

Thought for the month, June 2020

Many of us have enjoyed the silence during the Covid-19 lockdown. It is an absence of everyday noises - traffic both on the roads and in the skies, the circulation of people and business - that allows more space for birdsong and for thinking. It can be as soothing as it is unsettling - the latter because it signals a loss of the normal quotidian hustle and bustle most of us are never without. Silence is at the heart of Quakerism. During a Meeting silence offers time to gather one's thoughts and to reflect with purpose and duty. One can meditate and perhaps even doze. But at one remove from the usual pulses and pressures of life, Friends practice being more present - more aware and at one with the world. It is less about being at peace so much as seeking peace. Friends and attendees often share their thoughts; they use silence as an opportunity to engage with and imagine a better world - greener, cleaner, more equal, more just, and more sustainable.

The current pandemic affords us a similar opportunity. Whether it is the state's ability to invest heavily in our welfare or our more intense appreciation of nature, coronavirus has foregrounded what we most care about: the quality of our life, protection of loved ones, and respect for all, not GDP (as a poll recently confirmed). That is to say, the pandemic has shown us that our general welfare is and has to be more important than laissez faire individualism no matter what adverts and the free market tell us. That which nourishes and protects our commonality, from well-supported healthcare to local food production, from quality green spaces to public services, must come before the strictures of the stock-market, the share-holder, and the profit margin.

Covid-19 has exposed an unsustainable economic system based on immediate consumerism, precarious employment, the enrichment of the few, and short-term politics. It has exposed social inequalities whereby those most vulnerable - the elderly and the poor, especially people of color - are least protected and are victims of an inadequate healthcare system. The virus is also a symptom of a devastated natural world - humans are exposed to pathogens safely tucked away in nature. At the current rate of ecological destruction more pandemics are likely. But, in the silence, we realize it doesn't have to be this way.

As the Indian novelist and activist, Arundhati Roy writes, we long "for a return to 'normality', trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture . . . offers us a chance to rethink . . . nothing could be worse than a return to normality." She sees the pandemic as "a portal, a gateway between one world and the next". We have the chance to "walk through it lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

Bruce McLeod, Chair of Friends of the Dales
on behalf of Airton Friends Meeting