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Openness to transformation and connection: How Quakerism shows up in life and action at Beacon Hill Friends House

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This research note explores the practices of a unique Quaker organisation, Beacon Hill Friends House, in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, which offers an intentional living community, public programming, and a community hospitality programme. This paper explores the ways that Quaker values are embedded in this diverse community and organisation as the foundation upon which its members and the organisation engage in witness and action. It offers three grounding principles for life and action emanating from its programme: openness to transformation, holding multiplicity, and self-reflection. It ends by offering queries for how Friends can use these principles more broadly.



Introduction

Many Quaker organisations are asking, ‘What makes an organisation Quaker?’ and ‘What is a Quaker approach to social action today?’ Beacon Hill Friends House (BHFH) offers a fruitful case study for these questions.

Beacon Hill Friends House is a truly unique Quaker organisation. Founded in 1957, it offers a 20-person intentional living community, public events, guest rooms, meeting and event space for community groups, and is the home of Beacon Hill Friends Meeting (BHFM). Its mission is to ‘embody the Quaker principles of faith, simplicity, integrity, community, and social responsibility in order to nurture and call forth the Light in all of us’.

This research note, offered by the organisation’s current executive director, Jennifer Newman, explores the ways Quakerism shows up in life and social action at BHFH. The note explores how Quaker values come alive at BHFH, showing how the Friends House provides some structures and support to help residents, board members, and programme participants reflect, grow, and build skills and capacity to live in greater alignment with their values and our shared vision of a just world. This research note will never be able to express these elements in their fullness. This note’s goal is to gesture at some of the key pieces that have endured through time—openness to transformation, growth, and deepening that calls us into greater action and faithfulness—in a diverse, ecumenical, interfaith setting.

History and context of Beacon Hill Friends House

Beacon Hill Friends House was founded after a leading from John Greene to bequeath a property to New England Yearly Meeting of Friends for ‘the establishment and maintenance of a centre for religious and social studies for Friends to be located in or near Boston, Massachusetts’.¹

The property is an 1804 row house in downtown Boston’s historic Beacon Hill neighbourhood, on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Massachusett and Pawtucket peoples. The neighbourhood is home to the Massachusetts State House and borders the Boston Common (America’s oldest public park and the site of significant social and political activity in the area). The building is now also within walking distance from Boston City Hall, the John F. Kennedy Federal Building, and every transit line in Boston. It’s also a neighbourhood that is predominantly white, wealthy, and educated.²

¹ Greene, J. G., ‘Confidential memorandum from John G. Greene’, August 1, 1954.

² Boston Planning & Development Agency (BPDA), “Neighborhood Change & Displacement Tool,” BPDA Research Division, accessed November 2025, <https://bpda-research.shinyapps.io/neighborhood-change/>.

Greene's intention, which he wrote in a manuscript in 1954, was to create a Quaker centre of studies in Boston, writing that members would have the ‘“opportunity of more fully qualifying themselves—spiritually, intellectually, and experimentally—for any service to which they feel called” (from the original prospectus for Woodbrooke)’ which was regarded as a home and included a moment of silence at the beginning of every meal.³ New England Yearly Meeting ‘turned down the offer, feeling that the Yearly Meeting was not in business to operate such an establishment, and also fearing that it might become a financial liability.’ However, ‘it encouraged the general concept, and a few enterprising people in the Yearly Meeting saw great possibilities for the property and the project’.⁴

Former director Ernest Weed said, ‘The possibilities challenged a small group of Friends, who arranged for the Corporation to be set up’.⁵ These Friends gathered together to discern the way forward and created Beacon Hill Friends House, Inc., beginning in 1957, with this charge:

To advance and foster the distinctive principles of the Religious Society of Friends, to provide opportunities for the development of leadership for the Society, and especially to establish and maintain a centre where members of the Society and persons sympathetic to its principles, including those pursuing programs of study at other educational institutions, whether undergraduate, graduate or special, may meet together, and where such persons may live, and where the principles of the Society may be advanced and fostered by study and example.⁶

From the beginning, BHFH was an experiment—uncertain if it would last very long into the future, Friends poured a lot of goodwill and eagerness into the experiment. Beacon Hill Friends House navigated an initial leading, an initial ‘no’, and emerged through discernment from a group of Friends who saw it as the right way forward in the face of uncertainty and challenges.

