

Meeting for Worship

Friends' Experience of the Meeting for Worship

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 molds into patience, into innocency, into soberness, into stillness, into stayedness, into quietness, up to God, with his power.

George Fox, 1658

When you come to your meetings ... what do you do? Do you then gather together bodily only, and kindle a fire, compassing yourselves about with the sparks of your own kindling, and so please yourselves, and walk in the "Light of your own fire, and in the sparks which you have kindled?" . . . Or rather, do you sit down in the True Silence, resting from your own Will and Workings, and waiting upon the Lord, with your minds fixed in that Light wherewith Christ has enlightened you, until the Lord breathes life into you, refresheth you, and prepares you, and your spirits and souls, to make you fit for his service, that you may offer unto him a pure and spiritual sacrifice?

William Penn, 1678

As iron sharpeneth iron, the seeing of the faces one of another when both are inwardly gathered into the life, giveth occasion for the life secretly to rise and pass from vessel to vessel. And as many candles lighted and put in one place do greatly augment the light and make it more to shine forth, so when many are gathered together into the same life, there more of the glory of God and his powers appears, to the refreshment of each individual.

Robert Barclay, 1671

On one never-to-be-forgotten Sunday morning, I found myself one of a small company of silent worshippers, who were content to sit down together without words, that each one might feel after and draw near to the Divine Presence, unhindered at least, if not helped, by any human utterance. Utterance I knew was free, should the words be given; and before the meeting was over, a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by an old and apparently untaught man, rising in his place amongst the rest of us. I did not pay much attention to the words he spoke, and I have no recollection of their import. My whole soul was filled with the unutterable peace of the undisturbed opportunity for communion with God, with the sense that at last I had found a place where I might, without the faintest suspicion of insincerity, join with others in simply seeking His presence. To sit down in silence could at least pledge me to nothing; it might open to me (as it did that morning) the very gate of heaven.

Caroline E. Stephen, 1890

Our worship is a deep exercise of our spirits before the Lord, which doth not consist in exercising the natural part or natural mind, either to hear or speak words, or in praying according to what we, of ourselves, can apprehend or comprehend concerning our needs; but we wait, in silence of the fleshly part, to hear with the new ear what God shall please to speak inwardly in our own hearts, or outwardly through others, who speak with the new tongue which he unlooseth and teacheth to speak; and we pray in the spirit, and with a new understanding, as God pleaseth to quicken, draw forth, and open our hearts towards himself.

Isaac Penington, 1661

How does a Quaker Meeting work? Its foundation is the conviction that God is not a distant remote being but a living presence to be discovered in the deep centre of every human being. ... The Quaker experience is that, in the silence, as we are open to one another in love, we help each other by sharing our strengths and weaknesses. The Quaker conviction is that as we go deeper into ourselves we shall eventually reach a still, quiet centre. At this point two things happen simultaneously. Each of us is aware of our unique value as an individual human being, and each of us is aware of our utter interdependence on one another.

George Gorman, 1982

I have never lost the enjoyment of sitting in silence at the beginning of meeting, knowing that everything can happen, knowing the joy of utmost surprise; feeling that nothing is preordained, nothing is set, all is open. The light can come from all sides. The joy of experiencing the Light in a completely different way than one has thought it would come is one of the greatest gifts that Friends' meeting for worship has brought me.

Ursula Franklin, 1979

As I silence myself I become more sensitive to the sounds around me, and I do not block them out. The songs of the birds, the rustle of the wind, children in the playground, the roar of an airplane overhead are all taken into my worship. I regulate my breathing as taught me by my Zen friends, and through this exercise I feel the flow of life within me from my toes right through my whole body. I think of myself like the tree planted by the "rivers of water..." in Psalm 1, sucking up God's gift of life and being restored. Sometimes I come to meeting for worship tired and weary, and I hear the words of Jesus, "Come unto me, all that labour and are weary, and I will give you rest." And having laid down my burden, I feel refreshed both physically and spiritually. This leads me on to whole-hearted adoration and thanksgiving for all God's blessings. My own name, Tayeko, means "child of many blessings" and God has surely poured them upon me. My heart overflows with a desire to give Him something in return. I have nothing to give but my own being, and I offer Him my thoughts, words, and actions of each day, and whisper, "Please take me as I am. "

Tayeko Yamanouchi, 1980

The Light Within

The Light Within is the fundamental and immediate experience for Friends. It is that which guides each of us in our everyday lives and brings us together as a community of faith. It is, most importantly, our direct and unmediated experience of the Divine.

