

***The 2021 Australian Backhouse Panel Discussion: Searching for Truth: Friends
in a 'post-truth' - world***

Presented 5 July at Yearly Meeting 2021

**Panellists: Dorothy Broom (CRQ), Gerry Fahey VRM), Duncan Frewin (QRM)
and Pamela Leach (TRM)**

Moderator: Jennifer Burrell (NSWRM)

This is a transcription of the online presentation.

NOTE:

JB: Jennifer Burrell

DF: Duncan Frewin

DB: Dorothy Broom

GF: Gerry Fahey

PL: Pamela Leach

JB: Thank you, Friends.

I would like to acknowledge the First Nations Peoples of the countries on which we are each individually located tonight. I acknowledge their care and stewardship of country for millennia past and offer my respect to the Elders past, present and emerging.

I'd like to invite each of the panellists to introduce themselves to you, just very briefly. Perhaps I could start with Duncan Frewin.

DF: Okay. After life as a musician in various churches in my native Canada and in Queensland I found the Religious Society of Friends in Brisbane in 1983, and realized I'd found a home. I live in Brisbane with my partner, Patrick.

JB: Thank you very much Duncan. Pamela, would you like to follow Duncan.

PL: Sure. Well I've got some things in common. I've been with Friends since 1981 and apart from a few years West Africa and the USA, I've mainly lived in Canada where I was a university teacher in political studies and human rights. And then in 2010, with my son Paul, I migrated to Hobart to partner Katherine Purnell. I'm now a poet and learning to live well with disability. I serve as co-clerk of Tasmania Regional Meeting.

JB: Thank you so much Pamela. Dorothy?

DB: Well, I'm a late-comer to Quakers. I came to Quakers in 1999 as a millennium gift to myself and I've never looked back. I'm a sociologist by profession and by disposition but in that aforementioned previous millennium, I found myself serving as a kind of interpreter between feminist women's health groups and government departments. For the last three or four years I've become increasingly unwell and have had to lay down nearly all my Quaker involvements except Meeting for Worship.

JB: And finally, Gerry, would you like to introduce yourself?

GF: Yes, jumping through. So, I was born in England and came to Australia very young so this is my experience of country and land. I'm born a Catholic, raised a Catholic, very devout and then no religion for quite a while. Then about 30 years ago I found cosmology, Brian Swimme, Thomas Berry and Quakers all in the one bundle. So, I've what I see is that I'm living in an earth spirituality in a very grounded holding community and that's important to me. In my 30 years with Quakers, I've mostly been in small meetings, sometimes down to two or three people, but also very involved in regional meeting in spurts, and sometimes in Yearly Meetings. Most of my work has been as a librarian with dips into teaching and community. I'm a parent, a grandparent, a partner to Susan Nelson in a wonderfully blended family which I celebrate. I live on Dja Dja Wurung land. And for me what's important is on the north of a divide which means that the water that runs from our land runs up the compass being into the Murray Darling basin and takes a long way to make its way to the coast. And for me what's important in acknowledging my Elders which some of which my feet are now resting on in my room, is the rocks, the grounding, the mosses and the lichens and the fungi of the land that I live on. And these are my Elders and I draw on them for my grounding.

JB: Thank you Gerry.

JB: And finally, myself, Jennifer Burrell, will be taking the role of moderator tonight. There's so much commonality amongst panel members and also so much diversity. Like others, I came to this country from elsewhere. In my case, it was when I was just finishing high school and after a number of years of seeking, I found The Religious Society of Friends in the mid-80s. It's still the only church I know that welcomes free thinkers. So, maybe that gives you a brief, brief taste of who the panel are and what will be the turn to the topics tonight.

I want to thank you all for coming and we should start. But I just wanted to be clear about the format because this is not your standard Backhouse Lecture. I'll be asking the panellists for their reflections on various topics. They have had the topics ahead of time. They've had the opportunity to reflect deeply on them for a couple of months now and I hope very much, that we will all find their reflections inspiring.

We did talk about: *should we also ask the panellists to respond to questions from you the audience?* I understand there's quite a large number of Friends here tonight. We thought it might be just a little bit too tricky on Zoom for this first experimental Backhouse panel, but maybe in the future, who knows? I do want to just mention there is a Backhouse Lecture feedback session tomorrow at four o'clock Australian Eastern standard time and the timetable has the link, of course.

I invite you to attend that and give us all your feedback on this experiment, so, who knows maybe we will do it again. We'll finish up tonight at about 8.25pm (somewhere around there), with a brief closing silence.

So, our first question. I'd really like to ask Duncan to lead off. The topic for this overall thing is searching for truth, you know, Friends in a post-truth world. And that post-truth world was very much a phrase of the Donald Trump era. What does truth mean to you as a Quaker and in what ways are you searching for it.

