



Silence and Expectant Waiting

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INTRODUCTION

By: Michael Birkel

For Friends, Meeting for Worship is a center of gravity. It draws all to it. It provides a place to stand. It holds everything else in its right place. Quaker worship is a direct encounter with the Spirit of God.

Paths to the Center, Coming to Stillness

Upon entering the room, Friends often feel a sense of holy hush. Others may already be there, gathering in the silence, helping to prepare a setting in which group worship can occur. To some, it feels as though turning the attention inward allows some part of them -- usually hidden and obscured by the busy quality of their outward lives -- to come back into continuous, joyous communion with God.

The first task, then, is to invite the body and mind into a tranquil frame, to come to that center. Quakers do not insist on a single path to that center; in fact, they use a variety of methods. A worshipper feel drawn to one path over another based on personality or the particular season in that individual's life.

Many find prayer helpful — and prayer is a wide phenomenon. After situating the body, and perhaps being grateful for the great gift of having a body, some may pray for others in the room, with words of care or with a wordless impulse of love that desires those Friends' well-being. It requires attentive focus to arrive at the center, and the path is strewn

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with distractions. Some find that by taking a moment beforehand to consider what disturbances may come, they can recognize distractions from a distance and gently dispatch them before their emotional charge sends the worshipper off the path or into a ditch. Others find it helpful to weave potential distractions into prayer. Some may pray for the unquiet places in their own lives, holding in their hearts those situations of uncertainty, anxiety, conflict, or pain, and picturing those places illumined by light and love.

Note how gentle these methods are. Vexation is not fruitful. Distractions are natural and to be expected. Be they as mundane as a shopping list or as urgent as an impending crisis, it is good to receive them with a patient attitude and send them on their way with kindness.

Spiritual practices can employ the human capacity for imagination, or they may aspire to imagelessness. Both are anchors. After quieting the uppermost layer of the mind, some Friends find the path of images helpful. They may engage words and images in their prayer, softly revisiting in their minds an evocative phrase or perhaps a passage from scripture, welcoming the feeling of joy, gratitude, praise, or awe that this kind of prayer can evoke. Feeling itself, too, can be a species of prayer and a path to the center, without words or images. So some find it beneficial to empty the mind as much as possible, leaving God room to fill the heart with compassion and wisdom.

All these practices are merely pathways, not destinations. In Meeting for Worship, these are useful tools only insofar as they are catalysts to an increased awareness of God's presence. Once there, worshippers may find that they are led by the Spirit to hold others in the Light, but the object of their prayers and meditations is now centered in divine love and initiative, not in whatever worries -- however genuine or worthy -- they brought along to the meetinghouse.

Written in One Another's Hearts

In this quiet place, worshippers enter into expectant waiting, striving to be attentive to divine presence and hopeful that all may be blessed with awareness of the guidance of the Spirit. Here a door may open to experience the collective dimension of worship in community. In earlier times Friends called this "a feeling sense of the conditions of

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others.” One may feel an unspoken trouble in the life of someone else and minister to it simply by being present in silence and in love to that unvoiced difficulty. The centered state of some can assist others lost in distraction. Unawares, those thus assisted may simply feel “unfogged” and closer to a centered quietness. At times, all may feel knit to one another, gathered in the Spirit and canopied in the power of God’s uplifting presence.

Coming to Words

All this can happen in silence, but words can also come. Friends refer to this as “vocal ministry” because these words are spoken aloud and because their purpose is to minister to the condition of others in the room. In that quiet, centered place within, a feeling may emerge. This feeling may give rise to an image or insight, and this in turn may bring forth words. If words come, the worshipper who has received them has the gentle task of discerning if these words are for that moment in the meeting. They could be a message of care or concern to share with a particular person after worship has concluded. Or they could be a message for the person who has received them; in some cases, words tender enough to offer comfort; in others, powerful enough to redirect a life; what Friends call a “leading” from God to do a particular good in the world.

If the message feels like words that can minister to the worshipping community, the worshipper should speak them, aloud, for the benefit of those present. The task of others is to receive that utterance, opening themselves to what insight it may offer. Not every message speaks to the condition of each person present.