Friends have used many different terms or phrases to designate the source and inner certainty of our faith – a faith which we have gained by direct experience. The Inward Light, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Spirit of Truth, the Divine Principle, the Christ Within, the Seed, Inward Teacher, Presence, and the Inner Light are examples of such phrases. George Fox's *Journal* refers to "that Inward Light, Spirit, and Grace by which all might know their salvation" and to "that Divine Spirit which would lead them into all truth." Fox wrote: "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition" and encouraged Friends "to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one." Many Friends interpret "that of God" as another designation for the Light Within.

The Light Within is not the same as the conscience or moral faculty. The conscience is a human faculty, which is conditioned by education and the cultural environment; it is not, therefore, an infallible guide to moral practice. It should nevertheless be attended to, for it is one of the faculties through which the Light shines. Friends are encouraged to test their leadings by seeking clearness through direct communion in the Meeting for Worship, through the clearness process (see pp. XX-XX) and through other ways. Such testing enhances and clarifies insight so that the conscience may be purged of misconceptions and become more truly obedient to the Light Within. When conscience has been transformed by experiencing the Light, it gives more reliable guidance even though it may seem to point in an unexpected direction.

Friends' experience is that following the Light Within brings a release of the spirit and a state of peace that are independent of the tangible results of the action taken. Spiritual power arises from living in harmony with the Divine Will. George Fox and others often spoke of the power they experienced in times of need, and of that relationship between power and the Light. For instance, Fox writes that "the power of God sprang through me" and he admonishes us "hearken to the Light, that ye may feel the power of God in every one of you."

Continuing obedience to the Light increases our gratitude for God's gifts. Among these gifts are an awareness of enduring values, the joy of life, and the ability to resolve problems in accord with Divine leading, as individuals or as a Meeting. Under the guidance of the Light, the monthly meeting is enabled to use and transform the aspirations and judgments of its members. This waiting on the Light helps the Meeting make decisions and face undertakings in a spirit detached from self-interest or prejudice. Fundamental Quaker testimonies such as equality, simplicity, peace, integrity, and community have arisen from a deep sense of individual and corporate responsibility guided by the Light Within.

Recognizing "that of God" is in every person overcomes our separation and our differences from others and leads to a sympathetic awareness of their need and a sense of responsibility toward them. Friends believe that the more widely and clearly the Light is recognized and followed, the more will humanity come into accord. "Therefore," writes George Fox, "in the Light wait, where unity is."

Worship

Life grows from freely adopted self-discipline maintained by prayer, persuasion, the guidance of the Spirit and the motions of love.

T. Canby Jones, Friends and the Peace Churches, 1972

Worship is our response to what we feel to be of ultimate importance. Worship is always possible, alone or in company, in silence, in music or speech, in stillness or in dance. It is never confined to place or time or form and it is open to everyone.

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 a search for communion with God and the offering of ourselves – body and soul – for the doing of God’s will. The sense of worship can be experienced in the awe we feel in the silence of a Meeting for Worship or in the awareness of our profound connectedness to nature and its power. In worship we know repentance and forgiveness in the acknowledgment of God as the ultimate source of our being, and the serenity of accepting God’s will for our lives. Individual leadings are often made clearer by reference to the life and teachings of Jesus and by the transforming power of the Inner Light. From worship there comes a fresh understanding of the commandment to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27 NRSV).

Careful listening to the Inward Teacher can lead to fresh openings: an in-pouring of love, insight, and interdependence. True listening can also bring the worshiper to new and sometimes troubling perceptions, including clear leadings that may be a source of pain and anxiety; yet it can also bring such wholeness of heart that hard tasks can become a source of joy. Even when we worship while torn with our own pain or that of another, it is in worship that we discover new strength for what faces us in our everyday lives.

Each experience of worship is different. There is no one right way to prepare for spiritual communion, no set practice to follow when worship grows from expectant waiting in the Spirit. Vital worship depends far more on a deeply felt longing for God than upon any particular practice.

“Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”

Matthew 7:7 NRSV

“And one of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”. There is no other commandment greater than these.’”

Mark 12:28-32 NRSV

The Corporate Meeting for Worship

The Meeting for Worship is the heart of the Monthly Meeting and of the Religious Society of Friends. It draws us together in the enlightening and empowering presence of God, sending us forth with renewed vision and commitment. Its basis is direct communion with God. The Meeting for Worship is the only Quaker practice which has existed from the beginning of the Religious Society of Friends. Meetings for Worship are held at established times, usually once a week; appointed or “called” Meetings for Worship are arranged by the Monthly Meeting at the time of marriages, memorial meetings or other special occasions.