DF: Yes, in a post-truth world we've been confronted with different ideas of what truth means, and I think there's two meanings that I and probably most Quakers would agree on, is what I've called facticity. Is it actual fact? And that usually refers to things in the past or in the present. Is it happening or is it not happening? Did happen or did it not happen? But I think the truth we're really

concerned about here is a different sort of truth which we can only answer in the future, I think, in the way we plan how we're going to live. What comes to me is the saying in the Gospel of John, "I am the way the truth and the life", and the truth there is not about facticity it's really about the way, the path we choose in our life. And to me the truth is more about how we how we see our lives, how we live our life and probably its closest to the idea of integrity. And yes, being honest with ourselves. That's probably enough from me.

JB: Would someone else like to comment on that link between truth and integrity or perhaps something else that Duncan touched on? Dorothy, do you have an idea perhaps?

DB: Yes, I really appreciated Duncan starting by making a distinction between truth and facts.

When this topic was brought to us, I was reminded to go back and actually find the quote that I recalled generally from Niels Bohr, the Nobel Prize winner for quantum physics. Bohr says: *The opposite of a fact is a falsehood, the opposite of one profound truth may well be another profound truth.* And it seems to me, well I hope, that we're not in a post-truth era, we're in a post-fact era.

JB: Pamela, how does that fit in with your concept of continuous revelation? Does truth have any resonance for you within that frame?

PL: It certainly does. I think that truth has been a little bit captured by the marketplace and my response to that is to look behind the facade and the thin veneer, and understand what's going on behind. I certainly concur with what the other Friends have said. Ongoing revelation is absolutely central to who we are as Friends in my view. I think that in saying that, there is that of God in each person, we're also saying I can experience that of God in you, Jennifer and you, Duncan. And I can't experience that unless revelation is still happening and it continues to happen, and that I can trust it can happen in the future. And that informs my engagement with our environment--our environmental crisis. It engages my relationship with all the people who shape my life now and who will shape my life, and who will teach me the truths that I'm really thirsty for.

JB: Would you describe this as an ongoing search?

PL: It is both. I think we are both finders and seekers, and I feel we need to be both. If we never find, we probably cannot relate to the witness of Friends over many centuries now. Because that is a witness of finding but it's also the search, because the journey is the destination in a way. I think that for me, each new day, each new hour really brings new learning... a new insight...so I can't separate one from the other.

JB: And Gerry, would you feel that you would agree that this is a continuous finding and a continuous search, and how would you comment on the role or the phrase co-creation in all of this?

GF: Co-creation? Hmm..

JB: Skip that one if it doesn't appeal...

GF: The truth is that when I started reflecting, I feel that what Duncan said is really important, in there are these very different definitions, and it struck me that in exploring it and what it meant for me, I was struggling with that. And then coming back and remembering, ahh. When I went back and started looking for Friends' truth--(which) as you know, truth has a very particular meaning, particularly in early Friends, I was clear that I wasn't necessarily aware of that meaning and had to look at how that translated in my life. And so, for me, when I came to it, it was authenticity.

So, for me, if I ask how truth is in my life, it's for me asking how authentic am I in myself-- in my being-- and then in my community-- and then in the earth-- and moving forward? In that, for me, this is perhaps a little difference—and I'm curious about this. So, for me fact and truth in fact are entwined. Because it's in a growing understanding of who we are that you know we. When early Friends were around, there was no sense of evolution, there was no sense of an expanse. When Niels Bohr said what he said, we thought there was only one galaxy in the universe. You know, things have exploded in so many ways, and in our understanding even of other beings and other intelligences on the earth you. If any of us have seen something like my "Octopus teacher", or read about the intelligence that is within mycelia fungi in the ground, these are alien and yet they're present and they're our kin.

So, for me, we come to those things through facts, through this really little nitty-gritty picking at facts, pulling them apart, being able to extend and look further. And those very facts are what for me, open me into this deep mystery of being, this deep place of challenging me to be authentic and present in myself.

So, for me, they're just entwined in that way. So that ongoing revelation for me is in those small things. And returning again and again to the little things we know, it means letting go of some of the things that we have had, that have helped shape our story so far, and then looking at how we can replace and change that.

I'm not sure that we're in co-creation. I kind of struggle with words that imply humans are at the centre (and I have to flag that right now). But we are in creation and creation is ongoing and I think that is a really important thing. That it didn't happen 'back then'; it is continual, it is present. We are part of and immersed deeply and embedded in a process of creation. So, in that, I can fit co-creation into that, in an acknowledgement of that.

JB: You've referred a few times to, your understanding or our modern understanding of truth being different from the early Quakers, what are some of the differences that you would see?

GF: Well I have to say that I've been trying to dig out as much as I can about the early meaning of truth amongst Quakers, but I just know in the 'red book' it speaks at the section "the testimony to truth", it says and in a way I think it reflects what Duncan said about coming from the gospel, it just says there that truth is a complex concept. Sometimes the word is used for God, sometimes for the conviction that arises from worship, and sometimes for the way of life. And I actually really like that because, for me, I can sit very clearly with the way of life and conviction. And for me God is mystery and that sense of that but it is different. But I suppose it's good to have Trump and the modern throwing around of truth and what's fact and what fiction and what story we can tell and how well we can tell it and convince other people that it's our story. But if I take out truth and put in searching for authenticity, then we're not in a post-authentic world, we're in a very authentic, real world. And it's how we perhaps acknowledge that, speak to that and, dare I say, proclaim that.

