

What I mean is that those I saw on my way into the room where meeting took place had a benign expression on their faces and a certain calmness that made me feel relaxed rather than openly welcomed. I suppose "fellow feeling" is an expression that would describe it. There was no ostentation in their clothes or attitudes. They settled themselves and their fidgety children unselfconsciously into their places withoutorrying over much (as I would have done) about disturbing those who were already occupied in the odd process of sitting there in quietness. It was not dissimilar to other churches I had known, but I have to remark that in any town there are churches where "plainness" is not the first word you would think of to describe the worshippers. However, it usually is among Friends, and that applies to both the silent and the worship-service kind.

So here I was, sitting on a bench in a Friends meeting for the first time in my life, not knowing at all what to expect. There was nothing to look at, nothing to occupy my mind, nothing to appeal to my senses, nothing to sing, nothing to join in with, in fact, absolutely nothing whatever to do, and a whole hour to fill.

I imagine that nearly everybody feels like this at their first unprogrammed meeting, for this manner of worship is exceptional. However, one does not have to move for very long in Quaker circles to find that it can speak to the condition of Friends and non-Friends alike. There is a common pattern of experience, whatever the outward religious loyalty of those who come. People will say that at first the silence is highly demanding, but after a while it becomes a source of peace and spiritual nourishment. Those who find they are unable to do without it naturally tend to become Friends. Those who like to come sometimes, but prefer other kinds of worship, are usually friends of Friends. Sitting on my bench, it was not yet clear whether I would fall into either of those groups, for I had no experience of silence whatsoever. So what did I do?

First, I suppose, I did not actually do anything, but something happened. It was not terribly sensational. It was simply the consequence of being well brought up and put in a social situation in which I did not want to make an exhibition of myself. There was no opportunity

to stand up and stretch, chat to my neighbour, chuckle, yawn, snore, snort, wriggle, stretch out on the bench, keep turning round to see who was behind me, or do anything that might make a noise and disturb the other people in whatever it was they were doing. I knew they were supposed to be worshipping God, but there was precious little evidence of that happening. Being deprived of movement, and not a little frightened lest I be responsible for a grunt or a squeak or a sniff that would draw all the eyes in the meetinghouse upon me, I settled myself as comfortably as I could for a long wait and began to take stock of my surroundings. In the years that followed I was to become completely at home in the atmosphere I experienced that day, but on the first occasion I don't think I did very much worshipping.

I was not used to sitting totally still for a long period of time, so the meeting was quite an experience for me. I remember my astonishment at how I seemed far more aware than usual of all the messages my senses were giving me. It also dawned on me that these messages were there all the time, but I was normally far too busy to pay attention to them.

I was surprised to find the light remarkable, and I do not mean the spiritual variety Quakers like to go on about. After a good few years of membership in the Society of Friends, I have clocked up a pretty fair total of meetinghouses attended, and I get the feeling that there is something about the windows that is very important. In meetinghouses, they tend to be high up in the eaves, so that shafts of sunlight cascade to the floor, warming the worshipping Friends, coloring the posy of flowers on the central table, or burnishing the gold lettering on the spine of the Bible which also lies there.

Whether or not it was felt in former times that if you had windows to gaze out of, you would lose the art of inward retirement and spend too much time admiring the creation to take notice of the creator, I don't know. When the day is grey or dim, as it usually is in England, and the meetinghouse has a pitched roof or ceiling, you look up not to obscurity, but to as much clarity as the architecture can scoop out of the day. I do not now remember the state of the weather the day I first went to meeting, but I certainly noticed the light.

Part of the irresistible appeal that churches still have for me is the aura of mystery surrounding what they have in them. The altar, the candlesticks, the colored glass, the raised pulpit and lectern all speak to me of holiness in the midst of the ordinary. The meetinghouse was similar. The play of light gave me a sensation of being enclosed or momentarily retired from the outside world rather than being separated from it. The place where I sat was not a refuge in which to wait for the coming of the kingdom, but an outpost of that kingdom in St. Giles' Street, Oxford.

The next thing I was really conscious of was the group of which I was a member. I have already remarked upon the underplayed style of the people among whom I had walked down the garden to the meetinghouse. I knew that the Quakers had once worn grey-clothes without collars and lapels as a sort of uniform. I also knew that they had been such fervent and peaceable people that they courageously accepted prison rather than compromise their beliefs. I did not then appreciate the reasons for these things, but I was aware that their tradition was a living one.

There was little ostentation among them. The silence seemed to emphasize both their uniqueness and their solidarity. There were many variants of the benevolent gaze with which some swept the room. Others maintained an oddly rigid posture for what seemed to me to be an age. Closed eyes completed a frown of concentration on some faces or the blandness of apparent slumber on others. There were the human quirks—the flamboyant blowing of the nose into a gaudy handkerchief, the scratching of the outside of a leg, the unconscious pulling of a face that revealed the presence of a divine blessing or an uncomfortable memory. The odd newcomer like myself clutched an introductory leaflet. In the odd corner people read.

There were none of the usual landmarks of worship. With no organ, piano or order of service, there was no need for a little board hoisted up on high to tell people the numbers of the hymns. Indeed, apart from a Bible and a couple of other volumes peculiar to the Quakers, which were on the table in the middle of the room, there weren't any books at all. Since there was no priest or minister, and

one did not expect a public reading of the Bible, it followed that there was no need for a pulpit or a lectern. I rather liked the idea that the benches were arranged in a rectangle round the central table. Sitting at the back, I could see everybody else, and there was nowhere to sit where I would not be directly facing at least a quarter of my fellow worshippers.

I do not think I consciously sat and worked all this out. Rather, it was borne in upon me as I tried to sit still and open myself to the novelty. My reflections were not particularly religious, either. During the hour I prayed a bit and thought a lot about what I took to be divine things, but my mind kept coming back to the simple consciousness of where I was. At that stage of my life it was important simply to be there, and since I had been looking forward to my visit, I expect it was largely childish excitement that made my first meeting memorable.