Friends find it useful to come to Meeting with hearts and minds prepared for worship by a practice of daily prayer, meditation, and study. Some find help through Bible Study in the Quaker manner such as that described by Joanne and Larry Spears in the pamphlet *Friendly Bible Study*, thoughtful reflection, listening to the Inward Teacher, and the experience of others in the course of daily life and service. We thereby deepen our awareness of the wonder of God and of God’s love, and acquire the words with which to understand and to express that awareness as we worship.

As Friends arrive for Meeting, such preparation helps us set aside our preoccupation with ourselves and our affairs, and to settle into worship.

The first that enters into the place of your meeting ... turn in thy mind to the light, and wait upon God singly, as if none were present but the Lord; and here thou art strong. Then the next that comes in, let them in simplicity of heart sit down and turn in to the same light, and wait in the Spirit; and so all the rest coming in, in the fear of the Lord, sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the light. Those who are brought to a pure still waiting upon God in the Spirit are come nearer to the Lord than words are; for God is spirit and in the spirit He is worshipped.

Alexander Parker, 1660

The first thing that I do is to close my eyes and then to still my body in order to get it as far out of the way as I can. Then I still my mind and let it open to God in silent prayer, for the meeting, as we understand it, is the meeting place of the worshiper with God. I thank God inwardly for this occasion, for the week's happenings, for what I have learned at his hand, for my family, for the work there is to do, for Himself. And I often pause to enjoy Him. Under His gaze I search the week, and feel the piercing twinge of remorse that comes at this, and this, and this, and at the absence of this, and this, and this. Under His eyes I see again – for I have often been aware of it at the time – the right way. I ask his forgiveness of my faithlessness and ask for strength to meet this matter when it arises again. There have been times when I had to reweave a part of my life under this auspice.

I hold up persons before God in intercession, loving them under his eyes – seeing them with him, longing for his healing and redeeming power to course through their lives. I hold up certain social situations, certain projects. At such a time I often see things that I may do in company with or that are related to this person or this situation. I hold up the persons in the meeting and their needs, as I know them, to God.

Douglas V. Steere, 1937

Worship in meeting may thus begin with stilling the mind and body, letting go of tensions and everyday worries, feeling the encompassing presence of others, and opening oneself to the Spirit. It may include meditation, reflection on a remembered passage from the Bible or other devotional literature, silent prayer, thanksgiving, praise of God, consideration of one's actions, remorse, request for forgiveness, or search for direction. Even in times of personal spiritual emptiness, Friends find it useful to be present in Meeting for Worship.

Worshiping together strengthens the sense of the corporate body and deepens the act of worship itself. Such communal worship is like a living organism whose individual but interdependent members are essential to one another and to the life of the greater whole. It is like the luminous unity and individual fulfillment that arises when musicians, responding to the music before them, offer up their separate gifts in concert. Friends sometimes use Paul's image and speak of the Meeting for Worship as a "body whose head is Christ" (Taken from "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." I Cor. 12:27 NRSV and "And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." Ephesians 1:22-23 NRSV). The gifts and participation of each member are important in maintaining and enriching the spiritual life of the meeting for worship. Corporate worship is distinct from individual worship. There is a power that can often be experienced in the group that is much greater than that with an individual alone.

There is a renewal of spirit when we turn away from worldly matters to rediscover inward serenity. Friends know from experience the validity of Jesus' promise that "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20 NRSV). Often we realize our hopes for a heightened sense of the presence of God through the cumulative power of the worship of the group, communicated in silent as well as in vocal ministry. When we experience such a profound and evident sense of oneness with God and with one another, we speak of a "Gathered" or "Covered" Meeting for Worship.

Friends gather for worship in quiet waiting upon God. We come together out of our care for one another and out of our shared hunger to know God, to follow the leading of the Spirit, to feel with clarity our shortcomings and the reality of forgiveness, to give voice to our anguish, faith, praise, joy, and thanksgiving. At the close of the meeting for worship, we shake or hold hands in acknowledgment of our commitment to one another and to God, and go forth with renewed trust in the power and reality of God's grace and love.

In a truly covered meeting an individual who speaks takes no credit to himself for the part he played in the unfolding of the worship. . . . For the feeling of being a pliant instrument of the Divine Will characterizes true speaking "in the Life." Under such a covering an individual emerges into vocal utterance, frequently without fear and trembling, and subsides without self-consciousness into silence when his part is played. For One who is greater than all individuals has become the meeting place of the group, and He becomes the leader and director of worship. With wonder one hears the next speaker, if there be more, take up another aspect of the theme of the meeting. No jealousy, no regrets that he didn't think of saying that, but only gratitude that the angel has come and troubled the waters and that many are finding healing through the one Life. A gathered meeting

is no place for the enhancement of private reputations, but for self-effacing pliancy and obedience to the whispers of the Leader.

