

It Is Time for Friends to Learn and Understand Our Complete History

By Vanessa Julye

Sarah Mapps Douglass, an African American woman, shares an experience of her mother's, Grace Mapps, among Friends in letters that she wrote to Sarah Grimké, a Friend of European descent, in 1838:

While her children were in their infancy she had a great concern to become a member of Friends Society not only because she was fully convinced of the excellence of the principles professed by that society, but because she earnestly desired that her children should receive the guarded education Friends give to theirs. She mentioned her concern to a Friend who said "do not apply, you will only have your feelings wounded. Friends will not receive you." Thus admonished, and feeling that prejudice had closed the doors against her, she did not make her concern known to the Society. There was nothing but my mother's complexion in the way to prevent her being a member, she was highly intelligent & pious; her whole life blameless.

Sarah writes in another letter some of her own experiences among Friends:

As you request to know particularly about Arch Street Meeting, I may say that there is a bench set apart at that meeting for our people, that my mother and myself were told to sit there, and that a friend sat at either end of the bench to prevent white persons from sitting there. And even when a child my soul was made sad with hearing five or six times during the course of one meeting this language of remonstrance addressed to those who were willing to sit by us. "This bench is for black people." "This bench is for the people of color." I have not been to Arch Street meeting for four years, but my mother goes once a week and frequently she has a whole long bench to herself.

Yes, these experiences occurred 164 years ago. However, some of my experiences within the Religious Society of Friends have been just as hurtful. Unlike Sarah and her mother I was able to join the Religious Society of Friends, I can sit anywhere I like in the meetinghouse, and my son attends a Quaker school. However, I still experience prejudice from Friends of European descent. I find that some Friends make assumptions about me and act on these assumptions based solely on the color of my skin. I, like Sarah Mapps Douglass, have been the recipient of words from some Caucasian Friends that were hurtful and made me angry. I have had Friends of European descent call me by another Friend of Color's name. Many times I did not look anything like the person whose name I was called. The only similarity between us was that we were people of African descent. I have been told by Caucasian Friends that they no longer see the color of my skin and they forget that I am African American. I see the color of my skin everyday and everyday I have contact

with someone who reminds me that I am African American and therefore inferior in their eyes. There is nothing wrong with noticing the color of my skin. It is a part of who I am. What is wrong is making assumptions about me because of my skin and treating me differently based on those assumptions. When a Friend calls me by another Person of Color's name and tells me that they don't see my color I feel invisible, invisible in an environment where my ancestors also are and were invisible. I don't see pictures of Friends of African descent on the walls of our meetinghouses and churches. We are not taught about Friends of Color in our religious education classes. The knowledge I have acquired about my ancestors has been through personal research. Yes, Friends were abolitionists, but we were also slave owners. Friends, as citizens of the United States did not always see or treat Africans and African Americans as equals. As we look back at our history, we cherish and honor the Friends who participated in the Underground Railroad. Many of those Friends were read out of their meetings for this work.

This summer I participated in the World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia, Racial Discrimination and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa. I went as a released traveling minister supported by my meeting, Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting, and a delegate for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. It was a fruitful, exhausting, exciting and very emotional experience. As a Friend of African descent it was very important for me to participate in a conference where people from around the world came together to talk about the many different forms of racism and share strategies for addressing racism. I am a member of the Religious Society of Friends and also a citizen of the United States of America, a country that has been built on racism. Racism is a part of my daily life including my religious community.

After being exposed to Quakerism as a teenager and student in a Quaker school I returned to the Religious Society of Friends in 1994 and began my ministry. I travel among Friends sharing my experience as an African American Quaker, serve as a resource for Friends regarding issues related to Friends of Color and support isolated Friends of color within the Religious Society of Friends. I conduct workshops, write articles, helped establish and facilitate the Center for People of Color at Friends General Conference Gatherings, convene a monthly worship group for People of Color at my meeting, travel to yearly meetings sharing my experience and concern for Friends of Color, joined the Fellowship of Friends of African Descent where I have helped plan and attend their biennial gatherings and serve on several Quaker organizations diversity committees. However, it took me several years to realize that I had a ministry. It was not until I was asked to join Friends General Conference's Traveling Ministries Program that I went through a clearness process with my meeting and consequently received my minute.

I do this work because I have been called by God to help Friends hear the voices of Friends of Color, those of our ancestors and of us who are struggling within the Religious Society of Friends today. It is important to hear the voices of those who came before me within Quakerism who were called, as I have been, to the Religious Society of Friends by God, but were not welcomed by the European members of the religion.

Racism has been a part of the Religious Society of Friends for over 300 years. It is time for Friends to learn and understand our complete history. We need to talk about it with one another and begin a dialog on how this history is affecting us today. There is a reason that People of Color do not

participate in the Religious Society of Friends in greater numbers. As it was stated in the opening exercises of the World Conference Against Racism: “You cannot go into the future if you don’t know your past.” We need to begin having these discussions if members of the Religious Society of Friends want to be right with God.

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