

Aotearoa NZ Quaker Climate Correspondent: Ubuntu: Plenary Travel Reflections

4 September 2024

Kia ora koutou dear f/Friends

Home from South Africa - tired, a bit snuffly, but ok. I hope you are all ok; and, Meghan, I hope you got home all right too. Indulge me please f/Friends with some reflections on a remarkable month before I forget and/or face Aotearoa NZ realities. Francie, Gray, Liz, Anne and Alistair, Jillian, Peter, Michelle, Jae, and others, I will get to your emails and am sorry you have not yet heard from me. I hope this little travelogue gets beyond being a self-indulgent memoir.

Day 1: Leave Aotearoa NZ

Collect five plastic 'glasses' on a single flight from Auckland to Singapore. Look for 'real' coffee cups at Singapore Airport. End up in bar where at least the glasses are real.

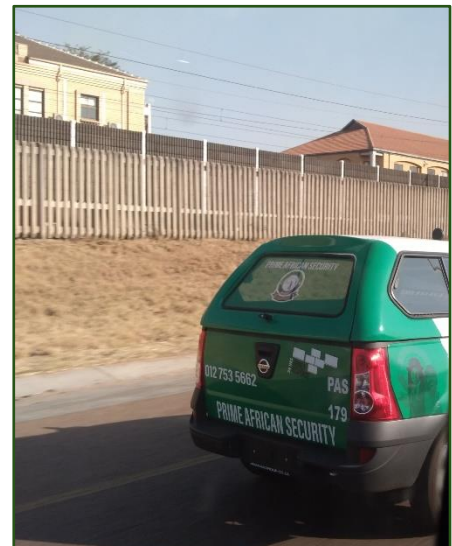
Day 2: Arrive Johannesburg

Sniff the air which smells very smoky from wood /coal? Coal is a very big deal here with [85% of South Africa's power](#) coming from coal fired power stations. Remember all those coal mines Margaret Thatcher shut down in the UK? Well, it turns out the [UK imported over 600,000 tonnes](#) of coal from South Africa in 2022, down from over 12 million tonnes in 2005. I don't get it.

Day 3: Plenary Johannesburg

Someone reads a prayer from [Thomas Merton](#) which seems apposite for this jumble of well-meaning people gathered here:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right
road,
though I may know nothing about it. ...



Please don't let us go here - security company car and barbed wire fence

Day 4: Plenary - Care of Creation Stream, Session 1 – (Recommend watching the videos (not long))

There are only around 30 of us out of 250 in this Stream. Where is everyone? [Ludwig's short inspirational video](#) about his personal activities in the Philippines has me making resolutions. [Lynn Finegan's](#) brief piece on balancing faith and action in climate work has me un-making them and noticing that we are talking about creation in a room bereft of natural light where microphones rule.

Day 6: Care of Creation Stream, Session 2 – (Watch videos – especially Emma's (suggest subtitles))

The 30+ people are onto the regional stuff today, and the group moves outside. We huddle around a wall to watch [Kees \(Netherlands\)](#) telling us how 17 million Dutch people are slaughtering 600 million farm animals

(excluding poultry)??? Surely that is not right? I cannot find the data, but the issues are familiar – water degradation due to intensive farming. Kees tells us about [Earth overshoot](#). I wonder about the too many people who are facing food insecurity and protein deficiency around the world and just feel confused.

[Emma from Bolivia](#), calmly explains that she and other Young Adult Friends are working to provide basic access to drinking water. I vaguely recollect that [access to potable water](#) is an urgent climate change risk in Aotearoa NZ, and prefer not to think about it. The river where Emma used to play keeps running out of water. I suspect Aotearoa NZ has a big issue we are all unwisely ignoring. In Emma's country, families have been fighting with soldiers to get access to water. Young adult Friends have also organised a food security programme due to seed potato crop failure. A bit of me freezes. How can this still happen?

[Adrian's video](#) (Asia West Pacific Section secretary) – We learn about the Tibetan Plateau, the third largest freshwater store on the planet, which feeds 12 of the biggest rivers in Asia and some of the recent floods, and how Pakistan ran out of places for pumping water. Weather patterns have changed so much that people have trouble reading traditional danger signs. Adrian refers to Quaker attributes which can help - simplicity instead of excess; integrity and how we could re-organise our lives. Asia West Pacific has too many people at the front end of climate change. I think of our Pacific peoples and remember I have forgotten to share the Pacific Council of Churches [Tuākoī 'Lei Declaration](#). I also remember Liz Bridgeman talking about the cryosphere (water stored as ice or snow) and me not paying attention because I did not know what a cryosphere was.

