

**Message – Cincinnati Friends Meeting
November 9, 2008**

**Worship in the Manner of Friends: The “Gathered” Meeting
by Donne Hayden**

Good morning, Friends. Welcome to Meeting for Worship.

Worship—“reverent love and obedience,” “ardent, humble devotion to a deity.” In reaction to rote rituals and Sunday mornings empty of real depth or devotion, some progressive ministers are calling for revitalized church services, “Expressing our love in worship that is as sincere, vibrant, and artful as it is scriptural.”¹

We have to modify this a bit for Quaker worship. While I would hesitate to require worship to be “scriptural,” I wholeheartedly embrace the idea that it should “express love,” that it should be “sincere,” “vibrant,” and “artful,” in the context of Quaker silent worship. Silent worship is an art, is artful; it includes the arts of listening and discernment and ministry. Today I want to talk to you about what Quaker silent worship **is, is not and could be**, and about the powerful experience of *corporate* worship² often referred to as a “gathered” or “covered” meeting for worship.

To begin, I have a question for our consideration: Do we, here, experience “sincere” and “vibrant” worship on Sunday mornings? Do we feel “reverent love” or a call to obedience”? Do we experience “ardent humble devotion” to something greater than ourselves, whatever we call it? Or, do we use the time to meditate and clear our thoughts? If this last is true, though we may find it spiritually refreshing, we may be missing something. According to British Friend John Punshon, retired Earlham School of Religion professor and recorded minister in Indiana Yearly Meeting:

That of God which is called the Light is positive, powerful and active. It speaks to us and leads us, and therefore the appropriate attitudes for us to take are of waiting and listening for it. . . .

¹ *The Phoenix Affirmations*, #4.

² In Quaker-speak, “corporate” refers to a group of individuals acting or responding as one body.

Friends have never regarded this as an individual activity. . . . People who regard Friends meetings as opportunities for meditation have failed to appreciate this corporate aspect. The waiting and listening activities in which everybody is engaged [produce] spoken ministry which helps to articulate the common guidance which the Holy Spirit is believed to give the group as a whole. So the waiting and listening is corporate also. This is why Friends emphasize the “ministry of silence” and the importance of coming to meeting regularly with heart and mind prepared.³

What happens in silent worship is at the top of my mind right now. It has come up a lot this week, especially in our discussions in the Quakerism 101 study group. We’ve been reading and talking about Quaker worship, about all that *can* happen in the silence. I have been led to think that on Sunday mornings, here in this beautiful space, we’re not getting all we can out of it; that we may be missing something, specifically, a sense of being part of something greater than ourselves. As Brinton puts it,

The mystics generally think of [the experience of union] only as union with God, but the Quakers, being more concerned with the world around them than were many of the great mystics, think of it also as union with their fellow men. The sense of union with God and the sense of union with our neighbors are so closely related that one is best realized when felt in conjunction with the other.⁴

George Fox advised “All Friends” to “mind that which is Eternal which gathers your Hearts together up to the Lord and lets you see that ye are written in one another’s Heart.”

Although what I’m about to read to you may lengthen my message this morning, I believe you ought to hear it. This again is from John Punshon, a *weighty* Friend, a highly respected, long-time Friend of both evangelical and unprogrammed traditions.

³ John Punshon, *Encounter with Silence: Reflections from the Quaker Tradition*, (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press), page 74.

⁴ Brinton, page 93.

And now I must be honest and admit to much of what I actually do in meeting. Certainly I pray and meditate, but I also do many other things. I daydream. I sing silently or hum inaudible tunes. On occasion I have gone to sleep, so I suppose slumber would be one of my meeting activities. I carry a little Bible in my jacket pocket, and though it is for reference, I must own up to reading it. There are other things Friends read, but that is my bag.

I often get bored. I fidget. I have to cope with my own body and its periodic discomfort. I shut my eyes and then open them and then shut them again for no very good reason. I wonder whether X wears a wig or what brand of toothpaste Y prefers or whatever induced K and L to marry. I think about work, about other people, about personal problems and relationships. I grumble a bit to myself, since I talk to myself a lot anyway. I periodically attempt to clear my mind, but much of the time I simply think. I speculate about theology but usually manage to make it subservient to my worship. I also think about the government and the state of the world, and I make it a principle to give serious and sympathetic consideration to all the spoken ministry.

