

Quotations on Meeting for Worship

GEORGE FOX 1657

Friends meet together and know one another in that which is eternal, which was before the world was. . .

CAROLINE FOX 1841

The first gleam of light, 'the first cold light of morning' which gave promise of day with its noontide glories, dawned on me one day at Meeting, when I had been meditating on my state in great depression. I seemed to hear the words articulated in my spirit 'Live up to the light thou hast, and more will be granted thee.'

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER 1894

. . . 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 our mutual purpose pleads
More earnestly our common needs;
And from the silence multiplied
By those still forms on either side,
The world that time and sense have known
Falls off and leaves us God alone.

CAROLINE E. STEPHEN 1908

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. . . And it is out of the depths of this stillness that there do arise at times something of the power of prayer—something of its quickening and melting and purifying effect. Such words as these have at least as much power as silence to gather into stillness.

☪ **THE BOOK OF DISCIPLINE OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS, GENESEE YEARLY MEETING 1929**

Gathering in an outward silence is not enough. Each individual must consciously and earnestly seek in humble reverence for a renewed sense of the inward power of the spirit. From the depths of that stillness comes the consciousness of the presence of God. In this experience the individual will not only find direction for his life and strength for his needs, but will also feel an urging to share with others the thoughts and aspirations that have come to him.

☪ **THE DISCIPLINE OF CANADA YEARLY MEETING OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS, FIVE YEARS MEETING 1932**

In a Meeting for Worship Friends gather together in silence as a congregation of seeking souls, and as they unite together in worship there comes a spiritual harmony 'the still life, in which the fellowship is attained to in the spirit of God, when there are no words spoken.'* But often, out of that silence, is born the message of that meeting, expressed it may be by several speakers and yet with a central thought common to each which frequently meets many individual needs. . .

* George Fox, 1657

The Meeting affects the ministry quite as truly as the ministry affects the Meeting. If those who come together do so in expectant faith, and in genuine love and sympathy with one another, striving to put far from them thoughts of criticism and fault-finding, and praying earnestly that the right persons may be led to speak and the right messages be given, they will not go away unhelped. It is in such an

atmosphere that the Holy Spirit can work effectively to bring forth the utterances that are needed, and to check those that are not required. On the other hand, the spirit of indifference or of cold and unfriendly criticism injures the whole life of the Meeting, and we need not wonder if in such an atmosphere speakers mistake their guidance.

THOMAS KELLY 1940

In the Quaker practice of group worship on the basis of silence come special times when an electric hush and solemnity and depth of power steals over the worshippers. A blanket of divine covering comes over the room, a stillness that can be felt is over all. And the worshippers are gathered into a unity and synthesis of life which is amazing indeed. A quickening Presence pervades us, breaking down some part of the special privacy and isolation of our individual lives and blending our spirits within a super-individual Life and Power. An objective, dynamic Presence enfolds us all, nourishes our souls, speaks glad, unutterable comfort within us, and quickens us in depths that had before been slumbering. The Burning Bush has been kindled in our midst, and we stand together on holy ground. . .

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 them, 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. . .

But what if the meeting has not been a gathered meeting? Are those meetings failures that have not been hushed by a covering? Quite definitely they are not. *If we have been faithful*, we may go home content and nourished from any meeting. . . If no blanket of divine covering is warmly felt, and if the wills have been offered together in the silent work of worship, worshippers may go home content and nourished, and say, 'It was a good meeting.' In the venture of group worship, souls must learn to accept spiritual 'weather' and go deeper,

in will, into Him who makes all things beautiful in their time.

GEOFFREY HOYLAND 1955

The ideal is that the worshippers gather in silence, and as soon as the meeting is 'settled' each offers himself or herself to God in uttermost self-abandonment, opening to Him the innermost gateways of their being as in private devotion. The communal worship thus begins, as all worship must begin, with an individual act of self-giving. The *whole* self is offered, sins and all, and then self drops out of sight and out of mind in the overwhelming sense of the reality and goodness of God as the worshippers, individually, lay themselves open to His will. And then as the sense of God begins to dominate the meeting to the exclusion of all earthly thoughts and needs, a new experience comes to the group. As the Living Silence lays hold of them individually they become conscious that they are no longer so many separate entities, they have become fused together in a unity which it is quite impossible to express in words. They are 'laid asleep in body, and become a living soul,' and they have become *one* soul, not a dozen or more separate souls, because they have entered into God and He has made them one. And this blessed unity involves no loss of personality, rather are they conscious that their individual personalities have been heightened and made more vividly alive because of their fusion with one another in God.

☪ CAMP NEEKAUNIS SEMINAR 1962

We may ask ourselves, 'What is my responsibility toward Meeting for Worship?' There is a query which says, 'Do you come to Meeting with heart and mind prepared?' The truly gathered Meeting is made up of people whose hearts and minds are prepared for the worship experience. In the deepest sense, the worship experience involves the aligning of our human wills to the will of God.

MARIE FERGUSON PARKER 1978

Meeting for worship -
A holy hush
A centering down.

Out of the depths a picture:
Lions and sheep and snakes,
Beasts that roar
That cower
That creep
That purr and cuddle
And hungry tigers!

