

**EMBODYING THE
QUAKER TESTIMONIES IN
SERVICE OF A LIVING PLANET:
THE CHALLENGE OF
ASKING BEAUTIFUL QUESTIONS**

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I. INTRODUCTION

I stand here hugely grateful – for the opportunity to speak, and for this faith community that means so much to me. I'd like to use this time to be as honest as I can in what I want to say. I will start as I mean to continue: at 34 years old, I am no longer considered young in virtually any group I interact with, apart from Quakers. More on that later. I am not here because of, or in spite of, my age: I am here because I have questions to ask of us as a spiritual community, and I want to be part of the resulting conversation.

I have questions I want us, as Irish Quakers, to be asking about what it means to be a spiritual community in this time of such destruction and broken relationships with the living planet. I hope these questions can help us bring the Quaker Testimonies to serve the living planet, and I also hope that some of them make us all feel a little uncomfortable.

Before I start, it is important to admit – and I am not the first or last person to say this – that I don't actually like any of the words we have to talk about this. Sustainability is still generally the most used word, but I don't want to be sustainable. *'Able to sustain'*: it feels mediocre and not exciting, and not at all representative of what the movement feels like. The word 'environment' implies we are separate from it, which feels weird, and don't get me started on natural resources! When did we start called sacred elements of creation 'natural resources'? Each time we lose another species, we lose a way of knowing God. How do you come up with a word for that? How do you start to convey the truth that we can't live or thrive on a dead planet? Climate justice is closer, but it's broader than just climate. Some circles have started using wellbeing, in an effort to be more all-encompassing than 'sustainability', some use 'Eco-justice', some call it Regeneration, others say the Just Transition, or the Great Turning, or even Reciprocity, which I really like. But I'm not going to be an eejit about it – if at my next family Christmas party I tell someone straight off the bat, I'm working to 'regenerate a world of reciprocity', well, good luck to me. But the challenge remains, that I don't really like any of the words we have. So I'll continue with a talk about a topic I don't have a word for ...

There are two things I am not going to talk about tonight. I don't want to talk about statistics or the science behind sustainability. I have listened to, and given, that talk, dozens of times. I don't regret it, and I will give that talk again, but I am so exhausted with the statistics, and I think people are exhausted listening to them. Over the past fifty years, it has slowly dawned on the environmental movement that statistics do not work as a way of persuading people to change their behaviours. If they did, they would have worked by now. We would have solved the problem 15-20 years ago! And so, if, in the year 2022, you do feel you still need to be convinced of the statistics, or the case for climate action, this is not the lecture for you. Ask me after and I can give you as many sources as you like. This evening, I get to talk to a room of people who share the Quaker Testimonies as anchors in how we try to live our lives. Peace. Love. Truth. Simplicity. Integrity. Equality. And this is a rare treat.

However, in case you've been living under a rock, here is the shortest summary possible. At its most technical, sustainability is the earth's capacity to absorb our waste and replenish our natural resources. Our current lifestyles in the Global North are exceeding both of those capacities, pushing against several planetary boundaries that are challenging the ability of the living Earth to sustain human life. Alongside this, global

inequality is deepening, with the world's roughly 2,000 billionaires now having more wealth than the bottom 60% of the world's population, which is 4.6 billion people.

The people in this room do not see the destruction: it is out of sight, in places that don't seem important. Naomi Klein, US author and social activist, calls these areas 'sacrifice zones', and says this of them: "They are poor places. They are out-of-the-way places. Places where residents lack political power, usually having to do with some combination of race, language and class. And the people who live in these condemned places know they have been written off."¹ Global Witness have been tracking the killings of land and environment defenders since 2012². They have compiled all the recorded deaths of people who have been killed while defending their land, forests, rivers and wildlife. 1539 environmental defenders have been killed since 2012. That is an average of three people a week for the past decade. Why have we not heard about these people? Because they are out of sight.

There are people, communities, and ecosystems being poisoned and killed in the name of progress. Environment and justice are not separate issues. Pope Francis, in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato' Si*, says the cry of the Earth is the same as the cry of the poor. It is the cry of broken relationships. Ecology and justice are inseparable. We know this. We also know that this way of living has not brought us contentment. Whether or not we want to admit it, deep down we know it's true.

And that is the end of the summary. I am not going to spend any longer persuading you why sustainability is central to Quakerism. I'm just not. Another thing I'm not going to do is systematically go through the categories of action happening in the transformation to a more sustainable, just world. Not because these are irrelevant – they are at the very core of the matter – but because there are dozens, hundreds, of places to get that information, including *'Regenerating Our Common Home'*³ by the Irish Eco-Quaker Committee earlier this year. Every major category of action – and the progress being made in them – deserves more than an hour lecture: transport, energy, food, land management, city planning, consumption, waste, chemicals, business practice, supply chains, manufacturing, investment, governance, mining, climate change, biodiversity, ocean management, forests, water management, disaster relief, global cooperation and international aid. We could talk about these for hours. And we should! Just not now.

