

**Quaker College Fair
Saturday, October 21, 2006
Arch Street Meeting House
Mark Myers**

So Whatchu Doing?

I participate as a trainer in a Quaker program called Alternatives to Violence which develops personal nonviolent conflict resolution skills in men resident in prisons who have experienced terrible violence in their lives. A group will meet for three days over a weekend and because of the depth of the concerns we address these sessions can become intense. We periodically break the tension with fun exercises we call light and livelies. It involves grown men having gentle fun with each other by play and laughter. One of my favorites is called "So Whatchu Doing". You may have done it yourself around a campfire a few summers ago.

In "So Whatchu Doing" we stand in a circle and in turn do something odd like patting ones head and rub ones stomach with the person next to us guessing what are you doing? The obvious is not the answer, but instead you may answer I am whistling while I am skipping. That person then must do that action and it passes on around the circle. Of course none of this makes sense and that is why it is so much fun.

So why does this story come to my mind in this occasion? If I ask you "So whatchu doing"? You would answer with the obvious that you are considering and selecting the college that you would like to attend in the future. That is of course correct, but more importantly and less obvious you are exploring what pathways you would like to open for your life as it continues to unfold. You also are exploring pathways that are less obvious and less traveled by many of your fellow students. Now that sounds heavy and tense, and I would suggest that you approach this with a sense of humor and fun to balance its seriousness. Ask yourself periodically, "So whatchu doing".

I can assume that there are a number of reasons that Tom Hoopes invited me to share thoughts with you today. The reasons could include that I am a graduate of Earlham College. That I have been on its board of trustees for 16 years and have chaired the board the past eight years. During that time I have frequently visited the question what does it mean to be a Quaker college today and in the future? A second reason which I think may be of interest to you is that I am a grandfather of a senior at Westtown School who has been going through the same process of "so whatchu doing" that you are. Those of you from Westtown may know her, Hilary Ann Myers. As she works through her decision, it has given me a special moment to reflect about students that are making this choice at this time of their lives and how a Quaker college education would be of importance to them.

At this moment you are faced with making a choice among many attractive opportunities. It would seem that you are making the choice of your lifetime. This can seem a bit overwhelming. I would relax a little about that because you have the capacity to make

any choice you select a successful one and thereby the right choice. Further you will be making ongoing choices about your educational pathways throughout your entire lifetime. You will have many opportunities to consider new pathways that you may have not initially chosen.

You have many decisions to consider as you work through your choice of what is the right place for you to attend college. I would suggest that there are three key choices you will consider.

1. Should I attend a large comprehensive research university?
2. Should I attend a liberal arts college?
3. If my choice is a liberal arts college, why a Quaker liberal arts college?

I realize that you have come here with an intention to consider the last question, should I attend a Quaker liberal arts college. It is important to remember that the Quaker colleges are for the most part liberal arts colleges. Indeed it is their excellence in that category that they are best known in comparison to other liberal arts colleges.

If we look at the enrollment of students across the nation, by far the largest number of students, 13.5M or 90%, are enrolled at comprehensive universities. The enrollment at liberal arts colleges is about 1.1 M or about 10% of the total. The Quaker college experience is a special case of the liberal arts total and is estimated to be 20 to 30 thousand students or 0.1%. So unless you are already in a Friends School or from a Friends College alumni family, your friends might ask you “So whatchu doing?”

The choice between a large comprehensive university and a liberal arts college education has the biggest differences in these three cases. The choice is highly sensitive to your own field of interests, family financial capacity and the social context that you want to live. I have enjoyed all of these different environments as a student, parent and trustee at Earlham, as a parent at Swarthmore and Haverford, as a Ph.D graduate at Penn State, as a visiting professor at Stanford and the University of Pennsylvania. I found them all great places in specific contexts and times in my life.

In the large comprehensive university you will often become tightly associated with a school and a department dedicated to a specific academic field. If your interests are highly developed and you want to go as deep as you can as soon as you can this can be a good choice. For example if you are certain that you want to be a chemical engineer and to find a challenging job at the B.S. level after 4 to 5 years, the comprehensive university is a good choice. If you have broad interests and want to explore many options across multiple fields you may want to explore your choice further.

The liberal arts college is a unique creation of the American Educational system and has limited counterparts in Europe and Asia. The educational architecture of a good liberal arts college creates an integrated set of critical thinking and analytic problem solving skills as well as skills in making and breaking an argument with written and verbal communications. Emphasis is placed on the critical use of a wide range of information sources such as research reports, diagrams, charts, interviews and field work. These

skills are applied to a balanced distribution of fields such as humanities, social sciences and natural sciences.

Clearly the liberal arts education places greater emphasis on these forms of skill development than the acquisition of specific knowledge of technology or techniques associated with the work of specific professions. The comprehensive universities place greater emphasis on the acquisition of specific fields of knowledge. Both are important and it is often a question of educational strategy and time sequencing.