So beginners and visitors to Friends meetings who are unaccustomed to the silence need to realize that the Quakers are doing just what they are doing. There is no secret way of coping with silence. You just get on with it. I do not wish to leave the impression that this is all there is, though. That would be very far from the truth. But we do not need to enter murky theological waters, we need simply to register that if meeting were nothing more than sitting in silence having pleasant but wandering thoughts, Quaker worship would be a wool-gathering farce.⁵

I wanted to share this with you all because when I read it, I took great comfort. I thought, "Oh, thank goodness. It's not just me." I also know from experience, and you know, too, that there is indeed more to the silence once we can get past a certain point.

⁵ Punshon, page 62.

Another well-known Quaker writer and historian, Howard Brinton, comments on a significant difference between Quaker silence and Buddhist or other forms of meditation.

The author [Brinton] has participated in periods of meditation among the Zen sect of Buddhists in Japan. These gatherings, which included many persons arranged in orderly rows in a meditation hall, were held in complete silence. They seemed much like Friends meetings, but an important difference was felt. There was no communication. Each individual was engaged in a solitary search for truth and reality. But the meditator might sometimes leave the hall and seek a brief interview with his roshi or teacher, who would offer special guidance. The meditator would then return to his meditation. The teacher supplied, in a way very different from the Quaker way, the need for ministry. . . .

The minister among Friends differs from the Zen instructor.⁶

Here, he refers not just to a minister at the front of the room but to anyone who ministers. All of you are ministers, remember? You are ministers and sometimes you are a minister in this meeting. When you are led to minister from the silence, you are different from the Zen instructor. A Quaker minister “*speaks as the immediate mouthpiece of the group of worshipers whose insight into Truth has been brought to utterance by the Holy Spirit, the Presence in the midst. . . .*”⁷

Among the earliest gatherings, Friends waited for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (and they all believed it would happen!), the same Spirit experienced by the disciples at Pentecost and described in Acts 2: 1-4:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, [like the sound of big wings?] and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared

⁶ Howard Brinton, *Friends for 350 Years* (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Press), page 102-103.

⁷ *Ibid.*

among them and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Edward Burrough, an early Friend, describes a Quaker meeting using language from these verses in Acts:

“While waiting upon the Lord in silence as we often did for many hours together . . . we received often the pouring down of the Spirit upon us and our hearts were made glad and our tongues loosed and our mouths opened . . . and the glory of the Father was revealed.”

A visitor to an early Friends meeting commented that those who spoke during worship “seemed not to speak, but to be spoken from.”⁸

Early Friends wrote of Meeting for Worship in terms clumsy to our tongues and foreign to our experience. They spoke reverently of “waiting on the Lord,” of “covered meetings,” of “gathered meetings.” Evidently, they experienced “gathered” meetings fairly often. Perhaps this can be accounted for by the fact that they regularly spent two or more hours sitting in silence, humbly “waiting on the Lord,” (who, it turns out, shows up in his own time, not according to our watches).

“Gathered” or “covered” meetings are worshipful in the fullest sense of the word. I say this as someone who has experienced such a meeting maybe only once. From reading descriptions and talking to people who have experienced gathered meetings, I understand that these meetings are filled with reverence, humility and awareness of the Presence of the Spirit, the Light, the Inner Christ; whatever words we choose to call it are inadequate. Descriptions of the gathered meeting may work best in old-fashioned language, such as that of early Friends like George Fox, who used the word “gather” in various contexts, such as *“Bring all into God’s worship. Plow up the fallow ground. . . . that the seed, the wheat, may be gathered into the barn; that all people may come to the beginning, to Christ, who was before the world was*

⁸ Seth Hinshaw in *The Spoken Ministry Among Friends: Three Centuries of Progress and Development*. North Carolina Yearly Meeting and North Carolina Friends Historical Society, 1987.

made."⁹ Or language from the Bible as in "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt. 18:20).