JB: I'm really interested in how you say proclaim that. I wonder if Duncan, you would comment on whether whatever message we proclaim today is the same as early Quakers proclaimed in their generation?

DF: Yes, I think it actually is, but the language we use is so different and the topics we use it with have changed over time. Maybe I can explain a little bit there. I think early Quakers spoke often of 'being broken' or 'being humbled', 'being opened', and they're not words that we use when we're talking about our spiritual life. I mean some people do, but I think it's more often that we would say

something like 'finding my path' or 'following the light'. So, it looks when you first read the old Friends, as if they're having a different experience from what we're having. But in fact, I think it is the same experience and it has the same effect on their life. There's a sense that it feels like a new life because you see things more clearly, your priorities are ordered differently, and you feel you stepped through the looking glass almost into something different. But what they're dealing with in this new world, is the same sorts of human problems that we have now: how to live with authenticity or integrity---I like the word authenticity-- and how to deal with the things that come up in the society around us that demand that we make choices. So, I think that the concept of truth has not changed and even the way we live it has not changed or at least the way that we're called to live it has not changed.

JB: Would you agree with that, Dorothy, or what would you sort of add to what's been said? Or would you disagree?

DB: I suppose I don't feel confident enough about what early Friends thought and did, to be able to say I'm reassured by what Duncan has said. And I suppose I --well two things---one is that I'm reassured just by the kind of tenor of what has been said in these first few moments, that although we are often using truth as a singular concept, the truth, I confess to getting a little twitchy about that, as if there is one version of the truth and when you get it, you got it. I would be exceptionally uncomfortable about that.

And then in terms of the question about how we see things now and how we do things now compared to what early Friends did, I mean there's just the sort of specificity, well, which early Friends when, but that's kind of tendentious. But I suppose to me, the more important question is, does that matter and if so why and how?

I don't know-- I'm truly asking those questions of all of us--and what does matter?

JB: And what does matter. Pamela?

PL: I didn't fully hear the question.

JB: Dorothy was talking about "Does it matter if we know or if we knew exactly what early Friends thought, did, experienced"?

PL: Alright. I think it matters because it is important that we know who we are and where we've come from as Friends. It's a complex story and I think that we have fallen down in some ways by not understanding and that manifests itself. Today, although we see ourselves as very inclusive and in some ways uniform, to sort of jump to another concept. But, in fact Friends are pretty good at papering over our differences instead of celebrating them. Friends are pretty good at avoiding conversation about difference and how we nourish difference and how we celebrate difference. And I don't think we get there without a complete, or at least a full comprehension-- a healthy comprehension-- of the diversity within our history. Because our history has gone off in so many different directions and that is because, of course, it's a diaspora. Because it's gone all over the world. Because we all have different historical and cultural influences and that's fantastic. And we've already heard a bit about that, through Yearly Meeting this year and Friends from other places.

I think we too quickly say that we are very similar we are practically uniform when in fact we're not very comfortable about talking about the difference that we have amongst us now. And if we don't get a lot more comfortable about that, I don't think we're going to be able to become a more open and welcoming Society, because we're perhaps --I'm not saying too polite--I think we have to get down to the brass tacks of being able to talk about difficult subjects. It's like talking to your kids

about things that are making you squirm. We have to do that. And we have to talk to one another in love, about difference and learn how to celebrate it.

JB: I can see a lot of people nodding when you speak and your words resonate with me, but I'd like some examples of ways in which we're different. A number spring to my mind but what springs to yours, Pamela?

PL: I think that although we in liberal Australian Quakerism are primarily white and we appear middle class, we see that there's been a merging --of everybody kind of appears middle class because we all buy the same brands or the same range of brands of clothes and and we live in houses made of ticky-tacky. I don't think that if we go more fundamentally, there are class differences amongst us. There are differences of ability that are real and profound. I don't find my Meeting very comfortable with talking about 'Well, Pamela's got a complex mental health problem and other disabilities, and is that something we can talk about?' Have we learned about how to engage with that? What happens when you have a clerk with a complex mental illness? You know, that's a question right there.

And I think that we are still learning from the younger generation about gender, the complexities of gender, not just the fluidity of gender but that the whole paradigm of gender is very oppressive for lots of people. How do we get beyond that?

Having the tough conversations about our climate crisis, I don't think we're on the same page and we're very scared of not being on the same page. Instead of saying "Hey, we're peacemakers. If we can't cope with this, who can cope with this? What can we proclaim if we don't understand our capacity to be peacemakers together in a society that is not all that different but not all that same?"

JB: Gerry, what are some of the differences that you see, that we paper over instead of celebrating?