Thomas Kelly, 1945

Meeting for worship can be more than just an occasion on which one's private religious needs are satisfied. Silent devotion should lead to an awareness that the meeting is less and less a place we choose ourselves, and more and more a place to which, out of love, God has called us. To understand this is to sense the meaning of those lovely phrases about the community of faith being the body of Christ.

John Punshon, 1987

Communion and Communication

One day, being under a strong exercise of spirit, I stood up and said some words in a meeting; but not keeping close to the Divine opening, I said more than was required of me. Being soon sensible of my error, I was afflicted in mind some weeks without any light or comfort, even to that degree that I could not take satisfaction in anything. I remembered God, and was troubled, and in the depths of my distress he had pity on me, and sent the Comforter. I then felt forgiveness for my offense; my mind became calm and quiet, and I was truly thankful to my gracious Redeemer for his mercies. About six weeks after this, feeling the spring of Divine love opened, and a concern to speak, I said a few words in a meeting, in which I found peace. Being thus humbled and disciplined under the cross, my understanding became more strengthened to distinguish the pure spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart, and which taught me to wait in silence sometimes many weeks together, until I felt that rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet, through which the Lord speaks to his flock.

John Woolman, 1740

Direct communion with God is a wholeness that transcends mere communication and it constitutes the essential life of the Meeting for Worship. Into its living stillness may come leadings and fresh insights that are purely personal, not meant to be shared. At other times they are meant for the Meeting at large to hear. It is incumbent on the Friend receiving the message to make the sometimes difficult discernment if the message is meant for the meeting as a whole or the individual.

When a leading is to be shared, the worshiper feels a compelling inward call to vocal ministry. The very name "Quaker" is by tradition derived from the evident quaking of early Friends witnessing under the power of the Spirit. Ministry today may sometimes be accompanied by such outward signs, and many feel the inward quaking. Vocal ministry may take many forms, such as prayer, praise of God, song, teaching, witnessing, sharing. These messages may center upon a single, vital theme; often apparently unrelated leadings are later discovered to have an underlying unity. Such ministry and prayer may answer the unrecognized or unvoiced needs of other seekers.

When someone accepts the call of the Spirit to speak, fellow worshipers are likewise called to listen with openness of minds and hearts. Reticent and tender spirits should feel the Meeting community's

loving encouragement to give voice, even if haltingly, to the message that may be struggling to be born within them. Friends whose thought has been long developing and whose learning and experience are profound serve the meeting best when they, like all others, wait patiently for the prompting of the Inward Teacher. Anyone moved to speak should first allow others time to absorb and respond inwardly to what has already been said.

Friends should not put obstacles including their own feelings of unworthiness in the way of the call to speak. Deciding in advance to speak or not, or feeling a duty to speak to provide some balance between silence and the spoken word, interferes with the guidance of the Spirit. Even if not a word is spoken, a Meeting for Worship can be profoundly nurturing.

All present should be mindful that spiritual opportunities entail responsibilities as well, including attention to the time of assembling and consideration for those already settled. Speaking carried on in a spirit of debate, lecturing, discussion or news reporting is destructive to the life of the Meeting for Worship and of the meeting community. Friends' experience has shown that it is not helpful to answer or rebut what has been said previously during Meeting for Worship. Any who habitually settle into silent reading or sit in inattentive idleness cut themselves off from their fellow worshipers and from the Spirit. If hindrances to worship occur within a meeting for worship, members of Worship and Ministry or others as appropriate should move quickly and in love to provide counsel.

Friends moved to vigorous support of causes need to voice their insights outside of Meeting for Worship in brief and sensitive ways. Similar sensitivity should be practiced by those who bring material to be posted or shared with the Meeting community.

I think it's extremely important that we learn to listen. Listening is a lost art. And when I say learn to listen I mean listen to our spouses, listen to our children, listen to our fellow believers in our communities of faith. But I also want us to learn to listen to God. I know from personal experience that God speaks through the Scriptures. He speaks through preaching. He speaks through friends. But He also speaks directly. We can know that, but we must make time and space and silence in our lives if we are to learn this in real ways and be the beneficiaries of His leading and His guidance directly. We are told in the 46th Psalm, "Be still and know that I am God." In another translation it says, "Stop fighting and know that I am God." Let's take time to listen to God.

Kara Cole Newell, 1982

It is unfortunate that much formal training in ministry does not even recognize that... inward preparation exists. In our world of degrees, exams, and training programs, it is easy to forget that ministry is not primarily a task; it is a way of being in the world. It is living in relationship with God and being a witness to God. Ministry is being able to listen to the Word of God and thereby have a word of life to share with others. Fundamentally, we do not do ministry. We are ministers.

Sandra Cronk, 1991