

FORTY-THREE

OXFORD FRIENDS' MEETING
43 ST. GILES OXFORD OX1 3LW

NEWSLETTER

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Careering Words: *Desiderata Apologetica*

Many of us have at some point enjoyed the poem *Desiderata*, copyrighted by Max Ehrmann in 1927. It's the one which begins with the quite Quakerly lines:

*Go placidly amid the noise and the haste,
and remember what peace there may be in silence.*

Recently, in the ongoing financial crisis, amid the noise of unemployment and the haste of redundancies, I was puzzled by two other lines nearer the middle of the poem:

*Keep interested in your own career, however humble;
it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time.*

Imagine you're among the newly redundant in 2009, and your earning prospects are bleak. Is it fair to say that your occupation, your former source of income, is 'a real possession'?

Perhaps people have questioned these lines before. In this country in the 1950s, there was a surge in recruitment into the fields surrounding steam-train technology and operation. Some called it the Steam Renaissance. Yet by the mid-1960s these trains had disappeared, being replaced by diesel and electricity. So engineers learned the hard way that entire careers can, if you will, evaporate. Then

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From Quaker Faith and Practice

The heart of Quaker ethics is summed up in the word 'simplicity'. Simplicity is forgetfulness of self and remembrance of our humble status as waiting servants of God. Outwardly, simplicity is shunning superfluities of dress, speech, behaviour, and possessions, which tend to obscure our vision of reality. Inwardly, simplicity is spiritual detachment from the things of this world as part of the effort to fulfil the first commandment: to love God with all of the heart and mind and strength.

The testimony of outward simplicity began as a protest against the extravagance and snobbery which marked English society in the 1600s. In whatever forms this protest is maintained today, it must still be seen as a testimony against involvement with things which tend to dilute our energies and scatter our thoughts, reducing us to lives of triviality and mediocrity.

Simplicity does not mean drabness or narrowness but is essentially positive, being the capacity for selectivity in one who holds attention on the goal. Thus simplicity is an appreciation of all that is helpful towards living as children of the Living God.

QF&P 20.27, North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative), 1983

Deadline for contributions to the April 2009 issue: noon, Friday 20 March

Contributions, of 500 words or fewer, would be appreciated, preferably by email: oxfordpm@yahoo.co.uk. Paper copy can be left in the 43 pigeonhole at Oxford Meeting House. For information: tel. 01865 557373.

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again, some were already wary of possessions: Bertrand Russell, born coincidentally in the same year as Ehrmann, wrote that 'it is preoccupation with possessions, more than anything else, that prevents us from living freely and nobly'. And to an engineer who had counted his career among his real possessions during the Steam Renaissance, Russell's words would soon have burned doubly true.

Because seemingly solid careers can be destroyed, in *The Careerfree Life* Gillian Hemstock and Frank McEnaney compared them to submarines vulnerable to enemy attack. Since the authors couldn't find a watertight solution to the problem, they argued that one ought to forego careers altogether and bob as a harmless bottle on the sea surface, flitting from minor job to job without investing too conscientiously in long-term cash flows. Infatuated with the smug buoyancy of this book as a teenager, I set a match to its pages in my twenties, for reasons I prefer not to discuss outside of therapy. The bottom line is I realised that, despite their multiple inadequacies, careers can enable us to do great things with our lives, and what's more the desire to build a submarine or another vessel to cross the ocean is something I can't easily ignore.

So careers are lovely things. However, I still question their prerogative over 'the changing fortunes of time'; how could one of my favourite poems be so wrong? The answer, I have just discovered, is that perhaps it isn't. The piece was penned nearly a century ago, when careerism existed but wasn't as entrenched as it is today. So 'career' might take on one of its older meanings: for example, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'a person's course or progress through life (or a distinct portion of life)'. You might have seen this immediately, but I wasn't so quick. Hardly necessary to quote, the modern definition is baldly 'a course of professional life or employment'; for instance in steam engineering, in firefighting, in shipbuilding.

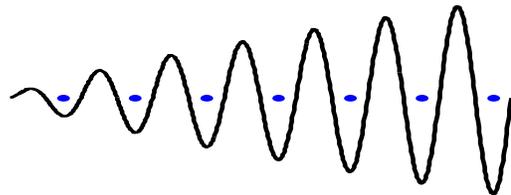
The various definitions of this word may also have differing etymologies. Apparently, career came to us initially from *carrāria*, an abbreviation for the Latin term for 'carriage road'. But it later re-entered English from the French *carrière*, meaning 'racecourse'. To the cynic, this latter route may seem more appropriate for describing a rat race; an optimist might visualise instead an Olympic

stadium (and how fitting for the mobile careerists of our time that London's will be possible to dismantle).