The foundational programme of BHFH is residency, where up to 20 adults can live in an intentional community. BHFH originally allowed predominantly students and young adults to be residents for up to two years. Over time, this expanded to an intergenerational community open to all ages for up to four years. Residents come from

³ Greene, ‘Confidential memorandum’.

⁴ Weed, E. H., *The Story of Beacon Hill Friends House: a personal account*, Boston, MA: Beacon Hill Friends House, 1979.

⁵ Weed, *The Story of Beacon Hill Friends House*.

⁶ Beacon Hill Friends House, ‘Agreement of Association’, The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Corporations and Taxation, July 19, 1957.

a diverse pool of people who apply to live at BHFH and are selected by a committee of residents and staff (who are also residents). They have in common a desire to live in an intentional community rooted in Quaker values, although most of its residents do not identify as Quaker. Although there was a focus in the charge on the Religious Society of Friends, the community has always been open to non-Quakers, often having a majority of residents not identify as Friends throughout its history. BHFH has never stated a purpose to convert its residents to Quakerism, only to invite them into living according to Quaker principles and practices. Ernest Weed wrote in 1979, reflecting on BHFH's continuing Quaker witness, 'there is no attempt to "Quakerize" anyone, but the Quaker atmosphere, worship, books, guests and manner of conducting business cannot be overlooked'.⁷

BHFH offers immediate touchpoints with Quaker practice for residents: every community dinner and every meeting begin with a moment of silence. House Meetings of the residents operate according to Quaker business principles, including having clerks. Residents serve on both committees of the House Meeting and of the Board of Managers. Residents are encouraged to use clearness committees to discern when it is their time to leave the community or to help navigate a particularly tricky conflict. The Residency Manual states:

In the spirit of the early Quakers, we of Beacon Hill Friends House have developed this set of queries, advices and policies based on themes relevant to our lives in community. Queries are provocative and open-ended questions designed to encourage reflection on a topic, thereby promoting clarity of purpose and understanding. Advices arise from the experience and aspirations of successive generations of residents, and are specific suggestions to guide us through life in the House. Policies are explicit expectations that protect the safety and well-being of residents and the sustainability of the House as a whole. Some policies are set by the Board and cannot be changed.

In big picture terms, the Quaker principles that inform personal and group conduct reflect the belief that we are accountable to one another, and that authority originates not in the rule of officials but in a common commitment to the principles of integrity and mutual respect. The queries, advices, and policies are intended not to govern but to guide residents, individually and communally, as we seek to shape the life of our community.⁸

⁷ Weed, *The Story of Beacon Hill Friends House*.

⁸ Beacon Hill Friends House, 'Resident Handbook', Updated 2019.

This commitment to Quaker values and practices is intended to create a nurturing environment where residents can grow spiritually, develop meaningful connections, and actively contribute to a shared vision of a just and inclusive community, harkening back to the BHFH mission statement.

BHFH public events also offer opportunities rooted in Quaker practice, providing spaces for reflection, dialogue, and community cultivation that mirror the principles and practices upheld in the residency programme, albeit in a shorter time frame, such as a few hours, one day, or over several months.

These aspects of how BHFH operates according to Quaker values and practices are more immediately tangible to someone first engaging with the organisation. This research note, however, seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the way BHFH embodies Quaker principles.

Discussion

Beacon Hill Friends House describes itself as being ‘as much a thing one does as a place one lives’. In 1985, in a book of messages left by outgoing residents, one former resident wrote, ‘I think BHFH is as much an organism as it is a home. It breathes life and people in and out, constantly growing and learning and unfolding’.⁹

Both of these quotes illustrate that the ethos of BHFH is in the way of life and being together, in the small and larger moments. One might call this ‘relationality’ — a theological concept that describes our lives as being made up of our relationships with other people and that we exist interdependently with others and in relation to them. Social action at Beacon Hill Friends House is rooted in this relationality and in an openness to transformation.