I would like, instead, to talk about how we talk about it. This may sound a bit indulgent, or even pointless, but it's not a philosophical or theological thought experiment. I believe how we talk about something can fundamentally change how we understand it. And how we understand something can profoundly change how we act in the world. To ask questions about how we understand what is unfolding around us, in this case, asks us to challenge our very theology. And 'our worship and our daily life enrich each other. Growing in the spirit is a consequence of taking actions, and action flows from our spiritual growth; here is the connectedness we seek.'

I also find how we talk about it absolutely fascinating. My work takes me into different worlds, which each look at sustainability and peace issues from slightly different angles. For the past seven years, I have been a writer for a project by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), with a team of almost a hundred environmental

¹ Naomi Klein (2004) *This Changes Everything*, p. 310

² Their annual reports are available at: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/land-and-environmental-defenders-annual-report-archive/>

³ Available at: <https://quakers-in-ireland.ie/2022/05/30/new-ecoquakers-booklet-regenerating-our-common-home/>

lawyers and academics from around the world that report on, and analyse environment and development negotiations and policy coming out of the United Nations. We sit in on endless environmental negotiations on climate, biodiversity, forests, agriculture, chemicals, gender, water management, energy, and governance. Alongside this, for five years I edited and designed a Northern-Ireland-based magazine called Freckle, which aimed to tell empowering, solutions-based stories around sustainability, peace and creativity (stories you would never hear in mainstream media). Three years ago, my husband, Andrew and I moved to an eco-village in rural Tipperary, a hugely ambitious project with 50 houses and 70 acres of land. And my illustration and editing work lets me work with a lot of NGOs both local and international. I love moving through and between these different worlds – United Nations, eco-village life, Quaker circles, illustration work and of course various circles of family and friends. These can feel like separate worlds, each with their own rules about what you can and cannot say.

2. HOW DO WE TEND TO TALK ABOUT IT?

And so here is my first admission: a lot of the time, I don't actually enjoy the way we talk about sustainability. The conversations can be a rollercoaster in themselves. You're at a dinner with new people, you're talking to the person on your right, and you mention you work in environmental stuff. You get the sigh and the slight head shake. "Well, China isn't doing anything." (And, it is, always, China, for some reason, at least up until a few years ago). "*Well, I'm not sure ...*"

"... At the end of the day, people are innately greedy"

"*Mmm, that's an interesting assertion ...*"

"... And also, they have completely unrealistic expectations. I can't afford an electric car".

And I turn to the person on my left, and they say "Oh, I recycle everything. And I make my own cosmetics. Do you make your own cosmetics?"

"*Oh you don't have to ...*"

"... And I took the train and bike here, even though it's raining."

"*That's great*"

I turn back to my right: "Me recycling doesn't make a difference ..."

It's like some sort of ecological whiplash. "Young people are just so just consumer-drive ... " " ... I've got it down to one bag of landfill a month, not many people can say that ... " " ... turns out the government doesn't feel the need to do anything ..."

All these statements have truth in them, and I've said most of them at one time or another. But I've been having these exact conversations for more than a decade now! And it's like at some point there's been an unspoken agreement that we have to choose either total anger, or self-righteousness, or total despair, or complete optimism. A few years ago, there was a beautiful 200-year-old beech tree just at the boundary between a farm and a walk I often did. It was big enough for me to sit in a nook ten feet up and look out West over farms and a forest, and I used to sit in it in the evenings. One day the farmer hacked all along the boundary (which he's allowed to do), including the half of the beech tree that overhung his land. It wasn't a clean cut, and there were splinters of wood lying everywhere. When I came across it later in the day, I wept. And the worst thing was that I didn't even tell anyone about it. I walked home praying that no one would see me, so I didn't have to lie about what I was crying about, because I didn't want to seem crazy. I didn't have the energy for someone to laugh it off, or tease me with words like '*oh Lynn, you're such a hippy*'. And I didn't want to sound preachy, and I didn't

want someone's optimism either, to be told it was all going to be OK. So I kept it to myself, like a shameful secret. So much baggage comes with conversations about sustainability.

And it's not just me. A major report published in the *Lancet*⁴ last year was the largest ever international study of climate-induced anxiety in children and young people. It looked at climate anxiety in 10,000 young people (aged 16-25 years) in ten countries (spread across the Global North and Global South). 50% feel that society is doomed, 45% say their feelings about climate change negatively affects their day-to-day experience of life, and around three quarters experience a sense of betrayal and abandonment from governments and adults. This is not teenagers occasionally feeling sad. This is a widespread feeling that the future is scary, in a way that is affecting young people's behaviour and life choices.

This is a rational reaction to climate inaction. How can we start to be present to such pain and disillusionment? How can we face the next generation as they inherit the dying planet we are leaving for them?