Much later, I learned that the original meetings in the seventeenth century took far longer than the hour that was scheduled for that morning—indeed the early Friends would have swooned at the very idea of scheduling the length of the meeting. Meeting for worship ended when the Holy Spirit indicated, and not before. But in the time of George Fox and William Penn, there were no trains and buses to catch. People were far more independent and able to dispose of their own time. So on this occasion, the Holy Spirit utilized the wristwatch rather than the inward illumination of the heart to tell the Friends when to break off their devotions.

The manner of starting and finishing were noteworthy too. We drifted into meeting and ended in what was for me a mixture of relief and anticlimax. This was all part of the pattern of having no clergy and no visible organization. The meeting began when the first worshipper sat down, so the next person to come entered an already living silence. In this way there was no chatter, no theatrical entry to give a clear beginning and no sudden switch of concentration from talking to one's neighbour to talking to God. I don't remember coming late, so I suppose I sat and watched others come in, wondering about them the while.

During my first ever hour in an unprogrammed Quaker meeting, there was what I now know as "ministry." After twenty minutes or so, somebody got up and made a short speech. It cannot have lasted more than a couple of minutes, and I came to recognize this as the norm. It was different from the prepared sermon, not only in its length but also its style. There were several other pieces of ministry during the hour, and though they were from different voices, the style was the same—short, pithy, illustrated with stories taken from life, and tentative or suggestive in manner rather than definite or authoritative. I never dreamed that I would much later come to admire, imitate and then question this style when I myself was moved to minister in meeting.

So my first meeting was spent largely in looking and absorbing the atmosphere. It was hard work because I was an outsider and I did not want to commit a faux pas. I said a few prayers so I could feel religious and thought hard about what had been said by those who ministered. The bench was even harder than my thoughts and time began to weigh heavily. At a quarter to the hour I was ready to go, but there was no escape. I had to sweat it out to the end, and I was truly grateful when two people at the front, who I later discovered were elders, ended the meeting by shaking hands. That action was followed by a relieved, but definitely friendly rustle. In the midst of the company, somebody got up and gave the notices and sat down. Hubbub began, and I dodged the Friendly greeters who were bearing down on me and escaped into the street. It had been nothing like I expected, but I went back. It turned out to be one of the big beginnings in my life.

## *Finding a Voice*

I went back to Oxford meetinghouse because the experience I had been through roused my curiosity. Was Quaker worship my path to a deeply spiritual life that was at the same time highly practical? In the bloom of youthful religious enthusiasm, I needed both those things—or at least I needed the assurance that they were available. Here in the meeting, somewhere, was one of their sources, and I felt drawn to try and discover it.

The surroundings were congenial too. I found that the plain architecture and the arrangement of the room used for worship were to my taste. A temperamental nonconformity revealed itself in me. Over the first few weeks of worshipping in silence, I realized that I was no longer able to enter fully into worship that was led by somebody else. This made me sad, and worried me not a little. It was hard to separate this distaste from a suspicion that I was simply being spiritually proud. I learned quickly that silent worship came at a price, and I needed to be sure I had the resources to meet it.

An uncomfortable feeling that was aroused in me was a sense of challenge. Some people attend their first Friends meeting and know straightaway that this is where they belong. They find that the silence refreshes them, and they can somehow sink into its peace. This was not my experience. I found it disturbing and rather troublesome. Used to a structured service, I found myself with no points of reference and nothing to check against. There seemed to be no shape in an

unprogrammed meeting, yet I sensed that there was, and that if I persevered, I would find it.

God is infinitely kind and infinitely tactful. As I look back on the religious journey that has taken me deeper and deeper into the stillness of Friends worship, I realize that the quietness does have a shape and a meaning and that God has used it to give my life those things. Over the years I have learned to see and to follow the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. I have also learned that the silence has little intrinsic value unless it is put in the setting of the Quaker way of life.

My exploration of Quaker worship became the discovery of this way of living. The practice of the one encouraged the other. I knew nothing of this when I started to go to meeting. As a beginner I naturally sought to use the silence for my own purposes. I had no thought that the silence would come to leave its mark upon me. If my prayers and meditations were stones, it was the silence that formed them into a temple and made them live.

On the surface, a silent meeting appears to be a group of people sitting together but worshipping individually. Some adventurous souls attach themselves to the Society of Friends because they are attracted by the silence. They conclude that Quaker worship is simply an opportunity for meditation. The collective wisdom of the Society has never accepted that view, however, for its evangelical and liberal wings both insist that meeting is a collective activity, as its name ought to indicate. Much of what we do may be personal, but we come before the Lord in a body.

There is really no way to avoid coming to grips personally with the demands made by the silence. This has to be done from the beginning, and it is highly challenging to the dedication and resourcefulness of the worshipper. There is no generally accepted plan, scheme or technique for learning the art of silent worship. The Society of Friends is not like the freemasons. One is not initiated into deeper and deeper mysteries by properly appointed persons when one has shown one's worth and learned the secret lore. I would hazard the generalization that while one can become highly experienced in Quaker worship, one cannot become expert in it.

This lack of direction may be dismaying. One may feel as if one has lost the oars overboard and cannot keep the boat going. In fact, however, the difference of Quakerly opinion about the use of silence is a charter of freedom. One can do what one likes in it without any sense of failure or falsehood, granted an initial sincerity of intention, of course. That is the first and most vital lesson about coming to unprogrammed worship.

It follows from this that learning to worship in the corporate silence of a Friends meeting is not like taking a course of study. There are no tests to see how far one has come or whether one has understood. The most important step forward in the life of prayer is to realize that we are all at the same stage—the beginning—every time we come into God's presence. We can learn many new ways of doing this, and we can adopt the ways that fit our own temperament or inclination. This is the point about experience as against expertise.

We may discover that there is a far wider range of approaches to God than we had imagined. We may well be able to achieve greater depth of devotion as time passes. But we shall never know, when we set out on the adventure of an hour's silence with Friends, or our own quiet time at home, whether that gift of depth will be given to us, or whether we shall once more be beached in the shallows we knew at the very beginning of our pilgrimage of prayer.

