In the last few decades, some social scientists studying organizations have recognized that organizations are healthiest when they embrace a bit of unpredictability. In this model, networks are more powerful than individuals. Resilience is more important than brute strength. And a groundbreaking idea can come from anywhere. I currently serve as co-clerk of the Earth Quaker Action Team (EQAT), which for the last ten years has been a volunteer-led group that defies a traditional organizational leadership chart. 2020 certainly pushed us, and so I am glad to share some of the things that have supported us to be adaptable in this time in our work for environmental, racial, and economic justice.

EQAT has long celebrated the idea of nimbleness. My mental image of nimbleness is of a mountain goat, hopping rock to rock. The way is winding, but intentional. Our current campaign, Power Local Green Jobs, has focused squarely on Philadelphia’s electric company, PECO. For years, we have pushed them to take action against climate change and invest in good green jobs for Philadelphians. And we have hopped from rock to rock, trying to find the best route to that goal. In 2020, we had to cancel many in-person actions, but we testified for hours before our state regulatory body via video call. We couldn’t gather shoulder-to-shoulder, but we broadcast our message on a banner from the Schuylkill River via canoes and kayaks. And in the midst of the pandemic, we expanded our message beyond climate change and jobs and stepped up to join low-income ratepayer advocates in demanding that PECO keep power on for those who need it. A focus kept us together, motivated, and moving. And nimbleness allowed us to adapt to our environment.

In 2020, one place EQAT risked losing our ability to adapt well to change was erosion of casual relationships. The “post-meeting meeting” has often been where some of EQAT’s best thinking gets done. But on Zoom, when the meeting is over, there is no snack table. Just click “Leave Meeting,” and you’re done. Recently, we have started to encourage people to stick around to connect. This has welcomed in some new members and allowed space to share joys and concerns. It has also sparked new ideas that have guided us forward and sharing information across the network. We have learned to never discount what could seem to be just “chit chat” as wasted time.

Flexibility also stems from hope. We have always seen our protest as an active way of saying “Yes” to a more just world. Even as we research, strategize, and plan, we hope that way may open to reveal new opportunities for transformative change. In the midst of prayers and tears this past year, EQAT maintained our hope. We celebrated our 10th anniversary online and we’re inspired by all that we have done and how we have grown. We named the cultural principles we want to guide us going forward. We continued our campaign and supported each other in the streets during Black Lives Matter protests. Even while the way has been uncertain and frequently needed to change, a spirit of hope is what keeps us in motion. Of course, flexibility does not fully address the pain we face in this time. There is no single answer for how we continue to be present with suffering and injustice, and
work to end it. But as we look ahead to a year that will offer new opportunities to practice flexibility, I am eager to see how we can continue to embrace the tension of focus and openness, to maintain our connection to one another, and to sustain our hope for a just and sustainable world for all.

*Learn more about EQAT’s cultural principles at Eqat/Our_Values_And_Practices*

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*Photo: “This is a photo from a socially distanced action where we were very nimble. The other side of the banner says ‘PECO: Forgive Bills Now.’”* - Lee

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