

APPROACHES TO MEETING FOR WORSHIP

Reflections and Useful Practices



This collection of reflections, independently written by 11 members and attenders of Belgium & Luxembourg Yearly Meeting, has been published to stimulate consideration of how and why we worship as Quakers, in Meeting for Worship. The Friends concerned have not been named.

APPROACHES TO MEETING FOR WORSHIP

1

Centring down begins on Sunday morning before Meeting. In the quiet of the morning, I gather my thoughts, sifting through the events of the week. What do I wish that I had said or done differently? Or, indeed, not at all? What were the moments when I sought guidance?

The walk to Meeting is another stage in the process of centring down. Giving myself plenty of time means I can meander and dawdle, alive to the sights and sounds of Jourdain market. I sometimes think my worldview was influenced by the Richard Scarry books that I read as a child, *“What do people do all day?”*, and *“Busy, Busy world”*. Another big influence in taking life more slowly was the novel *“The discovery of slowness”* by the German writer, Sten Nadolny. I also think about the words of George Fox, who invites us to walk *“cheerfully”* over the Earth, seeking that of God in everyone. I find that once you do so, it’s difficult to stop.

Sometimes I think about all the Quaker Meetings that are about to start all over the world. People

walking, driving, cycling, on a bus, tram, or train, travelling to gather together for worship. Sunday, for me, is First Day, and holds such promise. I remember a discussion in Meeting about the apostolic succession, and about how the Catholic Church had a chain of popes going back to the beginning of Christianity. A Friend told about the Quaker way, in which we have a chain of worshipers shaking hands with each other down the years, to link us to the first Quakers.

I mostly come to Meeting in Brussels; but when I travel, I like to visit other Meetings. There is an open greeting at the door of the Meeting House, a murmur of conversation, a taking off of coats and scarves. Smells of coffee. Mobile phones being switched to silent.

A skylight at Quaker House in Brussels draws light into the heart of the building. I approach the Meeting room slowly, wondering which one of the temperamental floorboards will creak. I remember the feeling of nervousness and excitement as I walked into my first Meeting.

Some Friends may already be there. I remember that Meeting starts when the first person enters the room. Entering into shared silence is a very

special feeling. There is something welcoming, reverential, holy about it.

There is an obvious physical reality to our Meeting room, the faded carpet that is so familiar, with its pink and yellow flowers; the rich, golden wallpaper; the stained-glass hearts. Try counting them the next time that you are there. But as I settle and centre down, I gradually seem to distance myself from place. This is in spite of my feet being square on the floor, and my senses open to the world. I can hear the buses changing gear as they come down Ambiorix, dogs barking, laughter.

Some of the techniques that I draw on in the process of centring down in Meeting derive from the Alexander Technique. Writing about 100 years ago, F.M. Alexander, an actor, encouraged his students to 'leave themselves alone', essentially returning the body to its natural, non-self-conscious state. Having the body open and relaxed strikes me as a necessary pre-condition for having the soul open and receptive. There are some breathing exercises that can help, or focussing on the third eye, or repeating a mantra. Eyes closed, or half-closed.

So, for me, begins the journey of moving into silence, of bringing stillness into my heart, and, quite simply, waiting.



2

‘Come to Meeting with hearts and minds prepared’ is one of the advices that speaks to me. I try to set aside at least ten minutes every day to wait silently on God. Sometimes I think of a passage from the Bible and at other times an advice or query. I find that all of these help me for when I come to Meeting on Sundays. This discipline is for me a way of opening myself up to allow light and space into my everyday work. This is one of the ways in which I put into practice the idea of life being sacramental.

Our Quaker worship for me is based on the silent waiting on God, the Spirit, the Divine. For me the silence is not an empty silence it is a way of being open and willing to be led, to listen both inwardly to the Spirit and outwardly to each other which might lead me to experience anticipation, stillness, peace, healing and unity. This does not

happen every time I go to Meeting but when it does, it allows me to grow spiritually and be refreshed from the struggles and worries of daily life.

One of the ways that I find helpful when “centring” down in Meeting is to reflect that Quakers have been meeting in silence for over 350 years and that for early Quakers this silent worship was based on a deep, experiential, religious search within the Christian tradition. When I think of this, I feel joined in spirit with those early seekers and this both fills me with peace and challenges me.

