

Forty-Three newsletter

Number 499
November 2020

Oxford Friends Meeting
43 St Giles Oxford OX1 3LW



Mysticism and Me

During the recent curtailments of daily life I have been able to grapple with a difficulty that has been nagging at me for some time. I have reached an understanding which I would like to share with Friends, some of whom have heard about parts of my grappings before.

In early life I became aware of the possibility of being swept along by a tsunami of religious awareness and practice that could affect my life choices. However, I was unconvinced that being swept along would bring me happiness, so while I half-admired those who allowed themselves to be swept I was stubbornly not going to go with them.

My joining Friends 40 years ago was influenced by the mystical aspects of Quakerism combined with a lack of imposed rituals and liturgy. I wanted to experience the fullness of life, some of which would be denied me, or made difficult, if disciplined holiness dominated over my instincts. I was not bad – I merely followed my own hunches while trying to live in a way that allowed human love to grow – and I did my best, in the world as it is, not to harm others. I felt that commitment to a totally spirit-led life would be like falling over a waterfall and losing aspects of myself. I thought I could probably work out what love required of me, intellectually, without submitting to unknown flows.

While I wondered about the experience of submitting to a greater guidance than my own mind, I put deliberate brakes on that kind of spiritual development – not even to put a toe into the water. I wanted to choose my Teacher when I was ready, but did not think about how to recognise readiness. That is probably why my image of spiritual development is not a journey but a continual unfolding: sometimes like a cabbage, worthy and dutiful, sometimes like a rose, fragrant and beautiful. Ready or not.

I cannot recall now why I started to read Thomas Merton's 'Seven Storey Mountain' but I did so and was not impressed. Why could I learn anything from a fairly typical story of a misbehaving man making a mess of life and then becoming a monk and advising other people how to redeem themselves? Several mystics have gone through this kind of life change and have then told us, in their writings, what Christianity should be, or can be.

But one passage grabbed me; Thomas Merton had attended a Quaker meeting and been unimpressed by some ministry about someone's holiday in Switzerland. He wrote:
"The Friends accepted it with patience ... but I went out of the meeting house saying to myself 'They are like all the rest. In other churches it is the minister who hands out the commonplaces, and here it is liable to be just anybody'. ... When I had read the

Please send contributions well in advance of the intended publication date.

Articles, preferably of 500 words or fewer, can be emailed to newsletter@oxfordquakers.org or a paper copy can be left in the pigeonhole of any editor.

Items for the calendar (on the last page) can be emailed to office@oxfordquakers.org.

For more information: tel. 01865 557373 or visit www.oxfordquakers.org

works of William Penn and found them to be about as supernatural as a Montgomery Ward catalogue I lost interest in the Quakers. If I had run across something by Evelyn Underhill it might have been different."

So I began to read 'The Mystic Way' by Evelyn Underhill, a book we had owned for many years but I had never read with real effort. She wrote more specifically about Quakers elsewhere, but it was a worthwhile discipline for me to read her generalities about mystics in this book, not only about people who had behaved badly and 'come to good' as contemplatives, but also other variants, such as Julian of Norwich, St Francis, and George Fox.

Underhill takes the reported life of Jesus as an illustration of a pathway that is also exemplified in the many lives and writings of people who might be called 'mystics'; they finally espouse and manifest a 'mysterious' unity with divine guidance, and a wholeness of perception that permeates their mind and behaviour. This starts with an illumination that is beyond words; George Fox wrote "*all creation gave another smell beyond what words can utter*". Some Friends report similar experiences. But that is only the start of a process – what am I supposed to do



having had such an experience? Is doing what I can for the environment the sole use of such an experience?

For the reported Jesus, the next move after illumination was to go into solitude for a while and, while there, face the temptation of carrying on with a life already being lived, or use the illumination to change direction. So he began preaching and behaving in ways that broke the strictures of his society, acting with love rather than in the law. Of course this attracted opposition, and he explained his actions to the disciples in terms of a higher law of love and equality and redemption. This teaching led to his destruction, after a 'dark night of the soul', and – after his crucifixion – to confusion among the disciples about what they could do next. His reported cry on the cross, "*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" seems to relate to Psalm 22, which is ultimately not an appeal to save one person from death, but a prophecy that all people could come to understand a better life. After that the resurrection is reported, which I interpret to be the sense that the disciples made of what they might do with his teachings after his death. How could their experience of living and learning with Jesus be continued?

