

Silence and Expectant Waiting

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 may 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 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 mediations 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 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.

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