For me being in a relationship means working at building at strong basis of trust, listening, understanding and love. This is the way I also see my relationship with God. Meeting for worship is an opportunity to open myself up to the promptings of love and truth of God in my heart. Sitting in stillness can take me to a place of communion with God and with others in Meeting.

Meeting for worship is for me a way of dedicating myself to God and to give thanks for all the blessings in my life. I don't always feel thankful in

Meeting as there are times when I'm troubled and maybe angry, resentful or sad. At these times, Meeting helps me towards self awareness and self-knowledge. I can then reflect on what motivates me to act in the way I act and to think about the consequences of my actions in my relationship with those close to me or with those I'm in contact with.

Meeting for worship is not just an individual exercise. The strength of Meeting for me is that it is a corporate undertaking. Meeting for worship is an act of communion between the people in Meeting and the divine. Together we are responsible for creating the quality of the Meeting and for the deepening of our spiritual experience. 'Where two or more meet in my name, I'm there among them.' This, for me, is a promise that gives me encouragement when I find Meeting empty and unfulfilling.

I believe that we all have a yearning to grow spiritually and finding a group of people like-minded is an important step towards this growth. One of the things that I would want from our Meeting is for it to be a spiritual community committed to mutual support and accountability

where we can take our place and are able to come to spiritual maturity, discernment and a deepening understanding of that of God in everyone.



3

I was asked by a child in Children's Meeting, 'What are the grown-ups doing in there, sitting with their eyes shut? Are they asleep?' This led me to think about the meaning and purpose of my own silent stillness in Meeting for Worship.

One of the things I particularly appreciate about the Meeting for Worship is that there is no priest or minister directing a service – it means that I have the chance to develop a spiritual life at my own pace in direct communication with God. It is not a lonely individual activity, because many members of the Meeting are experienced and share their own findings. It works both in a Meeting for Worship and in a Meeting for Business so long as everyone present is focused on seeking the will of God, or the most loving outcome for the matter in hand. This involves

those who vocalise their views and those who uphold the meeting in silence. There seems to be something happening that allows the balancing of individual insights with the shared wisdom of the group. But it is not easy; it demands effort and awareness.

Early Friends called themselves Children of the Light – they were transformed by George Fox’s way of worship, as was Margaret Fell; ‘I saw it was the truth, and I could not deny it’ (*Quaker Faith and Practice* 19.07). This changed her outlook and way of life from that moment on. My own attentive seeking in hopeful expectation is what I would like to be the inspiration for all my daily activities. But being human I fail. I have to keep reminding myself to attend to the Light within. It sounds simple: stand still in the Light, or, Be still and know that I am God. I have come to realise that I do not have to go dashing about searching for faith – for me it is more a change of attitude. I like to be aware of all aspects of life, but when I need to take action I think of it as standing still and changing direction, maybe a quarter turn to the right, or whichever direction the light is. It is also a trusting that I will be helped with whatever challenges me, even

though I will not know what form that help will take. This knowing that I will be helped gives me confidence, so that I gain the strength to be patient and unafraid of the future.

Most Quakers I have met find that their batteries feel recharged when they come out of a Meeting for Worship. It is much more than that. For me it is a sort of trusting that if I listen and give attention to my deepest inner promptings I will be answered. I might feel stuck or shattered at some points in my life, but I have to hold on to the knowledge that there is always new life and that gradually a way forward opens up.

I like the way Quakers speak from their own experience. We all have different experiences and what we discover about the non-material world is true for us as individuals, but also often resonates with others – perhaps that's why Quakers are so voluble during tea and coffee time after a silent meeting. We agree to share common values that feel real and important to us as a group and relevant to us as individuals. This is sometimes arrived at after much vigorous discussion and listening to opposing viewpoints. I like the way that Quakers allow extreme views to

be expressed and trust the group to reach a robust decision.

Most people who come to Meeting for Worship a few times have experienced, even if fleetingly, something of the inner life we seek to guide us. I find it important to pay attention to this, to nurture this seed, to give it time. For me there are often opportunities when I am out walking. In our busy lives it is so easy to be overtaken by everyday concerns that we fail to connect with the spiritual depths that can give meaning and purpose to our actions. Jo Vellacot, in *Quaker Faith and Practice* 20.05, compares living in the Light to doing housework in semi-darkness, only occasionally remembering to open the blinds, and she ends with the words, '.....but in fact I perhaps don't altogether want to take the demands involved, don't want to see all the dust in my life.' Personally, I need to work hard, discern right actions, attend to friends, deal with difficult people, be compassionate ... the list is endless. For myself, I like to keep it simple and remember the image of the ocean of light overcoming the ocean of darkness.



