

Lake Erie Yearly Meeting Epistle
Held June 19-22, 2003
At Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio
Engaging Fear with Spirit

At the 2003 gathering of Lake Erie Yearly Meeting, we began exploration of the fears that hold us back from a full experience of the Power and the Life in our Meetings.

The early morning bible studies facilitated by Susan Jeffers brought forth sharing that moved and challenged Friends. The 23rd Psalm, "Though I walk through the valley of darkness, I shall not fear, for you are with me," reminded us that when we depend on God, God does not magically pluck us out of harm's way. Rather, God gives us enough security so that we can notice and pass through "the valley," rather than becoming numb or paralyzed by fear, going nowhere. The 51st psalm, "Create in me a clean heart, oh God," reminded us that our inner transformation, as individuals and as a Meeting, depends on the movement of the Spirit. But we find it frightening to let go of our ideas about who we are. We resist being revealed in the Light, with all of our limitations and our gifts. Yet our tradition as Friends invites us to go "before the Lord," with "fear and trembling," hoping to be completely transformed! We are invited to prepare for a Pentecost, in which the Power and the Life break through our Meetings into a world desperate for Friends' witness.

Four Friends of the Yearly Meeting shared their experiences of engaging fear with Spirit. James Satterwhite, of Broadmead Monthly Meeting, spoke simply and eloquently of his experiences as a member of a Christian Peacemaker Team in Hebron, in Palestine/Israel. Several international witnesses have been harassed and two, including American Rachel Corrie, have been killed by Israeli troops. James has feared being killed, but has been able to move through the fear, being held up by his deep conviction that he is doing what he has been called to do. Robert Roehm, of North Columbus Meeting, described fearing episodes of scrambled perceptions and language, resulting from a brain injury, and of mystical experiences that led him to a spiritual center from which he could address his fears.

Bekah Sommer, also of Broadmead Meeting, spoke about the very real fears that teens experience, and especially those teens who live in difficult conditions. She talked about the fear of teens who live in abusive or alcoholic families, who feel responsible for their younger siblings, or who fear for their parents' health or safety. She also talked about the fears that all teens experience: the fear of not being liked or fitting in, and the oppressive fear of not having a future. Helen Horn, of Athens Meeting, talked about her fear of "not doing enough." Using her "antic spirit" she donned a variety of winsome hats to illustrate ways that she damps down her fears. She invited us to name our fears, hark to others and the needs of those around us, go with the grain by working hand in hand with others, and admit when we "don't know" and can "let go." Friends responded to these stories in small worship sharing groups, listening to and sharing stories of their own fears and engagement with spirit.

During our business sessions, we pushed some boundaries in our understanding of ourselves, beginning a significant new phase of our life as a community of faith. A record number of high schoolers are participating in Meeting activities, in large part through the ministry of Kri Anderson, who has been following a leading to gather in the Spirit the young people of LEYM. Following a threshing session, the meeting deeply committed to a proposal to expand the youth program, and established a committee to develop a long-term vision for the program. We also explored and reaffirmed the value of dialogue with groups who may see spirituality and human relations differently than we do, by considering an observer affiliation with the Ohio Council of Churches. The Meeting will proceed as led by the Spirit.

A series of afternoon workshops continued to explore the theme of engaging fear with spirit. Workshops included: Spiritual Journeys as Parent, as Child, as Teacher; Black/White/Quaker Grey: Friendship and Race Relations in the Society of Friends Today; Addiction; Meeting for Healing; and Dealing with Feelings of Powerlessness in the Face of War. The Meeting was entertained on our final evening together by the high schoolers' lively and humorous production of *The Night that Thoreau Spent in Jail*, exploring some of the ways that Thoreau confronted convention and fear.

We are inspired by the Spirit's movement among us, and look to be faithful to the work set before us in this coming year. May we continue to be opened to the Power and the Life.