Day 7: Care of Creation Stream; Session 3 – outside; Facilitator – me (with Lynn from Ireland)

Being an active part of Asia West Pacific-led worship sharing session earlier today affected me deeply. I presented a couple of whakatauki and the Lord's Prayer in te reo Māori between readings from Betty (Philippines) and Bikash (Nepal). In the middle of my reading, I looked and saw the faces. Who was I to be in this place with all these people from so many countries, cultures, and so many manifestations of the same faith all simply being present trusting me and others to share something worthwhile? Emotions overwhelmed, my glasses steamed up, and the words went blurry.

Later: The *Care of Creation* Stream now consists of a much-more-at-home-with-each-other bunch of outdoor-based individuals, some of whom look like they are chafing to make pronouncements. The tech person has found us a screen which is wafting in the breeze. Extra sound amplification gets lost somewhere, and we rely on subtitles with occasional laughs at the unintentional mis-subtitle humour.

[Lindsey Fielder-Cook's 14 minute video](#) (Quaker United Nations Office Human Impacts of Climate Change person) is not humorous:

- Paris 2015 hopes have been dashed.
- The multilateral environment is difficult; the UN in Geneva is underfunded; and the International Court of Justice being taken less seriously.
- Climate change does not exist in a vacuum but has *sister peace and justice crises* of species extinction, ocean acidification, chemical pollution, soil erosion, freshwater, and more.
- Underpinning the whole lot are *unsustainable energy use, unsustainable land use and land use change, unsustainable lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production* (according to the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) which collates the evidence).



- Promises to start moving away from fossil fuels made last December at the UN Conference of the Parties (COP) 28 have been followed by growing numbers of licenses for extracting fossil fuels and stronger punishments for climate protest.
- Nearly half of humanity currently lives in countries so burdened with debt that more money is paid in interest payments than is spent on health and education [most of those people live in the Asia Pacific region – me].
- *Urgent, feasible, and equitable near-term options are already available at scale to address climate change, and improve human wellbeing and planetary health, except we do not know about this because this finding was cut from a final IPCC draft by certain countries who found it politically uncomfortable.*
- “Money and power are not good bedfellows with Care for Creation.” Fossil fuel owners emphasise geoeengineering technologies that are not proven to scale, are expensive and maintain the climate drivers we are trying to reduce.

So, what does all this mean for Quakers?

- We often hear the story of doom, but *we need to tell the story of love for Creation.*
- *We are encouraged not to talk so much of sustainability, but of regeneration. Regeneration of nature we have depleted, regeneration of our spiritual health.* This is a call to Quaker witness.

Which means what?

- Lindsey points to: a need to rapidly reduce fossil fuel use and prioritise renewable and community-owned energy; sufficiency and circular economies; agro-ecology and farmer support; reduced deforestation; restoring ecosystems, conserving land; investing in publicly owned transport, education and health systems; reducing over-consumption, over-energy use; reducing military, and building education for girls, and, ensuring available birth control.
- Transforming energy economics and agricultural economics to enable a ‘sustainable and liveable planet for all’.



There seem to be power pylons everywhere

- Local action to care for creation. Nationally determined contributions (NDCs) reflecting the already available feasible, equitable near-term options. Do they respect human rights? Do they call for people’s engagement in decision-making? Do they help poorer countries? [Me – how is Aotearoa NZ doing?]

I think back to Marvin’s comment at the first Care of Creation stream meeting: *Seek what we have in common and what we value ... We live in a beautiful world which is upheld by Love and Life.*

So, what happened next?

The group shuffled around as the sun became stronger and our collective sun-seeking transformed into collective shade-seeking. I think everyone who wanted to speak got to speak; some will have wanted to speak more, but our worship-sharing process prevented any one or any one view dominating our time together.

If people wanted profound announcements from the Care of Creation stream, they were not going to get them. Life realities shaped people’s views. Some wanted radical action NOW! Some wanted a focus on

That of God in Everything. Others were grateful for jobs in mines so they could feed and educate their families.

Adrian's ministry sticks in my mind. I recall him speaking of an effective protest which went something like this: It was the opening of a box-style shopping mall (?). People arrived only to view an unexpected sign created by a local women's group which read simply: "We want something nicer." I like that. It is positive, energising, and makes the point.

