

The Quaker Practice of Expectant Waiting

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Psalm 46:8-11

Some of the questions that continue to be asked of me about Quakerism are about the use of, and the shared experience of the silence that is central to the way that we worship. What should I expect as I sit in the silence? How does one learn to focus on God and the Inner Light, and not on the pot roast I will be having for dinner? How do I know when I should speak and share a message out of the silence, or just stay silent? These questions, and many more, have been asked of me about our style of worship. They seem to be simple enough questions, but they are really difficult to answer. The silence in worship is the medium for individual spiritual growth, but it is also the medium for shared spiritual growth with our fellow worshippers. How are we spiritually helped individually, and how do we help one another?

I love the way that Caroline Stephen describes the purpose of a Friends' Meeting for Worship. She writes: '*A Friends' meeting,*

however silent, is at the very lowest a witness that worship is something other and deeper than words, and that it is to the unseen and eternal things that we desire to give the first place in our lives. And when the meeting, whether silent or not, is awake, and looking upwards, there is much more in it than this. In the united stillness of a truly 'gathered' meeting there is a power known only by experience, and mysterious even when most familiar. There are perhaps few things which more readily flow from vessel to vessel than quietness. The presence of fellow worshippers in some gently penetrating manner reveals to the spirit something of the nearness of the Divine Presence. 'Where two or three are gathered together in His name' have we not again and again felt that the promise was fulfilled and that the Master Himself was indeed 'in the midst of us'?

For me, silence, or what I believe is best described as the practice of "Expectant Waiting," has always played the central role in my own spiritual development. As the son of a Quaker minister, each First Day would begin by "going to Meeting." As we would find our

regular seats in the Little Friends Meetinghouse in Minneapolis, Minnesota, my mother would turn to me and my siblings, raise her finger to her lips...which is the universal sign to be quiet...and then would speak these words: *It is time to center down and mind the Light.* I knew the routine, and early in life I learned that in this experience of quiet, expectant waiting and seeking, the Sacred, God, and the finite, humans, could meet. It was hallowed ground.

Thomas Bodine writes about this "hallowed ground" in this way:

"A gathered Quaker meeting is something more than a number of individuals sitting down together but meditating individually. So long as each sits in meditation in the way one does when worshipping by oneself, the worship will seldom reach that greater depth which a Quaker meeting at its best achieves. The goal of a truly gathered meeting is to become fused into something bigger than the sum of its parts...As a meeting gathers, as each individual centers down, there gradually develops a feeling of belonging to a group who are together seeking a sense of the Presence. The "I" in us begins to feel like

"We."...we suddenly feel a sense of unity, a sense of togetherness with one another and with that something outside of ourselves we call God."

It is important to note that the silence itself is not the end of the seeking process. It is *the medium* through which we wait expectantly for a divine/human connection. Silence can sometimes be a dead form or an occasion to sleep. All of us have experienced times during the silence when we get sleepy, or when we keep looking at our watches, wondering if worship will ever come to an end. We know that kind of quiet deadness. However, and this is what my mother's finger to her lips was about, it may be, to quote Rufus Jones, "an intensified pause, a vitalized hush, a creative quiet, an actual moment of mutual and reciprocal correspondence with God." And such an experience may lead to what Friend Robert Barclay encountered when he entered a Quaker Meeting for the first time: "As I came into the silent assemblies of God's people worshipping, I felt the evil in me weakening, and the good raised up."

Worshipping in the manner of Friends is not something that we learn once and for all. *It is a continuous process of learning.* The most seasoned Friends among us are continuing to learn side by side with the most novice of Friends. So often the message that arises in someone who is considered a new attendee, is deeper and more spirit provoking than a message from someone who has been a member of a meeting for a number of decades. Here is the point: *Length of time in a Friends Meeting does not determine one's ability to share Truth in love.* It is the Spirit and not the individual that speaks through us, and a Spirit filled message can come from anyone.

Perhaps my Message this morning can be a beginning point for further seeking and questioning about the meaning and practice of Quaker worship. This would be a good thing. I know that the questions will continue to come, and the responses to such questions will lead to more and deeper questions. Such is the cycle of spiritual growth. For now, let us continue in worship, practicing the discipline of "Expectant Waiting," and taking to our hearts the

words of the Psalmist, "Be still and know that I am God." No group practices this stillness better than Friends gathered in worship, and no Friend captures the meaning of this stillness better than our Quaker poet, John Greenleaf Whittier. With this I close: *"And so I find it well to come for deeper rest to this still room. For here the habit of the soul feels less the outer world's control; the strength of mutual purpose pleads more earnestly our common needs: And from the silence multiplied by these still forms on either side, the world that time and sense have known, falls off and leaves us God alone."*