Anna and I have four grown children all of which each attended Quaker Colleges. I will give an example of a choice they made that you are now facing. How do you choose between a large comprehensive university or a liberal arts college?

Our oldest son Doug, Hilary's father, wanted to be an electrical engineer as he left high school. His final choice was between Cornell University with one of the best electrical engineering departments in the United States and Swarthmore an outstanding college but with a less prominent electrical engineering concentration in a small engineering department.

Doug made a great choice by attending Swarthmore where he could not only major in engineering but also economics and graduate in four years. Clearly Cornell would have offered a deeper education in the practice of engineering but he could not have shaped the breadth of education that he wanted without attending an additional one or two years for a BS. In order to achieve the technology depth, he followed his Swarthmore years with a masters degree in Electrical Engineering at the University of Illinois another outstanding department. Our son Eric, received a degree in biology at Haverford, followed by a divinity degree and ultimately became a lawyer. Lee Anne was a biology graduate from Earlham and became a veterinarian, VMD, and Tom was a language graduate from Earlham and became a computer engineer.

All of them share the skill of intelligent discourse on a wide range of subjects beyond the narrow interests of their professions. That is, they carry the mark of broadly educated people.

You may raise the question whether a liberal arts education requires a commitment of too much time in additional education. I would suggest that we are in an era that we will formally and informally be involved in education throughout our entire lifetime. In our knowledge economy, the breadth and depth of knowledge in all professions is now changing at an ever increasing rate. We will go through about four completely different careers over our lifetime each requiring as much learning as we did in our initial college four year degree. Building skills that enable this continuing process is essential.

It is in relation to this point that I find the liberal arts education most compelling. I believe the skills developed in this educational process create a substrate of competence that will allow growth into many fields and to continue to evolve into new bodies of knowledge throughout your entire lifetime.

You may ask me, “So whatchu doing”? I thought that we are here to talk about Quaker Colleges. In the sense that Quaker Colleges are liberal arts colleges, we have been. The Quaker Colleges are widely recognized to be leaders of the 640 liberal arts colleges in the United States. They practice the business of liberal arts education very well. But we should explore why Quaker Colleges are unique with respect to other liberal arts colleges. I believe that answer is how the colleges are now and have been influenced by the Quaker faith.

My short elevator speech describing the Quaker faith is described in four points:

1. The universal truth of God as revealed by the inward light.
2. Continuing revelation of the truth through all time
3. The sacred covenant community
4. The testimonies, our spirituality must be enacted through service to others

Our belief in the inner light places emphasis on caring for the leadings and the needs of each individual. The experience of each student at a Friends College is highly valued. The relationships of students to each other and to the faculty are built on a sense of responsibility to each other. It is often the case that all address each other in the traditional Quaker first name basis rather than an identification by relative position.

The notion of the universality of the inner light has encouraged Friends education to have a global perspective. We follow the leadings of the truth to wherever it takes us. That has caused Friends Colleges to have many programs both on campus and off campus offering an international experience. At Earlham, 75% of the student body studies abroad some time during their four years. These past two years there have been simultaneous visiting faculty members from Israel and Palestine engaged in middle east dialogues with students.

The continuing revelation of God’s truth has opened the entire universe of inquiry to Friends. The belief of God speaking new truths to Friends in a context of new knowledge has liberated Friends from historic dogma. This freedom of inquiry has enabled Friends Colleges to be leaders of the natural science education from their earliest formation and through times that faith and science seemed in conflict. This freedom for exploration of truth wherever it leads is carried out with a keen sense of moral responsibility for the consequences of our discoveries.

Friends believe we cannot find truth by ourselves alone. Our colleges aspire to a deep sense of community. Hence the education at Friends Colleges is deeply cooperative. Students are teachers to each other. We also do not find that we can learn enough confined to narrowly defined disciplines. The educational experience at Friends Colleges builds on the root knowledge of a discipline then extends out to the leanings of other disciplines. We recognize that growth of new understanding occurs most rapidly when different bodies of knowledge interact with each other.

As Quakers we have always believed that our faith must have impact on the world around us. We are called into the service of others. Our Quaker Colleges have a tradition of encouraging its students and graduates to be change agents for the good of society. We seek non violent resolution of conflict and an Earth restored. Students are encouraged to develop skills that will enable their contribution to a better world to live in.

I would like to end with some remarks I shared with the graduating class of Earlham last June.

“I would like to share with you a profile. It is a profile of you in the future, say 10, 25 and 50 years from now. My confidence in seeing you in the future is based on your earlier profile as you started here, the special nature of this college and the hearing of the life stories of the fellow alumni that have preceded you.

You will have lived lives that will have made a difference to your families, your communities and the world around you. You will have been willing to see the world differently and thereby see new solutions to problems that seemed intractable. You will have been good life partners and caring parents. You will have been good shepherds for the society and earth environment we live in. You will have been innovators and agents for positive change. You will have been peacemakers.”

“So whatchu doing”? You are preparing to let your life speak.