

## **Of Dryness and Light: Preparing Ourselves for Worship**

**by Donne Hayden**

Sometimes we look for complicated answers to simple problems that have simple solutions. Here is an example: The apartment building where I live is a four-plex, and there are four carports, one for each apartment. A light bulb dangles over each parking space and stays on twenty-four hours a day. One night when I came home fairly late, the lights were out in the half of the garage where I park. I looked all over for a light switch but couldn't find one. I looked again the next morning when it was light—still could find no light switch, either in the garage or in the hallway of the apartment building. I thought perhaps a breaker switch had blown, so I went down to the basement to see if I could find the breaker box. I did, but it was so intimidating that I left it without daring to flip any switch. Finally I decided I'd have to call the maintenance man since I didn't like pulling into a dark space alone at night.

The next morning, however, something led me to go look closely at the light hanging down above my car. There, within easy reach, was a light switch on the fixture just above the bulb. I pushed the switch and the light came on. The problem of why the lights wouldn't work was solved—someone had simply turned them off (who & their motivation remains a mystery). But I had spent several days looking for a complicated explanation for a problem that had a simple cause and simple solution.

I did the same thing recently when seeking an explanation for a period of “dryness” I was experiencing. Friends use this term to describe times when the Spirit seems noticeably absent from their lives, either in an individual or a meeting. For instance, 18<sup>th</sup> century Friend John Pemberton wrote in his *Life and Travels*: “Many of the professors of Truth [i.e., Quakers] in this day attend meetings for form, and because it is looked upon as disreputable to forsake going to places of worship...” In other words, many of them go to Meeting just because it was expected of them; people who didn’t attend worship of some kind were frowned upon. Pemberton continued, “many content themselves with going once a week, and by reason of these, our meetings are covered with heaviness, dryness, and gloom.”<sup>1</sup> Quakers at the time were expected to go to worship, not only on First Days, but at least once during the week.

In her 1930s book *The People Called Quakers*, Doris Dagliesh writes of John Woolman, who was deeply spiritual, a highly mystical man, one of the best examples of Quaker spirituality we have. At one point in his life, Dagliesh says, “Spiritually also he was depressed. It had been a time of inward poverty, but he accepted this dryness and darkness as a dispensation of kindness.”<sup>2</sup> (She then quotes Woolman’s explanation that such times led him to understandings he would not have achieved when he had the Spirit in “greater fullness.”)

And the great Quaker writer, Howard Brinton, explains that struggles with “periods of dryness” are found throughout Quaker writings from the very

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<sup>1</sup> Ross E. Martinie Eiler, “Luxury, Capitalism, and the Quaker Reformation, 1737–1798,” *Quaker History*, Volume 97, Number 1, Spring 2008. *Project MUSE* website, [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/quaker\\_history/v097/97.1.martinie-eiler.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/quaker_history/v097/97.1.martinie-eiler.html)

<sup>2</sup>Doris Dagliesh, *The People Called Quakers*, full-text from Internet Archive [http://www.archive.org/stream/peoplecalledquako12140mbp/peoplecalledquako12140mbp\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/peoplecalledquako12140mbp/peoplecalledquako12140mbp_djvu.txt)

beginning. He said, “It is not through a struggle to possess the Light,” he writes, “but rather by permitting the Light to possess us that inner darkness is overcome. The Quaker Journals do not indicate that this way is always successful. There are many records of long periods of dryness. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Now I tell you all this—partly because I’m in good company in having a period of “dryness”—but also because I wanted to talk with you about what I have experienced and see if some of you can identify with it. In recent weeks, writing messages has been a struggle and often I was less than satisfied with what came out. Very often, what came out of me, up here at the lectern, without preparation, was better than what I had written down, which may be as it should be. But I sensed that somehow there should be more Light, that more Light was possible and necessary. British Friend Edward Milligan “spoke to my condition” in these words:

Isolation of spirit ... comes to most - perhaps all of us - at one time or another. There are times in our lives when the tides of faith seem far out, times of dryness, times when we do not feel the comfort and guidance of God’s hand. ... within, we feel the agonies of isolation and the longing for light to lighten our darkness.<sup>4</sup>

That may be a little dramatic for what I was going through; I was just dry. But I was anxious because part of what I am supposed to do is to help bring Light, to be part of the group here that brings Light to our Meetings for Worship.

A couple of weeks ago, looking for an explanation, it occurred to me that I might be experiencing a “dark night of the soul,” so I began reading some of the medieval mystics: St. John of the Cross who gave us the phrase “dark night of the

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Brinton, *The Quaker Doctrine of Inward Peace*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #44, [www.pendlehill.org/resources/files/pdf%20files/php044b.pdf](http://www.pendlehill.org/resources/files/pdf%20files/php044b.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Edward Milligan, quoted in *Quaker Faith and Practice*, Britain Yearly Meeting.

soul,” and Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhart. But in reading their works, I realized what they talk about does not fit my condition. Each of them describes the “dark night” as occurring in the midst of great spiritual joy—one minute the person is full and satisfied by a deep connection to God, and then suddenly God seems to disappear.

I read *Dark Night Journey* by Quaker writer Sandra Cronk, who explains what she calls “the dark night pattern”:

The dark night describes the situation of those who have had a growing sense of relationship with God and are suddenly bereft of God’s presence, direction, and consolation. This unexpected change can be devastating. Our reaction is usually to flee from the emptiness to find some sense of meaning again. We search for something to fill the void. We try harder to engage in all the old pursuits and types of prayer. We attempt new techniques of prayer or search for new activities to give life meaning. . . . [I personally buy more and more books.]

