

The Silence Makes Us Different

by Donne Hayden

Earlier this week, a line came to me which I wrote down, thinking it might be the focus of my message this week. It was this: “The *Silence* Makes Us Different.” I was thinking of the difference between a period of Quaker silence and the same time filled with readings, song lyrics, and spoken direction about what to think or how to be; the difference between *listening* for guidance from the Spirit and *hearing* guidance from other human beings. It occurred to me that because each person in a Friends meeting for worship is (ideally anyway) experiencing direct and personal access to the Source, *no one person may speak for everyone else* in the room, though the Spirit may speak *through* someone. Even then, Friends recognize the possibility that every message is not for every person every time.

Like snowflakes that share a basic shape with infinite variations, so human beings are EACH ONE distinct from every other human being. In all the time of all the world, no one else *has had, now has, or will have* your particular combination of DNA. No one else has your fingerprints, your eyelashes, your internal organ structure, your voice; no one else has your memories and experience. No one else dreams like you do. No one else needs to hear precisely what you need to hear; no one else speaks in the language natural to *your* heart. In short, no one else has your “ears to hear” the voice of the Spirit.

We find reference to this—permission for it even— in the Christian tradition, by the way. As Paul puts it in 1st Corinthians:

*'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him'—
these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even
the depths of God.*

*For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is
within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.*

*Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that
we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not
taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are
spiritual.*

*Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for [the gifts] are
foolishness to them, and [those who are unspiritual] are unable to understand [the gifts]
because they are discerned spiritually. **Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are
themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.***

Among Friends, the goal has always been to go to the Source, not to filter through what others have experienced and interpreted as truth. Margaret Fell, describing her first encounter with George Fox, quotes him as saying: "You will say Christ saith this, and the apostles say this, but *what canst thou say?* Art thou a child of Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?" Can you only repeat what others have said that someone said? he asks us. You have direct access to the Light—does it not reveal the truth to you personally? We can only know if something is "inwardly from God" if we *listen* to the Spirit. Because each person is at a different stage of spiritual growth or on a different spiritual path, the ears we have to hear with will hear different things. Friends are united by our search for Truth and Compassion but not uniform in the revelation it expresses to and through us.

In thinking about the special quality of Quaker worship, I was reminded of "The Listening Place," an article I read a year or so ago in *The Christian Century* magazine. The article was by Gordon Atkinson, a Baptist minister who attended a Quaker meeting for the first time, an experience he described as "fascinating and wonderful." The perceptions he expresses in the

article are especially pertinent to my topic today, i.e., that silent worship among Friends means we cannot have a creed or dogma *because* each of us is listening to guidance that reflects where we are in our individual spiritual journeys at this particular moment.

In his article, this stranger to our meetings expresses more clearly than many of us can the unique authority we give to the Light Within each individual to listen for the continual revelation of new and higher truths. Here are Atkinson's insights about worship in the manner of Friends.

What impressed me most was the peaceful nature of it. There was a complete absence of anxiety in the room. In my own church experience—in the rare opportunities that laypeople have to speak in worship—there seems to be an unspoken concern that the person is somehow speaking for the community. If the person speaking says something that is theologically suspect or in any way threatens the existing traditions of the church, some in the congregation become defensive and angry. Anxiety levels rise. After the service people will talk about the rightness or wrongness of what was said. The person who was speaking may have no power to effect change in the community, but somehow the congregation is still threatened and upset.

When the woman at the Quaker meeting first began to speak, I was aware that I became tense. I disengaged somewhat and looked to see how others were reacting to her words. My life as a minister has programmed me to do this. But I saw no fears or concerns on the faces of the Friends. An elderly man next to me, a leader in this particular Quaker meeting, stared peacefully ahead as she spoke. He nodded occasionally, indicating that he understood

her. He seemed at peace with her words. More than that, he seemed at peace with her perspective on life and faith as a young woman.

That's when I realized that I was experiencing pure, well-differentiated listening. When someone speaks at a Quaker meeting, that person has no power to change the meeting or the rules or the nature of the community. If the gathered people sense the presence of the Spirit in the speaker's words, there are tried and ancient methods for testing that. But no one is threatened. Everyone is free to put his or her energy into hearing the person. Quakers are accustomed to seeking the wisdom of God in the words of a brother or sister. Sometimes a person just needs to talk. That's okay too.

