mother's hand was in mine as she told of the suicide of her 12 year old son which had happened in a 15 minute interval. His reason was unbearably awful for her. It was the place where I felt that of God most keenly. I was reminded of QF&P 21.67:

*I was terrified I'd break down.*

*I did.*

*It didn't matter.*

As the attached minute shows, there are many questions to consider. I would add 3 of the several others which I brought away:

Where does Medically Assisted Dying fit for Quakers?

What of those for whom 'all', as the minute says will not be 'well'?

What of those for whom a death is a release "I'm glad the b... is gone"?

Might they not need the helping up with a tender hand as they learn the map of their new landscape?

These are just a few pegs on which friends can hang their own thoughts. Perhaps a fitting finish to this attempt are the words of Ian Law, who spoke to us, and whose account can be found in part at QF&P 21.68:

*I loved Andrew. He died after living with AIDS. These are facts of my life. They are facts of life of The Religious Society of Friends. In out living and loving and dying I have found much to cherish as well as much that hurts, found growth as well as loss. My hope is that together we can share these things, together and hold them in worship, prayer and love.*