GF: Well, I want to talk to that but the other thing--and I was conscious coming into this session tonight when we had our discussion last week, we talked about it being a facilitated worship sharing and that allowed me space to allow myself to speak because for me I know that I can sit in meeting and be very close and hold silence with people and Friends deeply. As soon as we open our mouths if we leave the meeting and go and open our mouths to speak what we feel what we believe we're gone and I think that that's a gift of meeting.

But you're right, that we also we don't acknowledge differences. The stuff of mental health is really important and I know in our small meeting at times there have been real issues for one of our Friends who had serious mental health issues, not being able to speak (of) those because others in the meeting saying 'No, no, no, we can't do this. We can't do this'. And that's really hard. It pushed that person. You know, it's hard to hold that person in the meeting. I think that was a real issue for me.

I have to say the stuff of climate --you know what's happening in terms of climate issues and species extinction is, particularly the climate, in that this is a whole area that has been so politicised and some people say weaponized and throwing people out. I remember standing at Yearly Meeting a few years ago knowing I was standing immediately behind someone who was dead set we weren't doing anything wrong and saying to the Meeting we need to be doing something. And I could see a sea of faces out there because everyone else knew that this person didn't agree and they're all going 'Don't, don't say that, don't. You'll upset them.'

And for me, I feel, you know what Pamela said is really important. (That) we actually have to trust and have the courage and it's really hard to do. So, they're the ones that I can see very clearly where there are differences. I think in terms of our beliefs, in some ways, that having a quiet respect and a space for that is important. I'm looking at the one quote-- if I could memorise a quote from Quakers it would be John Woolman --- "There is a principle which is pure placed in the human mind which in different places and aids have different names, that is so powerful". And that challenges us. So, how to hold that and still be able to actually speak and have conversation. And hopefully this kind of space is actually, perhaps this is what we need to consider more of, where we actually do open and we allow for difference and we hold it, and we have all these Friends there holding us and listening and reflecting. So that's really important.

I want to share something that is challenging. My whole time with Quakers as I said has been very much around an earth-centered spirituality, so sometimes I might call myself pagan depending on who I'm talking to or whatever. The first time I ran a summer school I actually invited someone in who was a close associate of Thomas Berry and was going to run a summer school that was very much around the Earth spirits and an Earth way. And I had a very close dear friend who was more Christian than I was, who wrote me a letter and said "Friend, are you willing to pull us apart?" And I've never been able to go back and explore that with them. Perhaps that's something about trying to live a bit more courageously. But for me it was this space of what are we afraid of, if we're authentic in ourselves? If the five of us here are authentic in ourselves and open and listening, then there is nothing to be afraid of. We can speak difference. And if we can trust in that and hold the space, then that's really important. So, yeah, it's a roundabout way.

JB: Duncan, you've spoken a great deal about integrity and authenticity. What would be your comment on the integrity of celebrating difference?

DF: it's been part of my work life for 30 years dealing with groups of people from widely varying cultures and different ideas about language, which is what I was teaching. And to me, it feels it's formed my spiritual life in the way that I can sit with difference fairly easily now because that's what I did every day in my classroom. I can look around and see that the people in my meeting, some have no interest whatsoever in climate change and some are chaining themselves in front of trains to stop the coal. And I think there are places for all of that, and we probably all need to cultivate the skill of holding that, together.

I think one of the big differences that we haven't actually spoken of, is the difference in the wider community of Friends between the very evangelical, traditional Christian view held by the majority of Friends in the world and our minority group which is pretty universalist, (that) has pretty much left the Christian tradition behind. How do we hold that together? I think that's something we're all learning.

When the African Friends from Burundi joined our Meeting, I think we were all aware that these traditions didn't necessarily blend instantly. We were very lucky that Abel Sibonio, who many people here know, had a different take on it, and was able to sit with the differences quite easily. And I think that made it much easier for the rest of us also to sit with the differences. I'm not sure if that answers your question but I think that's what I need to say.

JB: I think that's the point tonight. It doesn't matter whether 'questions' get 'answered, it's the journey, it's the process, it's the reflection

DB: Yes, I was really hoping that that question about how we sit with the differences is something we could open up a lot more. By repeating the phrase-- at least for me, hearing it said-- I start to

wonder, well what does that mean exactly? How do we do that? And I loved that phrase Duncan used: *cultivate the capacity to sit with it*. It seems to me that that is a skill that, as you say, Jennifer, we as people devoted to a testimony of peace and who have some comfort with silence to a greater or lesser extent, might very well be well-placed to really inquire about the 'how' of that, and try to develop a much more conscious approach to cultivating it within ourselves and sharing it with those who are similarly inclined but perhaps not so well equipped.

JB: To me, it's a sadness to think that there are things which individuals are not able to say within their Meeting because they fear either being ostracised or they fear hurting someone else. And this doesn't really sit well with me. I think it's an ongoing tension that we probably all negotiate within our meetings, if not every day, then a great deal of the time because we don't want to hurt other people. It is easier to avoid conflict and we don't always seem to have a process or a forum to develop differing ideas in a way which isn't personal.

