

Blue-Collar Welcome

by N. Jeanne Burns on December 26, 2012
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WHEN I WAS STILL A FRIEND, I often heard tales of meetings wanting to be more welcoming. Friends spent a lot of time at committee meetings and meetings for worship or business discussing the topic. They talked about greeters, and potlucks, and literature, and how to be more “Friendly” to those they don’t know. But did Quakers talk about worship itself? One place I found particularly unwelcoming and sometimes hurtful was meeting for worship, and more specifically the ministry given.

I have working class roots. Growing up, all I saw was hard work - the kind that wore you out every single day so that you had little energy for anything more than pulling up the footrest of your recliner; the kind of work that required protective gear. Today I have lots of financial privilege, but in many ways I remain culturally working class. What I don’t remain is a Quaker, as I formally left the Religious Society of Friends in 2012. I’d like to, however, suggest some ways that Friends can be more welcoming to people like me.

During worship, I frequently heard references to things like GREs or NPR or CPAs, acronyms I didn’t know before moving to Minnesota at the age of 24. I heard about the trials and tribulations of graduate school and saw nods of understanding. Friends can find metaphors for ministry in complicated investment tools (which are still beyond my capacity to understand), academic treatises (which only recently have ceased to intimidate me), and even, once, in another Friend’s blog, in all the discipline required for doing middle class taxes (I always use 1040 EZ, one page, no tracking required).

Beyond using words and metaphors that aren’t accessible, sometimes the ministry is hurtful. Just a few years ago, a man stood to talk about all the help he’d gotten to get where he was, a retired and published college professor. He went on to describe a woman he’d helped at his private elite liberal arts college, and then stated his utter shock that she was so smart and talented even though she’d transferred from her local community college in northern Minnesota. It made me think that I shouldn’t tell him that I’d only recently graduated with a bachelor’s, at 40, from Metropolitan State University, a school perceived by many to be at the lowest tier of four-year schools in Minnesota, often where community college graduates finish their bachelor’s degree.

Another time, a dentist talked about her “a-ha” moment when she realized how unfair the labor trade was that she’d done with a man who painted all the walls inside her house. She’d given him partial dentures that took an hour of her time and little effort and didn’t realize how much time it took to paint her walls until later, when she painted just one room. She seemed to be using the story to “teach” us about economic inequality. There were a lot of assumptions in her story; the biggest one was that we all needed to be schooled about what it’s like to be working class.

I have some suggestions about making your Quaker community more welcoming and less hostile to those who don't seem to be like what you perceive a "Quaker" should be, some suggestions to make social class more conscious in worship.

1. Create explicit ways in meeting to address hurtful issues like these when they come up. My former meeting has channels to flag ministry that's considered inappropriate in Friends' ways (responding in a defensive way to a previous person, speaking right after another, using the platform to advance something overtly political or personal), but considering content seemed verboten.
2. Consider your use of education or finances or middle class professions as metaphors when you share a story at meeting. Is this something a hotel maid can relate to? A day laborer? A dishwasher? If not, is there another metaphor you can use?
3. You can only "preach" what you know, so you must speak from your own experiences. But as you reflect in silence before ministry, ask yourself if you're assuming that your life and your story are universal.
4. This one is radical. Make it okay to talk about social class in your meeting in an open and honest way, even when you talk about the quality of ministry. Ask hard questions about how welcoming your worship is for poor and working class people of all races and ethnicities.

This piece is adapted from a discontinued blog, *Quakers and Social Class*, begun in 2007 after the author attended George Lakey's FGC Gathering workshop on social class. N. Jeanne Burns lives and writes in Minneapolis and is seeking a new spiritual home. In the meantime, she knits on Sunday mornings where Spirit is encouraging her to let go of perfection.