

To Form a Faithful Community

by Julie Harlow

On February 24 this year, Russia invaded Ukraine. For now, I ask you to set aside all history and politics. I ask you to step back with me to that moment when I realized in terror that terror had just filled a country I had visited many times, where I had friends, where there was a Quaker meeting and facilitators for the Alternatives to Violence Project. The invasion couldn't be happening . . . but it was.

Still in that state of disbelief, I heard my phone ring. Kay and I had traveled together through both countries, Russia and Ukraine, had held babies there, hugged old women, accepted bouquets of flowers, laughed and cried. Now, we clung together in mutual disbelief. It was so natural to find each other in that moment, to hold each other heart to heart, to share our grief and rage.

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Shortly after that phone call, I realized, beyond question, that other people were longing to hear similar words of loving support, were feeling the need for friends to walk with them through this minefield of terrors. I realized that a meeting for worship was needed – and not just once. This war would last a long time. We would need the stillness and Presence as long as the war continued.

I felt called to initiate a daily meeting for worship. I felt an urgent responsibility to bring together from around the world as many Friends as possible – for us to hold in the Light all the people touched by this invasion.

Without thinking it through on a conscious level, I counted on the cooperation of Friends to make it happen. I never felt alone. I felt the accompaniment of Friends and Spirit all along the way.

I sent an email to the board of Friends House Moscow Support Association (FHMSA), the North American fund-raising arm of Friends House Moscow, asking whether they would sponsor this meeting for worship. I had barely hit “send” when I realized that I did not need

an answer from the board. I knew what to do and felt the spiritual authority to do it. In the moment, I had simple, faithful clarity.

The logistics came together almost as quickly as I can describe them: emails to all the presiding clerks I knew – of monthly and yearly meetings – and to *Western Friend*. An FHMSA board member offered his Zoom account.

At the first meeting, over 400 people gathered “to hold in the Light all those affected by the crisis in Ukraine.” At the second meeting, over 500 Friends from fifteen countries attended, literally people from all around the world.

A deep sense of profound grief – and shock and rage and fear – all were shared in ministry and held tenderly in silence. Friends shared concerns and prayers for displaced Ukrainians, for Ukrainian soldiers leaving their families, for the very land itself being destroyed. And Friends shared just as many prayers for Russian soldiers, mostly very young men, sent to the front with little training and usually no knowledge of where they were being sent; for the parents, wives, and children left to wonder if they would ever see their sons, husbands, and fathers again.

Many spoke of the painful confusion they felt in truly grappling with Friends' peace testimony for the first time. If one prohibits the use of violence, what happens to the Ukrainians? Is it acceptable to send weapons for defense? We heard the pain, saw the tears, and felt the love in the worship – like hands reaching out, trembling with emotion, touching each other, and encircling the globe.

Over time, a team developed to nurture this meeting. Lois and I would clerk the worship, and several other Friends would serve as hosts or co-hosts – Brother Clif, Will, Clive, Ann, and Jonathan. This hosting team has not only made the meeting possible, they have also made it into a secure, safe place for expectant waiting. This has allowed the clerk – Lois or me – to focus fully on the spirit of the meeting. It has felt like choreography, cooperating as a team, all of us carried by the movement of Spirit, building a mutually supportive community together.

Beyond offering mutual support to participants, this daily meeting for worship does more. We share a general understanding of the efficacy of prayer and a faith in it. Many spiritual traditions hold that if many people pray

together, this change can happen. In our worship, we give ourselves to the will of Spirit, humbly seeking to be part of the force for good. We envision peace, we embody peace, we pray for peace. We breathe peace into an atmosphere that has been polluted with hatred, violence, and divisiveness.

Gandhi said, “Anything you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.”

Václav Havel, Czech poet and activist, said, “Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well; it is the certainty that something is worth doing no matter how it turns out.”

And Mother Teresa said: “We are not called to be successful; we are called to be faithful.”

Over the weeks and months, the number of participants has gradually diminished – from 500 to 400, then 300, then 100. As of today, about 70 people attend frequently, and a core of about 30 attends nearly every day.

As human beings, we cannot sustain the intensity of rage and grief that most Friends felt back in February, which compelled so many at that time to look to each other for a safe place to share both horror and hope.

Though the numbers have decreased, the depth of worship and the sense of community in this meeting have grown. Coming together in a crisis, we were almost instantly united. Many say they feel closer to the participants in this worship than they do to members of their home meetings.

For those who stay, who participate regularly, who extend themselves to others in friendship and concern, who are willing to share more of their own lives – we feel the gift of bringing to life an unexpected unity.

The joyous cooperation, the profound ministry, the gentle holding of each other, the spoken concern for and attention to members who have been absent, the energy expressed in small-group discussions, the consistent attendance, the depth of the silence – these speak to me of a faithful community. ❀

Julie Harlow serves on the board of Friends House Moscow and is a member of Davis Friends Meeting (PacYM).

For information on how to support Friends House Moscow, contact Julie directly at [friendshousemoscow2022\[at\]gmail\[dot\]com](mailto:friendshousemoscow2022[at]gmail[dot]com).

All are invited to the Daily International Meeting for Worship for Peace. Go to: <https://westernfriend.org/qwfo-friends-house-moscow>



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