A "gathered" or "covered meeting" suggests to me the image of a bird alighting and settling down onto a nest of chicks, an image that occurs in various passages of the Bible, such as in the Gospel of Mark after Jesus was baptized by John, "*And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him*" (Mark 1:9-10). The Holy Spirit alighted on him and settled down around him like a bird flutters down onto its nest. (I have never quite understood the tendency of artists to paint a dove hovering above Jesus' head—for those who know birds and who can think metaphorically, it works I guess. But for those who think literally, I wonder if they understand that a dove did not really land on Jesus' head.)

In the Old Testament, HaShem ¹⁰ is sometimes described using bird imagery, such as when the Psalmist asks HaShem to hide him "under the shadow of thy wings," (Psalm 17:8) and in King David's prayer: "O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge" (Psalm 57:1).

Another "gathering bird" image comes from Luke 13:34 and Matthew 23:37, a verse in the New Testament that stands out in its strangeness.¹¹ This is in Jesus' lament for Jerusalem: "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings . . .*"

I have an image of Friends brought together by a mighty Presence, the entire group covered by a hovering Spirit that settles over us and keeps us all together for a while.

We can never again be like the earliest Friends, of course, and perhaps never experience "gathered" meetings the way they did, but perhaps we can learn something from them about the

⁹ *Quaker Psalms: A Book of Devotions*. Compiled and arranged by T.H.S. Wallace. (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: New Foundation Publications, 2002), page 25.

¹⁰ Hebrew for "The Name," used in place of YHWH. Used here in place of the word "God."

¹¹ The verses are virtually the same in both Matthew and Luke. This the only use of the word "hen" in the Bible (neither "chicken" nor "rooster" appears in the Old or New Testaments).

power available in the silence, about worship and ministry from the silence. In the first fifty years, Friends were energized by the Spirit and gave dynamic messages; their meetings were *filled* with ministry, the substance of which was agreed upon and the truth of it acknowledged by all who joined the movement. (George Fox once spoke for three hours, not exactly what we would consider silent worship.)

When 17th century Quakers met, first came a period of silence, and then

Quite often a prayer first broke the silence.

The spoken ministry arose from many different persons, “as the Spirit gave them utterance.” Much of the time these messages were quite brief: simple expressions of praise and thanksgiving, or earnest exhortations to deeper dedication and faithfulness. Some gifted individuals shared much more lengthy messages of instructions regarding the elemental facts of the Christian faith. When an individual had spoken, the custom was that his or her words should be followed by a period of meditative silence. Every word from the Lord merited careful consideration.¹²

Do you hear what is understood there? What is implied there—*every word spoken was from the Lord.*

This understanding, i.e., that what had just been uttered was “from the Lord,” brings up a significant difference between early Friends and contemporary Friends. While Friends today are urged to allow space between speakers and maintain a respectful silence after someone has spoken, rarely do we assert we have just heard a message “from the Lord,” (though we might acknowledge a message seemed to come *from the Light*).

The word and concept of “Lord” requires humility from us, though, perhaps even “reverent love and obedience,” or “ardent, humble devotion.” These ideas seem old-fashioned; they challenge the American sensibility and 21st century certainty. Although recent events have humbled us a bit, in general, we contemporary Americans are a proud and arrogant people.

¹² Seth Hinshaw, page 11.

Given this tendency, I wonder if it's possible for us to truly experience "worship" during the silence on Sunday mornings? Do we ever feel "reverent love and obedience," "ardent, humble devotion to a deity." Or do we choke on the idea that we should be humble or obedient to anything?

Knowing many of you as I do, I acknowledge the depth of spirituality in this group—if anyone in the United States can feel humility and reverence these days, I believe people in this room can. Perhaps a more direct question is—are we able to put aside all that keeps us from feeling worshipful in the fifteen-minute chunks of silence we currently have in our service? Some contemporary Quakers do experience "gathered" meetings, but such meetings are more likely to occur in the hour-long silence of unprogrammed Friends. Is it possible for us, Cincinnati Friends, to experience the grace of a gathered or covered meeting in the time we allot to the silence?

As we enter the silence today, I encourage all Friends to, as George Fox phrased it:

Mind that which is Eternal

which gathers your Hearts together

up to the Lord

and lets you see

that ye are written in one another's Heart.