I don't know, do we? Is that just my reflection or what do you think Dorothy? Do you think we need a process or something a bit more, or this something that just happens all the time, and I don't have an answer.

DB: I don't know what the process is but it does seem to me that there is a real skill in being able to sit with division and discomfort. The American Quaker Parker Palmer talks about the concept of the tragic gap which is the gap between what we know could be and what we know is, and Parker cautions against lunging either for a kind of baseless optimism on the one hand and a kind of paralysed pessimism on the other. And it's the space between that he refers to as the tragic gap, and it is an intensely uncomfortable place to stay. But I have heard it said that the ability to sit with discomfort is a kind of a superpower, and it's one that we might want to be cultivating, picking up Duncan's word. And to me, I don't feel at all good at it. But sitting in silence with whatever arises within me and being present to it however -- what's that Quaker query about unpalatable truths about yourself-- speaking of truth as we were ---- to sit with that, and not to need to distract myself--*well I'll want to distract myself from it*--- but not distract myself from it ---and not distract myself from how far that is away from how my authenticity would invite me to move.

JB: Thank you. Duncan, did you want to add something?

DF: Yes. I think something that that I've been aware of in myself is that as I gradually became much more confident in my own belief system--if that's the word-- I became much more comfortable with living with others' different belief systems. I could explore theirs knowing that I stood fairly firmly on my own. There was no threat to finding that somebody's way of looking at the world was completely different from mine. And I think that's something that's been a gift of being with Friends for me, to find that grounding in my own belief--my own truth, I suppose is the word, really.

I think the more we ground ourselves in our own truth, the more able we to deal with other people who have a different truth.

JB: Gerry, I can see you nodding, that resonates with you.

GF: Yeah, both what Dorothy and Duncan have said is really important. The lovely bit of Parker Palmer that I really like is where he speaks about encountering the soul in another or encountering the --in forme me, the inner-- it's like if you're going into the forest and you want to encounter a wild animal you don't barge in, you don't rush in, you don't hack the forest, you go quietly, you sit and you wait. And when the wild creature is ready, and is able and feels the trust, they will present

themselves to you. And that might take time. I just love that sense of sitting and waiting and listening, which is really important.

And I think Duncan what you said, reminded me-- if I have a mantra, it's the words of **Brian Swim** when he's asked. "How do we cultivate this sense of being present and sensitivity?", and he says we learn to listen. So that's this lifelong --it's a revelation-- a revelatory journey that we will always be learning to listen. We never get there. And for me, that has very much been about being able to set aside my needs. Sometimes I'm busting to speak what I need to speak. And at that point I'll come up against someone who is at the opposite scale perhaps, and they need to speak. And so, I will sit there and I will hear them and listen. And that for me is the real --it's like that's the goal --that's the - -no I don't want goal, because I don't like finders-seekers-- you know, I haven't found it. But that's the discipline and the learning that I have found amongst Friends, is that there is a space here--if we can get to it-- which is where we actually can ground ourselves and then listen to the other and listen to someone who is in a very different space from us and really listen and be empathic and take them in.

I really love being an Elder. I love the concept of Elders, as those who hold a meeting in the Light. That for me is a really powerful work that we do. I have this vision of Quakers as a broader group, community. For me, it's holding the earth in the Light but it's a holding that is that space of listening. It's lovely, I have to say. We think about this, but it this space-- it's the hearing what I say, reflecting on what we each say, and hearing what someone else says, and how these things intersect and entwine and also challenge as well, which is important.

JB: Pamela, did you did you want to speak on this?

PL: Sure. I think that I have heard it said that Quakerism is a methodology and I don't agree with that entirely. But it is a way, among other things, and what is that way? I think we need to be talking more about that. But what is clear to me, and this will perhaps jar with other Friends, is that one of the reasons we need to hang on to the teachings of early Friends who I believe were primitive Quakers—sorry, they were primitive Quakers ---primitive Christians-- and the one teaching that they were most united on was the teaching of love: how to be loving people. That this was what was transformative, this was what could give you new life. This was what could turn the world around is love. And to me, it's right under our noses. but we don't always practice it.

And I think that our ticket to a safe meeting and a safe community is love. We won't always like each other; just like a family, we don't always love, we don't always like the behaviours and patterns of other people's choices and beliefs. But if we can love unconditionally, we only get there by knowing one another. And so, the love has to start-- the thin edge of love --- is giving each other the time, the listening, as Gerry really put so well—but giving one another the time to know each other, in that classic phrase of Quakers 'in the things that are eternal'.

But what do we mean by that? Well, the thing that is most temporal and eternal is love and if we don't practice that --we've got to keep that muscle limbered up-- otherwise we're finding ourselves atrophying and finding that we don't know how to talk to one another.

And I don't think unless we are assuring one another of our love, that we do confirm this is a safe space. I want to hear you. I want to hear what you have to say. And I already love you. Don't worry about what you say, because I love you and whatever you can tell me will not make me love you less. And why do I love you? Well, partly because I know the spirit moves in you. I don't necessarily see how but I know the spirit moves in you.

