



They trusted in me... I had a major breakdown while on a psychiatric social work course when I was 23 – before I became a Quaker. My employers were not always sympathetic.

I am bipolar. I can cope with the depressive elements, but need short hospital admissions when I go high. I have had excellent psychotherapy and my condition, with the help of medication, has remained stable for more than 20 years.

The acceptance of Friends has been important and has meant a lot to me. They trusted in me, even when I had difficulty in trusting myself.



Some years ago, I was a Member of a meeting. My husband ... became ill and died. After his death I plunged into a deep depression, coupled with anxiety, on top of the grief. My GP referred me to the psychiatrist, and I was greatly helped by therapy and medication.

During this period I returned to meeting. Friends were sympathetic to my loss, of course, but as the months passed, the meeting continued 'as normal', but for me things never reverted to 'normal'. I found that the silence, in particular, was unbearable at this time. Silence, in fact, was associated in my mind with a deep existential fear and dread, which exhibited itself as a permanent 'silent scream' inside my head, which made it impossible to use the Quakerly silence in any constructive way.

I realise now that I was asking far too much of myself, too soon



A woman had worn out her welcome at other local churches and for months she disrupted worship and business with long tirades about social issues of the past which still preoccupied her.

Elders visited to discuss. Initially we were kind and polite and got nowhere. Then we tried speaking as though to a child: simply, bluntly and firmly, telling her that she must listen in Meeting for Worship and not speak every time.

At the same time we encouraged her to talk endlessly and repetitively afterwards with a few patient Friends and we set up a 'discussion group' to enable her to feel heard.

She has become considerably calmer, rarely speaks inappropriately and, equally important, her elderly husband is grateful for our acceptance and seems to value the hours' respite on Sunday mornings. And the discussion group continues and serves a different purpose.



Some years ago there was a young man who unexpectedly began to be very disruptive in our Quaker Meeting. He had come to Quakers several years before from a strict, biblical and evangelical sect. His disruptive behaviour took the form of haranguing us, especially with biblical texts during Meeting for Worship, arguing with our processes within meeting and especially in Meeting for Business. He disputed the accuracy of minutes of meetings he had not attended and if he was at Meeting for Business he was negative and argumentative. The meeting was very troubled. Various members tried reasoning with him by talking and in writing.

One Sunday during Meeting for Worship he harangued us at length quoting biblical passages that 'proved our sinfulness' and finished by calling us Fascists.

In the ensuing silence one of our Young Friends, a young woman of 13 or 14, stood and with tears in her eyes said 'I don't know what a fascist is but I know I am not one' and sat down. Our disturbed Friend walked across the room, hugged her and returned to his seat. Peace was restored.

Some weeks later a friend happened to see him at the hospital in the waiting room of the Mental Health Unit. We did not really realise that he had mental health issues at the time of all the disturbance until being seen there. He came back to Meeting and was part of it.



I was living in a new place where I knew no-one and my husband was starting a new demanding job. My son was born and welcomed by the overseers at the meeting to which I had just transferred my membership. I succumbed to acute post-natal depression necessitating hospitalisation.

Friends in the meeting were at a loss. The meeting offered to pick me up from the hospital for Meeting for Worship but this was too much of an ordeal. I only went once. I must have seemed difficult and ungrateful but what I really needed was the constant, undemanding support of an individual.

The local vicar's wife took in my husband and son and brought the baby to visit me regularly. Her kindness stays with me and motivated me to work with mentally distressed people. Eventually I came through and resumed going to meeting. But Friends did not refer to the reason for my long absence. I think they were embarrassed. I could have done with a sympathetic ear.



I MUDDLED THROUGH

. . . After a conviction for my gross misconduct as my life was going into meltdown, after being placed onto the sex offenders register, after a move to be with a new partner, now after learning to live with long-term unemployment, after finding a new and rewarding way of life in Christianity and Quakerism, after getting onto a good new combination treatment for bipolar disorder, after being clear of drugs for more than a couple of years now, after ongoing psychological input, after regular work with a lovely probation officer, after and because of all this, I'm a lot better. . . . Still the illness has not gone, I do struggle with low moods, but I seem to be able to find my way out of them easier . . .

I have met with problems within Quakers with respect to my conviction—despite the way illness was linked . . . reassurance can be taken that while I'm well then my conduct is OK, but it's also seen that all I have to do is to get unwell and . . . and as Isobel Lane said, 'fear is very powerful'. It seems that I only pose a threat to people who don't know me, yet they are also the people in a position to give me employment and so a sense of worth in the world. I am sore after being rejected for a volunteer position with Friends. I was deemed apparently competent to do the job . . . it was just a I posed a 'risk'. It seems to me that Quakers like to sing loudly about working in the prisons, about the heritage of fair treatment of the mentally ill . . ., but to have ex-offenders or the mentally unwell actually within the Society—in meetings for worship, or doing Quaker work—well, that's another matter.

You might say I'm extremely ambivalent though, because I also love the Society of Friends! It's been Friends who have helped me regain some self-respect, local Friends who have found me a number of little roles that let me feel valued. . . . Above all, personally I hope to be able to turn a negative and still painful experience of rejection by Friends into something that leaves me feeling rather loved and valued than feared and mistrusted.



When words are strange or disturbing to you, try to see where they have come from and what has nourished the lives of others. Listen patiently and seek the truth which other people's opinions may contain for you.' Avoid hurtful criticism and provocative language. Do not allow the strengths of your convictions to betray you into making statements or allegations that are unfair or untrue. Think it possible that you may be mistaken.