To draw sharp distinctions in an attempt to characterize the varieties of Quaker spirituality is therefore a mistake. In the past there have been opposing parties within the Society over the principles of worship. But controversies are seldom clear-cut. I know there are purists who see hymn-singing as a falling away from some pristine ideal of Quaker worship, but I doubt whether it is. There are times when I am suffocated by silence and I yearn for the liberty of scripture and gospel song.

But I also know that there are times when the cozy habits of my religious upbringing prevent me from hearing the voice of God speaking to me because I am drowning it out with the repetition of scripture and the words of hymns that represent experiences I have not yet made my own. What I do know about myself is that I need

## *First Steps in the Silence*

People give many reasons for going to unprogrammed meetings, some good, some not really satisfactory, but the opportunity for prolonged and undisturbed prayer seems to me to be the best. I won't quarrel about what the definition of prayer is. My way is not everybody's. But a Friends meeting that is not based upon a deep faith that God can be encountered in the heart, and that we can enjoy a heartfelt, divine communion in one another's company is not a Friends meeting, whatever else it may be. Prayer is the encounter with God in the heart, and the traditional fivefold division of the ways of that encounter do not seem to me ever to have been bettered.

At the same time, the ways to God are many, and we have to discover most of them on our own. They appear when we are ready for them and when our faithfulness has shown we can live with the consequences of further growth. This is one of the most important parts of Quaker spirituality, but I was not told anything about that when I first began to go to meeting. My presence was noted by the overseers I now know, but I was left entirely on my own, and I am thankful that I was. I was busy learning to pray, and that was sufficient. Like so many learners, I thought I was doing it myself. In the fullness of time I realised that it was God who was leading me on.

If I were to be asked, therefore, what advice I would give to a newcomer to unprogrammed or semi-programmed Quaker meetings, I would echo Paul's words to the Thessalonians, "Pray without ceasing."

I would add that it is necessary to develop one's prayer life in new ways. What follows is intended to be helpful to Friends and those who come to meeting fairly often without necessarily becoming members of the Society. It may also be of interest to others, but it is not an authoritative statement of how to do it. There can be no such thing; the whole point of Quaker worship is that we find our own way.

To some people, prayer comes easily. Others have to toil at it. Most people find they have periods of ease and difficulty alternately. The best thing to do if you want to make progress in prayer is exactly what you would do if you decided to take up tennis or golf—find a coach. Golf and tennis pros cannot play your game for you, but the wealth of their experience is at your disposal.

To have a spiritual friend is an ancient tradition which is being revived in our time. When I was beginning on my journey I did not have this privilege, but now I have such people. Prayer is the art of being, not doing, and what you learn from your friend is not how to pray by numbers, but by feelings and attitudes and responses. Spiritual friends are not really coaches but partners in growth. It is simple to start such a relationship. You invite someone willing, whose spiritual life you are happy with, to meet you regularly for a period of worship and prayer in which you can lay before that person, and discuss, what you feel is happening to you in your life.

The next piece of advice is practical. Do not expect to sit for an hour and have godly thoughts all the time. That would be more than flesh could stand. You should expect to give some consideration to the files waiting for you in the office on Monday, to think about the bonfire you are planning to build when you get home, to worry whether you left the garage doors open, to wonder what reason your children have to be so objectionable and inconsiderate. Learn to accept these things, for they are part of the life you are offering to God.

In your own way you will come back to your prayer and then wander again. Sometimes your prayer will be quite long, at other times brief. Unless you are a highly organized person you won't have any kind of order. It may help to begin with a sort of mental agenda, ticking things off as you go, but you may well find, if you can forget

any guilt feelings about your wandering attention, that after a few meetings, you will not need to be so highly organized. If you have a proper period of prayer every day, you will be able to be ever freer on First Days.

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.

While stressing that the actual experience of passing time in a Friends meeting is likely to be similar between newcomer and old hand, we must also acknowledge that there is much that one can learn about the practice of this kind of worship. There are more effective

and less effective ways of coming to meeting. What makes for equality is that the effective ones are not habit forming. An experienced Friend will know them, and how to explain them to others. But only what the Catholic tradition knows as an act of will permits their exercise. God adds spice to Quaker life by ensuring that the less effective ways are habit forming and can be a snare for the soul. Once adopted, Quaker worship can be dangerous. Its characteristic sin is complacency.

The following observations are intended to help and reassure anyone who may be thinking about a visit to an unprogrammed meeting, or who is uneasy at the thought that more earth-shattering experiences ought to be coming their way and aren't. The situation is normal and calls for nothing more than patience and a bit of common sense. These are some of the things I have found.

There are people who are secret members of the hair shirt brigade. A hair shirt was a scratchy garment particularly holy people were supposed to have worn in the Middle Ages to mortify the flesh and benefit the soul. I bet all it did was to make them bad tempered and objectionable. The modern hair shirt brigade thinks that you can only worship properly if you are cold and uncomfortable. So meetinghouses must have cold water flowing from the hot taps, damp towels, hard benches and draughts. Do not attend such places. Go where you can sit comfortably. This is very important. You are not there for the self-control Olympics; you are there to worship God in the beauty of holiness, and the best way to be still is to be comfortable.

When you have found a relaxing posture that you can keep for a while, remember it. Find others, and consciously adopt them throughout the period of the meeting. For example, you may like to fold your hands on your lap at one point. At another you might like to have them open, palms up, resting on your thighs. This can help your meditations too. Open hands are open to God, who will fill them with grace. They are open to the world, a sign of trust and strength. A bowed head or a straight head can express unconscious movement or can be used to express a mood of worship. Many meetinghouses have hassocks. Time was, quite recently, that Friends used them to kneel on to pray. That is a better use than a lodging for dirty boots.

Since everyday distractions are at a minimum in an unprogrammed meeting, one becomes conscious of all sort of things that are usually beneath our regular attention, like a hole in a tooth, a shaving cut, a leaky shoe, ill-fitting underwear, fat where there wasn't fat before. Usually we feel such things and then dismiss them until we get home and can put them right. But at meeting, we are stuck for a pretty long time, and our body keeps protesting that it wants our urgent and undivided attention, even though we have given it warmth and comfort. It must be ignored gently. The best way to accomplish this is constant deep breathing, relaxed and regular, all the way from the solar plexus, on and on until the regularity of it takes you over, as most times it surely will.