JB: I think that's a really powerful statement. Something that struck me, listening to the four of you, is the different concepts of this dynamic space between. It's a space of discomfort, where, with courage, we face the differences. It's a space where we hold in the Light. It's a space where we recognise and welcome the other.

I wonder if we could just take a very brief break but hold these thoughts and maybe come back to these, thinking about these spaces and what they are and how we use them and how the spaces relate to truth. But I'm going to suggest, Friends, that we just take two minutes for a worshipful wiggle. Turn off your video if you wish to do so. Then just come back in one minute and 40 seconds and we'll continue. Thank you, Friends.

BREAK 48:57 – 51:36

JB: I'm going to invite the panel to continue considering truth, the differences between and the engagement of love.

JB: Dorothy, I wonder if I could start with you and just get you to reflect on the different types of spaces we've been talking about, the different ways of holding each other's differences, and I guess we haven't talked about similarities either, but they also deserve celebration.

DB: I don't want to divert attention from the kind of grappling that it seems to me we're trying to do with holding the diversity within meetings and indeed between meetings, and I'm wondering whether it can be possibly useful ---and I won't mind in the slightest if I make these suggestions and you all blink at me blankly. So, I wonder whether there could be some value in our coming at truth not quite, so you know, full-on.

When I was asked to be part of this panel, I kept bumping into very unQuakerly sources having things to say about truth that really landed with me. For example, Neil Gaiman says fiction is a lie that tells us true things over and over, and Nietzsche says we have art in order not to die from the truth. And on a similar perspective, although more poetically perhaps, Emily Dickinson tells us to '*tell the truth but tell it slant or everyone be blind*'. I don't know exactly what that means, and I think that may be part of the point, is to be able to not know exactly what it means. The kind of wondering and curiosity that lets us listen really openly to someone who's coming from such a different place from what's familiar to us.

Could we encounter them? I don't know--as telling us truth aslant?

As I say, I'm not sure how to bring that to bear except to suggest that maybe digging back down the obvious rabbit holes may not always get us where we want to go, or put us in the right direction or something. I mean, already that metaphor isn't a good one, getting us where we want to go. Bringing us into fellowship with one another in the midst of our differences without having to iron them out necessarily.

JB: It can take great—I'm not sure what the word is-- courage is not quite right...

DB: I think it is.

JB: ... to welcome someone's different truth.

DB: I think it is courage. One of the questions that was on our list was about not losing hope and as I looked at that and reflected on that, I thought I'm not so much worried about losing hope, as about

losing heart. If we remember that the Latin root for courage is heart *-cor-* then you're suggesting that maybe what we need is courage, I think that's exactly what we need.

JB: Yes, for me, I think courage greater than I'm capable of, unless I have a foundation of self-trust. As someone who, when I was younger, had very low self-esteem, I can remember how hard it would have been not to be swayed by someone who was more 'weighty' if their opinion was different from mine, but maybe that is a thought someone else would like to follow up or take another *slant way* to reach us.

PL: Well, I'll tell a quick story. After Christmas one year, one of my students came back to campus with a crystal tied to her neck and she said. "See, look what I got. It's all because of you." And I thought, "Oh". "You said it in class. You said it." And I'm like, what did I say because I know nothing about crystals and regard them with some scepticism. But she said "No, you said, if there are if there are seven billion people, there are, you know, 27 billion perspectives-- facets ---on who we are and on our experience of the divine." And so, I decided, okay, even though her manifestation of it was really different from mine, that this was part of what we celebrated in taking a faith journey together. Any kind of journey is full of bumps and bashes and I'm sorry, but even death and how do we cope with that? Well, we cope with that, really, by celebrating and by falling back on love, even when we don't agree, we don't feel comfortable, but we have to love those beautiful facets.

To come back to your early question about revelation, that I love that Gerry and Duncan and Dorothy and Jennifer and all the other people who are listening tonight, have revelations that will never be revealed to me, and all I can do is trust and love them and know that the Light is shining through the cracks. It is brilliant.

GF: Can I follow on, from that. I don't know how many of you have ever seen Carl Sagan's little meditation called the 'The pale blue dot'. It's online and it was when Voyager spacecraft was sent off with the request that when it got out past Saturn or Neptune, it turned back and took a photo of the Earth. And so, there's this photo of the Earth where it is just a pale blue dot. I shared his meditation the other day-- a video --and it's him speaking --and Carl Sagan is a fairly strong --well, he probably called himself an atheist--- very strong science-- and I still find it magical and mystical. But I was conscious that as I was sharing it with some people from other faiths who were very, very Christian, (a couple of ministers) and it struck me that I love it because he says everything--all life—everything--every person, every being, everything we know, every human-- is on that dot. You're looking down on that and it's amazing. Afterwards, I thought as he speaks about all that and he gets a sort of focus on that, he doesn't speak about love.

