

Meeting for Worship in the Classroom

By Christie Duncan-Tessmer

Introduction

When Friends worship, we reach out from the depths of our being to God, the giver of life and of the world around us. Our worship is the search for communion with God and the offering of ourselves - body and soul - for the doing of God's will.

Faith & Practice, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

This description of Quaker worship is dramatic and true and very much from an adult perspective. The need to “search for communion” is present and even driving in many grown-ups who seek out Meeting for Worship. Children have the same need for communion with God. Love, Joy, the Source, but without the verb attached to it. Rather than searching, they simply live from a place of connection.

Children in elementary grades and younger don't have the same kind of definitional boundaries between time for work, time for play and time to be connected with the Divine that adults frequently have. For them work, play and worship is all the same thing and it doesn't have to be named – it's just living. The boundary that children define is between engagement in meaningful activity and boredom. And Meeting for Worship, when it is seen as a time when one just has to sit still, be quiet and count ceiling tiles for twenty minutes, is boring! As adults who worship with children, our task is to protect and nurture their connection to God as they experience it. Introducing and participating in worship in a way that is meaningful, not boring, can be quite simple and yet quite intimidating. This pamphlet provides some thoughts and concrete tools that can be used by elementary teachers in preparing for worship with children.

Questions to Start with

The place (physical, temporal, emotional) a classroom has for Worship can vary quite a bit. Classrooms with teachers new to Quakerism may shy away from it altogether. Some classes may include it as a matter of daily scheduling with no further thought. Some teachers may labor over it. Some teachers may feel they simply don't have the time or the permission to include worship. Wherever one is coming from, it may be helpful to consider some basic questions about classroom Meeting for Worship.

What is Classroom Meeting for Worship?

- Time spent in the classroom centering down and reaching inward to That which unites each of us. It is time to focus on the Wonder and Joy and Love that fills the world and all that is in it.
- It is a moment of silence to refocus on what is important.
- It is space to get perspective about what is important.
- It is time to appreciate the gifts and presence of each individual in the class.

How has Meeting for Worship functioned in your class?

Does it have to be silent and still?

- No! Sing! Make something! Dance, go for a walk, tell stories, play with clay, write a poem, play a game, draw, build, use your creativity!
- Parker Palmer writes “One does not apply worship to life. You make it your practice until worship and life become one.” This describes children and worship beautifully -it is exactly what young children already do.

When do you feel connected to Divine Life?

Why should I squeeze one more thing into my crazy-busy day?

- Because your day *is* crazy and busy. And so is the kids’ day. And is crazy-busy really what you want your classroom life to be about?
- Because you can focus more effectively in the midst of busyness if your mind and heart are settled.

How does being crazy-busy affect your own daily life?

When is a good time to have Meeting for Worship in the Classroom?

- Every morning to start the day.
- Every Monday to start the week.
- When the class is struggling with something important or difficult.
- When the sun comes out after days and days of rain or the temperature rises after a long cold winter.
- On a child’s birthday.
- On a child’s last day of school when they are transferring.
- To focus before a test, a performance or an athletic event.

- When kids are over-wrought.
- When you feel like it
- When a child feels like it.

When is a good time for you to step out of the everyday routine to renew your Spirit?

Where?

- In your classroom
- With another class in their room
- In the Meetinghouse
- In the Library
- In the auditorium or gym
- Outside in a field or a grotto or under a tree
- In a Specials classroom
- In a Garden or on a Walking Path

Change your space once in a while – new settings are inspiring! They are inspiring both for your planning ideas and for the kids' experience.

Set up

Make the space special, mark the time as something out of the ordinary. You can do this just by adding a little something that you don't usually have in your room. Doing the same thing every time helps set this time apart as its own special event. For example:

- Ask the children to be silent as they enter the room
- Light a candle
- Sing a particular song to start or finish
- Put some seasonal flowers in a special vase
- Try some incense
- Ring a bell, tap some windchimes or play an instrument to start
- Take your shoes off
- Sit on the floor if you are usually in chairs or vice versa.

Some of these ideas may feel too church-y or too New Age-y for you. Don't use those ideas. Find something that feels comfortable to you.

How long?

