

Discussion Aids for Sarah Mapps Douglass

Discussion Aids for Sarah Mapps Douglass, Faithful Attender of Quaker Meeting: View from the Back Bench

By Margaret Hope Bacon for high school and adult Friends

The following questions and activities are designed to help you create your own customized lesson plan or study guide for [Sarah Mapps Douglass: Faithful Attender of Quaker Meeting: View from the Back Bench](#), by Margaret Hope Bacon, with foreword by Vanessa Julye, Quaker Press of Friends General Conference, 2003.

Questions for discussion and worship sharing:

Responses to the foreword by Vanessa Julye:

- Vanessa Julye shares from her own experience as a Friend who is also an African American. She argues persuasively that, while there have been many changes since the nineteenth century, things need to change more. How did reading Vanessa’s foreword affect you personally?
- Can you identify with Vanessa Julye’s sense of isolation? When in your life have you experienced similar feelings? After reading the story of Sarah Mapps Douglass, or from your own analysis, can you identify things in the dominant Western culture that might cause Vanessa to see her own culture as a “maladaptation?”

Responses to the booklet by Margaret Hope Bacon:

- What struck you about Sarah Mapps Douglass’ story? Did anything about our history as Friends surprise you? Explain. How did reading this story of Sarah Mapps Douglass’ life make you feel?
- Why is it important to read about the lives of African Americans like Sarah Mapps Douglass?
- A Friend “kindly discouraged” Grace Douglass, Sarah’s mother, from applying for membership in the Religious Society of Friends because she “would only get her feelings hurt” (p. 6). What are some of the things, both overt and covert, going on in that exchange? What do exchanges like this one tell you about the nature of racism?

- On page 5 we read that Grace Douglass, Sarah’s mother, came to the conclusion that God had designed the insults and other injuries that she had experienced among Friends to humble her and to teach her love. What does this say about the way racism can work internally in people?
- What was Grace’s response to her mother’s appropriation of her suffering? How do you appropriate deep hurts that come to you?
- Despite their continued humiliating treatment, Sarah and her mother pressed on, working for change. Recall some of their activities on behalf of racial justice. What are some of the things Sarah indicates were impetuses for her own activist work? What would Angelina Grimké say were reasons Sarah and her mother pressed on? Consider their activities in the light of various Quaker testimonies such as integrity and equality.
- Clearly the history Friends have remembered of their involvement with people of African descent has emphasized the heroic and good. Do you know of any ways today Friends continue to erase any suggestion of racism and privilege among Friends? What can we as a religious society do to change these practices?
- Did any attitudes or assumptions white Friends expressed in relating to African Americans in Sarah’s story appear similar to what we see and hear among white Friends today? What could we as a Society do to search out and eradicate such behavior?
- Does Sarah Mapps Douglass’ story challenge the way you feel about your own tradition and/or the ways you respond to traditional stories—in your family? in your faith community? in the scriptures? Explain.
- It can be painful to read Sarah Mapps Douglass’ story. The fact that some people, like the Grimké sisters, chose to ignore convention and that white Friends who would have sat with African Americans had to be warned off, makes clear that white Friends could have behaved differently. Their disrespect of the Douglass women cannot be said just to reflect wider cultural norms. What in the behavior of Friends today requires similar scrutiny? In what ways do white Friends continue to behave in ways that suggest white culture is normative?
- What do you think white Friends need to change to be more welcoming to Friends of color? Look around your meeting house. What is on the walls? If there are pictures, are any people of color portrayed? If so, how are they portrayed? If there is literature on display, does it suggest that white culture is normative or is it welcoming to African American Friends and other Friends of color? Is the follow up to visitors who are people of color the same as or different than follow up to white visitors? See the FGC flyer produced by Advancement and Outreach, Seeking Racial and Ethnic Diversity: Welcoming People of Color at <http://www.fgcquaker.org/cmr/seeking.html>.
- What would it look like for the Religious Society of Friends to be well on the way to reconciliation and healing?

Activities for small groups or pairs:

- When in your life have you experienced pain and suffering as a result of prejudice or bias? Can you think of a time when despite this kind of hurt you stayed with a situation or individual? What helped you to persist or to resist? How has your faith helped you in difficult situations?
- Choose another person in Quaker history who has challenged the community—such as James Naylor, John Woolman, Lucretia Mott, Norman Morrison or Bayard Rustin. Learn as much as you can about how and why this person either persisted in identifying with Friends or left Friends. Has the history been softened or suppressed in any way to present a more favorable picture of the Religious Society of Friends? What can you say, based on your knowledge of the person, about what our religious Society meant to this person or about how the Spirit moved in his or her life? What were some of the tensions this person experienced in his or her relationship with Friends? Do you believe this person would encounter similar difficulties today?
- Some people may be tempted to dismiss Sarah Mapps Douglass' story as “the past.” But in her foreword Vanessa Julye speaks of the pain she continues to experience today. We can think of racism as a heavy wagon that keeps rolling on. The constant turning of the wheels has carved deep and narrow ruts in the road. The ruts are like deep grooves which determine the wagon's course and make change difficult.

Visualize the wagon. What does it look like? What is moving it along?

Visualize the wagon stopping and the passengers refusing to stay on the same course. What are some of the obstacles the passengers face? What actions might help the passengers make a positive change of course? Continue the story in your imagination, then draw or write what you visualize.

Share in small groups.

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