

Helping Prepare Children and Teenagers for Quaker Worship: Some of My Experiences Leading First Day School

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Multiple Friends have expressed concerns in recent years about how many children and young people seem to have trouble making the transition from Young Friend (in First Day School) to Adult Friend (in meeting for worship, committee work, etc.). I think we need to be intentional about helping them cross over and stop underestimating their capacity for spiritual experience!

To that end, my meeting decided to offer classes in First Day School on waiting worship. One year we offered eight sessions for our teen population and the next year we offered three sessions to our elementary aged children. Both groups were team taught.

The 8-session unit was conducted with teens in the 13 to 17 year range. The basic premises of this unit were (1) that silence isn't empty, and something is happening there that makes people come back week after week to experience it, and (2) nobody's going to tell you what you will or should experience, because you have to experience this for yourself. Throughout the sessions, we affirmed every contribution the young people made, and pointed out how the experiences they reported would lead to even better things, if they pursued the practice.

This group had had a unit the year before on various religions, with guest speakers talking about their worship practices, so in session 1 we drew on what they learned from that experience. We then went on to a discussion of how Quaker worship differs from that of other religious traditions. The young people contributed to the discussion, but much of the input was from the adult leaders. We asked how the teens had experienced their 15 minutes in meeting for worship that morning. Then we assembled a floor puzzle in silence, followed by discussion of the process: what did you notice in your own thoughts and feelings? What did you notice about how people interacted or didn't interact? We drew parallels from that experience to how people worship in silence as a group.

Session 2 began with a review of the previous week's experience to refresh memories and to benefit three teens who had missed the first session. We did an exercise where one student talked about a subject, and the others provided competing chatter; this was compared to the chatter in our own minds when our minds are so busy in meeting that we can't hear the speaker (God). We then did a hand-clapping exercise and discussed how it had felt to move very slowly, interacting with a partner. These teens had quite a lot of insight, observing how their attention changed as they moved more

slowly, and how they focused on the movements of the partner more than on themselves. After reviewing the principles of worship sharing, we shared on the following two queries: How do I experience the holy? What is holy to me? At the end of this session, we passed out copies of William Taber's Pendle Hill Pamphlet [*Four Doors to Meeting for Worship*](#), explaining that reading ahead would be welcomed, but not required.

Session 3 we had a disruption in the plans, with a substitute teacher. After talking about the meaning and significance of "holding in the Light," participants held in the Light individuals they were concerned about. We then had a general discussion of "good things that have happened in meeting."

Session 4 we talked about "Door One, the Door Before," introducing some thoughts about what silent, or waiting worship is, and about how there is an invisible but living stream of reality, always present, which we can step into when we become quiet. It is easier to step into it on a Sunday morning if we have taken the opportunity throughout the week to allow worshipfulness to occur. We talked about what times during their week might be opportunities to focus on the holy. We reviewed Bill Taber's suggestions for daily retirement, vocalizing, noticing beauty and wonder, and talking with a spiritual friend. We then passed out a "resource sheet" with Bible verses suitable for contemplation. I taught a song, Cause Me to Come, in FGC's Worship in Song: A Friends Hymnal, and we ended with the usual waiting worship.

Session 5 began with the song, then a review of how their week had been. Few reported taking any opportunities to worship. However, one student shared that, having forgotten to take a book to homeroom, he meditated during a free reading period. We then discussed "The Door Inward," with sharing coming from those who had read ahead, from those responding to our reading aloud in the session, and from the adults. We discussed distractions and how to deal with them.

Session 6, only one student was present. We talked about what new experiences he had had. I read Byrd Baylor's *The Other Way to Listen*, and we talked about how listening to God alone can differ from listening with others. We then discussed, reading aloud, "The Door Within," paying special attention to "deepening the quality of silence," how speaking in ministry is related to the silence, and how to hear the ministry of others. We also invited the teens to consider whether they might want to join the last 15 minutes of meeting for worship rather than the first.

Session 7 we heard a report on worship at an FGC Young Quakes conference from a teen who had participated and was very enthusiastic. We talked about the experiential differences between choosing what to focus on in meeting versus allowing God to provide the focus. One of the teens had been hospitalized with exacerbation of a chronic illness. We spent the last part of this session holding her and her family in the Light.

Session 8 we talked again about how to hear others' messages in meeting for worship, and how to know when to offer vocal ministry ourselves. Then I invited them to draw mandalas in silence, with a simple repeated tracing process that I led them through in the silence. After participants shared their internal experiences of this exercise, we closed with waiting worship, followed by expressions of gratitude for our time together.

As I wrote up this summary of the unit, I realized how much the teens had taught me, and how this learning had helped me when we did the class for the elementary age children. The teens were good observers of their attention processes, and showed me what each of these exercises may reveal; our discussions helped me clarify how attention processes underlie meeting for worship. The teens also came to understand more fully what a wonderful realm of sensitivity and growth they have within themselves. Within a year, four of these young people began attending meeting for worship instead of First Day School. I think we were able to point them to their Teacher.

Following is an outline of how we adapted the class for teaching the elementary children the same basic lessons, but in three sessions. With the premise that what happens in silence is that we pay attention to God, we used activities that explore ways of paying attention.

Session 1. After introductions, we invited observations on how Quaker worship is different from other religious services the kids have attended. We did progressive muscle relaxation, explaining that when our bodies are relaxed it is easier to listen in the silence. Then the children closed their eyes and passed a set of objects (a seed pod, a peach pit, a shell, a feather) around the room, paying attention to how each object felt, and trying not to talk about it. Then they listened while I read *The Song*, a book by Charlotte Zolotow, about a girl who hears a bird singing inside her; the idea was to trust your own hearing, and not depend on others to tell you what is real.

Session 2. We began with silence, reviewed together what had happened the previous week, and did some relaxing breathing exercises. We did a floor jigsaw puzzle in silence, then talked about the group process, pointing out that a group can help each other without talking about it, and also that this puzzle, like listening in worship, is easier for some people than for others, but that if we are patient with ourselves eventually we can do it well. This took quite a long time. We ended with silence.

Session 3. After silence, we taught a simple hand-clapping game, then tried doing it faster, slower, and much slower. The idea was to observe how we felt while doing it. Most of these boys found it quite difficult, however, and never got past observing that it was difficult. (Girls at this age can do it, and older boys can, but I overestimated the coordination of the 6 to 9 year old boys.) I read the book *Grandad's Prayers of the Earth*, then asked them to sit quietly and speak out of the silence about a time when they had felt quiet outdoors. We didn't get much reflection or sharing during this exercise. We ended by thanking them, out of the silence, for the time we spent together. Should we try this unit again with this age group, we would need to revise this last session.

We feel this unit was well worth our investments of time and effort, for the participants were opened to new and deeper experiences of inner listening and worship. I highly recommend that monthly meetings venture into these waters with joyful, expectant hearts.