

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting
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June 14, 2020
Jeremiah 29:11-12

Reading- Jeremiah 29:11-12

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you.

Message

So I finished high school.

I've been out of school since last Wednesday, and so far, it's been pretty anticlimactic. I've been thinking about graduating for years, and I'm definitely guilty of romanticising the ceremony. So, when it was announced that not only would our graduation be moved to July, but it would be held online, I've had a lot of time to reflect on my academic life up until this point. Even though my school life was often very difficult, I miss the challenge. Today, I thought I'd take time to look back on my school life in a bit of detail.

I love school, and I'm not just saying that. There are a lot of aspects of school I don't like, but the concept of education is amazing. My favorite subjects are the humanities, but I really like listening to people who are passionate talking about things they enjoy. I'm going to college to study interdisciplinary fields. I think a lot of my interests come from my childhood education at Whittier Friends School. From preschool to seventh grade, I was a student at Whittier Friends. As most of you are familiar, it's a small school with mixed grades focused on ideals of peace and communication. I was able to explore a ton of subjects, both academic and artistic, through the guidance of many great teachers and mentors, including Cassie. I remember when I was younger going into the library and reading every fiction and nonfiction book I could get my hands on, allowing me to explore subjects and writing that has influenced my interests and personality to this day. In my college search, elements of my Whittier Friends education were very important to me to replicate. Often, the schools I was drawn to had a basis in Quaker education practices, including the program I've selected. Concepts like consensus, community, nonviolence and stewardship should be emphasized by education, in my opinion. I have spent my last five years at a decidedly different school, Orange County School of the Arts. While WFS was small, close to home, and made up of people in my local community, OCSA is large, 21 miles away, and made up of people who had never heard of Whittier. I pursued the arts with an emphasis on Acting and theatre, inspired by my love for classical literature and Shakespeare, which I had many opportunities to experience in my time at WFS. OCSA is a

completely different world from WFS, and it was something I had to adapt to. It's definitely a universal experience, but one of the greatest journeys I've had to undertake was being true to myself and my values as a Quaker in such a different environment, while being able to mature as I learned more and incorporated new experiences into my beliefs. At OCSA I developed my passion for literature, filmmaking, law, design, and activism, all of which are essential parts of me. My education is something I've invested a majority of my time into, informed so much of who I am and who I will continue to be, but, at this point, I think it would be insincere to talk about my education while ignoring the re-contextualization of the experience that has occurred because of the pandemic.

I really don't want to make this message all about quarantine, but I'm sorry, it's unavoidable. This event is the most major upset of the status quo I've ever experienced, and now I have a captive audience, so I'm gonna talk about it. It has completely changed the way I think about my past and my future, and the way I interact with physical reality. I really miss being physically at school, as well as other places. I had no idea that being able to browse a craft store was so rewarding. While social media and zoom have really been a blessing in terms of still connecting with people I care about, this lack of structure has left me kind of aimless. After all, up until quite recently, most of my life was largely controlled by the rigid scheduling of academia. I've never really been used to so much free time. Sure, I've had summer and winter vacations before, but my family often travels, or, when we don't, I have a set of goals I have to accomplish- I've found in recent years that I can only ever feel accomplished when I'm physically doing things, which is a mentality largely informed by my previous experiences with education. During this safer at home period, days blend together. So, I've been spending a lot of time trying to establish some sort of order.

In the beginning, I was getting up at 7:50 every morning to do online school, just as I would typically. I thought this whole pandemic thing was only temporary, and that we'd be back to school at the end of spring break, and I had grades to maintain while I was still waiting to hear back from colleges. However, I learned that without all of the travel and socializing and contact with others, my schoolwork took very little time. A couple weeks in, I started waking up later and finishing my homework in the evening. Then, it was announced that our grades would be frozen, meaning they could not dip below that which we had before the pandemic. As dedicated to school as I have been, I lost a lot of motivation, now that the impact on my grades was minimal.

Thus, I began to spend my time working on craft projects. I've been obsessively working on art projects for about three years now, but all of those projects were made in the few spare hours I was not working on things for school. Without these obstructions, I quickly completed most of the projects I had lined up.

It was fun, and greatly fulfilling, if the large pile of fabric just out of frame of the webcam has any indication, but it wasn't enough. I got fed up with how cramped my room was, so, on a whim, I decided to clean my entire bedroom, which, because of my incredibly busy schedule, I hadn't cleaned in many years. Through weeks and weeks of intense work, I've made significant progress, but I can't take anything out to donate quite yet, so the project's on hold. This demonstrates the circular nature of my problem.