Pádraig Ó Tuama, the Irish theologian and poet, talks about deepening our capacity to be present to each other. He talks about the need to move away from "the damp blanket of bad stories", and instead ask questions that are good enough to open up the "possibility of relationship, or encounter," to move us towards a more shared humanity.⁵ I love this. It makes me wonder what questions could be worthy of the Quaker Testimonies. I have felt that damp blanket of bad stories many times during conversations about climate and sustainability, stories guided by uncurious, resentful questions. I have seen someone shut down a whole conversation in a room full of people with their climate grief that has festered into bitterness. It is true to say "the government isn't doing enough". It is not very *helpful* to say it as if that statement cancels out all other truths, or in a way that leaves no room for any other hopes or offerings of action in that conversation. While it comes from a very legitimate place of deep hurt, and anger, it can settle on the room like that damp blanket.

When these conversations happen among Quakers, they don't give me the feeling that we are being what George Fox told us, to be "patterns and examples, walking cheerfully over the world answering that of God in everyone." The much-quoted Quaker story about Penn's sword describes how William Penn had converted to Quakerism, and with it pacifism and the Peace Testimony, but he still carried his sword, as was custom in the day. Noticing that George Fox didn't carry a sword, Penn approached him and asked his advice on the matter, to which George Fox said "wear your sword for as long as you can." By that, he was saying 'I'm not going to tell you what to do: find your own way to the Truth, and answer not to society but to your own experience of the divine.' Imagine if George Fox had said "Well, the government isn't doing anything about sword wearing, so it doesn't matter what you do". Or, "Well everyone in China wears a sword, so what's the point?" Or "Sit down and let me tell you all about how long I haven't been wearing a sword for ..."

⁴ Marks, Elizabeth and Hickman, Caroline and Pihkala, Panu and Clayton, Susan and Lewandowski, Eric R. and Mayall, Elouise E. and Wray, Britt and Mellor, Catriona and van Susteren, Lise, 'Young People's Voices on Climate Anxiety, Government Betrayal and Moral Injury: A Global Phenomenon,' (2021) available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3918955>. Also discussed on Season 4 Episode 7 of the podcast *Outrage and Optimism*, available at: <https://www.outrageandoptimism.org/episodes/dealing-with-climate-grief-luisa-neubauer>

⁵ Pádraig Ó Tuama (2016) TEDxStormont talk, *Imagining Peace*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JjfBYz6tab8&t=775s>

After my first few terms of studying Geography at Oxford University, I would come home so angry. I had been studying economic development, climate science, environmental policy, and Indigenous peoples rights, and I was so angry with my parents for the choices they made about how we lived. I would storm around the house pointing out all the ways our lifestyle was destroying the planet. And it was horrible. I didn't enjoy it, my parents didn't enjoy it, nobody in close proximity to me enjoyed it. I slowly realised I didn't want to be angry all the time, and started wondering what would happen if I stopped telling people what to do. If I was to do this, I needed to stop asking "why are you being such an idiot?" I needed some better questions.

I went and spent time with Indigenous communities – the Adnyamathanha in Southern Australia and the Karen Hill Tribe along the border of Myanmar and Thailand. And, honestly, this sounds a bit dramatic, but it felt like waking up from the Matrix. When Morpheus gives Neo 'the talk' before offering him the red pill: "The Matrix is all around us. Even now, in this very room ... Unfortunately no-one can be told what the matrix is. You have to see it for yourself." The Adnyamathanha and Karen seemed to have a profoundly different understanding of the world, and a whole different set of questions they were asking of life. It wasn't "How much stuff can I accumulate?": it was "how can I honour the land today, and what might it offer me in return?". The thought of owning the Earth, or its 'resources', would be absurd, laughable. They didn't own the land, they belonged to it. Thinking about all the places I had seen so far in my life, I found I was fascinated by the question "What relationship do people have with their landscape?" And this has sort of been guiding me ever since.

I also realised that good questions are more interesting than the right answers. A good answer to a rubbish question is not much use. A beautiful question calls us to greater heights of curiosity, and transforms us as much in the asking as in having it answered. I would love us, as Quakers, to be guided by these sorts of questions. Here's one to start with: how, as Quakers, are we being asked to show up to the challenge of eco justice and sustainability?

3. HOW ARE WE BEING ASKED TO SHOW UP TO THIS?

What is it that Quakers can bring to the environmental movement?

Firstly, we get to remember that nature is sacred. I don't get to say these words in my work with the United Nations. But I do here! Nature is sacred. It's right there, in centuries of Quaker literature and theology, right back to John Woolman and earlier. We do not own the world, we belong to it.

There is an interesting story in Robin Wall-Kimmerer's book 'Braiding Sweetgrass' (one of my all time favourite books). She teaches botany and environmental studies at university level, and every Semester she asks her students if they love the Earth, "and they wholeheartedly agree. But then she asks them "does the Earth love you back?", and there is a great deal of hesitation, and reluctance, and eyes cast down, like 'are we even allowed to talk about that?' That would mean the Earth has agency, and that we are not anonymous little blips on the landscape, but that we are known by our home place. It's a very challenging notion but a liberating idea to think the Earth could love us

back”⁶. It opens up the notion of reciprocity, and that there is a two-way relationship going on.