Vocal ministry can nourish the soul, yet Friends do not privilege words; they treasure a living silence as much as speech. Vocal ministry does not interrupt but instead can enhance and deepen the work of the Spirit carried on in the stillness. The end of words is to come to that Word that was in the beginning. Early Quaker George Fox wrote that during Meeting “the intent of all speaking is to bring into the life . . . and to feel God’s presence.” The point of vocal ministry is to take the worshippers to that place beyond words, where there is “the feeding of the bread of life and drinking at the spring of life.” Spiritual nourishment is at the heart of the Meeting for Worship.



SILENT WAITING

1. *(The early Friends) made the discovery that silence is one of the best preparations for communion (with God) and for the reception of inspiration and guidance. Silence itself, of course, has no magic. It may be just sheer emptiness, absence of words or noise or music. It may be an occasion for slumber, or it may be a dead form. But it may be an intensified pause, a vitalised hush, a creative quiet, an actual moment of mutual and reciprocal correspondence with God. The actual meeting of man with God and God with man is the very crown and culmination of what we can do with our human life here on earth.* RUFUS M. JONES, TESTIMONY OF THE SOUL. 1937. WHITEFISH: KESSINGER PUBLISHING, 2006. PRINT.

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2. *It is not busyness that destroys us. It is simply being perpetually busy with things that only scatter rather than deepen us (p. 10). . . . the spiritual person is the one who breathes in and out the spirit of God toward which they move (p. 31).* JOAN CHITTISTER, "WELCOME TO THE WISDOM OF THE WORLD AND ITS MEANING FOR YOU." GRAND RAPIDS: WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY, 2007. 10, 31. PRINT.

Used by permission.

3. *Meeting is the chance to escape from the trivial thoughts of everyday living, and to find answers from yourself or from God. Some people are scared of the silence. Without the noise that serves to reassure us, that blocks out thoughts we'd rather not have, we're vulnerable and find it's time to face ourselves. We can never hide from God, but it's easy to minimise the effect he has on our lives - except in the silence where he can be heard. Don't feel restricted by the silence, it is there to set you free from the pressures of life. No-one is judging your movements, your thoughts... Freedom of expression is the freedom to worship God on your own terms. Value the opportunity to think unguided by the world. Learn what you feel you need to know, let other information pass. No moment of silence is a waste of time.* RACHEL NEEDHAM, 1987, QUOTED IN QUAKER FAITH & PRACTICE: THE BOOK OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE OF THE YEARLY MEETING OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS) IN BRITAIN. 5TH ED. LONDON: QUAKER BOOKS, 2013. PRINT.

Used by permission.

4. *Therefore, my dear hearts, be faithful every one in your particular measure of God's gift which he hath given you, and on the invisible wait in silence, and patience, and in obedience to that which opens to the mystery of God, and leads to the invisible God, which no mortal eye can reach unto, or behold.* MARGARET FELL, "EPISTLE TO FRIENDS", 1654, AS QUOTED IN BIRKEL, MICHAEL LAWRENCE. SILENCE AND WITNESS: THE QUAKER TRADITION. MARYKNOLL: ORBIS BOOKS, 2004. 15. PRINT. Public Domain.

5. Original video from www.QuakerSpeak.com "Quaker Silence"

Content: A diverse group of Friends share what they find most valuable about silence in Meeting for Worship.

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ENCOUNTER

1. *I will listen to what God the Lord says; he promises peace to his people, his faithful servants— but let them not turn to folly.*

PSALM 85:8 (NRSV)

2. *He says, “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”*

PSALM 46:10 (KJV)

3. *In silence, without rite or symbol, we have known the Spirit of Christ so convincingly present in our quiet meetings that his grace dispels our faithlessness, our unwillingness, our fears, and sets our hearts aflame with the joy of adoration. We have thus felt the power of the Spirit renewing and recreating our love and friendship for all our fellows. This is our Eucharist and our Communion.*

LONDON YEARLY MEETING, 1928, QUOTED IN QUAKER FAITH & PRACTICE: THE BOOK OF CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE OF THE YEARLY MEETING OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS) IN BRITAIN. 5TH ED. LONDON: QUAKER BOOKS, 2013. PRINT. Used with permission.

