

Silence *and* Speech

For anyone new to Quaker worship

by Richard F. Allen

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Dear Friends,

We are glad you are attending our meetings. Are you now perhaps wondering what is really happening in them? How they work? What prompts some people to speak and not others? Is speaking arranged or spontaneous? These questions can't be fully answered in words, but we will try to give you some hints to help you explore further and find the answers in the meetings themselves.

Preparation for meetings

First, a few practical hints to help you to participate fully in our meetings. These may not sound like very religious suggestions, but we have found them helpful to us and they should not be dismissed as gimmicks.

It is best to arrive in an unhurried way somewhat before the stated time of the meeting, and not talk much outside, but go in and sit down in silence. The meeting actually begins when the first person enters the meeting room.

When you are seated, it helps to try to relax in mind and body. If you know a relaxation technique, feel free to use it. Otherwise, most of us find it sufficient simply to sit upright with legs uncrossed and hands loosely in the lap, close our eyes and breathe deeply a few times.

Entering the silence

There are no set rules about what to do next. A generally quiet and receptive attitude is far more important than any beliefs or doctrines or religious background. The Quaker movement grew up in the Christian surroundings of seventeenth-century England, and the Religious Society of Friends still draws much from the Christian faith; but participating in a Quaker meeting is not limited to those who can call themselves “Christians.”

As the notice-boards outside our meetinghouses say: “All are welcome.”

If pressed to say what they are actually doing in a meeting for worship, many Quakers would probably say they are waiting—waiting in their utmost hearts for the touch of something beyond their everyday selves. Some would call it “listening to the quiet voice of God”—without trying to define that word. Others would use more abstract terms: just “listening” (though no voice is heard), or “looking inward” (though no visions are seen), or “pure attention” (though nothing specific is attended to). The word “inward” tends to recur as one gropes for explanations.

Notwithstanding the variety of strange and paradoxical phrases they might use about their meetings, however, most Quakers would agree that you can only enter fully into the silence if you can quiet the busy, anxious, thinking part of your mind and become not

merely outwardly but inwardly silent. In this troubled life that state is not always easy to come by, but when it is attained, even in a small degree, it opens the way into the shared silence of the meeting.

Sometimes this “centering down” happens easily, almost of itself, but often it requires a conscious effort, and according to their different needs and temperaments, Quakers adopt various means to help them. Some look at the thoughts and images arising in their minds and then put them aside. Some begin by holding up others in their mental arms, so to speak, desiring that all should be well with them. Others recall an event or encounter that has meant much to them, or a peaceful scene or a loved painting or piece of music. Some simply hold onto a single word, such as “God” or “love.”

Admittedly, there are times when no methods of centering down seem to work. The meeting seems cold and lifeless; or quite often, trivial and irrelevant thoughts dash around in your mind like flies—feeling sore about an argument with somebody, planning what to do next week, or wondering whether you have turned off the oven—whatever it is comes demanding your attention. But don’t worry about these distractions. We all experience them. Just put them gently aside, return to the gate by which you set out on the inward journey, and start again. If that doesn’t work, still don’t be discouraged; if you do no more than start again and again, the hour will not have been wasted.

Moreover, you may benefit in other ways—almost without realizing it. If you are carrying with you a yearning for forgiveness, or a need for healing in body and mind, sitting in the meeting may help you to see things in a new light, an important decision may click into place, or a deep worry about someone dear to you may become more bearable.

In the end, however, when we have done all we can by our own effort, arriving at the still center is something given; it can't be induced or achieved. Occasionally—we don't know why—the gift may be withheld for a time, but if we wait patiently, the gate to the inward path will open again.

Whatever your particular path, and whatever obstacles you may encounter, you ultimately come to an inward place where all images and thoughts and words, however lovely or sublime, fall away and your inner being becomes quiet and peaceful. The silence deepens to a stillness, and as you wait in fellowship with the others, you enter a state not only of peace, but of inspiration. We each respond in our own way, but our responses are drawn together into a unity. It is out of such “gathered” unity, at a depth beyond thought or feeling, that spoken ministry arises.

Speaking out of the silence

In some deeply gathered meetings nothing is spoken at all—those present seem to feel that the silence is

ministry enough for them; but more often than not, one or more people will rise and speak. Speaking is an equally important part of the meeting.