For many people making a deliberate spiritual journey, this pathway – of illumination, solitude, temptation, teaching, being with others, facing opposition, undergoing self-doubt and frustration and then a dramatic destruction of their sense of self, followed by 'resurrection' – is a reported pattern towards their achievement of unity and wholeness of and with the Spirit. Two different ways to complete this path are reported in writings about and by mystics: to become contemplative, individually or separately from the world, or alternatively to live life as it is in the world but to become more loving, more giving, more communal, less judgmental, more generous of heart, more joyful and creative.

So I need not have held back in case I fell over a waterfall. Instead I could push to one side my guilty sense of avoiding submission, and make room for my actions to be imbued with the Spirit, such as I understand it and am able and willing, in the whole of my life.

continued next page

This is what Evelyn Underhill saw in Quakers. Rather than putting faith in a liturgy that mimics some of the stages of the life of the reported Jesus, we follow the observable reported actions: sharing food (real and metaphoric), loving all, appreciating creation, maintaining humility, acting with courage, showing charity, and not attaching ourselves to possessions or to aspects of self that can be beneficially abandoned.

Evelyn Underhill also saw our understanding of God as inward, a battery that makes such a life possible, as well as outward, manifested through our actions. Of course you don't have to use the word 'God' here, but I do. There seems to me to be more than this analysis, because we do also have contemplation in our silent worship, so we combine the natures of these two 'ends' of the mystic pathway she describes. They are not separate. This is what prevents us getting lost (falling down the waterfall), and also supports us in our actions; the rose and the cabbage of my imagination unfold together within the social interactions and norms of Quaker life. George Fox and other Friends saw this, and Quakers have institutionalised the connection.

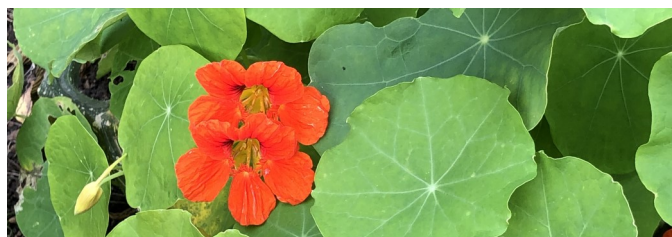
We worship together. (I note that there are no records of Jesus sitting in silence with disciples, though there are several instances of him going to pray alone. And he doesn't seem to have told his disciples to isolate and contemplate.) The disciplines of worship, of discernment to decide whether what I say and do is spirit-led, and of hearing ministry with an open heart and mind, are aspects of sustaining the connection.

Meetings for clearness are a more recent method of sustaining the connection. We can be sure we are not alone; we are asked to test by discernment our words, decisions and actions; we are asked to wonder whether we are mistaken; we ask whether we are swept along in truth or in fashion; we are asked to learn from others' experience and testimony; we learn from our own experience; we discern what love, evidenced through peace, justice, truth, sustainability, simplicity and equality, requires of us. What is more, we can support each other in sufferings, frustrations and uncertainties, and can celebrate the illuminations and resurrections that provide the Light.

It is a delightful relief and joy to realise that, while wondering about what I was missing by avoiding 'the path not taken', I had not been paying full attention to the background unfoldings that have always been going on among and alongside Friends, and which sustain the spirit-led life.

I look forward to the time when we can once again share tea and biscuits, and rejoice that we have found creative ways to share the metaphorical bread and wine.

Anne Watson
Autumn 2020



A Fairtrade Christmas

I recently received my copy of the Traidcraft Autumn/Winter catalogue, which of course features Christmas cards and other seasonal goodies. It also has a world map showing and listing all their suppliers, and also gives details about the companies- mainly co-operatives, often organic growers – and what they supply to Traidcraft. What is clear is that the majority live in countries with a low carbon footprint and a high risk of suffering from the effects of climate change like drought or floods, not to mention poverty.

I might add that one of Oxford's twin towns is Leon in Nicaragua, and Prodecoop in northern Nicaragua supplies much of Traidcraft's medium and rich roast/ground coffee. As a supporter of OLAT (Oxford -Leon Association & Trust) which fundraises for education and clean-water action, I see reports about some of that area's many needs. Of course, Oxford is lucky to have at least two Fairtrade shops: Fairtrade @ St Michaels and Headington Fairtrade, but if you aren't happy about going into shops, do visit Traidcraft's website.