... this darkness does not give way before our pressure. It only becomes more intense. ... Instead of God’s presence, we experience only an absence.<sup>5</sup>

This didn’t fit my situation either. I finally realized that I wasn’t really experiencing God’s absence because I hadn’t been paying much attention. I had gotten busy with life, you know. There was too much going on, so I let go my previous practice of long periods of solitude and quiet, of reading inspirational works, of going out in Nature, of centering in an awareness of the Presence which is always with me. Apparently, I had deserted God—not through intention, but through *inattention*. So my period of dryness was not a dark night of the soul, but secular preoccupation and perhaps, simple spiritual laziness.

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<sup>5</sup> Sandra Cronk, *Dark Night Journey: Inward Re-patterning Toward a Life Centered in God*. (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications, 1991), page 13.

Like looking for the breaker box to deal with the lights off in the garage, the “dark night of the soul” was a complicated explanation of the cause and unnecessary solution for my sense of spiritual dryness. The cause was that I had not been preparing myself for worship, and the solution was to return to doing what I know must be done for me to feel centered in the Light and Presence. I was spiritually dry because I did not go often enough to the crystal springs of the Light; I didn’t draw up buckets from the well of the Spirit and drink of it to refresh myself. Simply showing up on Sundays was like bringing a teaspoon to the well.

I wonder if some of you experience this at times. I used to tell my students that you get out of anything what *you* put into it. “If you’re getting nothing out of this class, what are you putting into it?” It is really true, and for nothing more than for Quaker worship. We receive in the degree that we give, I think. If you find Meeting for Worship dry or empty, is it because, like me, you’re bringing a teaspoon instead of a bucket? What do we expect when we come to Meeting for Worship? That we will come in empty and hope to leave filled, or vice versa, that we will come in full and hope to leave empty? Do we come to Meeting for Worship so full of ourselves and our lives and our busy-ness that there is really no room for the Spirit? To what degree are we responsible to each other for coming to this room, centered and ready to enter the silence, reverently?

This necessity of preparing for worship came up last week when I had coffee with several other ministers in Wilmington Yearly Meeting. One minister commented that he can’t go anywhere on Saturday nights because he needs to begin moving into “Meeting for Worship mode,” becoming centered and

spiritually focused. I have discovered that I need to spend *all day* Saturday (I like to have Friday, too) in quiet and spiritual pursuits to feel fully here for Meeting for Worship.

One minister said, “It’s funny you should bring that up. Just last Sunday I gave a Children’s Message on this subject.” He said he began by asking the kids what their parents did. One parent was a teacher, another an engineer, another a cook. He asked them what would happen if their parents didn’t prepare for their work. For instance, what would happen if the teacher went to class and didn’t prepare lesson plans? Or if the engineer made no preliminary drawings or plans for a project? Or if the cook didn’t obtain food and spices necessary for certain recipes? The children all agreed that, without some preparation, those jobs wouldn’t get done very well. Then the minister asked them how, at their homes, they prepared for Meeting for Worship on Sunday. This question, he said, was met by blank stares—and not only from the children. He looked out at the congregation and the adults looked puzzled and even a little alarmed.

So I’d like to call your attention to the Advices that I included in today’s bulletin that explain the need for preparing for worship, preparing to come to this room, not coming in rushed and harried. Sometimes we all must come here like that—our lives are that way. But if you *can*—if you have the luxury— or if you can make it a priority to be quiet at the beginning of the day, or even start on Saturday night to clear and quiet you life and your spirit, that will help what is supposed to happen at a Quaker meeting, and that is that we are all here in the corporate experience of the spirit. And there is a tradition among Friends that

each of us is responsible for doing our part to have a space for the Spirit when we come here for Meeting for Worship.

Here is an advice on the matter from New England Yearly Meeting:

“Preparation for worship is essential. Preparation is a continual process of prayer ...” We don’t necessarily have to do this only on Saturday, or Friday. It could even begin on Monday.

... of reading the Bible and other religious literature, of learning from human experiences, and of daily practicing the presence of God. Some come on Sunday morning expecting to receive God's revelation with no previous effort on their part. For the cup to overflow on Sunday, however, it must be filled up all through the week. Early Friends came to worship with their cup overflowing, and it was then that the power was given to go out and to share the Truth that had come to them. (*Faith & Practice* of New England Yearly Meeting)

From Thomas Kelly, we find this:

What conditions favor a gathered meeting?

...One condition for such a group experience seems to be this: *some* individuals need already, upon entering the meeting, to be gathered deep in the spirit of worship. There must be some kindled hearts when the meeting begins. In them, and from the, begins the *work* of worship. The spiritual devotion of a few persons, silently deep in active adoration, is needed to kindle the rest, to help those others who enter the service with tangled, harried, distraught thoughts to be melted and quieted and released and made pliant, ready for the work of God and His Real Presence. (Thomas Kelly, “The Gathered Meeting”)

I understand from our Clerk, Mary Ellen Krisher, that it has been a tradition in this Meeting for some Friends to begin early on Sunday to focus and center down and prepare for worship. Some might come early to the Meetingroom on Sundays and sit in silence, preparing the space, “kindling” it in Thomas Kelly’s words, *seeding* the room with the Light. These Friends would have, earlier in the morning, spent some time in silence, in praying or in reading

inspirational works before they came to Meeting. [Maybe they don't turn on NPR in the car on the way here.] I don't know if that is still happening, but I do know the room feels different when certain people are in Meeting for Worship. I wonder if they are those who are "gathered deep in the spirit of worship" as they enter this room.