4. *Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit -from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God, whereby thou wilt receive his strength and power from whence life comes, to allay all tempests, against blusterings and storms. That is it which moulds up into patience, into innocency, into soberness, into stillness, into stayedness, into quietness, up to God, with his power.*

FOX, GEORGE. THE JOURNAL OF GEORGE FOX. ED. NORMAN PENNEY. NEW YORK: COSIMO CLASSICS, 2007. PRINT. Used with permission.

5. *The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love!
With that deep hush subduing all
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of Thy call,
As noiseless let Thy blessing fall
As fell Thy manna down.
Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.*

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER, “DEAR LORD AND FATHER OF MANKIND” 1872.

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ENCOUNTER (cont.)

6. And this is the manner of their worship. They are to wait upon the Lord, to meet in the silence of flesh, and to watch for the stirrings of his life, and the breakings forth of his power amongst them. And in the breakings forth of that power they may pray, speak, exhort, rebuke, sing, or mourn, &c. according as the Spirit teaches, requires, and gives utterance. But if the Spirit do not require to speak, and give to utter, then every one is to sit still in his place (in his heavenly place I mean), feeling his own measure, feeding thereupon, receiving therefrom, into his spirit, what the Lord giveth. Now, in this is edifying, pure edifying, precious edifying; his soul who thus waits, is hereby particularly edified by the Spirit of the Lord at every meeting. And then there is the life of the whole felt in every vessel that is turned to its measure: insomuch as the warmth of life in each vessel doth not only warm the particular, but they are like a heap of fresh and living coals, warming one another, insomuch as a great strength, freshness, and vigour of life flows into all. And if any be burthened, tempted, buffeted by Satan, bowed down, overborne, languishing, afflicted, distressed, &c., the estate of such is felt in Spirit, and secret cries, or open (as the Lord pleaseth), ascend up to the Lord for them, and they many times find ease and relief, in a few words spoken, or without words, if it be the season of their help and relief with the Lord.

ISAAC PENINGTON, A BRIEF ACCOUNT CONCERNING SILENT MEETINGS . . . , 4:48, AS QUOTED IN BIRKEL, MICHAEL LAWRENCE. SILENCE AND WITNESS: THE QUAKER TRADITION. MARYKNOLL: ORBIS BOOKS, 2004. 124-25. PRINT. Used with permission.

Original video from www.QuakerSpeak.com

Quaker Worship Part 1 – The Challenge of Sitting in Silence

“What happens when you try to sit in silence for an hour?”

Content: Seven Quakers discuss the challenge of being alone with one’s thoughts in Quaker worship, and the opportunity for grace and true communion on the other side.

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VOCAL MINISTRY

1. . . really powerful hours of unbroken silence frequently carry a genuine progression of spiritual change and experience. They are filled moments, and the quality of the second fifteen minutes is definitely different from the quality of the first fifteen minutes. Outwardly, all silences seem alike, as all minutes are alike by the clock. But inwardly the Divine Leader of Worship directs us through progressive unfoldings of ministration, and may in the silence bring an inward climax which is as definite as the climax of the Mass when the host is elevated in adoration... (Words) should not break the silence, but continue it. For the Divine Life who was ministering through the medium of silence is the same Life as is now ministering through words. And when such words are truly spoken 'in the Life', then when such words cease the uninterrupted silence and worship continue: for silence and words have been of one texture, one piece.

THOMAS R. KELLY, THE GATHERED MEETING, THE TRACT ASSOCIATION OF FRIENDS, 1997. USED BY PERMISSION.

2. Original Video from www.QuakerSpeak.com

“Quaker Worship Part 2 – Giving Vocal Ministry”

Content: In the Quaker religion, adherents believe that a higher power can speak through them. We asked Quakers what it’s actually like to experience this.

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