Friends have different preferences about closing their eyes, as can be seen by glancing round the meetinghouse. I have difficulty if I close mine too soon, but I find that with deep, regular breathing, the surface distractions diminish and closing my eyes helps to accelerate this process. Somehow the power of silence becomes tangible at this point. After a few minutes of stillness I may have the sensation that my mental powers are being concentrated as a bird wraps itself in its wings and that I am coming into harmony with the other worshippers. This is the process known as "centering down."

This can be done far more effectively if one has come, to use another Quaker phrase, with heart and mind prepared. The hint about breathing is based on the experience that regularity and order, or perhaps rhythm, are as essential to silent worship as they are to other things. To come rushed and untidy to the meetinghouse at any other time than an emergency is to break all the organic links between our lives outside worship and our meeting. The silence is then a refuge and not a reflection of what we seek to practice every day. Whenever I go to meeting full of turmoil, centering down is like ploughing a rocky, stony field.

Underlying this advice is a conviction about how we ought to live. We are conscious of time and depth in our lives in all sorts of ways. In modern society we tend to live at speed, trying to do all manner of things, and often to do them simultaneously. Moreover we live in

a world of almost instant visual and aural gratification, and we move very fast from one object of attention to another. That is how work, transportation, TV and the media of communication organize things for us. So a Friends meeting has these strikes against it when it invites us to search for God's time and God's depth in our lives and refuses to compromise with the habits formed by the timetable and the calendar. During the week we need to try to take things one at a time and more slowly. The quality of worship improves that way.

There are Friends who think that we should clear our minds of everything when we come to meeting, that preparation is some sort of obstacle to the proper use of silence, and that we should rely on something happening to us after the meeting has been going a little while. I doubt whether that is good advice. To succeed in something as demanding as silent worship and to come to the point at which one can treat the silence in this way needs a great deal of experience. So as part of one's private worship during the week before attending meeting, one should look out for a thought, a text, a theme, or an idea on which to work, and which will complement or expand one's prayer.

One of the troubles everybody experiences occasionally is the inability to focus the mind. When I am in this mood there seems no getting out of it. Sometimes I am unable to concentrate on worship at all. At other times thoughts wander persistently and my mind seldom stays still for more than a few moments. At other times I am intensely disturbed by something I usually do not notice, like the ticking of the clock, or a cough, or the coins rattling in somebody else's pocket.

The problem here is usually frustration that I am failing to achieve what I came for and guilt that I ought to be using the time better. Hard though it was, I had to learn that neither of these things matters. Two things help. In my mind, I have learned to recognize my guilt and frustration and to set them on one side and look at them. Their power diminishes if I do that. Then I am able to feel better about the problem of maintaining concentration by using this little stratagem for bringing a wandering mind back to its path.

embraced by the wind of the Spirit. There is a Quaker way of getting here, and other ways in other traditions. But what happens is the same. Those who have had this experience speak of becoming their true selves. They are given a perspective on the world that comes from beyond it.

In Quaker parlance this is called coming to the light, and it has a dimension of intense ethical and spiritual struggle. 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. These are not at the outset passive attitudes, but are rather the moods in which one's prayer or self-examination take place. The point is that we try to make ourselves receptive to God.

It must also be remembered that 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 are activities in which everybody is engaged and, as we shall see, 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 and with heart and mind prepared. The similarities with liturgy continue to reveal themselves.

Different writers about Quakerism, not all Friends, arrive at different estimates of silence. Perhaps it has different levels. So far, I have been regarding it primarily as a *medium*, that through which one does something; for people learning to worship after the manner of Friends, that may be the most helpful way of understanding it.

Others, however, almost make silence an *object*, a thing to be experienced and taken on its own terms. The point here is that we accommodate ourselves to the absence of sound and allow it to mold our spiritual experiences. This has (to some) the advantage of doing away with the necessity of a specifically Christian spirituality and permitting other kinds of belief to take a place within the overall pattern of Quaker worship. Indeed, belief may be irrelevant. The

experience of silence itself may somehow refresh us, revive us, revitalize us, and return us renewed into the world for whatever it is we have to do there.

Then there are those who see silence as a *sign* or *symbol*. This is where the silent Friends in the world would take theological issue with those who have programmed worship services. On the basis of a church order which refuses ordained ministry and outward expression of baptism or the supper and which places the highest practical value on waiting for direct divine leadings, the silence actually proclaims the tradition, because no other practice is possible within it. To participate in the silence, for those Friends, is to be a Quaker.

So it is possible to think of silence in several ways and thereby gain a valuable perspective on what we are doing. Often, reflection will show that we have a preference or a bias for one or the other aspect of silence. That is a considerable advantage, for we can use that knowledge in our preparations and for worship itself.

We will then be more able to encounter the problems of silence with confidence, aware that the best way to use it is our own way. We all have to learn to make space for ourselves where we can simply be and cut ourselves off from everything else. We shall need to discover the particular rhythm of thought and rest in the silence that is agreeable to us. We need to experiment to find out and to practice and work at our prayer and meditation.

Most silent meetings last for an hour, so we also have to learn that gift which is equally important to tennis players, stand-up comics and Quakers of the unprogrammed tradition—timing. We can put it this way. The silent meeting is like the surface of a lake. We enter it in our devotions and begin to sink into its depths. On rare occasions we rise again to the sunlight of everyday life when the whole meeting ends, and there is a sense of perfection, of completion. Sometimes, as I did on my first meeting, we finish before the meeting ends and just have to sit there, well-manneredly waiting for everybody else.

At other times the reverse happens, and we are not ready to finish our worship when the official closure comes. Moreover, we soon make the acquaintance of two disappointments—the meeting

in which we totally fail to worship and flit about on the surface of the silence, unable to break into it, and the meeting in which we are unable to achieve any depth at all and paddle in and out of the silence, frustrated because we know what we are missing.