John O’Donohue, the philosopher and poet from the West of Ireland, said something similar when he talked about the soul and landscape and Celtic spirituality. He said “it makes a huge difference when you wake in the morning and come out of your house: whether you believe you are walking into dead geographical location, which is used to get to a destination, or whether you’re emerging out into a landscape that is just as much, if not more, alive, as you, but in a totally different form. And if you go towards it with an open heart, and a real watchful reverence, you will be absolutely amazed as to what it will reveal to you.”⁷ This notion is at the heart of Celtic spirituality.

A few years ago Andrew and I did a 28-day hike through the Pyrenees mountains in Southern France. As the weeks went on, the long grass and ferns and wild berries and warm rocks and forest floor became the norm. By the end, our bodies felt more alive than we had ever experienced: it felt more natural to be outside than inside. *This* is what John O’Donohue was talking about!

We then moved to the eco-village, where 13 out of the 70 acres are residential, and the rest is native trees, a fire pit, a stargazing circle, an outdoor amphitheatre for community gatherings, and a community farm. There are apple trees, plum, cherry, currants, berries, wild herbs, elder, hazel, birch, hawthorn, blackthorn ... I think our two-year-old can identify more plant species than I could when I went to university. You walk the land, and there are no doubts you are emerging out into a landscape that is just as much, if not more, alive, as you.

This is a very new, or very old, or very obvious understanding of creation, depending on what circles you move in. And through the different worlds I get to work in, I’ve now seen it in so many cultures and religions that I’m starting to think there might only be one socio-economic structure in the history of humans that has forgotten it: capitalist consumerism. When we look at the world, capitalism trains us to see a world made of commodities, rather than a world made of sacred gifts. But if we did manage to remember that we really are in the presence of God’s creation, how would it change our conversations about sustainability? Firstly, we would realise the absurdity in talking about it in a concrete room closed off from the living Earth, with mostly only one species present. If I really embodied my beliefs I would have insisted on doing this lecture around a campfire on a beach, followed by sea swim for those wanted to. [You’re laughing, but why?].

The second thing I think we can do, as Quakers, is really get to grips with how we understand hope.

Moving back to Ireland after seven years away, I noticed that a lot of people working on environmental and social issues were feeling lonely, disconnected, finding it hard to stay hopeful, and burning out. This led me to do a two-year project on hope and despair in the environmental movement, where I discovered there is a fast-growing body of research and literature on ‘eco-psychology’. It explores society’s emotional response to the ecological, social and economic crises of our times, and how to build resilience

⁶ Also recounted in Robin Wall-Kimmerer’s 2015 interview with Krista Tippett on *On Being*, available at: <https://onbeing.org/programs/robin-wall-kimmerer-the-intelligence-of-plants-2022/>

⁷ [sic] from John O’Donohue’s 2008 interview with Krista Tippett on *On Being*, available at: <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty/>

within social movements seeking positive change. Joanna Macy, a Buddhist eco-philosopher and systems-thinker, is one of the leading voices on this. Her premise is that of all the dangers the world is currently facing, none is so great as the deadening of our response⁸. It is not that most people don't care, it is that we are numbed, overwhelmed, bewildered and feeling a deep sense of powerlessness. This is very different from not caring. I see this in so much of my work: most people want to be part of the solution. They may be temporarily stuck in cynicism or despair, but if they can find a way to imagine a solution, they will turn up to the table.

This is where Macy's definition of hope comes in. She doesn't see it as a passive, 'oh I hope this will happen', sort of hope, but an 'active hope', a discipline we practise everyday, where we turn our hopes for the world into intentions that guide our actions. We become part of the world we hope to bring about. Greta Thunberg has famously said to adults 'I don't give a damn about your hope.' And rightly so. She needs our action. The reason we should be interested in hope is that without it, we can offer no action.

Now, this might not resonate with you. A few years ago I was hosting a book group on Macy's book *Active Hope*. After one session, with a shared meal full of animated and honest conversation, everyone had gone home and Andrew and I were tidying up. Andrew turned to me and said – slowly, so I knew something was up – “So, I've got a question about Active Hope.”

And I said “uh-hu.”

He said “There's something I don't quite ...” – and he paused, he was being careful – “... well, I don't really get the need for it.”

“The need for what?”

“Kind of, all of it? Like, the active hope bit”

After I calmed down a bit, I realised he was right: he doesn't seem to need it. He just keeps doing stuff. He's such a do-er. He's either got faith of steel, or he's of the variety of 'just choose your side and get on with it'. I'm not sure which it is, but I am impressed by him, sometimes jealous, and I need him. And, I think he is in the minority, so I shall continue ...

Parker Palmer, US Quaker and writer, talks about the Tragic Gap. By this, he means the gap between the hard realities we see around us, and what we know to be possible. And not just what we know to be possible in our dreams and prayers, but what we have actually seen. Palmer says that the challenge of our times is to stand in this Tragic Gap. The temptation is to 'jump ship' to either side. But if we spend all our time in the hard realities, we risk becoming relentlessly cynical, and if we spend all our time on the other side, in possibility, we risk becoming irrelevantly idealistic. Both these places may seem very different, but they have the same impact on us: they take us out of the gap. And the gap is where all the action is.⁹

When Andrew and I moved to Cloughjordan eco-village, we decided to help design and live in a wooden tiny house. Andrew was interested in project managing an eco-build, and I wanted us to live the Simplicity Testimony with more integrity, and reduce our possessions. At the time, I was involved in the UN Convention on Biodiversity, where there were 196 countries negotiating a global legal framework for biodiversity post-2020. It was taking years, and an agreement felt far off in the perfect future, and

⁸ Her best known work in this area, and a good place to start, is Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) *Active Hope: how to face the mess we're in without going crazy*. A revised edition has just come out this summer (2022).