I have nothing to do.

I am so uncomfortable at the idea of doing nothing. I have a habit of overbooking myself. (One thing the pandemic has illustrated to me is the absolute folly it would have been to be a lead actor at the Renaissance Faire during my last semester of high school while juggling full time rehearsal for Romeo and Juliet!) I just have to be productive to feel like I'm using my time effectively. I think our entire world is so fast paced, so focused on efficiency and productivity and speed that we're especially uncomfortable now that those of us who have the luxury of being able to protect ourselves at home have nothing to occupy our time with. I took AP Psychology last year, so obviously I'm qualified to guess that this can be explained by the more individualistic culture of America. At least for me, my happiness has always been tied to a sense of personal achievement, which is quite individualistic. This isn't a bad thing- I feel like my own contributions have been reflective of the support I've gotten. But in a world in which we cannot be near each other for our own safety, I lack community. And for me growing up, the most stable community I've had has been First Friends Church.

I don't want to belabor my history with the meeting. I've attended First Friends since I was very young and a good deal of my family attends as well. I've been part of the youth group, I've acted in the Christmas dinner plays, I've sung at Peace Cafe, I've attended and been a counsellor at Peace Camp. The meeting has always been a place where I've felt supported and safe. As I've gotten older and had less time to devote to the meeting because of school, my job, and my art, one of the most impactful ways I feel like I've been able to contribute is through service. The youth group and the meeting have been so helpful in providing opportunities to expand my faith and honor the values of Quakerism. I cannot begin to put into words the value experiences like the Ben Lomond Quaker Center, the Heifer Farm, and the Dig Deep Service Project have had on me. Simply put, the church has provided me with the resources to help others, which in turn has fueled my need to be productive and my sense of personal accomplishment. I personally think service is the most valuable exemplification of Quaker values. By using our hands and our voices, we can put into action the concepts of Peace, Community, Equality and Stewardship. Service projects are learning experiences, which give you the tools to articulate your faith through tangible action. I have

provided food, shelter, community and art to people around me through the help of the church, which has always defined community for me- a group of passionate people who want to make the world a better place, following the teachings of faith leaders who came before us.

But because of this connection I have, the pandemic has really impacted my ties with faith. As I said, I find fulfillment in providing service to others. But right now, the best way to protect others is to not do anything. Stay at home. This is no service project where we can clean the beach, build a deck, or physically right the situation. We simply have to wait it out.

Life changing events are characterised by how they put everything into perspective. I've had to think about the totality of my education, and how much of it is- and forgive my simplicity- frivolous. I am able to learn at home, and outside the confines of a classroom. I feel like now that I've had the facade of education pulled away by having to do it at home, I have to evaluate what education even means to me going forward. For example, interacting with teachers and friends about non-academic topics is not something I would have previously considered educational- but now, it's something I deeply miss. I can't be physically present at church and doing service projects- how can I translate that to activism at home? How does personal fulfilment and art play into this? How can one analyze their past and draw from it a cohesive plan for the future which completely addresses all mistakes?

I don't know how I'm going to move forward from this in any decisive way. Luckily, being a Quaker has trained me to be able to rigorously contemplate difficult topics in silence. I can't know my future. This pandemic assures me of that. My future was completely reshaped in like three weeks, because of a virus over which I have no control. I want to consider how disruption of the routine could help us personally improve our own lives, while understanding that not a single one of us has the answer. Education is ultimately about trying to decipher the context in which we live and how we can shape it to find fulfillment. No matter how much we try to control our circumstances, we cannot. How can we understand that and move forward? How can we learn from our past and improve ourselves, while also acknowledging we do not have the final say on the future? I can't be relentlessly individualistic, because there is so much that influences me, and ignoring that would be counterproductive. How can I use the world as a part of my education? I'm working on the answers, but it seems to be that no matter what stage of life I'm in, there is no such thing as real finality. The conclusion I come to today will be changed in thirty seconds. If I want to have some sense of meaning going ahead, I have to take into account all I have learned, and still blindly stumble into the dark, praying that things will coalesce in a favourable manner. And,

unfortunately, for a perfectionist like myself, I have to relax and label that uncertainty as hope.