

5/24/2015, 11:40 hour:

A worship sharing led by the Land Use Committee

Mt. Toby's land: Why does it matter? What does it mean to you?

We will do a round of worship sharing around each of these sets of questions:

* What has been your experience of the land? Why has it meant to you?

* What are your ideas about the future of this land and our relationship to it?

Last year's harvest on the part of our land that has been managed for timber production revived the meeting community's interest and questions about the 118 acres we own up the side of Mt. Toby. While there is no necessity for immediate decisions about the land, the committee sees great potential benefit in having the meeting community voice, and hear, its various perspectives on our relationship with the land.

We are particularly interested in Young Friends' perspectives. We would like to hear about how often, and in what ways, meeting community uses the land. We would like to hear ideas about what should we strive for in our future stewardship of this land: a nature preserve? a place of retreat and quiet? a recreational resource? a resource for generating income for the meeting and contributing to the local food and wood products economy? The committee is also interested in ideas about how we could support meeting use of the land: a reconstructed bridge? trail maps? organized walks? development of a few "destination sites" that provide views or deep woods quiet? There are also proposals emerging about other futures for this land: sell it? give it away? partner with a land trust for management? a green burial ground? a solar farm? This worship sharing will not be a time for formal proposals, though certainly we hope that the ideas and convictions they represent will be shared.

Notes by Audrey Barker Plotkin.

Present: Margaret Cooley, Cat Chapin-Bishop, Jan Hoffman, Ken Hoffman, Will Snyder, Andrea Cousins, Roger Conant, Shirley Conant, Andy Grant, Judy Campbell, Don Campbell, John Tobey, Ann McNeal, Susan Conger, Carol Cohan, Daniel Grubbs, Melissa Perot, Nina Weyl, Georgiana Foster, Peter Bishop, Diane Crowe, Audrey Barker Plotkin, Kathy Dyer, Jane Costello, Kit Johnson, Jane Johnson, Harvey, Shea Woods, Alice Swift, and one person whose name Audrey does not know.

Introduction from Will (much as noted above). Ken passed around excerpts from past Mt. Toby minutes regarding the history of the land in the life of the Meeting, and noted that the discussion today is mainly focused on the forested (rather than open) land.

ROUND 1. * What has been your experience of the land? What has it meant to you?

Cat Chapin Bishop – the land where she grew up was key to her spiritual awakening. She is a Mt. Toby member in part because of the land that is part of the meeting, which allows a relationship with this particular land. She noted that loving land in a capitalist society is to have your heart broken, again, and again, and again.

Andrea Cousins- is so glad the land is there. She most appreciates the birdsong around the meetinghouse, particularly at dusk, near the wetland.

Andy Grant – appreciates the Meeting’s connection to Mount Toby, the Robert Frost trail, and some of the special places on the land like the climbing tree. He enjoyed the ramble across the land last week (with the Meeting’s forester, Mike Mauri). He feels that the land has unmet potential as part of the life of the meeting.

Don Campbell – spent much time outdoors as a kid. He first came to know the Mount Toby meeting land in the 1970s. He feels that having the land is important because it provides a real relationship with a particular piece of land. It’s easy to have an abstract feeling about land, but the meaning is in having a real relationship with struggle, like any good human relationship.

Judy Campbell – grew up in NYC and land was something behind a fence. Now, knowing specific features of a place has deep meaning to her. Appreciates the connection of Mount Toby Meeting land to the history of Native Americans who lived here.

Jane Costello – growing up in NH & ME, land provided solace – a place to get away and be grounded. She has walked the Meeting land with youths and felt a sense of belonging and also a sense that the trails need better maintenance to feel more welcoming.

Nina Weyl – finds solace from humanity on land. It is important to her to have woods out there with minimal human intervention.

Harvey – we don’t own land, but are merely caretakers. The earth is a living being, and Harvey asks, ‘how do I relate to that being?’ He prefers land left in a natural state.

Ken Hoffman – has walked all over the Meeting land, and thinks it is essential to know the land in all of its manifestations, and the special places (like where particular plants grow). He used to be in the ‘don’t touch a thing’ camp, but has come to realize that human intervention can create beauty & variety – like the powerline right-of-way. He values variety.

Ann McNeal – notes how complicated the question is. Even if we leave the woods alone, they aren’t natural because of (human-caused) fire suppression.

Roger Conant – likes to imagine himself as a Native American, with a more enlightened view of the land and that he is just one of many creatures. On the other hand, he finds it difficult to find the trails on the Meeting land.

Alice Swift – enjoys hiking but needs a group to hike with, so hasn’t gone on the Mount Toby land. Her kids did enjoy the land when they were Young Friends.

Georgiana Foster – when thinking about the land, she asks herself, ‘What would Ethel say?’ She reminded us of the history of Ethel Dubois buying the land (with the house that is now the Archer’s) as a summer place, and riding the train up to the depot. Later, it became the Long Plain Nature Center, and she ran programs for inner-city youth. When the Meeting purchased the land, it changed its name (after 25 years) to Mount Toby Monthly Meeting, to reflect the connection with this place. Georgiana also noted that this land is connected with the Town of Leverett.

John Tobey – is new to this land, but that his general approach acknowledges both love of the wild with dependence on civilization.

Daniel Grubbs – emphasized that nature can only work if left alone. Co-evolved communities are more important than diversity. He recounted two visits to forests in Vancouver, 40 years apart. Now, there is much less ‘real, actual, wild forest’ than in the past. We need both to leave the land alone, and to have a relationship with this wild land.