Wishing you all happy and fairly-traded Christmas shopping,

Patricia Wright



Drinking the Fruit

His chosen place was a tavern in town
Where we could drink Apple and Elder brew
I was doubtful – too busy and bustling
Yet they showed us to a secluded corner
And I learnt on leaving – for in virus times
The way out is not the self-same way in –
That here was a holy spring, a sacred grove.
In Autumn, by their fruits you shall know them.
The Tree Alphabet's name – Birch, Rowan, Ash.
Harvest of knowledge, distilled words and letters.
We sat, wedged close to the city wall's remains
And concentrated. Still small voice of god
In the form of susurrating Aspen.
Yew, longest lived of all, figured twice over
An echo of Iona, consecrated Isle.
All this is cultural exploration
Declared the querent, yet our heads ached
From strange map, foreign tongue, occult calendar.
The seeker's issue: how to stay in town
Whilst moving to a peaceful, pleasant house.
As with all forecasting, when was not clear.
The trees insisted, a choice must be made
Six months, half-way round the ring, was implied
No matter which option, just taste the apple!
An Alder leant across my homeward path;
Alders form the foundations of Venice
Standing firm in water and persisting.
It said: 'Treasure is guarded by dragons.
Learn our ways and there is your reward'.

Karima Brooke
October 2020

In Memoria

In pre-COVID times, every November saw the annual service when members of the homeless community and their friends and supporters came together to remember those living on the street who had died in the past year.

In a moving celebration Mary Gurr, chaplain to the homeless community, read out their names and a candle was lit for each named person, usually by a friend or someone who had worked with them or known them well. After the service we shared tea and cake and reminiscences.

It was always an occasion of great pathos as well as shame that in a wealthy city like Oxford some of our most vulnerable citizens could be left to die on our streets.

This year we are unable to meet, commemorate, and drink tea afterwards, sharing memories of our friends. Instead, from 10:00 to 18:00 from Monday 16 to Friday 20 November, the city church of St Michael at the North Gate in Cornmarket Street will be open (and COVID-secure) for anyone to call in and light a candle and remember all those whose lives have ended in this way in 2020.

It will be good if some members of our community take this opportunity to remember members of the homeless community in our midst.

Elisabeth Salisbury



Lockdown in My Garden

Where has everyone been during Lockdown? I guess that many Quakers have been imprisoned in their homes, limited to walks along local roads and canal towpaths, and trips to parks and natural reserves. I, as a professional gardener, when not in the grounds of All Souls College, sweeping, weeding, watering and pruning, have been just sitting in my own semi-detached garden in Botley.

Karima and I moved in here 19 years ago. In April-May this year, on furlough like other gardeners, I took to sitting for long hours in my own little garden, and it struck me that I was not bored or restless.

It took me over three years to make the garden, laying paving slabs and brick paths, a compost area; erecting a bird feeder; putting in plants that I thought would thrive.

One influence on my design was Feng Shui in your Garden, by Roni Jay.

The idea in the book that grabbed my attention was that a garden (or home) one makes reflects one's personal, family and social life.

The garden, to be satisfying, must contain these eight elements that go with a full, balanced life:

1. Fame – the patio is where we invite guests who we hope will admire my garden, Karima's cooking and hospitality.
2. Health and Happiness – the white metal bench is placed furthest from the street, shaded from the noonday sun. It is next to a small pond; marjoram, sage and lavender, visited by bees and butterflies, grow around the gravel area.
3. Pleasure and Indulgence – this is where the

barbecue, swimming pool or badminton court should be, but perhaps I am lacking in fun.

4. New Beginnings – I have a cold-frame area for growing young plants from seed or cuttings; and for growing-on unusual plants as gifts.

5. Relationships – the rotary drier is necessary for taking it in turns to wash clothes, and do other household tasks. Sometimes Karima cuts flowers for the house.

6. Children and Family – there are twin boys next

door. They could climb up their apple through my pear tree and shimmy down the rope swing, but I would shout at them!

The creatures that benefit from the garden space – birds, frogs, squirrels etc – could be considered as children.

7. Wisdom and

Experience – the central part of the garden, where I position my wooden seat, next to the old pear tree. The compost heap is also in the centre. It is digesting while I am cogitating.