⁹ Parker Palmer (2009) 'The Broken-Open Heart: Living with Faith and Hope in the Tragic Gap', in *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life*, March/April 2009, Vol. XXIV, No. 2. Available at: <https://couragerenewal.org/library/the-broken-open-heart-living-with-faith-and-hope-in-the-tragic-gap/>

trying to make a tiny house happen, there and then, felt like a good antidote. We knew the tiny house wouldn't be perfect, and we knew it wouldn't save the world, but it was one step towards that world. We spent two years in that house, and many unexpected blessings came from it. One of them was that we both started to feel less bloated by possessions. It was 35 square meters. It took ten minutes to tidy the whole house. Turns out that less time tidying meant more time being out on the land, investing in our relationships, both human and non-human. We were valuing our relationships more than our possessions. I felt lighter and more content. I had taken a deep breath, said a prayer, and stepped into Palmer's Tragic Gap.

And I think as a faith community, we are quite familiar with this gap. In fact, it's one of the strengths of Quakerism: we have never made ourselves choose between action and faith: since the days of early Quakerism the answer has been both. Faith and action. They nourish each other.

In BYM's Faith and Practice (the red book), there is a 1970s entry¹⁰ from Wolf Mendl, a German Jewish refugee who joined Quakers with his mum when they arrived in England. I'm going to read it all out, because I couldn't say it any better:

“For us it is not so important when the perfect world will be achieved or what it will be like. What matters is living our lives in the power of love and not worrying too much about the results. In doing this, the means become part of the end. Hence we lose the sense of helplessness and futility in the face of the world's crushing problems. We also lose the craving for success, always focusing on the goal to the exclusion of the way of getting there. We must literally not take too much thought for the morrow but throw ourselves whole-heartedly into the present. That is the beauty of the way of love: it cannot be planned and its end cannot be foretold.”

I recently spent an evening with friends who all work in the field of climate and social justice. The discussion turned to Parker Palmers' Tragic Gap, and the best sort of questions came up. “Yeah but *how* do you stand in it?”

“How long am I meant to stand in it before I have a break?”

“Am I allowed to have a glass of wine in the Gap?”

“Do you try to stay in it even if it's [feckin'] eating you alive?”

We didn't agree on the answers, but we all left the conversation feeling renewed by the questions, and I went to bed thinking they were beautiful questions. So whatever name it is called by – active hope, stubborn optimism, the Tragic Gap, living in the power of love – how do we do it?

4. HOW CAN WE STAND IN THE TRAGIC GAP?

How, as Quakers, can we stand in the Tragic Gap? One way is to understand what Joanna Macy calls the three circles of the Great Turning (this shift towards a more just and sustainable world). The three circles are: Holding Actions, Building Alternatives, and Shifting Consciousness.¹¹ ‘Holding Actions’ hold back and slow down front-line destruction of life support systems, such as direct action, political campaigning and legal engagement. They are essential and save lives and ecosystems, but relying on

¹⁰ Entry 24.60

¹¹ Again, in Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) *Active Hope: how to face the mess we're in without going crazy*

holding actions as a sole avenue for change can leave us battle-weary and disillusioned. We also need to replace the destructive systems we are fighting.

'Building Alternatives' transforms the current socio-economic systems by offering alternative solutions, such as sustainable agriculture, public transport, community finance, community forestry ... these all contribute to the rich tapestry of a life-sustaining society. But alone they are not enough. These new structures won't take root and survive without deeply ingrained values to sustain them ... So thirdly, 'Shifting Consciousness' is being helped by all the people working on the inner frontier of change that enhances our capacity and desire to act for our world, such as art, storytelling, and therapeutic approaches. These help us draw from a deeper pool of strength and courage, and remind us we are each a small being in a much larger, interconnected web of relationships.

The idea of these three circles has given me a lot of comfort and sanity, and I think it speaks to a central aspect of Quaker theology that sees divine inner Light in everyone. Once we see this, it liberates us from thinking we have to do everything. We don't. We just have to do our part. We are all called to different circles, and this is what makes the movement beautiful.

What if the question isn't "what are thee five things we all have to do tomorrow?" but instead something more like "how can we cherish and nurture the greatest possible number of ways to heal the living planet?" Rumi said "there are a thousand ways to kneel and kiss the earth".