One clear example of the way this kind of practice shows up in daily life at BHFH is in chores. Its ‘Chore Handbook’ for residents includes a philosophical preface written by Laura Rediehs around 1992 and edited over time. One particularly poignant part reads:

Ultimately, we do our chores for each other.... Although we can think of doing these tasks as a way of caring for each other, we must not then interpret the neglect or avoidance of chores as hostility or lack of caring. We must be careful not to take everything personally. Most of the time, patience, communication, and forgiveness are all that is necessary. If there are times when we notice that someone, for one reason or another, isn’t doing a chore to our standards, we should find a gentle way to express our concerns to the person directly.

⁹ Beacon Hill Friends House, ‘Alumni Letters 1985’, August 1985.

This means that when we see a full sink of dirty dishes that others have avoided loading into the dishwasher, we can transform our momentary discomfort into forgiveness and compassion by remembering three key points. These points are: a) that the person before us was probably in a terrible hurry and didn't mean to make us angry; b) that we are not in such a hurry, and it could be rewarding/satisfying to clean up; and c) that the person who follows us will appreciate finding the dishes all clean and put away. We can also all learn to slow down and allow time for unexpected obligations like emptying the sterilizer or cleaning up a spill we made.

Resentment can creep in and sour our experience of community. We walk into the kitchen and find a mess; someone doesn't clean our bathroom the way we like it; we sweat to make a room shine and others rush through their chores. Watch yourself for resentment. If you notice resentment influencing your mood or actions, take a break, address any concerns you have with specific people, consider talking to a committee or initiating other institutional change, and then take a deep breath and do what has to be done. We have systems to make labor as equal as possible, but sometimes, we all feel like we are carrying more of the load, and that is normal.¹⁰

This transformation of resentment into communication with each other around discomfort and cultivating compassion for each other transcends dishes. It is, however, the practice of this in the daily moments of unloading the dishwasher that provides the skills for engaging with this around social action and change.

Here is one story from 1979 that illustrates the kind of space for transformation at a larger level that BHFH has provided, intersecting with residency, public events, and the Quaker ethos of the organisation:

[In 1979,] the gay rights movement was getting underway, and Ernest spoke out very strongly against gay rights at one Board meeting....Later that year, Johan Maurer organized a public forum on gay rights, and several very thoughtful and deeply spiritual gay people were speakers. At the end of the meeting, Ernest came down to the front of the room and said that he had opposed gay rights, and homosexuality in general, all of his life, but that he wanted to say publicly that he knew that he had been wrong, and that he embraced the speakers. The entire room, who knew Ernest, was astonished.¹¹

¹⁰ Beacon Hill Friends House, 'Chore Handbook', Updated 2024.

¹¹ Putney, C. and Spencer, S., (eds.), *A Jubilee History Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of Beacon Hill Friends House*, Boston, MA: Beacon Hill Friends House, 2007, pp. 74–75.

This story is not in isolation: there are countless other examples (known and unknown) of BHFH providing opportunities for transformation through community and encountering difference. One might draw a connection here to the Quaker concept of continuing revelation. Phil Lord, then rising clerk of the Board for the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), wrote this about continuing revelation in the context of AFSC:

Continuing Revelation is more than a transcendent experience coming down from unseen heights. It is also immanent in our daily encounters with each other as spiritual beings seeking to “answer that of God” by responding to the divinity that dwells within each human heart. It speaks to us even before we hear the words the stranger utters and invites us to respond in love. For the law and the prophets of every spiritual tradition seem summed up, as the Bible says, not only in the holy invitation to love God but equally in the admonition to love our neighbor as ourselves.... I believe that in faith and in fact, all of our testimonies are only ours if we live into them, renew them day by day, and humbly seek to be the student of the Spirit in all of Her forms—human and nonhuman—rather than aspire to become the teachers of the world.¹²

The intentional community and programming offered by BHFH are also a conduit for continuing revelation, providing opportunities to nurture and call forth our own Light and recognise and answer the Light in others.