8. Wealth – the garage doesn't hold a car, but stuff that might come in useful sometime? Now there are stored apples and potatoes; in winter precious tender plants.

There are other ideas and elements in the balanced Chinese garden, but I think the most important is ch'i, the energy that must not be blocked or stagnant, but flows through the garden (we are situated on a hill). There are wind chimes hanging from the tree. A tall Bamboo sways in the lightest breeze.

I am not sure that this account has much to do with being a Quaker, but I refer you to Quaker Faith and Practice 21:22 "*there is, it seems, an excess of religious and social busyness these days ...*".

In Friendship,
Steve Brooke





Channel Crossings

*“you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land”*
from *Home* by Warsan Shire

The Daily Telegraph recently headlined a claim by Nigel Farage that it is time to “declare an emergency in the Channel”. Far right protesters descended on Dover singing ‘Rule Britannia’ and chanting “We want our country back”. The Prime Minister described the channel crossings by people seeking safety as “dangerous and criminal”, the Home Secretary suggested that asylum seekers be sent to islands in the South Atlantic. Now it is proposed to stop the boats with nets, or even wave machines. You might think we were facing an armed invasion rather than men, women, and children fleeing war and seeking refuge.

Last week at a meeting organised by the Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN), forty Friends were able to share concerns and hear what is being done to support asylum seekers and refugees. Thanks to Zoom, Friends joined from Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, as well as many parts of England; two guests from South Africa also beamed in.

These are troubling times. We were heartened to hear that Britain Yearly Meeting had made a submission to the Home Affairs Committee Inquiry in to the Channel crossings. A QARN article challenging the myths and disinformation appeared in *Quake!* and was translated into

French and Dutch by colleagues at the Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA)

But we cannot act alone – we need to make alliances with others struggling for justice and compassion in the asylum and migration system. The Churches Refugee Network (CRN) meets at the end of the month and will hear from refugees and learn how the churches are responding. QARN will be there. We also support the StatusNow4All (<https://statusnow4all.org>) movement which has brought together trades unions, sympathetic MPs, and undocumented people to call for undocumented migrants and those in the legal system to be given Leave to Remain. An Early Day Motion (EDM#658) has been initiated by Claudia Webbe, a Leicester MP. Some critics have described the call as unrealistic, but we believe we need to have a vision.

We heard of many other issues and actions to address the impacts of the hostile environment, and there is not the space here to list the multitude of other organisations that were mentioned. Many will be familiar to you, and I know Friends in our Area Meeting are deeply involved in refugee support and advocacy.

So, as the call ended and the faces faded away, I felt encouraged and had a vision of a web of connection and solidarity, extending far and wide, joining us together in our struggles for truth, equality, justice and peace for all.

Bridget Walker
Headington Meeting
Bridget is a member of QARN:
<https://qarn.org.uk/about/>

Children's Meetings in September and October

Our children's meetings continue to meet regularly via Zoom: *Beansprouts* (for younger children) meet during the 11:00 meeting, and feature a story, activity and some singing; and *Sunflowers* (for slightly older children) on Sunday afternoons. We currently have a regular group of children enthusiastically taking part every week.

In September, *Sunflowers* have been thinking about what it means to be a Quaker, getting ready for our all-age meeting for worship on 4 October. Since then we have been looking at different topics. The collage on the left, using natural materials, was inspired by a story we read, '*Wangari's Trees of Peace*', about Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan environmental activist who inspired many women to plant trees across Kenya as part of the green belt movement.



Matthew Gee
on behalf of Children &
Young People's Committee

All-Age Meeting for Worship 6 December

Our meeting's next all-age meeting for worship is on Sunday 6 December, during the 11:00 blended meeting for worship.



Our meeting has three all-age meetings for worship each year; these include an opportunity for babies, children, teenagers and adults to worship together.

The meeting will include a reading of *This is the Star* by Joyce Dunbar, with artwork by our meeting's children to illustrate the poem. There will be a chance for everyone in the meeting to take part. Look out in notices and December Forty Three for details!

Matthew Gee
on behalf of Children &
Young People's Committee

Beauty Secrets ...

These beauty tips — often mis attributed to Audrey Hepburn (who apparently liked to quote the lines)— are thought to have originated with the American journalist and humourist Samuel Levenson. The lines may even have been read at Hepburn's funeral:

For attractive lips, speak words of kindness.

For lovely eyes, seek out the good in people.