During one of my seasons working on an organic farm, I came across John McCormick, the farmer, in wellies, knee-deep in that years compost, absolutely delighted with the world. He was sifting through it and visibly grinning, and I started laughing. Not one bit bothered about my reaction, he called over to me "It's good this year, Lynn, it's really good!" I know some of the best environmental lawyers in the world, and they would be aghast at the thought of standing knee-deep in this years compost. I thank God they aren't: a lot of the farmers I know would be terrible lawyers, and a lot of the lawyers I know would be terrible farmers. And we need them both.

I spend most of my time in shifting consciousness, a bit of time in building alternatives, and, to be honest, holding actions terrify me. But I want to be surrounded by all the circles of the Great Turning. I want it all: the doers, the idealists, the innovators, the listeners, the artists, the teachers, the commentators, the team players, the healers, the leaders.

It is a beautiful thing to be around people who are doing what they're meant to be doing. A few years ago I was having a cup of tea with a neighbour in the eco village. It was the weekend, so we were leisurely observing life over a pot of tea, when another friend came in carrying two beekeeping suits and said "Lynn, I need you to help me collect a swarm of bees". I had expressed an interest in helping, and she could not have been happier, and more committed, and more welcoming in what she was doing. That was one of my favourite afternoons I've spent in the eco village, collecting that swarm of bees. It was community. And simplicity. And beauty. And female empowerment.

(By the way, in my experience, if people are embodying their way of loving the Earth, they also tend to start automatically doing the things on all the 'five things we must do to save the planet' lists. Because you get to the point where you can't not do them. Like

William Penn and his sword, I challenge you to put food waste in landfill as long as you can.)

With Freckle magazine, we were trying to encounter people with genuine curiosity, respecting their location in the three circles of the Great Turning. We asked people what was bringing them joy, grief, excitement, and struggle. Over nine issues, we featured almost 200 stories, that you would never hear from mainstream media, and many of the people who I interviewed gave me goosebumps, they were so brave, so normal, so courageous in their commitment to what is possible. One of the most common responses to Freckle, we got over and over again, was ‘I didn’t know all this stuff was going on *here*: in other places, yeah, but not here, in Northern Ireland.’ That was satisfying. We were embracing all three circles of the Turning, trying to offer a different way to show up to these conversations about the living planet and our relationship to it.

There is another big thing that helps me stand in the Tragic Gap. The fact Quakers have been doing it for centuries. Our faith asks us to see the world both as it is and as it could be. So we just need to figure out how to do it in the context of sustainability.

During COP26 in Glasgow last year, I was listening to conversations among colleagues who were there, inside the negotiating rooms, and then also to conversations happening among friends who were campaigning on the streets of Glasgow. And it was that ecological whiplash again. Among the colleagues in the room, there was a sense of optimism, not that it’s all been solved, but that there is real momentum and commitment across almost all governments. Before the Paris COP in 2015, global pledges to reduce carbon emissions amounted to 6 degrees of warming. Coming out of Paris, this was down to 4 degrees. This went down to 2.7 degrees going into Glasgow, and, coming out of Glasgow, if all commitments are implemented, we’ll maybe drop down to below 2 degrees. This was inconceivable seven or eight years ago.

In conversations outside the process, however, on the streets, I was hearing things like “It’s a total farce”, “Well, they decided they didn’t need to do much about the whole climate change thing.” There was a lot of tension between these two separate worlds. *And they were both true.* If we are going to stand together in the Tragic Gap, we don’t need to argue about which statements have more truth to them. There are real, ambitious and meaningful commitments emerging from the private sector. And, there is a huge amount of corporate greenwashing out there. Both of these are true. We are on the right trajectory towards staying within 1.5 degrees, and, it is not enough. Both are true.

To do this, we need nuance. And we need better questions. What questions are we choosing to show up with? Are they about simplifying the world into people who are right, and people who are wrong? Do they leave room for seeing that of God in everyone? In fact, what would happen if we refused to choose between our rage and our optimism? This brings another question worth asking: how can I welcome my anger, my grief *and* my joy?

5. HOW CAN I WELCOME MY ANGER, MY GRIEF AND MY JOY?

Anger can fuel action, but not if it festers into bitterness. Grief can remind us of what we love, but only if we acknowledge it. The grief that we are treating God’s creation like a

commodity to accumulate and turn into as much money as we can. Grief that the planet's oceans, biodiversity, climate and forests are reaching their capacity to sustain human life.

To face our grief is all we can do, and the best we can do. And I can't always do it. At times when I can't, I curl up on the sofa and watch comedy. This is my way of dealing with my job when it gets too much – I want nothing to do with anything related to sustainability. I want comedy and a hot water bottle and a sofa.

But we only grieve what we love. And that brings a different way of thinking about it: our capacity to see the pain of the world is our capacity to suffer with it. To 'suffer with' is the literal meaning of compassion. Grief is the other side of love. The eco-psychology literature tells us to honour our pain. Rather than feeling afraid of it, or trying to stuff it down as far as we can and hope it doesn't re-emerge, we learn to welcome it, feel strengthened by it, and recognise it as something valuable.

