



Gabi Clayton

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Dear Olympia Monthly Meeting,

August 21, 2017

I am writing this letter to ask to be admitted into membership in Olympia Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

I want to share some family and personal history that I think is important for perspective. My father's parents were proud of their Jewish heritage but not particularly religious. His family escaped Germany to France before Hitler came into complete power. They then sent him to a boarding school in England for his further safety. Then when he was a student at the London School of Economics, the British went to war with Germany and they rounded up my dad and other German Jews and shipped them to an internment camp in Canada as enemy aliens. That is how he got to this side of the pond. (See more if interested here: <http://gabiclayton.com/heritage.htm>) In the camp my father joined a Marxist study group. Later when I was a child he was a member of the Communist party and our house was watched by the FBI.

My mother's father was an Orthodox Jew from Lithuania. When he was twelve years old he walked across Europe alone to Amsterdam where he caught a ship to join his father in New York. Later as a young man he was studying to become a rabbi. Something caused him to break with his father and become a militant atheist (and socialist). He died when my mother was 16 years old. Within a year, my grandmother married a Communist shipyard mechanic from Scotland.

As far as I know my mother always considered herself an atheist,

a socialist and a feminist. When I was a child, she attended and took us to the New York Society for Ethical Culture meetings (<http://www.nysec.org>) and she later occasionally took us to a Unitarian Universalist Church because she approved of their commitment to social justice and thought being part of a community was important. I went to Camp Homestead two summers which was a UU camp, and was briefly involved with the UU's Liberal Religious Youth program.

So I am a birthright atheist – and very comfortable with that. We had Hanukkah candles and Christmas trees when I was little so that we would not feel left out with our friends.

Later when my family was living in San Francisco and my mother was married to my second stepfather (a Marxist), I attended John Woolman School for a summer camp, a work camp, and my junior year of high school. That experience was important to me, an oasis in my chaotic family life. What I learned about John Woolman and Friends was inspiring. And while I did not believe in God, I participated in silent worship there and that contemplative time brought me peace and strength, connection and inspiration.

Since then I've thought, "If I wasn't an atheist I would be a Quaker." But then I let it go because I was, and am, an atheist.

I converted to Catholicism for a short time in the '70s, inspired by Jack Scully who was kicked out of seminary in the late '50s for what was named "imprudent zeal" because he was pamphletering against Joseph McCarthy. Jack had been involved in the Catholic Worker movement in NYC before leaving it to start his own organization – Everything for Everybody – where I met Alec and lived and worked for several years in New York City. (See <http://alecclayton.com/EverythingforEverybody.htm>)

I was inspired by Jack, and by Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, G.K. Chesterton, Hans Küng and others. But I realized that I was not comfortable identifying as Catholic because of my non-theism and my disagreement with some church doctrine.

So I went about my life and worked to make the world a better place in the manner of Jack Scully but without the Church.

We moved to Olympia in 1988. Curious about Friends, I attended the Meeting in 1991 when you were meeting in the YWCA building, but I only went once because I coughed all the way through Meeting. I was a very heavy smoker then. I decided not to return because I didn't want to disturb the Meeting. I still have the sweet handwritten postcard sent to welcome me – it has been stuck in my Faith and Practice to bookmark information about membership for years.

I discovered Parker J. Palmer in the early 1990s through his book *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* – and was pulled once again toward Friends. I clung to his words in that book as I was trying to make sense of my life and the world.

Skipping ahead, sometime in around 2011, I went to an FOR conference and connected with R . I knew her because her daughter A was my first boss in Olympia when I was a student at Evergreen and had a work study job at Media Loan. When R gave me a ride home, Olympia Friends Meeting came up and I told her I had always considered myself a Friend. OMM had just bought and moved into the Meetinghouse on Boston Harbor Road. R offered to pick me up and give me rides – and the rest is our history.

Back to my almost forgotten roots, the words of the Society for Ethical Culture ring true to me today and explain some of my beliefs:

“Ethical Culture is a religion centered on ethics, not theology, whose mission is to encourage respect for humanity and nature and to create a better world. Members are committed to personal ethical development in their relationships with others and in activities involving social justice and environmental stewardship.

“We believe all individuals have inherent worth and dignity, the potential to grow and change, a responsibility to strive for ethical growth, and a responsibility to create a better world.

“As an Ethical Community we are all part of something that transcends the individual experience and are enriched through our relationships with others. As such, we have responsibilities to each other, to the Society, and to the community.”

I have imperfectly tried my whole life to live the Quaker SPICES testimonies of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and stewardship with as much passion, courage and grace as I can muster, and I know I can't do it alone. My family is a tremendous support to me in this quest, as are many of my friends.

I feel a bit odd when I say I am a Quaker now because while it is a part of my identity I have never been a Member of a Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends. And so, finally, I am asking to become an official member of this community which provides the kind of commitment to following light – however we define it – with the kind of love I have come to know among Friends.

Thank you,
Gabi Clayton

Clearness Committee for Gabi Clayton

October 29, 2017

Committee Members:

We began with silence and then Gabi shared that she has been an attender for 6 years but has thought of herself as a Quaker since attending John Woolman High School. As a young woman she was inspired by Catholic Workers service to community and became a Catholic for a time but did not agree with all of the Catholic beliefs. Her life has been full of providing service to others. It has included among many other things, running a shelter that mostly hosted battered women and their children, working in homeless services, supporting hate crime victims and their families, and serving in a leadership role with PFLAG Olympia. After stepping back from that role to allow others to step forward, she started attending OFM when R started to give her rides to meeting, and she began to feel like OFM was her spiritual home. Being at worship is a light that is powerful for her.

Gabi has been intentional about asking for membership, taking time and trusting what she needed to share in her request letter. It is important for her to be known for who she is – including as a red diaper baby and a non-theist. She feels that being an atheist does not rule out her having a spiritual journey. That even though she does not believe in a creator she recognizes that people have hearts and souls and “spirit” which is more than their physical body. She believes in the power of love and the importance of people joining together. She honors other’s spiritual paths even if they are different from her own. Her knowledge of Quakers and Quaker testimonies is strong. Noting that the testimonies of peace, integrity, and the stewardship of people are very important to her. She intends to continue as Clerk of Peace on Social Justice and is interested in working with others to more deeply explore what it means to be a Quaker and a non-theist. Perhaps that may mean leading a worship group at Quarterly Meeting about it.

The committee recommends Gabi Clayton as members of Olympia Friends Meeting.