As the shape of the silent meeting and the ways we can approach it begin to emerge, we begin to learn the discipline of structuring our worship over time. If we think about what we actually do, we can begin to find possibilities for ourselves, and, thence, lines of growth. By thinking about the times when we reach depths of worship, we can make ourselves more open to receive this blessing. By preparing properly and by learning how to concentrate better, we can minimise the difficulties which, in fact, we never entirely overcome. Finally, when a meeting is not going well for us, there are things we can do even then to turn it to good account.

This is where we can discover that worship is an art. Amateurs, by definition, can go and do something else when the going gets hard. That is why they very rarely excel. Professionals have the hard-won knowledge that when difficulty comes, their craft will take them through. It is as if an energy from outside takes over and raises what they do to a higher power in one act of transformation. If we are willing, this is what God can do with our worship.

## Listening to Ministry

I have been sitting in Friends meetings for about thirty years now, and I must say I remember very little of the ministry I have heard during that time. That is as it should be, for the function of ministry is the spiritual formation of Friends, not their instruction.

One of the most memorable pieces of ministry I ever heard was given by an elderly Friend shortly after I first came into membership of the Society. He rose and stood in his characteristically stooped way, with his finger in his little pocket Bible, and said that we ought all to be picking up sticks. I sat up in surprise at this, and then heard him tell the story of Elijah going to the widow of Zarephath for refuge, and how he had found her gathering fuel for a fire on which she would probably never have anything to cook.

I thought he was crazy. He must have drawn a moral from this, but I do not remember what it was. Much later, however, as I began to reflect on the nature of Quaker ministry, it became dear to me. This message operated at two levels. There was certainly an element of teaching in it. The Old Testament was being applied to modern life, and I was being pointed to it in no uncertain terms. There was also an element of exhortation. He said that we ought to pick up sticks too.

That was why I thought he was touched. As a new Quaker I didn't want this kind of puzzle. I wanted grand visions, inspirational sermons, endorsement of all the things I brought to the Society of Friends in my youthful enthusiasm. I now realize that I did not want

to be ministered to; I wanted a message. I wanted something to enjoy or react to, something I could deal with, take to bits, pack up for future reference or throw away as useless or unacceptable. I listened with my mind, not my heart, and I did not hear what was being said.

Nevertheless, by the grace of God, my elderly Friend's words lodged in my mind. I have always remembered them. I never quite appreciated why, until, having gone through a number of changes over the years, I began to see traditional Quaker spirituality as a living option for my own life. The sticks the widow was gathering were collected in faith, with no clear idea of their ultimate use. Faith and habit were carrying her on. But she had more than sticks. Put together they were something else again—fire, one of the most powerful and frightening things in human experience.

Thus it is in the world of the Spirit, my old ministering Friend was saying. Having a good trip in this meeting is all very well, but you must take a longer view. If you garner all the gifts of imagination and reflection which God sends you, you will have something which can catch fire. But like the widow, you must be faithful and patient.

The next piece of memorable ministry did rise out of my faithfulness, in a funny way. On another occasion, soon after I was married, there had been a snowstorm. My wife and I knew that many people would be prevented from coming to meeting, so we felt under a special obligation to struggle through the drifts to get to the meetinghouse, which was in the forest. When we arrived we found chairs set out in a small side room in front of a large coke fire which filled the fireplace, burned brightly, but made almost no impact on the arctic temperature in the room.

During meeting we received ministry from another elderly Friend who was bright of eye, sharp of nose and wit, and who always wore a broad-brimmed hat tied under her chin with a wide black ribbon. In her precise voice she pointed out how Britain believes that snow is un-British and consequently never takes sensible precautions against it, simply wishing it would go away. She was right. British people on the whole think it is bad mannered of the weather to snow, and that was how we came to be a little band of survivors, huddled together for

warmth, worshipping in conditions of some discomfort, affronted at climatic bad form.

Our Friend then changed gear and drew our attention to the prodigious range of temperatures in the universe and how narrow, in fact, was the band in which we lived, where it took a drop of only about twenty degrees to snarl up so much of our normal pattern of life. If it were to stay like this, she told us, there would be no spring and no harvest, and when the cans of beans ran out, that would be it.

That piece of ministry has also stayed with me for many years. I was at a time of life and in a period (the sixties) when there was unbridled optimism abroad. We could do *anything*, particularly if we were young. But the snow that day put a question mark against some of my assumptions, particularly my values in worship. As I have said, I did much thinking by my own strength in those days. Our dear Friend's ministry probably marked the beginning of my understanding of what reverence meant and that intimacy with God does not mean familiarity. There are things we are not meant to know, or to do, and we have to learn what they are. They are God's and they are holy.

Perhaps the third piece of ministry which I remember vividly was from a Friend more of my own generation, a man of spiritual weight, with a dry and magnificent sense of humor. I once heard him remark that things are not what they were, with the Catholics having doubts and the Quakers getting short of money. He rose once, about the turn of the year and quoted, I guess, Ezekiel 3:16, who says, "Son of Man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel . . ." He described how he chose for each year a role, as it were, to explore in his own devotional life. This year it was to be the role of watchman. Standing in Ezekiel's shoes, what did God have to say to him?

I have not followed his example as an annual discipline, but his words have been very important to me at different times in my life. I have found that when I am going through particular periods of stress or change, I look for some such model and explore it. I have found that it works like a radio receiver. You are on a wave band, and you can pick up all sorts of messages that are always there, but you usually don't either notice or need. I have found this a great aid in spiritual

discernment for myself. What arises in another's ministry often falls like seed in one's own life, and the discipline of waiting in silence gives time for germination and for this process of discernment.

Discernment is a fashionable word in religious circles these days, but it is really no big deal. In ordinary life, it is simply the ability to distinguish, or separate things out. It is like choosing things, or naming them, and is a closely related activity. Indeed, it is basic to both. In principle, spiritual discernment is no different. It is the activity of the soul in deepening its relationship with God.

That may involve many things, but its most obvious application in Quaker life is in the process of weighing the words given in ministry at the meeting for worship. No sooner do we sit down in an unprogrammed meeting than the questions are put before us—how do we recognize genuine ministry when we hear it, and how do we recognize our own call to minister when it comes? Many newcomers are likely to be too busy exploring the nature of an unfamiliar way of worshipping to pay much attention to these matters, but the time comes when they cannot be avoided.

