ARThUR MORGAN SCHOOL and CelO Monthly Meeting recently hosted Southern Appalachian Young Friends (SAYF) for their annual retreat here. The Quaker Earthcare Witness Outreach Committee contacted the organizers to share about our work, leading an afternoon session with the youth. After a rigorous hike to idyllic Strawberry Fields, a boisterous, sunburned group quickly quieted when presented with the “60-Minutes” Juliana vs. the US segment followed by a clip of 16-year old climate activist Greta Thunberg’s stunning speech at the United Nations Climate Change Summit (COP 24) in Poland in November. After a thoughtful, probing discussion, we went outside for a “Milling” exercise from environmental activist and author Joanna Macy’s Work That Reconnects. It was the highlight of our time together.

I tried this exercise several years back with a high school group in a workshop I led at the Friends General Conference (FGC) gathering, and it was beyond the comfort zone of several of the kids. This was true of one or two of these 40-odd SAYFers, but for most of them and the adults who mingled with them, embracing both the gifts and pain of being alive on Earth now was soul-satisfying.

The exercise moves from frenetic, disconnected hurrying past each other during a busy lunch hour on city streets to slowing down and noticing the faces of those around you, to “moving like kelp in the sea,” gently brushing others as you lazily follow the current. As the exercise progresses, the participants stop several times in pairs, contemplating the wonders of human evolution as well as the terrors of modern civilization in a militarized, industrial growth economy. All of this is conducted in silence. There were a few initial giggles, but our children and grandchildren soon settled into Meeting for Milling.

Listening to Joanna’s lyrical recital of evolutionary history, one partner examines another’s hand, eyes closed. “If you were anywhere in outer space, in intergalactic reaches, and you were to grasp that, you would know that you were home. It is only made here.” In the final segment, holding the hand of one’s partner, looking them in the eye, participants accept the hazards of premature death, due to the riot of toxins, the odds of nuclear attack, and the probability of rapid climate change. “Don’t look away! We can face this together.” The exercise closes with an affirmation that this partner “may play a decisive role in the healing of our world, that they are in the right place, at the right moment, with the right gifts and motivation.” Like Greta Thunberg, I added.
Knowing that this was all a bit much for the group I led at FGC, I had decided that the SAYFers, many of whom have had years of retreats emphasizing non-judgmental bonding and Quaker process (they have clerks and meetings for business and clearnesses, all conducted by the youth), would be primed for such an exercise. And I was right, based upon the tone of the exercise and the deep discussion afterwards (which went places I never imagined, led by a 12-year old girl who may well be the next Greta Thunberg). I received several affirmations of the power of this experience, and some of the teens said they wanted more. One girl said it was “transformational.”

The next morning, I walked through the Arthur Morgan campus on my way to Meeting just as the SAYF group began the same journey. Halfway there, the young clerk stopped the chattery group. They circled in silence, settled, and we walked the rest of the way to Meeting in silence. I scrambled to keep just behind that 12-year old girl, who was taking the lead, without knowing the turns in the maze of paths which connect us in Celo Community. We had a spirited session of hymn singing, followed by a worship into which the youth centered rapidly. They knew what to do, and unlike many of the adults hustling in late and distracted, they had walked in quiet preparation through the woods, “like a family,” as one the SAYFers put it.

After Meeting settled, our clerk shared the story of the ancestors of the Southern mountain folk. These folks kept a fire in the hearth at all times, and when they traveled, carried an ember with them. Addressing the SAYFers, he counseled them to do the same, as they carried their concerns out into the world. We had built the hearth fire high the day before, and there were coals aplenty for distribution.

As I left meeting potluck, I encountered one of Celo’s own SAYFers. Her mother had just asked me for the opportunity to have an experience like the Milling. We discussed having an intergenerational Saturday workshop in the near future. Knowing that this mother and daughter had been at odds in the recent past, I told the girl of her mother’s wish. She looked thoughtful a moment, then smiled and said, “Sounds like a good idea.” A new generation is rising to lead the climate rebellion, and we can and must support them.

Robert lives in Celo Community, NC. He is a member of Celo Monthly Meeting and QEW representative for SAYMA. Robert’s blog is <ecospirit.blogspot.com>.

Image: Young Friends on a hike before annual retreat by Jonas Kramer-Dickie.
Southern Appalachian Quaker Youth Respond to Climate Crisis
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