4

Preparing for Meeting is an on-going process, and you could say that it begins as soon as the previous Meeting ends. Coming to Meeting calmly and with a still mind provides us with the best preparation for the silent hour. Some of us find it helpful to get up early enough to prepare in an unhurried way and to walk or cycle to Meeting. Others may see weekday life as part of a spiritual whole in which work, rest, leisure, diet, study and reflexion are all part of a longer term preparation process. In a sense, Meeting for Worship never ends: we hope to take the inner stillness, if not the silence, out into the world with us as one Meeting ends and bring it back with us as we enter the next week's silent hour.

Once we arrive at the Meeting House, we try to continue this stillness and bring it into the Meeting with us. Remembering that the Meeting has most probably already begun, it is often helpful to leave conversations that are more than simple, quiet greetings until the social time after

Meeting has finished. The Meeting begins for each of us as we walk calmly up the stairs, turn the door handle and take our place with the least disturbance possible – all of this helps us to sink into the waiting silence. We bring the stillness in with us like a seed to plant in the waiting group, in the hope that it will grow in us, and our fellow Friends.

In this early stage it is also important to settle ourselves as comfortably as we can so that we shall not be distracted by physical discomfort later in the hour of waiting. For each person this may be different, but many Friends have discovered that sitting upright with feet placed flat on the floor and with hands placed gently on your lap loosely and comfortably clasped is often a helpful way to sit. Eyes slightly lowered towards the floor in front of you or focused on the table in the centre of the waiting group, or even on the candle that burns there steadily, can be helpful. Being aware of gentle breathing in and out helps to steady our minds and calms us for the period of silent waiting.

Once we are settled, there are a number of ways to begin the process of centring down, and each of us must find out for him/herself, what works best. I like to look around those who are gathered together and think about their lives and situations; as the *Advices and Queries* say, 'enter with tender sympathy into the joys and sorrows of each other's lives'. This may lead on to thinking of other Friends who are not present, and then move outwards to others, Quaker or not, whose existence we are unaware of, and beyond those to the whole world. Being thankful for the miracle of our own existence and that of the world, contemplating the fact that all is ever changing and will one day be no more. In this way, we come to feel 'unity with the creation' as George Fox said.

It can also be helpful to focus your mind on a text that inspires or challenges you turning your thoughts inward towards the calm that you are encouraging, nurturing. *Advices and Queries*, with their pithy character, can be very helpful in this process. 'Take heed dear Friends to the promptings of love and truth in your heart ... Live adventurously ... Let your life speak ... Know one

another in the things that are eternal ... Enter imaginatively into one another's joys and sorrows ... Consider it possible that you may be wrong.' *Quaker Faith and Practice* is also a good source of contemplative material, as is the Bible and other writings from both the Christian and other faith traditions. For some, poetry speaks directly to the heart whether its theme is overtly spiritual or not.

'In stillness there is fullness. In fullness there is nothingness. In nothingness there are all things' (17th-century Quaker ministry by an unknown Friend). I also often think of this in the opening stages of Meeting.

As the Meeting progresses, you may find that you continue to simply focus your attention on ideas that arise in your mind, at other times it may seem as if you are going nowhere in particular as your thoughts swing back and forth through the everyday and banal. Do not fight these thoughts, but gently place other calmer reflections alongside them and let things settle. Sometimes, the hour passes and you have still not gone beyond this stage. Alternatively, you may feel

that you have passed beyond thought into a realm of pure silent feeling where you are 'beyond what words can say'. Either of these two states may plant in you a seed of insight that urges you to share your experience with those gathered in the silence. You may also develop a special openness to the spoken contributions of others in the Meeting. Both of these may help you to move onto a deeper plane of experience. When many of those at a Meeting enter this state, we call this a 'gathered meeting' and it can be a very wonderful experience. At its best, a Quaker Meeting is outwardly simple, while, in fact, not being at all simple. It takes practice and patience and its reward is a calm inner strength.