It has to be admitted right at the start that not all ministry is equally helpful, or that we should take it at face value just because it is given in a meeting for worship. There is trivial as well as profound ministry. It can arise from deep experience but sometimes seems to express only personal whim. Mostly it will answer to the spiritual needs of the meeting, but it can sometimes be seen to have no value beyond expressing the immediate need of the person who gives it. So part of the art of spiritual discernment in an unprogrammed meeting is to decide how to respond to ministry when we have heard it.

First, there is the courtesy we should expect to extend to any deeply felt expression of feeling or opinion. What matters is what is said, not the way it is put. Hence we have to make conscious efforts not to be impressed by eloquence or to judge people from outward appearances. The simple can frequently see further into the nature of things than those wise in the ways of the world. People may have annoying mannerisms, and we must be careful to ignore them.

Again, it helps to be able to interpret what kind of ministry is being

given. In the old days, they expected prayer, praise and preaching. There is a lot more than that nowadays, though, on reflection, most offerings can be made to fall into one or other of those categories. Some Friends speak earnestly, exhorting the meeting and often sharpening up its moral or spiritual sensitivity in disconcerting ways. Others get up and chat, almost absent-mindedly, but may produce a profound insight, like a gift of diamonds wrapped up in newspaper. Some ministers sound a trumpet call to action in the world. Some play a reed pipe, pointing the worshippers to the hidden currents of divine activity deep below the surface of life.

Though it might not be obvious on the surface, ministry should be coherent and structured and given for a purpose. Since the urge to speak often comes welling up from a deep place, this order may not be fully grasped by the Friend speaking and may acquire shape as it is expressed. So we have to help it along by sympathetic understanding and imagination and try to be sensitive to what the minister is striving to say.

This is why style must be taken into consideration. The old Quakers thought ministry was being a sort of flute for the Holy Spirit to play on. You had to be quite passive and let God do the talking through you. This view is still to be found, but most modern Friends in the unprogrammed tradition put it rather differently. Since we are created with differences of temperament and insight, we may expect to be given different gifts to be used, each in our own way.

It follows, I think, that we have to train ourselves to overcome our personal likes and dislikes and treat everything said in meeting with uniform seriousness and consideration. That is part of Friends' spiritual discipline and cannot be compromised with. It is not at all easy, but it is unavoidable. If we are to practice discernment we have to do it at a spiritual and not a merely intellectual level. We need time and calmness to reflect on what we have heard. Only when we have taken it into ourselves shall we be in a position to decide whether or not it is from God.

The ministry given in the silence of unprogrammed meetings and in the open worship of programmed meetings is thus of unique

importance in Quakerism. When our personal response harmonizes with what is said at a level below everyday preoccupations and prejudices, the ministry will be sound. But if it fails this test, we have to let it "go over us." The price of discrimination is that we receive the words tenderly but cannot accept them as a prophetic utterance.

There is a celebrated passage from the *Journal of George Fox* which is part of a letter written by him to Friends in the ministry. Many Friends know it by heart. It goes, "Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one." The art of discerning the value of ministry in a silent meeting for worship is to test whether what is said reaches, or answers, that of God within you.

Where these two things meet, the ministry has been given genuinely, or "in the life." The revelation of truth which God imparts to you in the depth of your own soul receives and confirms what has been said by the person to whom the words have been given. There is no escaping the consequences of this. The early Quakers took it to be the experience of the first Christians and what underlies the passages in the New Testament about the early church and its worship.

Listening to ministry is part of the art of spiritual discernment, so it makes sense to think about the manner of its delivery as well as its content. Though this is not perhaps one of the main purposes in developing our capacity to hear, long experience of the ministry of others can teach us that we have the capacity to minister ourselves. God often teaches us to recognize his personal call to us by giving us a sympathetic understanding of his call to other people. If we can understand the different ways ministry comes to us, we shall learn how we may ourselves be moved to minister.

Years before I spoke my first words in meeting, I had the longing to minister. It was not a dishonorable desire arising from my own conceit. Many of the ministers I heard were able to see the hand of God at work in everyday life in a way that was denied to me at that time. Rather it was the wish to have that gift of practical wisdom out

of which I knew ministry grew. As my ministry drew near, I began to notice how different Friends approached their ministry in different ways, but how there was an underlying pattern.

Looking back I think I can remember certain stages in my journey towards this particular call. I know for sure that it took a very long time, and I remember being quite fretful that I, always pretty eloquent, was given no words. Looking back, I know that this was God dealing with me. I have come to learn that our faithfulness is always tested in our willingness to set aside those things we value most—particularly the personal qualities in which we have every reason to feel ourselves blessed. This is so we can know that when they are ready for use, they are being put to God's purposes, not our own.

If I had to draw a chart, or name stages, I should say that after a while it dawned on me that there was a possibility that I might one day minister. I was too busy learning silent worship, so I did not consider it at length. But after a while the notion returned, this time arousing in me an inclination. This was something I was equipped to do, so why not do it? But this time I knew the difference between speech and ministry, so I could answer myself. But the next time the leading returned, it had changed into a desire.

This stayed with me for some years, and then, shortly before I first spoke, the tempo changed rapidly. The cloak of desire was thrown aside and intention appeared. I knew it was only a matter of time. I was going to minister. Then I felt the need to minister, as if I was carrying a burden. Then, on that fresh December day, there was the urge. It was irresistible, and I was on my feet with a Christmas message that spoke of suffering and spite. I was frightened by what I had done.

No Friend, nor even an experienced attender at Friends meetings of any kind should be afraid of this call. One does not need to be a Quaker to have it. Nevertheless, people are often troubled about knowing when to speak. Though there is never ever any absolute certainty about whether one has been called, there are a few simple ways of testing one's call for oneself.