All within me
All within you
Passions at war!
Hated, despised, condemned, condoned;
All here in this divine presence.

In meeting for worship
Acknowledged
Accepted
Respected
Transformed!
Passions at peace!
The fierce, the meek
Lie down together.
Holy hush -
The Peaceable Kingdom.

☪ **URSULA FRANKIN 1979**

I have never lost the enjoyment of sitting in silence at the beginning of meeting, knowing that nothing is preordained, nothing is set, all is open. The light can come from all sides. The joy of experiencing the Light in a completely different way than one has thought it would come is one of the greatest gifts that Friends' meeting for worship has brought me.

GEORGE GORMAN 1982

How does a Quaker Meeting work? Its foundation is the conviction that God is not a distant remote being but a living presence to be discovered in the deep centre of every human being. . . The Quaker experience is that, in the silence, as we are open to one another

in love, we help each other by sharing our strengths and weaknesses. The Quaker conviction is that as we go deeper into ourselves we shall eventually reach a still, quiet centre. At this point two things happen simultaneously. Each of us is aware of our unique value as an individual human being, and each of us is aware of our utter interdependence on one another.

☪ **DEBORAH E. HAIGHT 1987**

A Worship Group begins something like this. It grows out of experiencing with one or more individuals a sense of being deeply comfortable with one another; of being unusually free to be ourselves, unmasked; of it seeming quite all right just to be quiet together and maybe even to quite forget our outward selves for a while. If we are familiar with the words of Jesus, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst,' we begin to sense a truth in these words that we can identify with.

WILLIAM TABER 1992

Throughout Quaker history there have always been a few Friends called to spend a special time of personal 'retirement' before meeting on Sunday morning, and many of them have testified about how much this has helped their experience of group worship later in the morning. Even when family or other responsibilities make it difficult to find this time on a Sunday morning, it is possible to focus inwardly, again and again, in the midst of all the Sunday morning tasks and travelling, to just remember 'Today I will be in Meeting; in fact, a part of me is already there, for the Stream always is, always was, always will be.' Even as we drive into the meetinghouse parking lot, even as we walk across to the door, even as we greet our friends, even as we pause to chat about some unfinished bit of committee business, a part of us can already be in worship, already being gathered into the Stream. . .

Sometimes a meeting gathered into this living oneness does not want to end, so that the elders on the facing bench must wait long beyond the normal hour before they feel free to shake hands and 'break' the meeting. Yet this privileged experience must end sometime, and we must proceed through the Door Beyond, shifting back to the more 'normal' state of everyday consciousness. . . Just as

most religious traditions carefully set the stage of the opening moments of worship, so they also pay close attention to the concluding moments of a worship service, assisting the congregation not only in changing levels of consciousness but also in preparing them to go forth into daily life with renewed energy, vision, and resolve. In the same way, these final brief moments when we shift levels of consciousness at the end of the meeting are just as important as all of the previous stages of worship, for the meeting is of little value unless we can carry its blessing with us into our life in the world. . . . And so as we shake hands with the people around us, we know that each handshake is a token, a promise, a ‘symbol, sign, and seal’ of our new or renewed openness to God and of our commitment to go forth into the world with new eyes and a greater faithfulness in all that we do.

☪ **BILL MCMECHAN**

There is a place in the ascent of the mountain where the climbers meet.

It is not far from the summit, but at that point there is a unity in accomplishment.

Regardless of the path by which the place was reached or with what climbing gear or how long it took, or whether others assisted the climbers in the various stages of the ascent; when there, the climbers recognize one another as those with the same goal and single aim. Things that were important at lower altitudes, language, techniques, dress, and so on, fall away and a unifying sense of humility and privilege prevails.

All of the loneliness and difficulties of the climb, the thoughts of the contented life below, fade into oblivion in the sheer beauty and reality of sharing the achievement of the climb with those who, in other places, would be strangers to each other but, at this place, are closer than family.

There is always the expectancy that another climber will arrive, perhaps by a path not used by anyone else and without all the trappings required by many of the others.

ANNE HOSKING

At meeting for worship relax and let your baby be with you; my small daughter called it ‘the best cuddle of the week’ when I couldn’t

rush off and do something busy. It’s not easy for the parents to believe their child’s gurglings actually help the meeting rather than interrupt it. Nevertheless, that is true, and you shouldn’t give way to the temptation to take a happily babbling child out of the meeting (though howling is something different!).

MARTY WALTON 1997

If all Meeting means to us is a soothing place to dip into once in a while, we are missing the substance, the opportunity, the very message that early Friends experienced—that our reality can be changed, transformed through living together with God.

☪ **CONSTANCE MUNGALL 1998**

This I know experimentally:
That if I go within
I find a quiet place
full of Light.
That if I can be silent
I stay in that place.
I can speak and act from there.
I can trust
have faith
that what I say and do is
true, enlightened by
a universal energy. Divine.

I need no more words
to describe this joyful fact.
Only persistence
to follow the Light.

*Quotations suggested by Halifax Friends for use in the chapter
‘The Meeting Community’ in the book of faith and practice
being prepared for Canadian Yearly Meeting*

☪ *Canadian contribution*

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