**Report on being a Friend in Residence at Pendle Hill, PA, Fall Term, 2024**

In 2024 I was appointed by Britain Yearly Meeting to spend the Fall Term at Pendle Hill, PA, as a Friend in Residence. As an associate tutor of its “sister” centre, Woodbooke in the UK, I had known about it for many years, and had long wanted to go to this centre with its Benedictine values of worship, learning and labour. I was not disappointed. Although there were practical problems at the beginning – hot water, showers, laundry etc – and in finding out how things worked, it was a hugely enriching experience.

**The campus and community**

I have never lived in community, and was a bit concerned that I would find it difficult. But I need not have worried. I had plenty of private time and space – in my own spacious room, in the lovely library, and sitting in the sun outside. From the moment I arrived, the sense of community was palpable, and included me. As people walk across the 24-acre campus at different times of day, they wave at each other, exchange greetings.

The place is beautiful, and the Fall colours were a daily joy. Birds, squirrels everywhere, deer too. The hundreds, maybe thousands, of trees are truly loved, beings that surround the humans. Two ancient trees had to come down while I was there – one was dead, the other diseased. As a group of staff and I sat outside eating our lunch, we watched the awesome skill of the tree surgeons, as they brought one down, and grieved.

**A difficult time**

I was told that I had arrived at Pendle Hill at one of the most difficult times in recent history. Not only was it extremely busy – in September and October large groups arriving on a daily basis, with staff having to manage quick turnovers, food cooked for about 80 people at a time – but it was at the time of the build up to, and then the experience of, the Presidential election. And neighbouring states were battered by hurricanes.

And then there was an upset in the community itself. For reasons of confidentiality, I did not know about it for a couple of weeks, but then learned that there had been a personal sadness that had led to two senior members of staff quitting with no notice, leaving others upset and with a challenging workload. I thought it was always that busy, but it did all calm down after the first month or two.

I was Pendle Hill for Thanksgiving and, to my dismay, discovered that the entire campus, kitchen and all, would be closed for four days. Although plans were very fluid, I was told I would be looked after, and had to trust that I would. As the only non-staff member on-site, I was actually locked in Main House, where I was staying, with the director Francisco and me holding the only keys to the back door! But Frances, the head of education, very generously invited me to her very warm family Thanksgiving on the day itself, and Francisco looked after me for the next two days: cooking all my meals in his house. We were able to get to know each other on a deeper and less formal level – walking, talking and playing games. We affirmed the sense of presence we felt in the other, and hope for a creative continuation of our relationship.

To some extent those staying at Pendle Hill were insulated by being in such a like-minded community. There are no televisions, and far less use of phones, but with up to a hundred on line for the daily worship, and people from many parts of the US coming through (one specifically to canvas for the election), we were very much in touch with what was going on in the outside world.

**My role**

I soon settled into the rhythm of the place, and found my own: after breakfast and the daily worship I walked the labyrinth, then went into the woods and sang to the trees, before settling down to some work. The role of the FiR is deliberately left vague. It is to support the life, work and worship of the centre, to offer whatever gifts and experience that person has to give, to be open to whatever comes – a very good lesson in life.

I acted as elder (was on the “facing bench”) once or sometimes twice a week; I helped prepare for dinner three times a week, and joined others for the monthly morning’s work, in my case in the kitchen – chopping vegetables for about 60 people. I found my main role was to be a welcoming presence, to greet people as they arrived, or got lost; to be a listening ear – for someone who was on retreat after a bereavement, for someone whose house had just been flattened by a tree falling in a hurricane, for a number of people who were at pivotal points of change in their lives, and for the staff too. Sharing experiences with a very diverse group of people, often at a profound level.

I was asked to lead two workshops within a fortnight of arriving – one for the 94th anniversary of PH, the other to celebrate World Quaker Day. I was then asked to lead two hour-long workshops online after worship the Saturday before and the Saturday after the election, which felt quite a challenge for an outsider. But, with about forty at each workshop, they seemed to go down well.

Much help that a FiR can give is ad hoc, but also geared to their personal experience. I was happy to be asked for suggestions of activities for people coming on retreat, and for ideas on outreach – so many visitors know little of Quakers – and also for ways of updating the residents’ guide, most of which is currently geared to the Spring Term.