Since one is engaged on an exercise of discernment, it is important to enquire of oneself as to whether what one feels led to say arises

naturally out of personal experience. Is it part of a pattern? Is it grounded in life? Is it a second-hand reflection, or does it come from deep inside? Normally it tests one's faith, for one will have to decide whether the message is about God or whether it comes from God. If the former, one may not give it.

Then there is the meeting. Do the words fit this gathering? Is it part of the exercise of Friends that day? If one has been a member of the meeting for a long while, one should consider how it fits in with the long-term concerns and spiritual needs of the group. If one is in the habit of praying for the meeting, or holding Friends in the light, could this be an opportunity for saying something that needs to be said? There may be bereavements or separations, births or anniversaries, quarrels and reconciliations. They may need to be marked in indirect ways that bring nourishment, challenge or comfort.

This is the sort of concern that arises naturally if one has time in one's life for reflection and prayer—a spiritual discipline. We need personal retirement for communion with God and also space to reflect on the needs of our community. It is always possible that we can leave needs like this to be met by spontaneous and unpremeditated ministry that rushes over us all of a sudden, but I doubt it. It is not necessary to prepare ministry to have given thoughtful consideration to what might be said. What counts is to recognize when God is calling upon us to give it.

I once heard a story from an elderly Friend, who, when young, crassly asked Rufus Jones whether he prepared his sermons. The sage replied that he spent much of his time constructing sermons, but had to wait to be told to give them. I can imagine the twinkle in his eye as he said that, for it puts a profound point. Many people believe Quaker ministry should be spontaneous, ejaculatory and unpremeditated. Such is not the case, provided one has the spiritual discipline to be able to distinguish God's prompting from one's own.

So I do not think Friends need to bother over much if they think they have brought the words to the meeting. It is best to trust one's judgment as to whether one is called upon to deliver them. There are much better ways of getting into a tizzy than trying to decide whether

what one has to say is spontaneous or not. That is not the point. One should not ask, "Is it spontaneous?" but "Is it called for?"

This is the point eventually reached by everyone who has ever ministered properly in a Quaker meeting. It is a cause of heart-searching and occasional agony when one cannot decide whether it would be right to stand up and speak. But there is no way round the difficulty, no advice one can give, no help to be proffered. It is like being on the 'exit to system' button on a computer, and no Quaker writer has ever been able to explain it. I think the point is that God approaches each one of us in a highly individual way which is very hard to express. What we can say is that faith, trust, and commitment to Friends' doctrine of the continuing inward and unmediated revelation of God are absolutely essential. Beyond that, one simply has to shove doubt on one side and take the consequences.

This is yet another example of the formative influence of the stillness that arises out of silence. If the ways of God in our experience are like this, what we should do is to wait patiently for the angel to disturb the waters. As a minister, I do what I did when I was a beginner in the art of silence. I structure things, go over the words and try to be sure I have them all safely marshalled. But that is a phase I am leaving behind. I am now being given the gift others have received right at the start. I am beginning to find I can go by feel and can wait for the words to come when I am on my feet.

I find that if I do all these things in an attempt to deny the call, to prevent myself speaking, there are many occasions in which the feeling passes. But there are other times when I feel almost forced to my feet. I find the urge goes away but comes back again more strongly. When it has done this once or twice, I give way to a sort of fatalism. God must be allowed to take over. If it is right, I find myself speaking. If it is not, I remain in my seat. Whichever happens, I know the deep feeling of faithfulness the great Quakers of the past called a baptism. In words or silence, I know I have been touched by God.

## The Call to Minister

The first ministry I ever gave in a meeting for worship is still dear in my memory. It was shortly before Christmas, more than ten years after I was admitted into membership of the Society of Friends. I was reflecting on carols, and the thought struck me that the medieval ones had an edge of warmth, innocence and harshness that was absent from many of those from later centuries. They seemed somehow closer to the reality the season is supposed to celebrate.

Then I came to reflect on the practice of many families in hanging a holly wreath on their front door. I have never been at ease with the easy optimism and conviviality of Christmas, so I offered these reflections to the meeting and enquired how many people with holly wreaths on their doors recognized that it was also a crown of thorns.

I got up because I wanted to and had to. The time had come for me to "appear in the ministry," to use yet another of those expressions from the Quaker phrase book. I did not know it at the time, but all the turmoil and heart-searching I had experienced before getting to my feet was something ministering Friends have known from the beginning.

It is possibly not coincidental that my first ministry was given at Christmas, which in England is usually drab, damp and grey. The weather is a perfect setting for a festival of light, particularly at dusk on the Eve of the Nativity. At that time, I always have the sensation that the world is slowing down, becoming still, wailing with a divine

resignation for the singing of the angels and the wheeling stars to stop. One of my private symbols for that peace is the pigeons perching calmly in the trees. At midwinter there are no leaves, and you can see them there.

I love meeting for worship in winter for similar reasons. Though, as a Friend, I am traditionally not supposed to look to outward symbolism for religious truth, the peacefulness of the Christmas season is irresistible. More than at any other time I feel a oneness between my worship and the one to whom it is offered. I am sure those of other churches feel similarly. I can only explain that this is how I come close to the heart of the unprogrammed meeting for worship in the Quaker tradition.

I have also learned that the spoken ministry can be given to the unsuspected need of someone present in the meeting. On another occasion I found myself ministering about the atmosphere in the burial ground outside our meetinghouse. I said I hoped to be buried there and that its calm and dignity as a place presaged what I hoped the experience of leaving this life would be like. I was well aware of the number of elderly Friends in the meeting, and I was afraid of what I had to say. There was a tinge of impertinence about my words, a lack of consideration perhaps, a sense deep in me that I was treading on holy ground. There is always the ultimate fear I cannot escape from, that uncalled-for ministry is blasphemy.

When the meeting closed, a Friend came up to me, and we fell into a lengthy conversation about what I had said. Soon thereafter, he rang me up out of the blue and told me to come to his house and take instructions for his will. He was insistent. The following week would not do. I was to come immediately. When I went, I was shaken by the deterioration in his physical condition. I produced a will for him in double quick time, and it is as well that I did, for he died within the week.