That's the theory, anyway. A few years ago, I was just back from a conference of the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste. On the agenda was the problem of plastic waste. Most of Europe's plastic 'recyclable' waste gets shipped to South East Asia, to countries who don't have the infrastructure to deal with it and much of it ends up in rivers and waterways in those 'sacrifice zones' Naomi Klein talks about. The conversation was brutal, and I was knackered. Countries were discussing potential legal options to best deal with this international movement of the one million plastic bottles the world consumes every minute, and the fact that only around 9% of global plastic ends up actually being recycled. It is mind boggling to get your head around. So I'm curled up on the sofa, in the fetal position, fully committed to the comedy series I'm watching. And because we'd been at this for almost a decade together, instead of worrying about me, Andrew brought me a cup of tea, some chocolate and one daffodil – because he knew more than one would look "too happy" – and tells me to stay on the sofa all night if I need to. (And he quietly goes off to help build some solar panels.)

I'm not particularly proud of it, but it works. Although, recently, I have noticed something interesting. Meitheals are quite common in the ecovillage. Meitheal is an old Irish word: when I asked a Gaeilgeoir what it means, first they did what they always do – they looked off into the far distance and say 'ah, that's untranslatable, I'd say'. Then they said the closest you get to a translation is a working group, traditionally neighbours in rural communities coming together for a communal outdoor task, a bit like a barn-raising. In the eco village, often someone will call a meitheal to look after common land, plant new trees in Autumn, prune fruit trees in the early spring, or help a neighbour put up a chicken shed or build a fire pit. It's often followed by a big meal shared by all the workers. Anyway, a good meitheal is one of my favourite things in life. I love them. And after a meitheal, I notice that it's easier to face into my grief. I can read the IPCC reports without curling up on the sofa. Welcoming my joy helps me welcome my grief. They are two sides of the same life.

While we are talking about grief and joy, I'd like to turn to the topic of age for a minute. I think there may be an intergenerational dimension to this challenge that I would like to name. I mentioned at the start that at 34, I'm not considered young in any other context of my life apart from Quakers. But let's pretend for a minute that I am young. And please be gracious enough to allow me to be direct. To all my Quaker elders: if you have decided to draw up your deck chair and sit and watch the end of the world, at least have the honesty – and courage – to admit that you are feeling broken by life.

That your grief and despair have got the better of you, and that you have lost the faith needed to see that of God in the younger people around you. As nice as it is to hear how wonderful it is that young people bring such energy and enthusiasm to this challenge, this is not what we need. We need you to accompany us in the Tragic Gap, to share your wisdom and, most of all your stories. Not your stories about how you've been committed to social justice since before we were born, or how much we have to learn and how wonderful it is to be young and full of idealism. Those are shite stories. We need your real stories, of love and pain and struggle and humility, of how you campaigned for nuclear disarmament, of how you changed the system, of what broke your heart, of what you did right, and what you did wrong, and what you wish you could do again. Those are the stories we need, and we need them badly. And we need you to tell us, with kindness and patience, how to combine our anger with love, how to change the system from within as well as from the outside, and how to actually live the Peace Testimony. Many of you have done just this, and it has made all the difference to my journey into Quakerism over the past 15 years.

Andrew and I have dear friends we call our 'Earth Elders'. We visit them when we can, and often, as we enter the kitchen, the opening line is something like "well, what do you think of the recent EPA ruling?" There is no small talk. They are busy people, but I have never once seen them glance at the clock during our visits. The gift they are giving us, that is so precious and radical these days, is their time. They are disobeying the rules of capitalism: they do not believe that time is money. And our souls are nourished for it.

And, to the actual young Friends in the room: I know I look old to you, but there are moments where I'm still just pretending to be an adult. But, let's, for a minute, pretend that I am properly old. I hear your anger, and your complete and absolute disillusionment of adults. I need you to know that when we say things like 'look how far we've come', this is us clinging on with our fingernails to the progress that has been made since we started working on this. Because we have to, for our own sanity. Ten years ago if you contacted a company and wanted to talk about sustainability, you got through to customer services. Now, at least, you get through to strategy. It may not seem like much progress, but there's some hope in knowing that if they're lying to you, at least it's the managers that feel the need to do it. *It's not enough.* And *it's something.*

We need your anger, your pain, your determination, and your joy. We need all of it. We need people shouting at the system from the outside AND we also need people fixing the system from the inside. You get to choose, but whichever you choose, do not forget what the Quaker Testimonies are asking of you. What does Peace require? What does Love require?

And, to all of us, when we say 'well China isn't doing anything', are we saying 'I feel deeply angry about global politics', or 'I feel powerless'. If so, maybe next time we should say 'I feel angry and powerless' and see what happens. Or ask 'is there anything you've read or learnt about climate action in so-and-so country recently, because I haven't been able to find a nuanced source of information? Or even, 'you know what, I've just read this article about the 700,000 square km ball of floating plastic in the Pacific Ocean and I am pissed off, and frightened today.' It might invite into the conversation the possibility of something equally honest and transformative and nourishing. When working with colleagues who I trust deeply, I've had moments where someone has said "I'm going over here with my cup of tea, to be thoroughly bitter and judgemental about the progress being made here. You are welcome to join, but you've been warned!" The honesty there is a beautiful thing.