The Meeting comes to an end when the Friends whose task it is to close the Meeting, shake or join hands with those on either side of them. This is a symbol of friendship and peace, unity and equality – important concepts for Quakers over the centuries. Our task is to take this message and practice out into the everyday world and bring it back enriched the following week.



5

Ideally, Meeting for Worship should be an extension of how we live our daily lives, but I often find this difficult to remember. I will therefore deal only with my own practices during Meeting as I know others have covered the subject more ably than I ever could.

It's important to prepare physically for Meeting before entering the meeting room, in order to minimise disturbance for other Friends: removing coats, switching off phones, finding handkerchiefs etc. It should be possible to sit down quickly and quietly immediately on entering the room, without any fussing with belongings.

I find it helpful to sit in an upright position, both feet on the floor and my hands in my lap, either lightly clasped or with upturned palms. Periodically throughout Meeting I remind myself of one of the tips taught in the Alexander Technique: imagine you are suspended from a cord attached to the crown of your head.

I start the process of centring down by attempting to come into the present, which starts by becoming aware of my breathing. I find it useful to mentally repeat the word 'one' or 'now' on each outgoing breath. The next stage is to become aware of all sensory input, starting with the feeling of my weight on the chair, my feet on the floor, and the touch of my clothes against my skin. The sense of hearing is also important. I try to acknowledge and accept all sounds, within the meeting room and outside, letting my hearing run out to the furthest sounds, reminding myself that there are no 'bad' or disruptive sounds. I try to keep my eyes downturned – or occasionally closed – throughout Meeting and avoid directly looking at other Friends. Although worship is a joint activity, I feel that we are all entitled to privacy in this quiet time. I also try the more difficult exercise of holding an image of the room, the house, the square, moving outwards through town, country, continent, planet etc. and my physical place in all this. If I am having difficulty with the above exercises, I read something suitable for a few minutes before starting again.

I periodically repeat the centring exercises throughout Meeting. Each time I become aware that my mind has wandered away from the present – and it may have been absent for quite long periods before I realise this – I observe the passing thoughts without self-criticism and let them go. If I am capable of observing my thoughts, I cannot *be* those thoughts. Some part of me that is nearer to the centre of my being is acting as the observer – or the ‘watchman’ as it’s called in some traditions.

The urge to fidget – moving my legs, scratching my nose etc. – can sometimes be distracting, especially if I’m feeling tired. I find the best way to deal with this is to put off the movement for as long as I possibly can before giving into it. This gradually increases the interval before the next fidgeting spell returns. A more personal problem is the tightening of my jaw and throat muscles, which I become aware of and relax every few minutes throughout Meeting.

In meetings which I perceive as being ‘gathered’, the shared silence quickly starts to feel like a presence in the room, a presence that both includes and transcends the individual presences

of the Friends around me. On rare occasions, this can seem almost palpable, and I have to focus on my breathing to avoid becoming ecstatic, which would be a distraction. However, this kind of experience – though welcome – does not seem to me to be the real point of Meeting for Worship, but rather a manifestation of Grace to be gratefully accepted and acknowledged without any expectation that it will be repeated.

In those meetings that are less ‘gathered’ I sometimes find feelings of irritation arising in me. This may be due to traffic noises coming from the street, but more often to the sound of Friends constantly squirming on squeaky chairs or flicking noisily through books. I also find myself occasionally becoming irritated or even angry during ministries, either because they seem to me to be overly long and self-indulgent or because I strongly disagree with the views being expressed. At times like this, I try to remember that it doesn’t matter if a ministry doesn’t speak to my condition, and that it might be helpful to someone else. In any case, events that I perceive as disruptive are grist to the mill. They remind me that I don’t own the silence and offer an opportunity to work on the task in hand, which is

to remain present and centred. I also find it helpful to turn my hands palms-up if I'm feeling powerless to stop the irritation – whether in Meeting or elsewhere. This position produces a feeling of surrendering to the negative stimulus, thus allowing it to drain away. If all else fails, I meditate on my preferred Christian mantra for a while, which deepens my sense of connection with those around me.

And finally, if I feel the need to minister myself I wait for as long as possible without speaking to try and establish whether it's a true leading or just something originating in the ego. I find that only about one in four passes the test!



6

I look forward to the shared calmness of Meeting. Just the thought of being able to sit in collective worship with others, united in our very diverse backgrounds and experiences, gives me hope. Knowing that we view an Infinite Being from many stances, yet find common ground in the things which are essential and eternal helps

me to overcome the despair I sometimes feel during the week when I hear the news just once too often.

