

Completing the Circle by Chris Stern

“ All along the way there has been God's Grace. Matt and I started out as,” father and son,” and now we are like brothers.” (Journal entry, September 8th, 2023.)

I met Matt Rosen at Pendle Hill. He was there for the spring term, 2023. He was totally different from what I had expected. As a philosophy major, coming from Oxford University, and as the Cadbury Scholar, I assumed he would be highly intellectual, very aloof, and difficult for me to make connections with. Instead, I met a young man who had a strong intellectual gift, but was clearly following his heart as well, and had two feet firmly on the ground. As it turned out, our faith journeys were very similar, despite our age difference (4 decades!) and we soon became close friends.

We were both brought up in suburban Quaker Meetings, even in the same Quarter! We both struggled as youth, trying to understand the Quaker Meeting for Worship and not finding the strength within ourselves to be, “good Quakers.” We both left Quakers looking for answers elsewhere. We were both totally turned off by religion and found it empty and meaningless. We were both spoken to deeply within by a Power greater than our own. Both of us were drawn to read early Quaker writings and found real Life and Hope in them. Both of us were “convinced” deeply by an experience of Jesus as our Living Teacher, within us, and among us. We both returned to Friends to try to share our experiences and call Friends to connect to the vital faith in our roots. Pretty amazing. I was gobsmacked!

Matt and I visited the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College. He was working on a paper about Quaker “convincement,” what it means, and how it relates to membership. I suggested we take a break and explore the new cafeteria building. As we were looking around, a staff member came up to greet us and asked if we were enjoying our visit. He clearly thought that we were a father and son, looking at Swarthmore on a college tour. From that point on at Pendle Hill, Matt was referred to as my son. My wife, Verona, also “adopted” Matt. He quickly became a part of our family.

It was hard to say goodbye (after six weeks) when Matt left to go back to Oxford. Not long afterwards, an unexpected email arrived saying that Matt was, “feeling called to travel in the ministry” and visit meetings in the Oxford area. I shared the email with Verona and she said, “You have to go!” Friends at Middletown Meeting agreed, and some of them even offered financial support for the trip. So, with some trepidation, I wrote back and asked Matt if he had a traveling companion (elder) to go with him. I told him that I might know someone who is interested. He wrote back encouraging me to come.

This began a journey together that provided an extraordinary opportunity for us both. It helped Matt to, “find his voice,” and it helped me to close a circle and find my way forward.

I had been called to travel in the ministry among Friends as a young man (around Matt's age) and didn't know what this meant or how to proceed. Some older friends had encouraged me and traveled with me to help me find my way. Now I could do this for Matt. Coincidence? To me it felt like it was a gift from a Divine Hand, something I had never planned or anticipated.

We traveled to six Meetings together, often spending the night in the home of our host Friends. This allowed for good informal conversations and opportunities to learn about the joys and concerns of each meeting. As we traveled together, I was given the Grace to encourage and support Matt in many ways. As he grew into his calling, I also grew in my understanding and experience of what it means to be an elder.

I encouraged Matt to look for additional opportunities outside of Meeting for Worship where he could speak for longer periods of time. I suggested that he make sure his heart had been fully cleared and to ask for questions and responses afterwards. He first tried this at Jordan's Meeting, in a small village outside of London.

Matt started by speaking of his own "convincement" experience. Then he spoke about his work with the Oxford Young Friends. He finished by speaking about his experience of yielding to, and following a leading "to travel in the ministry among Friends." The first person to respond after Matt spoke said that he had never heard such a clear and deep explanation of the Quaker faith. He was clearly moved. Others also expressed their appreciation. By sharing from his heart, Matt opened the door for Friends to have deep conversations about their faith.

As I write this, Matt is continuing to travel, accompanied by other friends, carrying a message of Light and Hope. If you want to hear Matt speak, you can register for his Pendle Hill Monday Night Lecture, November 6th, 2023. The link is listed below.

<https://pendlehill.org/events/awakening-the-witness-convincement-and-belonging-in-quaker-community/>