Spoken ministry is naturally a serious and responsible undertaking. Those who speak feel themselves to be in a presence which, however they may name it or avoid naming it, commands their reverence. They feel, too, that they are not merely speaking to all present, but in a sense speaking for them—for their seekings and their needs. Care and sensitivity are therefore needed, and the few conventions that govern the spoken ministry reflect this.

As to just how ministry arises, no precise account is possible. Many Friends who speak say that quite often, when they have centered down, a thought or feeling presents itself to them. It sits there, so to speak, and seems important. If that happens, you ask yourself whether it is a contribution to be shared with the meeting, or only a bright idea, or a subject for debate, or something just for yourself. If you feel sure that it is something to be offered, you ask yourself whether you are called to offer it then. You ponder over this for a time. Meanwhile someone else may speak on a different theme, or—and this is by no means uncommon—someone may make the very contribution you have in mind, and perhaps do so more effectively. If in the end you don't speak on a particular occasion, there is no need to be discouraged; if your contribution is valid, the opportunity to give it will return some day in one form or another.

If you feel moved to contribute after others have spoken, our experience is that it is well to wait a time, and ask yourself whether you will be carrying further what has already been said. It is almost never right to spring up immediately. Admittedly, some self-discipline is required if something excites or upsets you. The ministry of others may not always be helpful to us, but we try to receive it in a loving spirit; for, surprising as it may seem, ministry which is unhelpful to one person may bring comfort and strength to others.

Sometimes—though rarely nowadays—ministry may take the form of prayer. On this subject there is no concise or authoritative view. We would only add that you have no cause to feel ashamed if you find verbal prayer difficult, or even impossible; many of us are in the same situation. Moreover, prayer is not necessarily dependent on words at all, or even on the feeling of having someone to pray to. Whenever you go out toward anyone or anything in a loving and accepting spirit you may be praying without knowing or naming it. And whatever anyone may say about prayer, when anyone is deeply moved to offer spoken prayer in a meeting it is nearly always very helpful.

When a meeting is nearing its end and several people have spoken, we have found it is usually better not to try to add your special bit, but to leave things where they stand. Most people find it helpful if a meeting closes with a few minutes of unbroken silence.

One almost invariable convention is that no person speaks more than once in a meeting, though even this is not an absolutely cast iron rule.

Finally, a simple but important practical point: we enjoin on ourselves to stand and speak audibly and distinctly, remembering that some of those present may not have perfect hearing. One should not worry because one seems to be speaking too loudly. This is far better than failing to be heard due to a hurried or indistinct delivery.

The subject matter of ministry

As you may already have noticed, the subject matter of spoken ministry can vary widely. The Bible and passages from Quaker and other religious literature are sometimes quoted, but ministry often relates to subjects not in any obvious way “religious.” On different occasions I have heard ministry about the nesting habits of wasps, the poetry of Bertold Brecht and a journey to prison in a police van!

A speaker will often start from something which has happened to him or her and has prompted thoughts about it which he or she feels may be helpfully brought into the meeting. Such ministry is, as it were, germinating outside the meeting in those Friends whose hearts and minds are open to receive it.

In any case, we all bring into meeting, whether we realize it or not, everything we have experienced or

thought or read, our hopes and fears, our enthusiasms and perplexities. This doesn't mean however that we encourage ourselves to speak off the top of our heads or yield to emotional outbursts. Nor on the other hand are we encouraged to bring prepared speeches into meeting.

Some subjects call for special caution. Contributions about theological issues need to be very carefully pondered before being offered to the meeting. Some Friends have a gift for deploying scholarly learning in a helpful way, but anything in the nature of argument or disputation is to be avoided. We all have very different approaches both to faith and to religion in general. Judging by what people say, even the basic word "God" means different things to different people.

To some, God seems to be a person to whom they can speak; to others, God appears more as a spirit or even an abstract presence. "Christ" and "Christian" too are understood in different ways. For some Friends, Jesus of Nazareth is their inspiration, and the meeting can be for them a waiting on God as revealed in his life and teachings; but many other Friends acknowledge a debt to the saints and sages of other religions, and to wise people of no declared religion.