I try (clearly not always successfully) to come to Meeting with heart and mind prepared. Waiting for the Spirit to reveal some truth, sometimes about matters I have been agonizing over the preceding week. Just entering the Meeting Room calms me down and gives me a sense of being in the right place. And in the stillness, I am sometimes surprised by the thoughts and Ministry of others which reflect on an aspect of what has been in my mind from the start.

For me, one of the most significant and important texts from the Bible is 'Be still and know that I am God'. Often I centre down by meditating on those words. What do I understand at that particular time to be the nature of God? This is not a total constant for me, because aspects shift as I grow and change. I focus on what it means in the context of our current existence. This exercise helps to provide an entry point to my worship. I attempt to see its relevance in applying its significance to all that

might be going on, not only personally, but also our community of Friends and the world at large. And no matter what state I find myself in, this can provide the starting point for making sense of all that has gone before and is now going on around me, both in my life and in the wider world. I find it a constant and ephemeral mystery – what do I understand by ‘knowing’? And what difference does it make to me/ to us as a Meeting if I believe I do know that there is a God and struggle to understand the nature of this God in a world which is so complex and exhausting?

I also often reflect as a starting point on what it means to meet that of God in every person. It is a challenge that deeply moves me, mainly because although it seems such a straightforward, even simple, idea, its carrying out in the practical sense is such an enormous challenge. But I believe it sets us the goal to strive for, because the idea puts to the test the ‘otherness’ of fellow human beings behind which it’s so easy to hide. So every prejudice, false idea, preconception or anger against another person that I might be feeling is held up to a scrutiny by such a seemingly straightforward notion.

Not surprisingly, I find the experience of reading *Advices and Queries* alone completely different to when it is read aloud as Ministry. Going to Meeting is sharing in community - the gatheredness of engaging in our deepest inner self, whether or not overtly expressed. It gives me the strength to move forward, even when I don't want to do much, other than run away from the numerous problems around in the world. Together, we gather an understanding of what it is to work and move together as community and all the joys and frustrations contained therein!



7

I always have trouble centring down, and I cannot remember a time when I have successfully cleared my mind of thoughts that get in the way. I begin by sitting quietly (and most times I only do this), and wait. After a while I become aware that my hands are folded tightly, so I pay attention to these and keep my hands unfolded, not tightly

wrapped around each other. Closing my eyes helps, as does looking at the candle flame. I prefer to have a visible focus, and a candle works for me.

When I feel my attention wandering, I look back at the candle, and recall the words from one of Gospels from Jesus, 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I also'. This concentrates my mind properly into a better state of humility and offering up of whatever I am, and waiting for something to emerge, or not. It doesn't get any more complex than that.

If I were to feel satisfied and as if I had achieved something after Meeting for Worship, it would be because a problem in my life had found a solution, or something that had been making me feel unsettled, snappy, or worried, had become clear and a way forward made possible. Things emerge from the depths for me during Meeting for Worship. Though I might feel, at the end of the hour, that I had thought of nothing but To Do lists, and smug daydreams or re-enactments of situations that troubled me, there was clearly a need for me to process these things that were

bothering me, to be set out in the open, before resolution can happen, or a way forward can be perceived. I am full of mental energy after Meeting, and have plans bubbling to be carried out as soon as I've left the Meeting House.



8

Meeting

Finding the circle,
Drag footed, or buoyant,
Reaching the meeting house,

Wooden, or gilded,
Empty, sometimes cramped,
Settling to sit.

Bid thoughts quietly leave.

Though they linger and
Delve into darkness or sun,
Flit dragonfly -winged

Over the surface
Of yesterday, or of later,
Mesmeric and swift,

Watch them for a while, iridescent,
Then bid them go again
Elsewhere, beyond that pane.

Now the place they emptied
Blossoms with the tumble
Of blood in the veins.

The heart's humble bloom

Of blood flow flowering;
Alive to the circle

Each breath is like a gift.
In the lift of lung and longing,
Growing and slowly gathering,

Silence swells like tide.

Words here are woven
Into the circle
Or slip wayward,

Incidental, or inspired,
Like grain or gravel.
Or like birds

High above, distant
And descending

In spirals to swoop

On the trembling

Prey below, talons

Piercing into prayer,

Grasping the soul,

Then rising into nowhere,

Without trace, while

We sink into Silence.