Quaker Faith & Practice records the shift in meaning. Entries written in the early 1990s (see for example 22.31 and 23.63) suggest the modern interpretation, whereas an entry from 1917 (see 21.54) is not so limiting: death itself is the start to a career!

I can't be completely sure, without asking Ehrmann's biographer, which meaning he intended: traditional or modern. On the other hand, this is a poem – so surety isn't needed. When I consider that my unique past is no less permanent than the origin of my salary, however, it becomes clear which definition I'll favour.

Mark Ebdon



Towards more effective Business Meetings

Quaker Business meetings are also Meetings for Worship in which silence and a spirit of discernment are primary. Chapter 3 of *Quaker Faith & Practice* (QF&P) gives detailed advice and guidance on the conduct of our Meetings and we hope that whatever we do is based on this wise and rich foundation. However, modern technology allows us the opportunity to share information in advance more easily so that people can come to the Meeting with 'hearts and minds prepared'. This is particularly important in a large and complex Meeting, such as we have in Oxford. So at our February Meeting we agreed the following minute:

We agree that for a trial period of six months we will adopt the following:

- a) set an approximate time limit of 2 hours
- b) begin the Meeting with a brief reading from QF&P followed by a period of worship
- c) circulate a detailed draft agenda with supporting documents in both email and paper format approximately one week before the Local Meeting for Worship for Business (MfWfB)

d) request that reports and items for the agenda reach the clerks, as far as is possible, 10 days before the MfWfB.

We hope to review this in July 2009. We also commit ourselves to maintaining the discipline of a Quaker MfW for Business (Minute 04/09).

We hope that circulating agendas in this way will allow routine business to be dispatched fairly briskly, so that we will have more time for those issues which require reflective discernment. We also hope that people who are not able to come to the meetings will feel better informed, and more fully included in our decision-making process. Perhaps some who have not so far attended will become interested in being involved?

If you are not receiving agendas and minutes by email and would like to do so, please send an email to sandra@greenfig.demon.co.uk asking to be added to the list of recipients.

Sandra Figgess and Judith Atkinson
(Co-Clerks)



Detaining children

In December last, Kate Joyce wrote to local MPs on behalf of the Local Business Meeting about the detention of children in connection with asylum and deportation. Kate has since received a reply from Andrew Smith MP, enclosing one from a Government minister, Meg Hillier, which says that the detention of children is kept to a minimum and 'subject to frequent and rigorous review'.

At the next meeting of the Human Rights and Asylum Group – 2pm on Tuesday 17 March in the FMH Library – we shall discuss to what extent these statements are consistent with evidence we have read about specific cases, and decide whether to draft a reply for the consideration of the next Local Business Meeting. This will be one among various issues concerning human rights and asylum that we shall focus on that day. Please join us.

Further information from: **Janet Toye (tel. 726695, toyejj@phonecoop.coop), Sally Wilkins, Helen Kimble, Patricia Wright, & Elisabeth Salisbury**

Introducing Members and Attenders of Oxford Meeting



Laurie Michaelis
talking to Tanya Garland

I was born in 1962, and have an older brother and younger sister. We are Jews and my mother's grandparents had moved from parts of Russia around the turn of the 20th century. My parents separated when I was five and we were brought up by my mum. My dad's parents were from Germany. We first lived in Bushey, near Watford, where my dad lived. I only realised that his flat overlooked the Meeting House there when I visited Watford a couple of years ago. We moved to northwest London when I was 12. We started school in the local primary school in Bushey, and then my brother, Charlie, and I went to Merchant Taylor's – a boys' public school. I didn't fit the culture and was always Charlie's quiet little brother. As a teenager I was introverted, overweight, hopeless at sports and had very low self-confidence socially. I came bottom of the class, but in the Lower Sixth the head of science encouraged me to sit a scholarship exam. After winning that, I won all the school prizes for physics and maths and got into Oxford to read physics. About the time of that scholarship exam I decided to lose weight – stopped eating for a couple of weeks and started walking to school instead of taking the bus. Since then I've struggled on and off with food, tending to alternate between over-control and binge-eating. In my gap year I became very involved in an organisation that ran personal development training and by the time I came to Oxford, I had more confidence.