Recently, I was sitting around a fire on the community farm, celebrating the midsummer solstice. There was light still in the sky at 11pm, and there were about 20 of us enjoying the easy warmth and humour from the best storytellers of the group. There were stories welcoming all three circles of the Great Turning: a recent climate march, work on the farm, old Irish mythology. And we weren't making ourselves choose between our grief, our anger, or our joy. It was all being welcomed. Someone was telling us the wild cherries were almost ready to forage, and they located the place in relation to plants and compass points: they were "just past the hawthorns before you get to the old beech trees on the Northern boundary". And we all knew where they meant! And someone else said they spotted a badger set beside the fir tree surrounded by ragwort. And I knew where that was. And I didn't feel so crazy anymore.

After these evenings around the fire, I feel like I'm starting to understand what a right relationship to the living planet might look like. That real healing has come, not just from loud revolution, but a sort of quiet abandonment of the systems that no longer serve us. I don't think anyone who was around that fire participates in the fast fashion system, we heat our homes from shared renewable energy sources, and in the summer, many of us can eat entire meals sourced within five miles. And don't be fooled into thinking this means we win some sort of eco score sheet, or that we are an exemplary group of worthy, righteous individuals who deserve your praise. That is the Matrix talking again, tricking us into thinking we are isolated individuals. We couldn't do it as individuals: it's only possible because the eco village is a huge, ambitious community effort. We are more than individuals. We are our relationships, and the relationships we choose to nurture, both human and non-human. Living in a place with people who don't believe their main role in life is to be a consumer, is both a radical act of defiance, and really good craic.

And there's another few questions to add to our collection. Not how many ticks do I have on my eco score sheet, but rather, what sort of relationship do I want to have with the land I live on? What will nourish my soul *and* the Earth? When is the next campfire?

6. CLOSING

One of the Quaker Advices and Queries – that set of stunningly beautiful questions to guide us on our Quaker journey – tells us to 'bring the whole of our life under the ordering of the spirit of Christ. Are you open to the healing power of God's love?'¹² Similarly, I think we should bring the whole of our sustainability journey under the ordering of the Spirit.

Bring all the Testimonies to the table all of the time. Refuse to choose just one way of creating change, or one emotion: bring everything. Especially our honesty, and our love. That's how we should show up, surrendering ourselves to the Way of Love, not knowing, or worrying too much about the results. And what if *that* is our Spiritual gift to the movement?

And with that question, I am almost done. I have not even tried to convince anyone that sustainability and climate justice are right there in the very centre of the Quaker Testimonies, and they have been there all along. Please, God, say we are past needing that conversation. I want us, as a spiritual community, to be guided by curious, beautiful

¹² Quaker Advice and Query number two

questions. I want us to show up as Quakers. I want us to stand together in the Tragic Gap.

I want a lot of things. For now, I want to leave you with one of my favourite understandings of hope, that I've been coming back to for years. It comes from Unitarian Minister Victoria Safford, in her chapter in the book *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*¹³. She says

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope – not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges; nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right.” But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see.

See you in the Tragic Gap.

¹³ ‘The Small Work in the Great Work’, an essay in Paul Rogat Loeb (2014) *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: Perseverance and Hope in Troubled Times*

APPENDIX - A COLLECTION OF QUESTIONS FROM THE TALK

“A beautiful question calls us to greater heights of curiosity, and transforms us as much in the asking as in having it answered.”

(Not so beautiful questions ...)

1. Why are you being such an idiot?
2. The government isn't doing anything, so what's the point?
3. And I make my own cosmetics. Do you make your own cosmetics?
4. How much stuff can I accumulate?
5. What are thee five things we all have to do tomorrow?
6. How many ticks do I have on my eco score sheet?

(More beautiful questions ...)

7. How can we face, and be present to, the next generation as they inherit the dying planet we are leaving for them?
8. How can I honour the land today, and what might it offer me in return?
9. How, as Quakers, are we being asked to show up to the challenge of eco justice and sustainability?
10. What is it that Quakers can bring to the environmental / eco justice movement?
11. Do you love the Earth? Does the Earth love you back?
12. If we did manage to remember that we really are in the presence of God's creation, how would this change our conversations about sustainability?
13. How, as Quakers, can we stand in (Parker Palmer's) *the Tragic Gap*?
14. How can we cherish and nurture the greatest possible number of ways to heal the living planet?
15. What stories and questions are we choosing to show up with? Are they about simplifying the world into people who are right and people who are wrong? Do they leave room for seeing that of God in everyone?
16. How can I welcome my anger, my grief *and* my joy?
17. What are the Quaker Testimonies asking of you?
18. What does Peace require?
19. What does Love require?
20. What sort of relationship do I want to have with the land I live on?
21. What will nourish my soul *and* the Earth?
22. (When is the next campfire?!)
23. Are you open to the healing power of God's love?
24. What if surrendering ourselves to (Wolf Mendl's) *the Way of Love*, not knowing or worrying too much about the results, is our spiritual gift to the environmental / eco justice movement?

(To be added to ...)