It was the most refreshing spiritual exercise I've had in years.

We attended a second meeting. I was more relaxed this time and found myself entering into the spirit of the Friends. A man stood and spoke. Whether what he said was right or wrong, or whether those categories even applied, was not important. He felt led to speak. He was taken seriously. They heard him. I didn't understand everything he was saying. That was okay. I felt myself trusting the community. Those who needed to understand him would. His presence and willingness to speak became a backdrop to my own worship experience.

I felt both a wonderful connection to the man who spoke and a distinct disconnection from him. This too seems to be a truth about the Religious Society of Friends. Quakers are at once deeply connected and very disconnected from each other. The connection comes from being in community and listening to each other for years; the disconnection comes from their refusal to claim ownership or responsibility for the way another person relates to the Divine.

[Emphasis mine.]

By the end of our second meeting, I was beginning to trust the silence and the words of Friends led to speak. The rightness or wrongness of these words seemed above my pay grade. God and the community's ancient processes would take care of that. Letting go felt good for my soul.¹

Forgive me for including such a lengthy quotation, but because he comes from a tradition that insists on conformity to a particular interpretation of the Christian message, Atkinson's words carry a good deal of weight. For him to recognize and value the different way Quakers worship I find especially affirming. For anyone considering membership in this meeting, I commend Atkinson's article to you so that you may know what you are getting into. Though you will be welcome as a seeker of Truth, if you seek authoritative answers, sanctioned and approved by everyone in the meeting, you may not be comfortable here.

It reminds me of something that happened in Theological Reflections, one of my seminary classes at ESR. After several weeks of intense class discussion that revealed the variance in our theologies, one of my classmates, a conservative AME minister, came to class one day and announced: "God spoke to me last night, and God said, 'David, I will not fit inside your box.'"

Though Friends were founded and grounded in the Christian message, people seeking spiritual conformity or uniformity are unlikely to find it in a Quaker meeting. Instead of conformity, Friends respect the individual's relationship with the Holy. Instead of uniformity,

¹ Gordon Atkinson, "The Listening Place," reprinted from *The Christian Century Magazine* February 23, 2010, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=8171>

Friends find unity in the search for higher Truth, understanding that it may be expressed in a myriad of ways including, but not exclusive to, Christianity. Among Friends, the Spirit is free to grow and expand beyond any container human thought has devised, including Scripture and orthodox tradition.

Two days ago, I woke up at 6:30 in the morning with these words in my mind. I got up and began writing:

“Listening to Each Other Listen”

To one Friend, the Spirit speaks
 a dream of earthquakes, of clambering up,
 up the gash of a deep arroyo
 toward Sangre de Cristo peak
 as earth splits behind him.
 To the Friend on the third bench,
 the Spirit sings yellow, gold,
 black, crimson; twirling globes, clay cups,
 and feathered shawls. To another, the Spirit
 whispers ancient & holy words:
Maranatha;
Alleluia; Dona nobis pacem;
Be still and know that I am God.

One Friend hears her heart beating
 in the silent meetingroom;
 her pumping blood and DNA carry
 markers for audacious witness,
 markers for tireless testimony;
 She listens for cadences of silence,
 her Holy and comfortable home.

A Friend who lives in the woods listens
 for the Holy that speaks light
 filtering through leaves;
 that speaks perfume
 of locust blossoms
 snowing down in a spring wind;
 that speaks the bleat of sheep, the hum
 of bees, the trill of cardinals.

Because the Spirit
speaks to us our singular language
with the fluency of a native-speaker,
we may believe we know the language of the Spirit.
The truth is rather that the Holy knows all languages—
mine, yours, his, hers.

The Spirit is a trillion-tongued polyglot,
speaking the individual idiom
of every single soul who ever lived or lives.
It speaks *every* language *ever* spoken; it speaks Cherokee,
Hmong, Basque, and Pashtun. It speaks Nazarene
& Gnostic, Buddhist & Baptist, Holiness & Hindu, Jesus & Jain.
It speaks fire, speaks water, speaks air, speaks earth,
speaks Love in every language.

Here, in this quiet room
no one tells the Spirit what to say.
Let those who have ears to hear,
listen.