

Telling my Story – Gill Pennington

Saturday Morning

Hello, I am Gill Pennington from Central England Area Meeting and I am going to tell you the story of how I have come to recognise and nurture my gifts and been enabled to offer them to others.

I was in an A level revision chemistry lesson at Ackworth School, when the head teacher came to fetch me. My Dad had come up to school and he told my brother and I that my mum had been killed in a road traffic accident the previous evening. Work stopped, my A level results were poor, and instead of going to medical school, I studied biology and then became teacher – the one thing my mum had always advised me not to do - perhaps because she was one herself and knew what hard work it is!

How do we recognise our gifts? Over the next 35 years I honed my teaching skills and added facilitation, coaching and counselling to my toolkit. I had my own 'dark night of the soul', suffering a period of depression when the children left home to go to university, my marriage ended and work became impossible.

For a time, living all alone and comforted only by my beloved border terrier Sam, I was immobilised by mental anguish, wondering if life was worth living at all. Slowly, slowly, I recovered, and began to re-engage with the world, starting my own consultancy business, buying my own home, leading a Hearts and Minds Prepared group at meeting. God was preparing me for his work; building my confidence and embedding my gifts.

In 2009, when the recession was at its height and I had very little work a Friend in my meeting showed me a job advert in The Friend. It was at Woodbrooke, which I discovered is the Quaker study Centre in Birmingham. She said "you could do that"...and on reflection I thought I could! I applied and was invited for interview. Knowing that at interview appearance is important, and being familiar with the business world, I wore my beautiful wool suit and stiletto heels. My hair was up, my make-up on... I looked fabulous! However as soon as I walked through the front door at Woodbrooke I realised that I had got it all wrong. I felt overdressed and underprepared. Needless to say, they were very kind but I didn't get the job. I fell in love with Woodbrooke though.

The following year I enrolled on Equipping for Ministry, a two-year part time programme. As I went through my first year, immersing myself in the calm tranquillity and enriching teaching that is Woodbrooke I struggled with what God was saying to me - "trust me", "just be". How could I trust God when I had so little income that I wasn't sure where my next meal was going to come from? How could I just be when I needed to continuously 'put myself out there' in order to find business? In fact I didn't ever miss a meal – especially when at Woodbrooke – so I was being cared for.

During my first tutorial my EFM tutor gave me this quotation: "The place God calls you to, is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (Frederick Buechner) Over the year I began to realise that now

I was released from family and regular employment commitments I was free in a way I never had been before. I could choose to let my whole life be my ministry and perhaps this would involve working for Quakers...

In January 2011, the Head of Education at Woodbrooke rang to offer me the job as Tutor for Quaker Roles, whilst I was still driving home after the interview, back to my beloved New Forest where I had lived for 30 years.

I accepted at once, we discussed how I could manage the commuting, as I didn't want to move; and I started the following month. My wildest dream had come true – I was working at Woodbrooke – God is amazing!

God also has a sense of humour! My carefully laid plans about how to manage the role and continue living in Hampshire came tumbling down around my ears and it quickly became very apparent that I was to be in Birmingham. How did I know this? Well a meeting for clearness helped, as did talking with other EFMers and with wise Friends from my meeting but actually events overtook me as God picked me up by the scruff of the neck and dumped me in Birmingham. Still during the recession I sold my home and bought a new one inside a week and moved house in under three months. Who says miracles never happen?

Living in Birmingham is a challenge. I am a country girl through and through and the city overwhelms me. I escape the city when I can but it has taken a long time for my soul to catch up with my physically moved body and even now there is a sadness within me that I have learned to live with.

I long for the peace of the fields and the trees, the gentle ruminating of cows, the open rides, the pigs and the ponies wandering free, star laden skies, the sea, long walks, with no traffic noise, clean air and few people. I believe that this is 'the cross' I am called to bear. It sits alongside the deep gladness and joy I feel as I fulfil my ministry and use my gifts in God's service

God really is amazing! The gifts that God has nurtured through my life are being used and new ones have emerged and grown as I immerse myself in a second role as Spirituality tutor. This continues; last week I was appointed as Ministry Coordinator in place of the Quaker roles work I have been holding for the past five years. It seems that as my own spiritual life deepens and matures, I can offer my life in service to God and to Quakers in new ways.

There is also the opportunity to discern and nurture gifts in others; inviting Friends to join our associate tutor team, offering spiritual direction and walking alongside people on courses as they discover their own next steps and consider how to live adventurously.

As I was recovering from depression, a close friend sent me a card with the following words on it:

"When you come to the edge of all that you know

You must believe in one of two things

There will be earth upon which to stand

Or you will be given wings."

If you are standing on an edge, take the time needed to discern if now is the time to 'live adventurously'. If it is, take the risk and step out, putting your faith into action as you are called into a new way of being. It takes courage and it

is not easy but when we take that step, using the gifts we recognise in ourselves or that others have discerned lie within us, we grow spiritually; deepening our understanding of our true self, discovering more about our connection with the divine and breathing life into our Quaker meetings.

Gill Pennington March 2016