Rippled circles of worship,

Now a wisp of grace

On water undisturbed.



'Heart and mind prepared' is the phrase that is always in my head, thinking of Meeting for Worship. Preparation for us is essential, as a family, though it has often more to do with the physical practicalities. We agree the intention to go in advance, but it always has to remain a last-minute decision. Upon waking there are a number of questions to be answered. Will I be well enough to get washed and dressed? Will I need help? Can it be given, if so? Can I cope with the ride to Brussels? Can my partner manage the drive? Can I handle physically sitting through Meeting for an hour? Will I need one of the soft chairs to be brought in for me? Is our son up to going? He varies, sometimes he is very keen, sometimes he would rather avoid it altogether. It seems to be entirely ruled by mood, but is still important to keep account of. What is the traffic likely to be like? Are there any cycling competitions in our area, or any grand event at the Expo, which could slow us down enormously and make the journey even more taxing.

When all these things are considered, and the answer is: 'Yes, let's go', we have to get ready,

and by then we are usually under pressure of time.

By the time we are all settled in the car, and on our way, there is quite a lot of background noise in my mind, including the excitement of being able to attend, and looking forward to seeing Friends again. Trying to get that to calm down is the true exercise in getting my heart and mind prepared.

Then there is the discipline when arriving to avoid getting into conversation and catching up with Friends before going into Meeting, as there often is lack of time. I am always acutely aware that Meeting for Worship starts as soon as the first person has entered the room. I wish to be respectful of that, as soon as I go into the building. Usually, though, I get distracted. Getting my son in with the children, facing the stairs, seeing Friends after what has mostly been a long time since our attendance is so irregular.

This continues into Meeting for Worship itself. Eyes scan the room and the people in it. Who do I know? What is happening in their lives? Eye contact is made, with that nod or smile of recognition. To some extent this process

continues all the way through Meeting. Meanwhile there is silence, first only around me, and then little by little stillness comes inside too.

It is a fine balance between the intense sense of peace that this stillness brings, and the restlessness it causes. Once within a group of Friends we considered how each of us used the silence in Meeting. Our search for Truth meant we had to admit to using it, at times, to consider our shopping list, say, or other practical, seemingly trivial, things. Then one of us offered the idea that we are supposed to put our whole lives in front of God, and shopping and other such considerations are very much part of that. I often remind myself of this. It allows me to free my mind, and let it roam, where ever it will go. Repeatedly I have found myself counting the patterns in the carpet, or the window panes in the door, looking at the decorations on the houses across the road, and intently listening to the noises inside and outside of the room. People shuffling around a bit, the rhythm of each other's breathing, the traffic.

The hour is long for me, every time. It requires discipline. Many times I have counted the

minutes, looked at the hand as it moves around the clock. There always comes a time when I start to expect some kind of ministry. I wonder what is on other people's minds, what they might bring to my awareness. At the same time there is the consideration whether I have anything to offer myself.

Sometimes I am so full of all that is going on in my own life that that takes the upper hand, the whole time, even beyond other Friend's ministry. Despite the silence, there is so much clutter in my mind. Yet it often leads to discernment, to guidance, to understanding and to peace. I guess the art is to let the noise be and listen beyond it. Give the excitement, the pain, the happiness, the fear, the gratitude, the anger, whatever it may be space to roam, to sing out loud in my heart if it needs to, to cower away and whimper if that is more healing. And then to hear whatever is left.

Sometimes the answer does lie in other's ministry. If and when it comes, the challenge is to listen to it, truly listen. What message is in this for me? It happens that my first sense is resentment, my inner process is getting disturbed by someone else's voice. Sometimes I have to

search for the words that touch me, that speak to my condition. Other times a Friend will say exactly what I needed to hear, at the time I needed to hear it.

Equally it can be my own ministry that brings me clarity. I learnt very early into my Quaker life that being guided to minister is as much a physical, as a mental, and emotional process. How do you know whether the time is right? I just do, I feel it with my whole heart and body. In fact, for a while I had to wear a heart rate monitor. Just at the time when I was about to make that final commitment to speaking out loud, it would start to beep. My heart rate goes up. It rarely is well prepared or considered. I know what I am led to say, but how I should put it comes as I am doing it. More often than not it is revealing to myself, however it may be received by those around me.