I was also able to contribute a bit from my work as a writer, giving a talk on “Being a Quaker Author” at Swarthmore meeting, and being interviewed for two podcasts – one for PH, the other for QuakerSpeak. Both will emerge sometime in the New Year. After a month or two of not writing, I was inspired by the Fall to submit a potential pamphlet on “Letting Go: Steps in the spiritual life”.

**Beyond PH**

I didn’t leave the campus very much. I did not feel I was there to travel – I have done much in my life - but to be there. I had no transport, and was reliant on the kindness of others to take me anywhere. I went into the little local town of Media for lunch a couple of times, and bought some cookies – PH doesn’t offer sweets on the whole – and postcards to send home. Because of my membership of Quakers Uniting in Publications (QUIP), there were some local Friends that I knew, and several came to visit. It was a real pleasure to renew friendships, and Friends that I met were outstandingly generous. I was twice taken to Philadelphia, once just to have a look at the central Quaker Meeting House at Friends Center, and on another occasion to go to a concert in the Presbyterian cathedral. I was also taken to Swarthmore college for a film about that remarkable activist, George Lakey, and to a local amateur theatrical performance.

I visited two local meetings, twice. Swarthmore, and Providence which is Francisco’s home meeting and was celebrating its 340th anniversary. Throughout my time, I was strongly aware of how deeply rooted Quakers are in the area: so many meetings, so many Friends with long ancestral connections.

**Learning**

There was probably less opportunity for formal learning than if I had been at PH during the spring term, as was originally intended. There were no resident students or scholars. Apart from two young German interns, who were there for a year, I was the only non-staff resident. I did, however, attend a day workshop called “The Clownful Quaker”, which tuned in to the fooling I do in the UK, and introduced an interesting combination of Quaker and clown. I also attended in person three of the first Monday lectures: “Too Queer to be Quaker” with Brian Blackmore; “Spirit-led Community Building” with Rai Carter and Ruth Cutcher; and on the eve of the presidential election, “Towards a Just Democracy” with Alicia McBride and Jose Santos Moreno”. A privilege to be there and meet some of the presenters.

Informal learning

But my time at PH was replete with learning from all I met: from diverse spiritual groups, including sixty Zen Buddhist monks, and groups working with climate change, peace, or racial justice. I learnt about training for activism from Spadework, about the international work of Witness for Innocence to combat the death penalty, about the numerous Quaker schools from new teachers who came to several gatherings for training. My daily spiritual practice was fed by reading many of the PH pamphlets available in the library and enriched by joining the monthly reading group.

Pendle Hill staff are a wonderful example of the saying that the place God calls you to is where your deep joy meets the deep hunger of the world. Two staff mentioned the joy of their work, even after decades; others showed the love they had for the grounds in their care. A member of staff who came three years ago after a very different kind of work couldn’t believe how it was possible to work like this with people who actually care how you are. “I only live a mile down the road, but it’s like a different world when I come to work.” We agreed that being at Pendle Hill made it possible to believe in a better world.

The Spirit was evident in so many often chance encounters. Walking in the labyrinth one morning, I passed a Zen Buddhist from Spadework, on retreat before running a course. “Here we are,” she said, “both on our path.”

From a group of healers: “We’re here to heal ourselves, heal others and maybe heal the world.”

When I told Francisco that if I had come earlier in my life there might have been more of a transformation; his response was: “There are many kinds of transformation.”

One morning, as I emerged from singing in the woods, I encountered a woman who was about to leave after a week’s stay. As we parted, she said, "I hope you find what you are looking for." I am grateful for that pointer to such an important question, which resonated in my time there and continues to do so as I settle in at home.

I write with a huge sense of gratitude: to Britain Yearly Meeting for appointing me, to the Trust that finances the appointment each year, and to the Pendle Hill staff for accepting me, for welcoming me so fulsomely. Gratitude to have had the remarkable opportunity of spending three months at Pendle Hill, a "place to be and become", as its sticker says, to spend three months in community and solitude. To be in the company of the vast old trees, and of inspiring people who work there and pass through. For the spontaneous and profound conversations. For the wonderful organic food, much grown on-site, for the precious daily worship, and the challenge of being open to whatever turned up in my day. If this were a microcosm of the world, what a wonderful world it would be!

Thank you, Pendle Hill, for being there and for offering so much to all who come to stay, including me.