ROUND 2. * What are your ideas about the future of this land and our relationship to it?

Kathy Dyer – would like more information in order to make an educated opinion. What are the risks of leaving the land alone? And, is it really a choice of one option (management) vs another (hands-off)?

Will Snyder – reminded the group of some of the possibilities put forward: : a nature preserve? a place of retreat and quiet? a recreational resource? a resource for generating income for the meeting and contributing to the local food and wood products economy? The committee is also interested in ideas about how we could support meeting use of the land: a reconstructed bridge? trail maps? organized walks? development of a few "destination sites" that provide views or deep woods quiet? There are also proposals emerging about other futures for this land: sell it? give it away? partner with a land trust for management? a green burial ground? a solar farm?

Don Campbell – advocates keeping the land so that we can engage in a real relationship with the land. He also points out that the land is not very large, so choosing just a few options probably makes the most sense.

Roger Conant – Why not give the land away to a land trust? One of the things that draws him to Mount Toby is the disinclination to accumulate wealth or endowment. Shedding the burden of owning land is consistent with this stance. He also noted the name of the committee is ‘land use’ rather than ‘land care.’

Andy Grant – brings forward the concept of a green (conservation) burial ground. To Andy, one of the most moving actions of the Meeting was to approve burial of people rejected from other burial grounds. He also feels the green burial movement is a caring way to address the end of life, and that embracing this would increase both the appreciation of and access to the Mount Toby land.

Georgiana Foster – her Iowa upbringing gives her a pragmatic streak to humans’ dealings with land, and advocates keeping the practical side in mind – we humans do need the land for livelihood, wood, a place for a home, food.

Margaret Cooley – expresses a sense of privilege that this Meeting can worship in a place with less human noise than a city. Part of this privilege is the fossil fuels that many of us use to get to this place. She reminds us to listen to the voice in the spirit of the land and be led by it.

Diane Crowe – expressed that she liked the ideas put forward, except for using the land to provide wood products to the larger community. If we choose to sell the land or put a conservation restriction on it, we are foreclosing possibilities, some of which we haven't yet envisioned. Let's keep the land and options open.

The 11:40 hour time was then up, but the Land Use committee encouraged anyone to express their thoughts in person or in writing, to us (Ken, Will, Audrey, Sally).

Written thoughts sent after the 11:40 hour:

Melissa Perot: I didn't speak during the worship sharing today feeling that I was an outsider and was there to listen and hold the various points of view in the light. Roger's 'action' seemed eminently appropriate to me given what I had heard and yet I resonated more with Margaret's word "privileged" and it has stayed with me to a point where I feel moved to express the following ambitious/unrealistic thought. Years ago Gwynedd Meeting, (where we were members), took on a refugee couple and their baby boy (boat people from Vietnam), and launched them and another son into a productive life here in the USA. Our third floor housed them initially but they were soon integrated into the life of the Meeting enriching it in many ways, eventually becoming independent and valued members of society.

Supposing Mt Toby's land were developed as a small sustainable community for refugees who would eventually be able to integrate into the wider society. Europeans drove out the original inhabitants of the area. Could we perhaps 'give back' by supporting those now driven out of their lands today by greed and war. Mt Toby land seems to me to be an opportunity to forward our belief in the value of every human life and our understanding of the interrelatedness of ALL life by creating a balance between conservation and right living in harmony with the natural world and others. Just another crazy thought that could spark something else.

Shay Woods (written notes) – we may need the land someday. Let's leave it alone except for trail markers and wait and see what emerges. Would not like the green burial proposal because if it was opened to the public, the land might be ruined. 'My church is the woods' – is why Shay named herself Shay Woods.

Summary & additional thoughts from Cat Chapin-Bishop: I hadn't planned to stay for the after-worship discussion on land use at my Quaker meeting, but I'm awfully glad I did.

Mt. Toby meeting owns about 100 acres of land--some under agriculture, some managed as forest. There's a (somewhat neglected) outdoor worship spot, trails, and lots of wildlife. When [Peter](#) and I first came to Mt. Toby, we still lived downtown, and our weekly visit there was the only time I could be sure of spending on land that was not likely to have been used as an ashtray, or littered with trash from constant human traffic. It was the only place I could let down

my shields, and be in open, loving relationship with a piece of land. And it was water in a time of spiritual drought to me, in that way.

The Land Use Committee is undertaking a reevaluation of our meeting's relationship with the land--not because there's a crisis or a particular proposal to change it, but because we want to be conscious and spiritually guided in how we relate to that land (and to land in general). And it was, again, water in a time of spiritual drought to hear so many voices saying things about the need to see land as alive, to respect its spirit, and to be in relationship with it. [Don Campbell](#) talked about the need to love an individual piece of land--not just trees in general, but each specific tree, particular rocks and springs. Judy talked about the history of the land, and how being in relationship with land also pulls one into relationship with history (and I was reminded of the close relationship, in Norse mythology, between the spirits of land and of ancestors, as embodied in the Dísir). [Daniel Grubbs](#) spoke of the particular beauty of truly wild land--and of his grief at revisiting forests he had hiked when he was younger, to discover how much of them had fallen to developers.

I did speak of my own relationship with land, and the part it has played in my life at Mt. Toby and in my spiritual life overall. But what mattered most to me was hearing so many voices speaking for loving land, being in relationship with land as a core spiritual experience. No group of Pagans could have said it better, or more lovingly. I am in the right community for me. Mt. Toby is my home, and I am deeply grateful.