My first room at Oxford was in St Giles next door to the Lamb and Flag – again looking out on to the Friend's Meeting House, though I was only aware of the newsagent nearby that sold Cote d'Or praline bouchées. Since the age of 10, when I read that world oil reserves would run out in 30 years, I have been obsessed with energy and environment issues. From Oxford, I went on to do a PhD in Cambridge on the use of wood as an energy source. I made all sorts of self-denying decisions at that time; 1984 was the year of the Ethiopia Famine and Bob Geldof's 'Band Aid'. I was learning a lot about

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global inequalities in access to food and energy, and I tried to adapt my lifestyle to Indian or African levels of consumption. I finished my PhD in 1986 and moved to Brighton, to the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University, where John Toye was director. That didn't last.

I thought people were not ready to respond to energy and environmental challenges and, believing education was the key, I trained as a teacher. I also started attending Brighton Meeting and became a member in 1988. Moira and I met in Brighton, and we moved to Swindon together for my first and only teaching job. Joshua was born in 1990.

In 1988, Maggie Thatcher made a speech that marked the beginning of a huge surge in concern about climate change. By 1990 there were lots of new jobs in energy and climate research and, as I was struggling as a teacher, I moved to work on energy policy at Harwell, finding it much easier and better-paid work. Moira and I married at the end of 1991 in Swindon Meeting and when I got a job in Paris at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development (OECD), we planned to move together. But by summer 1992 we realised the relationship was not right for either of us and I moved to Paris on my own. The OECD is an intergovernmental organisation, supporting policy in rich countries. My job was analysing and writing on energy and climate policy and for several years I was very involved in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). I had specialised on the transport sector and from 1993-95 I convened the lead authors of the transport chapter in the Second Assessment Report. In many ways it was one of the best times of my life – partly because I was very focused on work, which I was enjoying, and it felt useful.

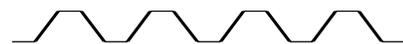
Fiona and I met at the OECD, working together on projects supporting preparations for the Kyoto Protocol. In 1998 she was ready for a move and Oxford seemed a good place to live, partly because of the wide range of opportunities for environment-related work, and for me it meant being within easy reach of Joshua. I had stayed a member of Witney Monthly Meeting while in Paris, but had felt rather in exile, as some Friends disapproved of my leaving Moira and Joshua. Returning to Oxford meant re-engaging with the Monthly Meeting community and when I was asked to be an Overseer in 2000 it felt like a symbolic reacceptance.

Fiona and I married that December. It was my second Quaker marriage.

The question of whether we have a Quaker 'earth testimony' was on the agenda at 2001 Yearly Meeting. That year we started the Group on Sustainable Living in Oxford (GOSLings) and, wanting to bring my working life and Quaker life together, I embarked on the two-year Woodbrooke course, Equipping for Ministry. We started the Living Witness Project in 2002, which supports Friends and Meetings in developing our sustainability witness.

In 2003, Fiona and I had some difficult conversations about our relationship that led to seeking counselling. But before we reached a shared understanding of where we were, I began the relationship with Lizz that broke up our marriage. The last five years have been some of the most difficult I've experienced – involving a lot of work to try and understand my own and other people's patterns better, and a fair amount of exploration of the Shadow. I'm just beginning to feel able to move beyond this a little.

I use the word God often, although I don't believe in a God as an independent agent. I was very helped by Walter Wink's books. He describes angels and gods as a kind of collective personality. I find it helpful to see the sustainability challenge – my work – as wrestling with the 'spirit of the age', with its values of individualism and materialism. Quakers have a distinctive approach to balancing individuality and community, based in our listening spirituality. Being 'non-creedal' can mean recognising diverse experiences of the divine, but if we overvalue the Quaker silence and don't get to know each other "in the things that are eternal", Friends avoid encountering each other's experiences. I think it's good that we don't have a shared belief system, but I also think it's a problem when Friends are intolerant of others' expressed views.



Prayer

In our country they are desecrating churches.
May the rain that pours in fall into the font.
Because no snowflake ever falls in the wrong place
May snow lie on the altar like an altar cloth.

Michael Longley

Selected by Rebecca Howard