For a slim figure, share your food with the hungry.

For beautiful hair, let a child run their fingers through it once a day.

For poise, walk with the knowledge that you never walk alone.

People, more than things, have to be restored, renewed, revived, reclaimed, and redeemed.

Remember, if you ever need a helping hand, you will find one at the end of each of your arms.

As you grow older, you will discover that you have two hands, one for helping yourself and the other for helping others.

contributed by **Val Speechley**



My Time on OxFAP Committee

As I come to the end of my second triennium I reflect on my experience of being on the Oxford Friends Action on Poverty (OxFAP) committee. I had thought that I knew about poverty, partly through my education work in and around Oxford and also through family experience of addiction and life in hostels.

What I knew was the tip of an iceberg. On the committee we learn more all the time about local poverty and its associated homelessness, illness, debt and despair. The cycles of difficulty are extensive and persistent for people without right to remain, work, income, health, family support or home.

Everything is made more difficult; one problem leads to another, and working through the chains of bureaucracy can be a full time job. Some people face periods without any income at all, and many more who do receive benefits or wages do not have enough to live on, however carefully they budget. Costs associated with schooling, documentation, legal help, unfurnished accommodation, mobility, can create debts that sometimes have massive interest rates.

Many people in this position lack the necessary confidence, literacy, documentation and personal networks to cope with these issues – so they go to agencies and charities for help.

Hundreds of people in Oxford spend their working or volunteering lives supporting the poor. Much of their time can be spent writing to charities for help. We say 'yes' when we can, but often the need is greater or more complex than we can help with and caseworkers have to keep repeatedly applying to several possible charities. Imagine, for example, the work involved when a family is moved into new accommodation that has no furniture, no white goods, no flooring – and there is no spare money.

As I come to the end of my service for OxFAP I find myself wondering about the costs associated with

case workers having to do so much paperwork which might not be necessary if rents were lower, wages were higher, universal credit was quicker and more generous, housing benefit better matched to Oxford prices, people leaving prison were properly funded and so on. In short, if society really did look after each person when trouble comes then maybe more time and effort could be spent on supporting the quality of life rather than merely temporarily alleviating drudgery and destitution.

I am not suggesting that we have not been doing the right thing, of course we have, but throughout the last six years I have had echoing in my head the words of Joseph Rowntree: "The soup kitchen in York never has difficulty in obtaining financial aid, but an enquiry into the extent and causes of poverty would enlist little support." QF&P 23.18

OxFAP plugs gaps, and rightly so, but Rowntree also says:

"Charity as ordinarily practised, the charity of endowment, the charity of emotion, the charity which takes the place of justice, creates much of the misery which it relieves, but does not relieve all the misery it creates." QF&P 23.17

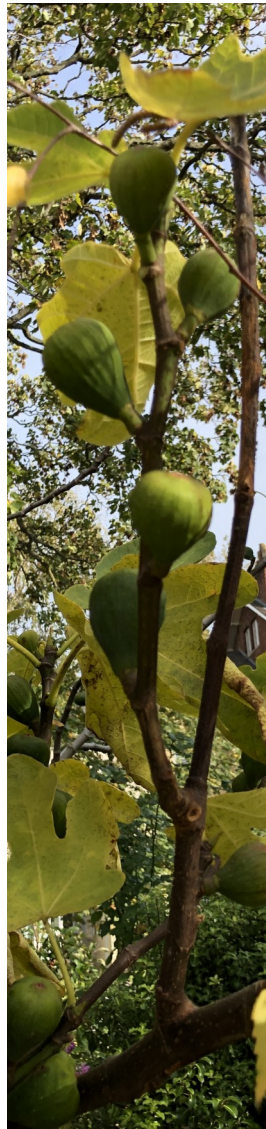
Can OxFAP be accused of 'creating misery'? No, of course not, but I recognise that we have become an important part of the complex system that lets politicians off the hook because churches and charities, particularly food banks, will pay up – and the extensive grant work that case workers have to do is invisible to the public eye.

Praise is heaped on volunteers, communities, charities, and schools who fill the gaps, as if public praise is an adequate alternative to political action and prioritising. It isn't.

We are blessed with two MPs who recognise these problems, and I also realise that everything I have said is irrelevant until there is some kind of settling after Brexit and COVID-19.

I am writing this in a personal capacity.