At BHFH, it is both each person and the community itself that engage in this kind of reflection. In 1998, the BHFH House Meeting approved a proposal for a policy change to send to the Board of Managers. In that document, they wrote

The BHFH House meeting also sees the need for a community which reflects upon itself and is constantly exploring what it means to live in community and how as a group and as individuals we can move towards a more intentional community.... We envision self-reflection as occurring on both a collective and an individual level.¹³

With regard to social action, this reflection requires nurturing both the individual: ‘How am I led?’ and the collective: ‘How are we led?’ BHFH’s approach to social action is to provide opportunities at both levels.

¹² Lord, P., ‘AFSC: A conduit for Continuing Revelation’, American Friends Service Committee, February 26, 2014, <https://afsc.org/news/afsc-conduit-continuing-revelation>.

¹³ Beacon Hill Friends House’ House Meeting, ‘Proposal for Policy Change’, 1998.

Another key piece to a Quaker approach to social action at Beacon Hill Friends House is engaging with difference and holding multiplicity. BHFH is made up of people with different faiths, ethnicities, cultures, family practices, and more. We share common commitments and values, but (as with any Quaker congregation or community) we have different subjective approaches to these. Rather than see this as something to move through, such as only working to find similarities and common ground or working to create cultures of same-ness, BHFH seeks to hold that multiplicity. Beacon Hill Friends House relies on holding multiplicity as a deeply spiritual practice. The goal is not to get everyone to one right way but to find practices that enable us to hold multiple right ways while also enabling us to move toward each other in understanding. This exists in a tension — always requiring grounding and returning to the tension and, therefore, toward community, rather than to easy solutions or quick answers that actually steer us away from understanding and holding complexity. To call back Phil Lord’s language about continuing revelation, holding multiplicity requires us to ‘answer that of God in others’. It requires that we respond in love—not to flatten difference but to see how we may learn from it, how we may be transformed by it, and how we may be called from it. It calls us to be agents of peace by responding to the Light in others as we tend to the Light in ourselves.

Ultimately, Beacon Hill Friends House approaches social action and change at a high level through creating a space to experiment and practise how to live this out in daily life, creating the world we want to see in our own home. This is not easy to practise.

Conclusion: Offering BHFH as part of a Friends Fractal

Beacon Hill Friends House is a small-scale organisation that seeks to embody Quaker values. It does not necessarily seek to transform Quakerism as a whole or purport to have that ability. However, to understand the potential power of BHFH, we can look to a framework offered by adrienne maree brown in *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Brown writes

Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions”—I will repeat these words from Nick Obolensky throughout this book because they are the clearest articulation of emergence that I have come across. In the framework of emergence, the whole is a mirror of the parts. Existence is fractal—the health of the cell is the health of the species and the planet. There are examples of emergence everywhere. Birds don’t make a plan to migrate, raising resources to fund their way, packing for scarce times, mapping out their pit stops. They feel a call in their bodies that they must go, and they follow it, responding

to each other, each bringing their adaptations. There is an art to flocking: staying separate enough not to crowd each other, aligned enough to maintain a shared direction, and cohesive enough to always move towards each other. (Responding to destiny together.) Destiny is a calling that creates a beautiful journey. Emergence is beyond what the sum of its parts could even imagine.¹⁴

Brown lifts up fractals as part of the concept of emergence. Fractals are natural and geometric patterns that repeat a pattern from a small scale to a large scale. What happens at a small scale is what happens at a large scale in fractals. 'The patterns of the universe repeat at scale'. This model of change holds that 'what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale'.¹⁵

Beacon Hill Friends House's embodiment can be seen as part of a fractal for Friends: practising at a small scale the values, diversity, community, and love that we most want to see at the universal level. The term 'practice' is key here. BHFH is not achieving perfection or some ideal, but rather, moving toward our values through engaging each moment with attention. BHFH is made up of humans, and we will make mistakes and things will be messy (also a part of the natural world). However, with attention to practise we can envision and move in the direction of a more just world, rooted in perhaps the most basic Quaker concept: that there is that of God in every person. There is Light in all of us, and being in community and experiencing relationship with difference can help us nurture and call that forth to make manifest what we are called to do in the world.

It would be revealing to have further study on the experience of different residents, board members, programme participants, and others affiliated with BHFH.

¹⁴ brown, a. m. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2017.

¹⁵ brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

Author Information

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