I love those gathered Meetings: sometimes entirely quiet, sometimes with several pieces of ministry flowing into one another as if we are all of one mind, sometimes challenging, sometimes soothing. That sense of oneness, of being all part of a bigger whole, I find unique to my experience

of Meeting for Worship. I seek it every time I attend, and thankfully find it often enough.

The transition to the social interaction immediately afterwards I find quite difficult, despite the gentle step up through notices and announcements. I am in my own world, me and God, and though everyone and everything has become very much part of that, the interaction now required fits awkwardly. There is so little that really needs saying any more, yet so much left to be said and heard.



10

I have been going to monthly Children's Meeting for quite some time. Earlier as a little kid, now as a teenager. I remember how I used to both hate and love the five minutes we kids would spend with the adults. My reasons for disliking that time were very diverse. They reached from having to stop working on whatever I was working on (which was usually a drawing) to having to spend around five minutes in complete silence. In those five minutes I had to scratch myself at least ten

times, yawn, cough, sit on my father's lap and then decide to go sit on the floor to sit with the other kids, whisper, get into staring competitions with my sister and, usually, end up giggling about something. My reasons for liking the five minutes of silence were that I liked staring at the lit candle that was on the table in the middle, I liked looking out the window and seeing how everyday life out there would go on normally while I was inside wrapped in a bubble of silence and, of course, I loved the thought that in five minutes I would be allowed to have a cookie! Now I don't dislike the silence at all, in fact I have learned to love it. Every time I am in it, part of it, I find it mesmerizing. Quaker meeting is one of the only places I have ever experienced such a complete silence that is so peaceful. It gives me a whole different perspective on life. I often use the silence to think through my problems, find solutions for them or sort through what I want to get done during the day. Sometimes during meeting I try to meditate, to empty my mind and just enjoy the few minutes before everything goes back to normal. Nowadays, I never get bored, but I used to. It just never occurred to me, that I could just let my thoughts trail, like in class

when everything from sharpening pencils to writing notes to my friends seemed more interesting than listening to my teacher but I couldn't do that without getting noticed.

When I can't find anything interesting to do, I imagine opening a box and finding another box inside it, that I then open and so on. Other times I look around the room and get lost in either the wallpaper, the ceiling or the carpet, because they really are interesting, even if you wouldn't think so at first. Quaker Meeting changes a lot, people come and people go but the silence always stays the same.



11

When I leave home to go to Meeting for Worship, I prefer to walk, at least part of the way. On Sunday morning the city feels different than at any other time. It relaxes from the week's business and noise – and so do I. I try already to begin entering into the stillness, especially to quiet the constant chorus of my own thoughts.

What strikes me is that I almost always notice somebody or something that recalls me to the purpose of *meeting* or gathering together for *worship*. The experience may be reassuring – somebody’s act of kindness, bird calls that otherwise are drowned by the noise – or disturbing – somebody looking alone and forlorn, leftover signs of Saturday night. The point is not what occurs. The point is that I’m making space for the simple experiences of truth-in-life.

Spirit is at work in the world – or sorely needed – everywhere at every moment. The possibility of gaining insight or guidance from spirit, or God, or Light, or Truth, is always available. The choice to become an example of ‘good rising up’ in the world is always open. And that is what Meeting for Worship means for me.

A brief hour on Sunday morning, sitting with like-minded and like-hearted souls ‘waiting expectantly in the Light’ is my one best chance to practice earnestly what I want to become, and live.

Sometimes I practice easily – I feel the silence and the gathered attentiveness of others in the circle. I feel worshipful.

Sometimes it is difficult. Many Quakers speak of the ways they 'centre down' or come into their stillness. Breathing helps. When my mind is particularly busy, or when I am preoccupied with my own concerns, I try to get my talkative mind to help me. Silently I ask a question. "What would be helpful for me to understand today?" Or, "What do I need to understand about what is bothering me?" Then I try to sit quietly and wait for an 'answer'.

Am I waiting for God to speak? The higher part of myself? Wisdom from the universe? I still don't know, after more than 20 years.

But insight does come – not always, and not always right away. The most astounding thing is that it often comes from the words of another Friend whose own worshipful listening has brought them to the point of speaking. On more than one occasion, I've felt their *ministry* speaking directly to my condition.



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