

# Understanding Truth



Reading Quakers

Truth has many facets. Forty people came to a public event at Reading Quaker meeting house on 1st July 2018, to explore our understanding of truth.

The event was part of the Reading Quakers' initiative 'What can we do?' which seeks ways of responding to these uncertain times. Over the past year, the theme of truth has emerged as one of the key threads from this initiative.

Five guest speakers addressed the subject of truth from their different perspectives. Periods of stillness before and after each presentation allowed space for questions to the speakers to arise.

**Vanessa Baird, Co-Editor of *New Internationalist*.** *She has written on migration, money, religion, equality, indigenous activism, climate change, feminism and global LGBT rights. She also edits the Mixed Media, arts and culture section of the magazine. She has written several books and In 2012 won a prestigious Amnesty International Human Rights Media award.*

Vanessa spoke about the complexity of understanding truth in this contemporary world. There are challenges for the media to honestly seek the truth and for the public not only to hold the media to account but also to believe that some journalists are doing their best to uncover truth.

As a journalist, she understands that the most reliable sources of information are those that show their sources. She can check back through the sources to verify what they are saying and to build deeper knowledge of issues. She encourages others to do the same.

She advocates healthy scepticism rather than negative cynicism and warns against the temptation to disengage. It is important instead to be prepared to research around a subject and keep asking questions.

**Helen Drewery, Head of Witness and Worship for Britain Yearly Meeting,** *with responsibilities both for helping Quaker meetings to thrive and for helping Quakers to live out their faith by making the world a better place.*

Helen began by quoting from a Quaker song book: "Truth is a seed, not a pearl; truth is a way, not a destination" and referred to the words of George Fox, the founder of Quakers: "Walk in the truth".

She explained that Quakers worship together in silence, in the stillness, listening, waiting: "Sometimes we hear the still, small voice of the Spirit. And that Spirit speaks truth." She gave the example of this Spirit of truth speaking in the stillness when thousands of Quakers gathered together in York for a triennial national meeting. After much deliberation the decision was taken to support and campaign for same sex marriage, long before British parliament legislated for this.

Helen discussed Quaker perspectives on truth, highlighting spiritual truth as a "living truth that cannot be fettered by words" while acknowledging at the same time the significance and value of words. They can convey weight and meaning. They can clarify or confuse. Helen's presentation poses a challenge to consider how we use words and what they are really conveying. Are we looking within, seeking the help of the Divine source of Truth for help in living with integrity?

**Reading Quakers** are part of Mid Thames Area Quakers, registered charity number 201030. For more information go to [www.midthamesquakers.org.uk/reading-quakers/](http://www.midthamesquakers.org.uk/reading-quakers/)

**Simon Bond, a member of Quakers for Europe, the British Committee supporting the work of the Quaker Council for European Affairs (based in Brussels to promote Quaker values at the European level).**

Simon described the Quaker practice of 'quiet diplomacy' in the UN and the EU. Diplomats who represent opposing political positions are invited to share a meal together in a setting that is peaceful and confidential. This simple model of hospitality and privacy seems to be helping to break down barriers and allow diplomats to build friendships.

He talked about Serbian and Croatian young people who were brought together to talk about the prejudice they had experienced in their different contexts: the Serbians living in post-war Croatia and the Croatians living in post-war Serbia. They began as natural enemies but the jewel of this 'quiet diplomacy' was that these young people could hear each other's pain. In fact, at the close of their encounter, when Serbian and Croatian government leaders joined them to hear their concerns, the young people chose to advocate for each other.

**Jean Scott-Barr who, with her husband, has worked with refugees in The Jungle at Calais. She sees that this experience has had a significant impact on the truths she lives by.**

Jean talked about her experience of The Jungle at Calais. Through encounters with refugees, her perspective shifted from the distance of anonymity to a sense of relationship with them. She was deeply touched by their warmth and kindness towards her and her husband, despite their extreme circumstances. These encounters have left deep marks that have altered the focus of her life. In Britain she now gathers provisions and knits blankets for refugees. Jean also works directly with refugees closer to home through Reading Refugee Support Group.

**Dave, attender at Reading Quaker Meeting**

*He shares his understanding of truth through the lens of his life journey.*

Dave described his life as a journey towards spiritual truths. In his earlier life he had chased success and recognition in ways that damaged him. As he struggled to free himself of substance addictions he was introduced to a Quaker who guided him in the practice of stillness. Over time he experienced a peace he had not previously known and this has gradually led to a transformation in the way he lives his life.

His journey resonates with Helen Drewery's talk about living by the Quaker truths of peace, simplicity, truth and justice. Dave now lives one day at a time and is thankful for people who believe in him. He now supports others who are treading a similar path to him, offering them the same hope of living by different truths that bring peace.

Robyn Appleton

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July 2018