

Sara Satterthwaite
October 5, 1942 -- July 31, 2013



Sara Satterthwaite first came to Friends Meeting of Washington in the 1980s. She had been brought up as a Unitarian in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, but she liked to joke about having Quakerism in her genes, claiming that a Quaker ancestor had been read out of meeting for marrying a Portuguese sailor. She was strongly drawn to Quaker social justice and peace testimonies as well as to Friends' silent worship and to the absence of hierarchy and the openness that Quakers aspire to in their lives. She quickly became involved in the life and work of the Meeting and raised her two daughters, Pam and Meg, as Friends.

Sara worked hard for the Meeting, contributing her time and effort to many committees in the course of her 30 years at FMW. These included the Hunger and Homelessness Task Force, Religious Education, Ministry and Worship, Peace and Social Concerns, Personal Aid, and Hospitality. She taught the Inquirers' class, was an advocate for the Washington Peace Center, which used to be housed on the third floor of the meetinghouse, and a founding member of the Friends of John Woolman, an informal group that worked to raise awareness of racism and privilege among Friends. She also served as clerk of the William Penn House Board, an assignment she found particularly valuable and satisfying. Sara was a regular attender at the Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business, which she considered an important part of her commitment to the Meeting. When she joined FMW after 20-plus years as an attender, many people were surprised to find they were welcoming as a new member someone who had already contributed so much to the meeting.

She grew up during the Civil Rights era in a family where racial equality was a core value. In one of her first jobs, as a social worker in Philadelphia, she became familiar with the same kind of racism, both conscious and unconscious, that she was later to find when she moved to Washington, D.C. These influences and her own early awareness about white privilege and its corrosive effect on blacks and whites alike led to her lifelong concern with racism. Throughout her time at FMW, she was active in groups that worked to understand racism and counter its effects, among Friends themselves as well as in the larger society. She spent many years in Process Work DC, learning how people's assumptions about race play out in everything they do and say. It was not enough, she believed, to confront overt racism. White people had to cultivate awareness of the racism that was often implicit in their assumptions and thus in their actions and speech. Sara was always willing to challenge people, gently but firmly, to look at their actions and pay attention to what they were saying, but she did not make big statements about her beliefs or judge other people to be "racist." She embodied the equality she believed in by the way she perceived and treated others--whoever they were and wherever she met them.

Sara also felt deeply about the peace testimony. Like the testimony of equality, she saw it as a matter of personal practice, not just belief. Over the years, she participated in many peacemaking efforts and projects, most recently a series of meetings on torture, which she helped to organize. For a number of years, she and Neil Froemming, her companion and later husband, hosted Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors who visited Washington on the anniversary of the bombing. Sara was a natural peacemaker, and everyone who knew her benefited from her willingness to "seek peace and pursue it." She did not do this by simply agreeing or by avoiding contentious issues. Her way of approaching potentially difficult situations at FMW and elsewhere was to speak directly to those involved and attempt to find some common ground. She believed that if people could recognize where they agreed, they would have a basis for talking and could begin the process of coming to an agreement. She understood that making peace is an active not a passive thing and that it involves patience, skill, and courage from all concerned. She was always willing to do this work.

Sara delighted in the world around her and wanted to see it as deeply and clearly as possible, and if the shapes of trees in winter or an insect's wing deserved her close attention, this was doubly true for human beings. She wanted to know about whoever she met. So she reached out to them (for Sara that was not just a metaphor: her favorite form of greeting was a hug). She had an uncanny gift for creating intimacy, probably because she liked people and really paid attention to what they said. When Sara talked with people they felt special, listened to, even if she did not agree with what they said and told them so. As a result they opened up to her. They sought her out, asked for her help or advice, wanted to talk things through with her. She often struck up conversations with people she met in stores, on the street or in

their front yards, and after such conversations she often ended up hearing details about their lives and their work. She greeted homeless people on the street by asking them how they were doing and stopping to listen to what they had to say.

Sometimes casual contacts led to Sara's becoming involved in the lives of the people she met. For example, this happened with two homeless people whom she found living in her backyard when she moved to Capitol Hill from McLean. Her reaction was to consider them neighbors and treat them that way. She talked with them about their lives and helped them deal with the problems that poor people living on the edge of society often face, taking them to appointments, offering them a place to get their mail, helping them manage their money, and sometimes giving them small amounts of cash.

It could be hard to get Sara on the phone because of her enormous list of people to call. That was true to nearly the end of her life. When she finished an appointment she often sat in the little green car that she referred to as her office, calling and writing emails to people who expected to hear from her. A friend once asked her how she could be interested in so many people. She put it down to curiosity. She was, as she said, always up for what might be coming next.

Sara spent half her life "battling" diabetes and cancer complicated by asthma and other health problems, but she vehemently rejected that metaphor. It is truer to say that she strove to live lightly with poor health. The diseases and the often strenuous treatments she underwent were facts in her life but she did not let them turn her into a patient. Even in her last years when cancer treatments were continuous and harrowing, she did not become absorbed in her illness. If someone was impertinent enough speak of her bravery or sympathize with her suffering, she would change the subject. One of the first things a new acquaintance would be told is "don't ask Sara how she feels." The truth was she enjoyed life and wanted it to go on as long as it continued to be a pleasure. She often said she was a healthy person who had cancer, and she lived that way.

She was an off-and-on meditator for many years, beginning with the Maharishi and Transcendental Meditation. Her practice took on a new seriousness when her cancer, which had been in remission for a number of years, returned. She approached a Buddhist teacher whom she had heard talk and asked if he would guide her and a group of friends in learning to practice Vipassana meditation. She found her daily meditation practice and Buddhist ideas about human happiness and suffering enormously helpful. The focus on living in the present moment (because only that is real) helped her accept the uncertainty of her life. She got special strength from the "don't know mind," another formulation of our total inability to see beyond what is in front of us. It was a kind of mantra that steadied her and

helped her continue to live in her life, with joy as well as sadness, as death approached. Ten days before she died she sent this message to her friends: "I want you to know that at the end of my journey, I have found peace and that there isn't anything to worry about."

Sara was generous with her love, but she was no Pollyanna. She was a complex woman with a healthy dose of skepticism and an ironic view of the world. Because she had a keen insight into her own and other people's flaws, she was often uneasy with the adulation people heaped on her. She was usually gentle with the flaws of others, but she could be sarcastic and cutting, as her friends knew. Sara had a delight in adventure and an independent streak--you might call it stubborn--often ignoring the advice that others were eager to give her. Because she was always open, always looking, always questioning, she wondered, sometimes, if she was who she seemed to be. Above all, she loved life and wanted as much of it as possible.

Sara spent her final days at home cared for by her husband Neil and daughter Meg. She had already said goodbye to many of her friends but knowing that there were people in the Meeting whose love and friendship she wished to acknowledge, she asked Neil to invite all who wanted to come to meetings for worship at their house. That was her final, generous, gift to Friends Meeting of Washington.