Looking around at smoky South Africa, and those water-depleted Canterbury rivers it is easy to point out, "We want something nicer".

Day 8: World Plenary

Betty from the Philippines is selling clothing to raise money to fix her church back home damaged by flood waters in a super-typhoon. The water was up to her knees in the church and up to her hips outside. Bikash from Nepal is going home early. He is a pastor at numerous churches and gets around them on a motor bike. Two of his churches have been washed away in floods. He is grateful his family are ok.

Day 9: World Plenary Epistle and Tapestry reading

I am not sure about the [Epistle](#) and [Tapestry](#) documents. I do appreciate all the hard difficult work, but wonder that if, by necessity, they are collations of compromise? But maybe I just do not understand.

What I am sure about is the prayer at the end of the tapestry document. When FWCC clerk, Simon Lamb, read that prayer, all of us different people, with all our different faith manifestations, and our different cultures, countries, concerns, and experiences; all of us collectively fell into a soul-piercing silence. It was like we all knew we did not know. It was like it was the real outcome from the Plenary; and remarkably, a very solid rock to stand upon.

A prayer

God of love and grace, we are a beautiful and broken people, living in a beautiful and broken world.

We confess that we have fallen short in caring for each other and for creation.

As a faith community we ask you to forgive us for neglecting creation, and for inflicting grave injustices upon one another.

Give us the courage and wisdom to move forward boldly.

Grant us the strength to seek each other's forgiveness, and the love and courage to hold both pain and possibility in our hearts.

We ask you to send us on a new journey with our fellow humans and all your creatures in the spirit of Ubuntu.

Amen



Later (by the pool – which is icy – even for us Kiwis)

Meghan, Jonathan, and I 'move forth boldly' and, during some rare time out, write a letter to the ANZ Friends Treasurer suggesting we fund those QUNO scholarships which Lindsey Fielder Cook had suggested at Aotearoa NZ Yearly Meeting back in April.



Day 11: To Kruger National Park

Jonathan and I are off to look at the animals. We pass numerous banks of solar panels on the way, and an astonishing number of huge articulated truck and trailer coal trucks.

Day 14: Kruger National Park

An orderly line of elephants makes its way across the road heading towards water. It is the dry season, but I have no idea whether it is more or less dry than usual.

[Day 26: Melbourne – Mr Husband reads out an article about Namibia planning to *cull more than 700 wild animals, including dozens of elephants and hippos, and distribute the meat to help locals struggling under what the United Nations has called the [worst drought](#) to affect the country in 100 years. Around [68 million people](#) are affected by drought in Southern Africa]*

The African plains and full moon leave me feeling small and apprehensive about life beyond the path between our room and the main part of our lodge. I picture animals with big teeth mistaking me for a tasty hors d'oeuvre.