- 30 seconds; 5 minutes; 30 minutes. It depends more on the age of your children and the context of the worship than an outside standard. Traditional silent worship will likely be shorter than worship through stories, discussion and art.
- You may want to have an expectation of how long silent worship will be from the outset. On the other hand it can be powerful to simply worship as long as you are led to. Feel for the right moment to end it – not by how long the wiggliest child can stand it but by what seems right in the center of your self.
- Allow one of the children to determine when to break worship by shaking the hand of her neighbor. Being the one to determine when is the right time to end worship makes one have to pay very close attention!

Inspiration for Planning

The best, most appropriate worship for your class will come out of a planning process that is centered in the Spirit. If your goal is to make space to live out of the Spirit for the duration of worship then the plans for the structure of that worship need to come from the same place. Use all the additional resources you like, but start by stopping your thinking, fretting, wanting and planning. Take time to sit quietly, centering yourself. Use your heart to listen for guidance about what you should do to make a space for connection to the Divine in your classroom. Doing this work together with the Spirit has taught me more about what worship is than anything else in my life. Then, if you need to complement or support your leadings with resources turn to:

- Friends and co-workers
- Stories
- Books about worship, centering, meditation
- Craft resources

Introducing Centering to Children

Wherever you are led to go with your class in worship, whether it is a simple minute of traditional silent worship, includes a story and discussion or is a whole community service endeavor rising out of silent worship – or anything else – it needs to start from a spiritual space centered in God. That traditional “moment of silence” needs to be a meaningful centering into the Wisdom and Love that unites us and feeds us.

You may have had the experience of walking into a worship service, whether Quaker or not, and *feeling* deeply that there is something electric or binding moving through the room. When that happens, the worship pulls you right into the center of it, whether you know what you are doing or not. That is a very powerful way of learning through experience what worship is all about and how to do it. However, a classroom (or a meetinghouse) full of children who are not experienced in worship in the manner of Friends is not likely to start at such a powerful place. So we can provide a bit of a map to guide ourselves and our children to a space that allows us to be open to the Spirit's presence. I want to repeat that: We need only to make the space in our lives to recognize or be open to the Spirit, that's our responsibility. Following are a few suggestions of landmarks for your map. Teaching landmarks to the children and starting with the same routine every time will help them learn how to use the time and eventually to sink naturally into worship as soon as they start to gather.

- The first several times (more for younger children, less for older, but always more than once) you worship with a class, be explicit, in language meaningful to you, about what Meeting for Worship is about. Keep it simple. Here are some examples:
 - We're going to listen for God with our hearts
 - We're going to let go of everyday thoughts and concentrate on what is most important deep inside of us.
 - We're going to be still and feel the Love that is inside and all around each of us.
- By not getting too specific, you allow the children to recognize God and Love by their own understanding. By using words you may not use all the time (God, Love in capitals), you set it apart as something special.
- The way in which worshipers hold themselves physically is significant. We do not sit all slouched over like we do when we're watching any old show on TV. We sit up, in a balanced way. When our bodies are balanced, it helps us find internal balance as well. Sitting with straight spines, regally but not stiff like soldiers, allows our breath to be natural and deep. Teach the children explicitly how to sit.
- I like to draw attention to hands. As soon as I start talking about sitting straight and centering down, children start holding their hands in traditional Buddhist meditation positions and then they start giggling. I ask them what they think about when they do that and the answers are frequently about cartoons. I explain that serious meditators hold their hands in different ways because hands are powerful and when they put their thumb and forefinger together it means something to them. To the kids, however, it just means cartoons. So I show them how I hold my hands in a way that is meaningful to me: open in my lap to remind me to be open to any gift of a thought or idea or feeling or

song that may be waiting for me in worship. This also helps children to be aware of restless hands in worship and gives them something to do with them. If you are familiar with mudras (hand positions for meditations), you may choose to teach them and their meanings to the children.

- Eyes. The older children are, the less they want to close their eyes. The benefit of closing one's eyes is that one's attention is not caught by every movement and every friend in sight, rather attention is drawn internally. An alternative is to look down at the floor a foot or so in front of one's self.
- Suggest starting with a deep breath. It is amazing how relaxing and cleansing and centering such a simple thing can be.
- Other landmarks you may want to teach kids include a brief physical relaxation exercise and visualizations. There are several books that give good suggestions for doing these kinds of activities with children.

Talking about God with Kids

It is not unusual for teachers to hesitate to bring up issues of spirituality and divinity with students. Those who have had experience in public schools have learned that it is inappropriate to bring up such matters in the classroom. It is a personal subject and some prefer not to share deeply. On the other hand, Friends schools have made a commitment to supporting the spiritual growth of children, typically both in their written statements and in their actions. For this reason, teachers are invited to explore ways to explicitly and implicitly bring the spiritual into the classroom.