Anne Watson



New Books in the Library

Here is a list of new accessions to the Meeting House Library. The items on racism were kindly donated by Hugh Palmer and Hoonie Feltham after their presentation on Racism for Friday with Friends.

If you want to borrow any books, please email me at hilliard.catherine@gmail.com The library is currently available 14:00-18:00 for use as a study space for student Friends, and indeed for anybody else.

Catherine Hilliard

Bayfield, Tony	<i>Deep Calls to Deep: Transforming Conversations Between Jews and Christians</i>
Eddo-Lodge, Reni	<i>Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race</i>
Eisenstein, Charles	<i>Sacred Economics: Money, Gift, & Society in the Age of Transition</i>
Hirsch, Afua	<i>Brit(ish): on Race, Identity and Belonging</i>
Lammy, David	<i>Tribes: How Our Need to Belong Can Make or Break the Good Society</i>
Pares, Susan	<i>Displaced by War: Gertrude Powicke and Quaker Relief in France and Poland 1915-1919</i>
Pearce, Cyril	<i>Communities of Resistance: Conscience and Dissent in Britain During the First World War</i>
Pearce, Cyril	<i>Comrades in Conscience: the Story of an English Community's Opposition to the Great War</i>
Saad, Layla F	<i>Me and White Supremacy: How to Recognise Your Privilege, Combat Racism and Change the World</i>
Wootton, Sarah & Riley, Lloyd	<i>Last Rights: the Case for Assisted Dying</i>



Fruits of the Forest

An oil painting from our four-night stay in the Forest of Dean, where working class families still mine for iron ore and coal – 'the fruits of the Forest' – to heat their homes.

Jill Green

Realisations Invitation

Realisations

Following the Black Lives Matter protests, many Friends have been concerned about what they can do. Friends were invited to discuss this in small groups, and a sequence of three Friday with Friends sessions were convened. Is it time now to collect in one place some of the realisations Friends have come to regarding themselves as well as possible actions?

Friends are invited to make contributions to a possible compendium of Realisations which could appear in 43, and possibly in a single publication to serve as stimulus to others.

Request

All Friends are requested to submit brief accounts of realisations arising over the last 8 months. Contributions are likely to be most informative when they are brief and vivid accounts from direct experience, so that others may recognise aspects of themselves.

There is no time like the present

As soon as possible, jot down some realisations you have come to and send them to newsletter@oxfordquakers.org.

John Mason



Joining a Meeting for Worship with Oxford Quakers

1. You can attend meetings via Zoom or in person at 43 St Giles. To attend in person you must book via **Oxford Quakers Eventbrite** page <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/oxford-quakers-30657885404>
You can book up to the day of the meeting.
2. You can join all our **Zoom Meetings for Worship using the same Meeting Identity** for all meetings throughout the week.
To Join any Zoom Meeting for Worship click on this link:
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87383304611?pwd=Vkkya2ZweVVRZjRmOE1JVDBFdTdwUT09>
The Meeting ID: 873 8330 4611
You may need to enter a passcode (again the same for any meeting). **The Passcode is: oxford** (all lower case)
If you are **dialling in on the phone:** +44 203 901 7895 United Kingdom or +44 131 460 1196 United Kingdom
The telephone passcode is: 525212
3. You can uphold the meeting quietly in your own home at these times.
4. You can join the unconnected but simultaneous meetings.

The office issued a new Zoom meeting list on 2 October.



From Quaker Faith and Practice

People matter. In the end human rights are about people being treated and feeling like people who matter. ... In ignorance or knowingly we all violate human rights. We are all involved in the exercise of power and the abuse of power.

London Yearly Meeting 1986
QF&P 24.49

MEETINGS FOR WORSHIP

All meetings for worship are now blended.
For more information, contact the office at
office@oxfordquakers.org
+44 (0)1865 557373

Sunday: Meetings for Worship
9:30 & 11:00

**First Sunday of each month:
Meeting for Worship for Business**
12:15

Monday: Young Adult Friends
20:00

Tuesday & Thursday: Meeting for Worship
7:30

Wednesday: Meeting for Worship
12:15

Forty-Three is available online, at
www.oxfordquakers.org/newsletter

If you are considering writing an article or notice but would prefer it not to go online, please don't hesitate to contribute it. Just indicate that the piece is not for inclusion in the internet version. The same applies to calendar items.

*The views expressed in this newsletter
do not necessarily reflect those of the editors.*

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