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Quaker House Hosts Simplicity Discussion

By Andrew Thompson

Although the simple life came to Haverford on Wednesday, reality TV snob Paris Hilton was nowhere to be found.

Instead, participants discussed living simply in the context of being a Haverford student, and as one of the Quaker testimonies. The conversation was organized by Noah Lavine '11 and is the first of a tentatively planned discussion series on the Quaker testimonies.

Though Quakers generally avoid strict creeds or dogma, the Quaker testimonies are often considered as traditional expressions of Quaker belief. They are not formal statements, but rather commonly held views many Quakers have.

The most frequently cited testimonies include Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, and Equality. Community and Stewardship are sometimes also included.

The discussion was held in an informal atmosphere, with the approximately ten attendees gathered in a circle in the Quaker House common room.

Eli Blood-Patterson '11 began the discussion by asking, "What does simplicity mean?"

Amira Shulman-Kumin '10 said there is often a blurry line between needs and wants. Molly Minden '12 added that people can always go further in the quest for simplicity.

Andrew Ross '11 mentioned that social expectations should be a factor in living simply, in that they should be satisfied but not exceeded. Blood-Patterson added that he thought the pursuit of simplicity should not overly complicate one's life.

Inez Steigerwald '09 said that extravagance is hard to quantify, because an expensive item might save people money in the long run because of its high quality.

The discussion then shifted to what things people felt complicated their lives. Steigerwald said that if one was too concerned with material things, they would be less concerned with their spiritual and emotional well-being.

Solomon Lutze '11 brought up how choices have the power to make people happy but can also be extremely stressful and overwhelming.

Lavine said that he measured how complicated things were based on how he would react if he lost them. Minden said she was wary of technology.

"If I became reliant upon it, it would complicate my life," she said.

Lutze said that technology has now been incorporated into our culture, and not having it complicates things. He later mentioned personal relationships as sources of complexity.

Ross expanded this to include both romantic and platonic relationships, saying that both sometimes had their own elements of mental anguish and complexity.

Discussion again shifted to whether college, and the knowledge and intellectualism present in this environment, were simple or not. Minden said that college was far-removed from the reality of the greater world.

Blood-Patterson said that Haverford was associated with exclusivity and a feeling of eliteness, and wondered if something like exclusive intellectualism could even be simple.

Lutze explained that life as a student wasn't inherently less simple, merely different.

"Students at Haverford [could explain some things] better than a lifelong farmer, but the farmer [could explain] other things better than the Haverford student," he said.

Lavine said that there was nothing fundamentally complicated about being in college.

"[You] wake up, go to class, eat, work, sleep," he said.

Shulman-Kumin said that college life was abstracted from reality.

Blood-Patterson added that students are paying to live in this environment. However, he considers college an investment.

"I would like to get a job that fulfills me, so I can live simply," he said.

The conversation then turned towards discussing in what ways people try to live simply in college.

"I do class, work, Frisbee, and that's it," Steigerwald said. "I know some people are involved in a million things, and that brings them great joy...for me that would be overcomplicated."

Heather Harden '11 stressed that all activities that make people feel fulfilled are worthwhile.

Ross had a different perspective.

"If things prevent me from going with the flow, they aren't simple," he said.

The discussion closed after about an hour and a half with a moment of silence.

Lavine said that there was no defined purpose for the discussion.

"Everyone came for different reasons," he said. "[I] just hoped it would be a good discussion."

In regards to the future discussions in the testimony series, Lavine said the next one will be sometime after Thanksgiving break and will possibly address the Integrity testimony.

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