

At the Gathering: A Lesson on Invisibility

by Hilary B. Bisenieks

Although I have less to report about the 2009 summer Gathering than I would prefer, due to another long week of Nominating Committee work for the FGC Adult Young Friends (AYF) community, the pieces of the Gathering that I got to experience firsthand were oases in a desert of late nights, fluorescent lights, and endless nominating slates to fill. If you were in attendance, you may have seen me from a distance—a tall man in a kilt and top hat—but unless you were also a part of the AYF community, it's likely that you would have seen me *only* from a distance, making a beeline for the dining hall or the AYF dorm, or standing/sitting/lying around on the lawn outside of the dorm.

Honestly, I wasn't trying to avoid other Friends—one of the things I most enjoy about the Gathering is getting to talk with Friends whom I've never met before. But my normal route for interacting with a wider variety of Friends during the Gathering, going to my workshop, was closed to me when my bicycle experienced a compound snafu

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that I lacked the time to fix (indeed, that bicycle still sits, forlorn, waiting for me to have the time or energy to fix it). And although the singles cluster was located in the same dorm as the AYF cluster, my opportunities to interact with other Friends were limited. This is something that I don't understand, but I suspect that I am far from the only AYF (or High School Friend, for that matter) whose interactions with the wider FGC community are limited. I know that part of this stems from the nature of these smaller communities within the wider Gathering community, which make it easy for Friends to connect without having to step too far out of their comfort zones, but is it so bad to step out when doing so can open up new opportunities for fellowship? This is not one-sided, not a matter of older Friends needing to reach out to younger generations or vice versa; this is something that we have to do together.

The problem as I see it is that these groups don't know how best to connect with each other—especially AYFs with other adult Friends. Depending on the AYF in question, high school may be a thing long past or a recent memory, and the same goes for college. The operative word is *adult* more than *young*, a fact that other Friends would do well to remem-

ber when trying to make connections with AYFs. We have jobs (some of us even work for Quakers), payments to make, spouses (spice?), even children; we just lack the gray hair.

Another problem, which has been pointed out before, is that many AYFs are the children of Friends, but that doesn't mean that they don't have their own identities. Likewise, AYFs should remember that the parents of their friends have their own identities. We should strive to relate to each other as individuals separate from their relatives whom we may already know.

What I saw during the Gathering was a joyful, energetic, Spirit-led group of Friends, who stayed up just as late conducting the business of their community as they did going about the business of having fun. I saw a group of Friends who are not satisfied with "good enough" for their faith community and are willing to do the hard work that it can sometimes take to help that com-



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Photos from 2009 Friends
General Conference Gathering



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nominating them instead of socializing with them.

Did I learn anything at the Gathering? Sure—though not in my workshop, which is often where Gathering attendees learn the most during the course of the week. Rather, my work on AYF Nominating Committee was what taught me during the course of the week. This was my third consecutive year serving on that particular committee, so it wasn't the process I was learning, it was an appreciation for the work that nominating committees must do every year. Even though most nominating committees are not tasked with filling slates that are roughly one sixth of the size of the communities that those slates are designed to serve, nominating any number of people is still a formidable task.

During the week I also learned to be aware of the invisible members in our communities. I had felt rather isolated at Gathering, but I didn't really have perspective on my isolation until I was talking with a friend on one of the final days,

and he told me that he had barely seen me all week. This awareness of those among us who are invisible did little for me during the remainder of the Gathering—I remained quite isolated until the very end of the week when the business of my committee was finally finished.

Since that time, I have given this a lot of thought. To that end, I pose this query to all Friends: *Be it Gathering, yearly or monthly meeting, or outside of Quaker circles, who among your community is invisible?* This query is open-ended because there is no one way that invisibility manifests itself. Certainly some forms of invisibility are easier to overcome than others, especially as some things, like committee work, are a part of how we operate, but we need to be careful not to ignore what is happening all around us. Consider the new members and attenders, who are trying to find their places in your meeting; the new parents, who are trying to navigate a completely new world; the young adults, who are not as scary as we may

community grow. In short, I saw the essence of the Religious Society of Friends, and I'm glad to be a part of that community, even when I have to spend so much time



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seem; and yes, the members of committees, who can get caught up so much in working for their communities that they cannot see the fruits of their labors.

In an odd—if not unexpected—turn of fate, my work at FRIENDS JOURNAL since the Gathering has had me reading through the notes from two of this year's plenary speakers, giving me a new chance to experience a few of the aspects of this year's Gathering that I missed while I was actually in Blacksburg. Interesting though I have found these notes to be, I feel that they lose something not being read by their authors with the dynamic of a group moving the text, subtly pulling and pushing the meaning. I suppose that I may have read something that was not heard by the people who attended these plenary addresses, but on balance I would guess that I have lost more in this way than I have gained. Sitting at a table, pen in hand, reading through notes with an

eye towards what might be included in this year's coverage of the Gathering while listening to music on my iPod is a far cry from sitting in an auditorium with hundreds of other Friends, listening to a speaker bring those notes to life. While I may miss plenary addresses for a variety of other reasons, be it a lack of interest in the topic at hand or a pressing obligation to socialize with Friends who I see only rarely, I value the choice of whether to attend or not. When I do go to a plenary in person, it's my interest or curiosity that is drawing me there, not some obligation or assignment. I don't know if the descriptions of these plenaries, when weighed against my other hypothetical options, would have called me to attend them. This isn't to say that reading about some of the highlights of the Gathering isn't worthwhile—if it weren't, dear reader, you might not have made it this far—but it's like reading about your friends having fun instead of going out and joining them.

As important as these lessons have been for me, I would certainly have preferred to learn them in some other manner. I eagerly look forward to next year's Gathering, when my only obligations will be to eat and sleep, leaving open all my options for fellowship, worship, workshops, and all the other things that make the Gathering a memorable experience for attendees every year. □

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