And I thought if there are alien, intelligent advanced civilizations out there, they will know love and if they have the senses as they're coming into a solar system like ours, and they're scanning the planets, what will they see on the pale blue dot? And for me, as far as I know at this point in time, it's the only space, place, in the universe that radiates love.

Pamela, what you said to me and what you were talking about love earlier, I thought that is actually it because when I reflect on trying to struggle with truth, in the end love was the word that I would most use to replace truth because -- and this is again Thomas Berry-- says that if you love something you can't let it go. If we really love each other and if we really love the Earth, then we will bust a gut because there is that that --you don't always agree but you love. That's that first principle. So, for me that's a really, really important thing. I just want to find someone who is clever enough to build a device -- and I don't know how you would do it. Perhaps it just has to be humans looking out into the universe. If we're looking for other life, we're looking for love, you know. And literally, we look for

love personally. We're looking for love in the universe and that for me is just a wonderful awe-inspiring image to hold. So, thank you for really honing in on love.

JB: And maybe love is how we tell the truth slant so that we don't blind the people who are hearing it.

PL: But tell it. don't keep silent.

JB: Tell it.

PL: Yes. Tell it in your silence and in your in your word.

GF: Maybe that's about learning how to tell it so that someone else can listen. So--that's the stuff of metaphor, I like metaphor-- we actually can open that space and cultivate difference because we're not locked into the hard fact.

JB: And maybe it would be helpful if we made our expectations more explicit, that this is a safe space where people can tell the truth. Maybe tell it a little bit slant, maybe just hold it in silence. Celebrate the space.

Because as you've been speaking, I've been having this image, and I am not a scientist so if this is completely wrong don't tell me, of an atom and there's this kind of space and little things whizz around within it, and it's the space that makes the little things actually dynamic, actually makes them happen. And it's a kind of symbiosis perhaps (and there's another scientific term that I don't understand) --each needs the other. I think love is partly that too. If we are looking out to the universe to find love or looking to others to find love, it's because we need that to be complete ourselves, to be actors in the world.

I'm putting that very, very clumsily so I apologize for all that. Could someone else please take over now and rescue me from my sea of poor scientific metaphors. Duncan....

DF: Two phrases that sit in my mind one was something attributed to Gandhi and I can't quote it at all, but something he said to the effect that people say God is love but others will say there is no God. He turns it around and says love is God because nobody will say there is no love. And I think the truth in that, is that this is what we are seeking.

And the other thing that was in my mind was the yin and yang of love /truth, that truth without love is not really truth, and love without truth is only sentimentality. So, love is actually calling us to be honest and to face the hard things. I think when we live in a community of faith, that is a real challenge because there are people in our community who just irritate the bejesus out of us and we have to learn to love even with the irritation, perhaps. It's that truth and love combination --or truth and love being the same thing --that that we're seeking through the life of a faith community.

I'd like to go back though and pick up something from way back and tie that in here. We were talking about ongoing revelation and I was thinking, yes truth is growing and growing is about life--about living-- and living and loving in some ways are the same thing. I think when you look at the words, you see that there's a relationship in many languages, living and loving are somehow related. I think that's what we're looking for, is that heightened sense of being alive. I think that's the message of the synoptic gospels to me-- that sense of a heightened sense of being alive, that's the kingdom of heaven. And I think that is what we've been talking about-- in love-- in our faith community-- is that search for that heightened sense of being alive--of knowing our aliveness.

I think that's probably as much as I can say without venturing off into things that may not be truth.

JB: But it is worth exploring some of these ideas. What came to me was the phrase *to be in right relationship*. I think for me, this is similar to your being in a more heightened state of being alive. There's a sense within yourself---myself anyway--- when I feel that I'm doing what I'm meant to be doing. I think part of being in a faith community is the reciprocal responsibility to help each of us be our own best self. If I'm behaving badly it is not an act of love to cover it over and let me get away with it.

DF: And I think that's one of the hardest things we're called to do, to love each other and then sit down and say look, I've got to tell you a few things. And you can lose friendships if they're based on sentimentality. But if there's genuine truth-telling, I think we can work our way through them.

JB: That reminds me of what you were saying earlier, Gerry, about it taking time, to listen to walk into the forest, without beating the bushes, to wait for the animal's time. And similarly, I sense that what we're talking about here is waiting for the time of the other, as well, instead of charging in with our machetes right and left and saying I've got something to tell you.

GF: Friends will know about Parker Palmer's Circles of Trust, because the other thing he speaks about in that is, he's really clear --that it's when you're sitting in the circle -- I think we've all experienced this probably in other contexts as well --is that not everyone will necessarily speak. But by being in the space and in the discipline of listening and in the discipline of holding, the other things may come to us, things may be there for us. He speaks often about people going away through a weekend process and they haven't shared once in the process. Someone else might say-- oh well, they weren't really engaged because they didn't share. But to catch up with them afterwards, and to find out it's actually completely overturned their life because they've been listening to another, and in that, there's the space for themselves.