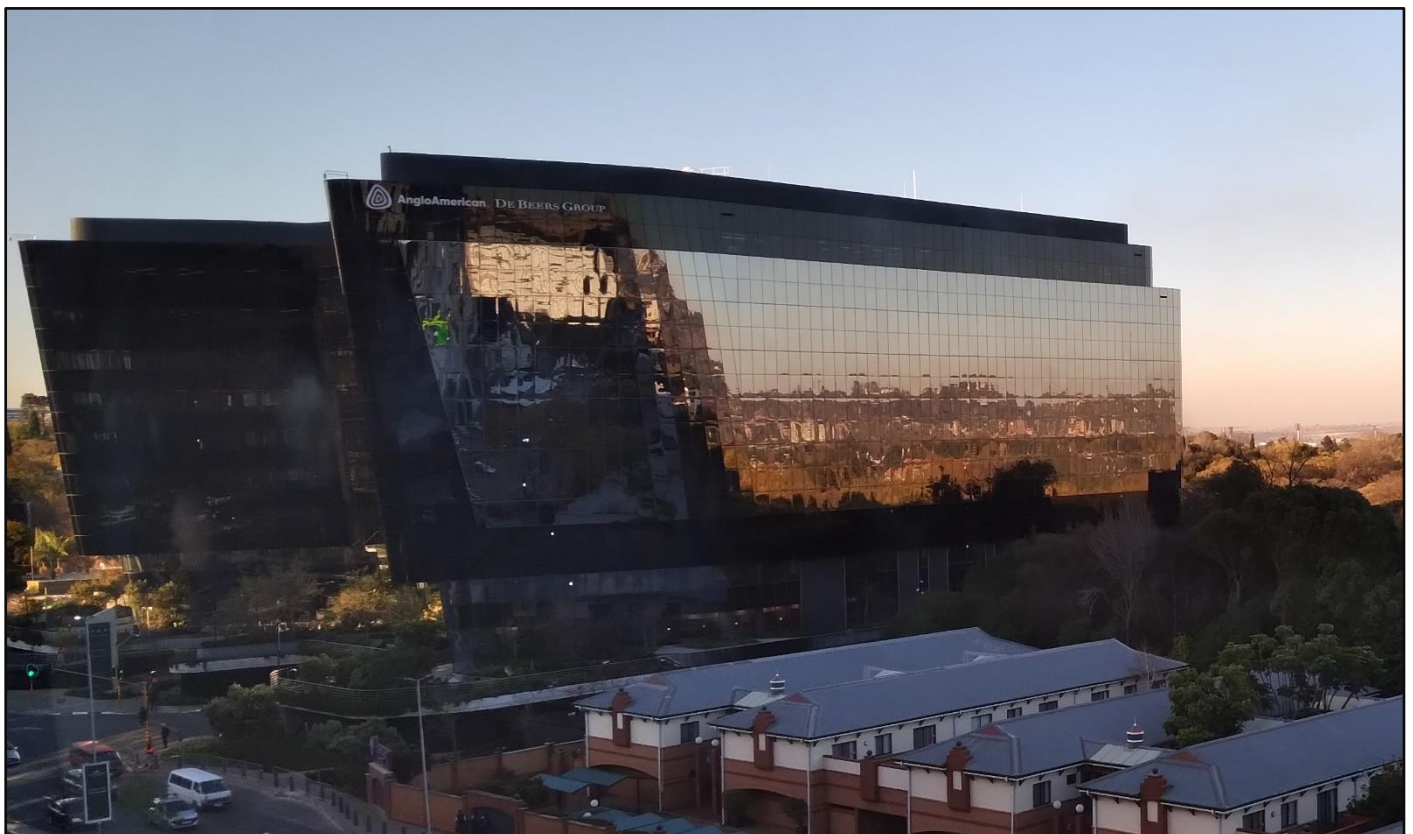
Day 15: Kruger National Park

We get told we will not see a rhino. We see a mama rhino and small rhino. The guide is ecstatic.

Day 16: Back to nice hotel in Johannesburg

The coal trucks seem to have multiplied. Power pylons etch their way across the vast landscape, and despite their numbers, South Africa is short of power and has been load-shedding (that's power cuts) since 2007. The big news is there have been no load-shedding power cuts for the last four months.

Our nice hotel in its nice area is opposite a massive black mirror glass monolith which turns out to be the Anglo-American mining company building. I have never seen anything like it.



Day 17: Cathay Pacific flight to Hong Kong

We each get one plastic bottle of water, and coffee in recyclable paper cups. Hong Kong airport appears to have no 'real' cups, plates, bowls, glasses. Feel guilty about NZ\$11.00 coffee in cardboard cup.

Day 19: Melbourne

I know when it is time to get up when clunking trams suddenly sound more frequent outside the window. Our young family is navigating 21st century expectations of life; housing in Melbourne, childcare, compatible jobs. Day to day reality is all-consuming. Our 20-month-old grandson loves trucks and diggers. We visit a building site.

Inspiration or even Adrian's 'We Want Something Nicer' turns up down the road (near the building site). CERES is an environmental education centre, community garden, urban farm and social enterprise hub spread across four locations, linked by the Merri and Darebin Creeks on Wurundjeri Country, Melbourne. It was established in 1982 and is beautiful. We feed the chooks with our daughter and grandson. Chooks are not quite as interesting as diggers, but he likes them. I like the coffee and Danish pastry place.

Day 31: Air NZ, Melbourne to Wellington

We are going home. Reflections crowd out my ability to write them down. It has been extraordinary. Ordinary life got replaced by an extraordinary retreat cum comfortable pilgrimage for a whole month. The closest we came to ordinary life was my forgetting my polar fleece at Johannesburg airport while stressing out over a woman's comment that my tip for her assistance had been too small. I felt so bad.

And climate change/ environmental damage? People mean well and some have enough time, energy, and inclination to act, re-orient, or provide extraordinarily lovely examples of what can be done. But most people, do not. And that is how it is.



That prayer from the Plenary (again)

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Amen

Thank you everyone for all the support and encouragement to step up and take on the responsibilities, challenges and joys involved with being an active part of the Plenary.

See you soon.

With aroha, Philippa