These are areas in which it is all too easy to say things that are distressing or disturbing to others. Some of those present may have had other people's

religious ideas imposed on them in the past. They now rejoice in the acceptance of diversity in Quaker meetings; but they can still be upset when something is asserted—especially if it is in a confident or dogmatic tone—from a viewpoint which they have been led to abandon (often with distress) because they have found that it was not “right” for them. It is well to remind ourselves now and again that however strongly we may be convinced of the validity of what we are moved to say, the “crystal truth has many aspects,” and we can never be quite sure that we have perfectly seen the aspect presented to us.

Political themes, too, require special care. Anyone who cares at all about other human beings is bound to feel strongly about war, hunger, homelessness, poverty, damage to the environment and many other issues with political implications. But natural emotions are not enough; a complete transformation of human nature is needed—beginning with ourselves. Ministry on overtly political themes is therefore helpful only if it brings those present to a deeper understanding of the human condition and strengthens them in playing their part in trying to better it.

No amount of explanation can, however, provide a recipe for ministry. Ideally, in a truly “gathered” meeting the silence itself governs both the content and the form of what is spoken. It supports those who speak, and at the same time exerts a gentle discipline on what they say and helps them to find the right words.

Their words do not then break the silence, but arise from it and return to it. Present-day Friend Lorna Marsden has written that “the speaking voice rises and falls on the silence as the droplet rises and falls on the fountain.”

When that happens, the true purpose of words is achieved—which as an early Quaker, Isaac Penington, put it, is to bring people “to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter.”

Who may speak?

After reading thus far, you may feel that you would be so afraid of putting a foot wrong that you would never speak. But that would be mistaken. Yes, the silence does impose a discipline, but it is also the source of the prompting to speak.

If you feel moved to speak, therefore, you should not feel inhibited. Nor does it make any difference that you are a newcomer; everyone is on the same footing in meeting, and like all others you bring something unique to it.

And when all advice and encouragement is done, what really matters is obedience to the inward prompting, whether it is to speak or to remain silent. One day you may simply find that you are on your feet, wondering how you got there, yet feeling confident that the impulse was right and that the right words will be given to you.

The meeting and daily life

Quaker meetings are not just a Sunday activity. They are the core of a total way of life, some aspects of which have become publicly known—in particular, Quakers' opposition to all war and their efforts to improve social conditions—but there is a lot more to it than that.

For our present purpose, the essential point is that what we receive in our meetings strengthens us in our daily lives; and then in turn we bring back our experiences to our meetings, where they may sometimes give rise to ministry. This two-way traffic is not regulated by rules or achieved through theological doctrines or political theories; it is a quiet, unseen process, which is seldom exciting or dramatic, but can in the long run have deep and far-reaching effects. Another early Quaker, Robert Barclay, wrote: "When I came into the silent assemblies of God's people I found the evil in me weakening and the good raised up." Many Quakers since his day have testified to similar experiences.

Quakers are not perfect

All this may sound high-flying and perfectionist, but this letter cannot and should not be concluded without emphasizing that what has here been portrayed is an ideal, and that like most ideals it is seldom fully

attained. Quakers are not as “good” as some people imagine; like other human beings they have their shadow sides and fall short of their aims; and these imperfections invade their meetings. Nevertheless, the underlying spirit has a wonderful way of coming to the surface. To quote Isaac Pennington again:

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but ‘praying for one another,’ and helping one another up with a tender hand.

It only remains to say that whether or not you continue to attend our meetings we all wish you every blessing on your spiritual journey.

Suggested reading for a new attender to Friends worship:

Birkel, Michael. *Silence and Witness: The Quaker Tradition*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004. (Introduction to Quaker thought, practice and spiritual life. Passages from the writings of early Friends are interspersed with discussion of how the principles are understood and practiced today.)

Kelly, Thomas. *A Testament of Devotion*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1941. (A short book of devotional essays about living in communion with the Divine. Still widely read among Friends.)

Punshon, John. *Encounter with Silence: Reflections from the Quaker Tradition*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1987. (A small, rich, and readable book on Quaker worship. The writer speaks personally from his own experience as a Christian Friend.)

Taber, William. *Four Doors to Meeting for Worship*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992. (This pamphlet describes the different levels on which we prepare for and experience silent worship. A good guide to deep and authentic worship.)



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