I think that we just don't realize how hard it is. I mean we haven't touched on the word *trauma* and I don't really want to go there, but it has been spoken of, and I think just in our lives there is so much. And it's really hard. We all want to grow.

I think for me a fundamental way that I have to --because I can be quite different --I can be very hard on-- you know there are people in the world that I think "Well, they're just out to --really sorry-- screw us over"--- I have to try and come back, and say well, actually, what we all want --absolutely all want ---is love. Both to love and to be loved. And we want to accept and be in ourselves and who we are. And this can be really hard.

I think a lot of us who've come to Friends from different ways have come because we've come from somewhere where that wasn't there for us, and there is a hope that it's here. That's probably one of the hard things we talk about, kind of what the Quaker pr or something is, but I know for me, I came to Quakers after reading about them and other stuff, thinking, there's an open space here. There's something here. There's something in me that's yearning to sit in and find a space where I can-- without having to leave every time someone says something that challenges me. I think that's a really important thing and it is that. It's that it does work in it, and it takes us our lives to get there.

And just the other thing for me that's important is --Pamela, you spoke earlier about living involves death. We really, not just Quakers but as humans, we really struggle with this--that things end. You know we all end. We each end. I invest my energy in my family, my family might end. You know -- well these things happen-- there are endings and we can get caught up in it. And for me, I always

felt, like well, you know, how would it be as a society if we can just accept one day, maybe society will end. I've seen people be really upset by that. Because I suppose sometimes, we can hang our hooks for hope on something else.

This is when we come to the hope. For me, the only problem with hope is where we hang our hope on. If we can put our hope in love, and our hope in compassion, then that can sustain us. But if we put our hope in something or someone or a belief or something else without somehow living it, and being in it, then that can put us at risk. That's my sense of it. That's how I work with it. And in the end, for me probably, love and compassion are the things that are at the core.

So, if nothing else in my life--and I don't know what happens to the earth. If you want to watch an end-of-universe video online there are many of them and they are very depressing. I remember Jocelyn Bell talking in her astronomy Backhouse Lecture, in the end she said, well you know here's all this and then here's my Christianity and they're odd bedfellows. I felt, oh well she's still struggling in that, and that's really important to share that struggling in that space. Because I can say, well, I'm going to die but this will live or that live.

When I was a child, I used to panic that the Earth was going to be consumed by the sun and that's in like 20 billion years from now or some ridiculous time. So, we can get caught up in in endings. For me it comes back to, all I can do is say is that I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what's going to become. But I can just come back and try to live in compassion and love now, here, today, in this moment.

PL: When I think back to early Friends, I think that the importance of love was really the super testimony. It was the testimony, and all our other testimonies, all our 'Spices' and different formulations, these are manifestations --expressions -- of love. So, if we want to talk about Earthcare or honesty or all the other --equality-- and all the other things-- these are expressions of love. How do we go about equality through love? How do we go about truth? We go there through love. And if anything, I think I've heard it said, is your idea of God big enough? But following on, what's been said just recently, is our love big enough?

I have found sometimes that that I run up against concepts of love that are not big enough. For example, people who cannot cope that I am married to a woman. That is not consistent with their understanding of marriage or human relationship. But I think that each one of us has to interrogate our own idea of love, also. Is it big enough? Could I expand my idea of love? Could I learn to love bigger and better?

That takes me back a little bit, to what was said about listening, to Meeting for Learning which many Friends have found very, very transformative experience. And perhaps what the most transformative part of it was really spending a lot of time listening and honing our capacity to listen; hearing new truths that surprised us through that capacity to listen; and, finding ourselves resonating with a deeper truth through the listening. So, I guess I would challenge myself, and hopefully other Friends might take themselves in hand to say "Is my capacity, is my idea of love, big enough? Is my love big enough? And that's not only about who I love but how I love them?"

JB: That is a very quick yet profound query and challenge too.

Dorothy did you want to make a comment? It'll have to be a final comment. I think we're getting towards the end of the session.

DB: I think what Gerry and Pamela have said is a perfect place to finish.

DF: That Friend speaks my mind.

JB: Friends, I think we have reached a natural ending point and it's true we are coming close to the end of our set time. So I'd like to thank our Friends for the challenges and the listening and thank you all in the audience for your listening, your presence. I realise this is a difficult or a one of 'those' sorts of comments, but I think it takes the audience as well as the panellists to co-create the event. And it's been for me, very special tonight.

We will finish with a few moments of silence and of course, you may wish to hold the panellists and each other and maybe also those Friends who irritate you completely, in the Light, as we wind up this evening. It's 8.25pm by my computer clock now. This finishes at 8.30pm. The Epilogue if you wanted to move on to that, which starts at 8.30pm, is on a separate link so you'll need to leave this meeting and then join if you wish to be part of the Epilogue tonight, Friends. But now, I just welcome you into that refreshing, loving silence which celebrates the spaces between and among us and ask you simply to leave this meeting when you are ready. Thank you, Friends.