

Notes from A Quaker Dietitian

The Well Now way: connecting self-care and social justice through nutrition

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of chocolate cake? Is it deliciousness, guilt, calories, your weight, sugar content, birthdays, gluten . . . ?

It can be hard to have a healthy relationship with food when we are constantly bombarded from all directions with messages that link eating, health and body weight with moral and social worth. So too, the sheer amount of (conflicting) nutrition information can be overwhelming and leave us confused about how to integrate sustainability and welfare issues in food choices.

Current public health campaigns unwittingly foster body shame, size stigma, food guilt and plain bewilderment. The narrow focus on weight correction and lifestyle means many other factors that have a significant impact on population ill-health get left out of the equation - such as loneliness, oppression, trauma and environmental security. Approaching nutrition without considering these factors only serves to hide privilege and supports the status quo.

It also fosters judgement by creating and encouraging feelings of superiority or inferiority for being a certain size, or eating certain foods, and normalises criticism and blame of those who fail to match up. Why else would we see so many photos of fat people without heads in the media? Have you ever felt the need to justify the sugar in your tea? Or noticed a knee-jerk criticism from yourself to others for eating biscuits? Or to you, from others? It happens in all places and at all times. And the time to address this is today.

I am a dietitian and Quaker. The dietetic approach I developed is called Well Now. This promotes body respect and health-gain for all, irrespective of size, shape and habits. This shift in focus helps people end their struggles with food, to feel more at peace in their bodies and so improve their physical, mental and social wellbeing. I also strongly believe that it contains the seeds for shifting the social conversation from negative judgement to one of proactive compassion, positive dignity, and radical action.

When I first came across the Quakers I was surprised and heartened to find so many resonances between the energy that drives my work and the vision articulated across Quaker publications. Since joining the Quakers, my initial sense of 'right fit' has been continually affirmed, and I see how this Quaker-Well Now congruence happens in different ways:

- At a broad level, Well Now works to advance social justice. The Well Now approach explores the bigger picture of health in our communities and looks at why we need to understand stigma, trauma and privilege in order to address health inequalities and deliver real change. These are obvious links with Quaker values.
- At a personal level, Well Now invites people to take their experiences, emotions, needs, worth, concerns seriously: *what canst thou say?* It encourages us to consider knowledge from many and diverse sources, drawing on bodily awareness (including spiritual and collective energy, whatever these mean to that individual), the intellect, and our circumstances to inform our actions. I remain excited and energised by the Quaker principle of discernment, which has tested and expanded this process over centuries.

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Well Now is grounded in the unshakeable belief that we are all worthy of respect. It insists on human dignity. In Quaker terms, its foundational premise is to affirm *'that of god in everyone'*.

Well Now helps people explore the established beliefs that lead them to judge themselves or others as being undeserving of love or respect. It supports them/us to counter and challenge these false teachings and learn compassion and acceptance, antidotes to judgement and competitiveness. Well Now recognises that non-violence starts with the self.

Well Now is

- compassion-centred,
- trauma-informed
- and justice-enhancing.

I work the Well Now way because I want to do Love's work. This goal is shaped by my being a Quaker as Friends hold me in the Light, nurturing the strength and conviction that embolden me to *live adventurously and do what love requires of me, and so let my life speak.*