- That which is Divine has many names. Use the ones that are comfortable to you:
God Force of Unity Love Jesus
Spirit Light Nature Perfect Goodness
- Encourage the children to use the names comfortable to them.
- Share your own beliefs, briefly. Your sharing your faith teaches them that these conversations are acceptable and valued. Your speaking briefly guards against their absorbing your beliefs as their own journey, without doing the spiritual work they need to do.
- If students are asking questions that feel too personal to you, don't hesitate to tell them that your faith is personal and you choose not to share more than you already have. Allow them the same option.
- Encourage them to speak with their family about what their family beliefs are. Make space for them to share with each other what their beliefs are.

- Some kids don't believe in God. Their beliefs need to be welcomed as safely as every other religious belief the children bring into the classroom. This is one reason for using names for God that are less connected to religious traditions: Love, Wisdom, Truth (all names Quakers like to use!). It is not a reason to back off from the spiritual in the classroom.

Living from the Center

In the Introduction I stated that children don't separate regular, everyday space from the Sacred space in their lives. Then it seems as if I went on to write a whole pamphlet about providing support for making one part of the day, worship, sacred. This is a segmented way of perceiving worship and it may be used in that way. Alternatively, however, worship can be understood as one more part of the Life-filled day where particular care is given to recognizing that Life. Next on the daily schedule may be math class which is also part of the Life-filled day where particular attention is given to numbers and their patterns. Regardless of the content of one's interactions (numbers, music, places and events, centering), the Life that courses through and unites each of us in a fundamental unseen way is present. Read the opening quote to this pamphlet again and you will notice that it doesn't state that the process of reaching out to God is something that happens in Meeting for Worship. It only says worship. The reaching and the searching is truly something that can be part of each breath we take.

On a very long car ride across several states when my daughter was four, she announced "I'm God and you're God and that tree is God, we're all just different shapes." And less than a minute later, with just as much gravity, she announced "Wouldn't it be funny if walkie-talkies were phones that walked?" In her perception walkie-talkies, trees, her self and God are all of a piece. Math, language arts and social studies are of that same piece. The way in which we approach these subjects and our friends who are learning about them is just as much a matter of making space for perceiving the Divine as worship is. To repeat my favorite quote from Parker Palmer: *One does not apply worship to life. You make it your practice until worship and life become one.* Children already do this and so in this way the children can be our teachers.

Balance

Worship, whether during Meeting for Worship or in the midst of math class, is not something that can be directed. You can't tell the children *how* to worship. You, the teacher, have enormous influence in how the environment is set up. This encourages worship, but then

everyone needs to feel their way in by themselves. You make the space and let God do the rest.

Worship is when we live from the center of the Spirit, and it is time for everyone, not just the kids. In worship, teachers need to participate. But they need to participate as *participants* – not teachers! The kids are used to you being in charge. You tell them what needs to be done and where to go when during much of the day. It's your job. If you continue to be the teacher in worship, the kids will continue to be the students. Their own initiatives may be inhibited. Worship with the kids, not in front of them.

- There is a balance between being the leader of the children and being the follower of your own leadings, intuition, path, God. You need to feel for that balance as you lead and as you follow.

Resource List

- Darian, Shea, Sanctuaries of Childhood: Nurturing a Child's Spiritual Life, Gilead Press, 2001
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- Murdock, Maureen, Spinning Inward. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1987.
- O'Reilly, Mary Rose, Radical Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1998
- O'Reilly, Mary Rose, The Peaceable Classroom. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1993
- Religious Education Cme of Friends General Conference, Opening Doors to Quaker Worship. Philadelphia: Friends General Conference, 1994.
- Rozman, Deborah, Meditating with Children. Boulder Creek, California: Planetary Publications, 1994.
- Sher, Barbara, Spirit Games. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002.

- Wolf, Aline, D. Nurturing the Spirit in non-sectarian classrooms. Parent Child Press, 1996

Pendle Hill Pamphlets

- Boulding, Elise, Born Remembering, Pamphlet 200
- Heath, Harriet, Answering That of God in Our Children, Pamphlet 315
- Lacey, Paul, Education and the Inward Teacher, Pamphlet 278

All of these books may be ordered through:

Quakerbooks of FGC
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bookstore@fgcquaker.org * www.Quakerbooks.org

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