On that one occasion, at least, I have no doubt that God was calling me directly and personally. I was able to minister to a Friend in great need, and I hope my spiritual comforts were as acceptable as my professional services. I have certainly continued to help my

friend's widow where I can. What I said, certainly unpremeditated and unpredictable when I entered the meeting, led to important consequences. Not least of them was my Friend's ministry to me. If I live to be a hundred I shall never encounter anyone who approached the end with such clear-sighted courage, faith, and concern for those who would be left behind.

When I gave this ministry, I was afraid, because I had in mind that many of my hearers would be elderly. But my Friend was in the prime of life, and I could have had no notion of the outcome of my faithfulness. But such it was. I was called to service in a chain of events that went well beyond me, and at that time I had no inkling of its existence. I think that this must be another of the reasons why the point at which we feel the call to minister is awesome. It is desirable and frightening at the same time. It is the nearest I come to understanding the meaning of the word "holy."

It is almost impossible to describe the feeling. It is like the welling up of a spiritual wave within or a breaking forth of some invisible glory in the soul. There is a sense of an almost tangible power or strength. One is taught, rightly, to resist the urge to rise and speak when it first comes and to struggle until it becomes irresistible. So it does, as if one has wrestled with an angel.

I think this explains the use of the word "ministry" to characterise these (usually) short speeches in an unprogrammed meeting. The word is in use because Friends understand them to be expressions of divine truth granted to the person ministering as an act of grace. They are considered to be one of the gifts of the Spirit of which the New Testament speaks.

Friends believe that this call to minister can come to any member of the meeting. It springs in the soul of anyone who has centered down or entered this experience St. Teresa called "recollection." There are not two kinds of experience, that of the ministering Friend, and the others. Nevertheless, Friends have always recognized that some of their number receive a special vocation to the ministry. It can come to any member of the meeting, and the tradition reveals

a very large number of instances in which Friends have undertaken a particular discipline of prayer and self-examination because they feel that God is beginning to call on them to minister regularly, and personal preparation is the only way to respond.

When we talk about the "gift" of ministry, we must be careful, for the word can be taken in a number of ways. People are said to have a gift if they enjoy a certain skill or talent, but also, someone has a gift if they have received a present from somebody else. Among Friends, the call to minister is understood as a divine gift in the latter sense. One can prepare oneself to receive it by striving to become worthy of it, but one cannot fit oneself for it by study or meditation alone. These things can be a help, but on any given occasion words may be given or withheld, and none of one's own reflections can make up for their absence.

So words are a part of the Quaker tradition. If the ministering Friend has been faithful, the words will have come at a cost. If the Friend has not been, the words will not have been spoken "in the life" as Friends say. One of the skills in listening to ministry is to tell one from the other. This difficulty is also felt by ministers. Part of their struggle, as they strive to find words for the messages that rise in their minds and imaginations, is to distinguish the true divine leading from the purely human one.

I can only know for certain afterwards, when I have physical symptoms that can only be described as quaking. If my words have been in the life, I am in no doubt. I feel dry and weak, as if something has gone out of me. I find the after-meeting politenesses unbearable and have to go away somewhere by myself. This is an odd reaction, because my ministry often does not seem to merit that sort of feeling of responsibility. But it comes, and a lot of Friends will admit to feeling the same.

It must never be presumed that because the call has come once, it will come again. Equally, if it has never come, one must never think it never will. Strictly speaking, all one is called upon to do is to be ready if called, and in this, once more, the distinction between the minister

and the ordinary worshipper disappears, for in the silence there is no organizational need for a leader, and leading is left to God to choose whom he will.

It has to be said, however, that there are meetings in which there is little sense of divine leading in the spoken ministry, but a lot of reliance of what Friends used to call "the creature." These flights of imaginative fancy, intellectual preoccupations and emotional difficulties provide much information about the ministers but not a great deal about God. They are the exception, however. Most meetings are held in deep reliance upon God, and those who minister in these meetings do so out of a sense of responsibility and calling.

The stillness and the speaking are the two poles of a meeting in the unprogrammed Quaker tradition. Some people come to Friends and are attracted immediately by the stillness. Others find that the ministry, quite apart from anything specific that is said, expresses what they feel should be the intimate connection between religion and life. In addition, many find in the directness and spontaneity of the ministry, a spiritual authority they have missed elsewhere.

The great English Friend, Caroline Stephen, who came from an intellectual Cambridge family, wrote of her first meeting:

... before the meeting was over, a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by an old and apparently untaught man, rising in his place amongst the rest of us. I did not pay much attention to the words he spoke, and I have no recollection of their purport. My whole soul was filled with the unutterable peace of the undisturbed opportunity for communion with God, with the sense that at last I had found a place where I might, without the faintest suspicion of insincerity, join with others in simply seeking His presence. (*Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of The Religious Society of Friends*, London, #80.)

In a well-ordered meeting the ministry and the silence work together. When Friends individually have centered down, the meeting begins to gather, and often someone will rise and speak at this point. After further quiet, another will rise. Again, if the meeting is rightly ordered, what is then said will take the first message further, and after subsequent contributions, a pattern or a theme emerges.

What happens is that the particular exploration of truth which the ministry is making proceeds one step at a time. Waiting for leading is a Quaker principle of great importance. One does not rush ahead quickly. A sort of dialectic is in process, with different and possibly inconsistent things being said. Then there is a search for a resolution of these things which does justice to them all, and in the midst of private prayer and meditation, the meeting is expected to take part in the process.

This process is called the "exercise" of the meeting, and the word is another piece of Quakerly jargon which illustrates the unwritten lore surrounding silent worship and the fact that practice in it over a period must be guided, for it can easily be changed into something else. The sense of exercise is somewhat weak these days, possibly because the time set aside for worship is usually the arbitrary hour, and the meeting ends at a time of purely human convenience.

Nevertheless, where a meeting is truly exercised, there is a deep feeling of guidance among those assembled. Towards the end, the spoken word may lapse, as Friends feel united by something stronger than themselves. In the past, such words as "gathered" or "covered" were used to describe feelings that are probably not accurately called blissful, but certainly meet the description, "the peace that passes understanding."

When early Quaker writers spoke about silent meetings, it was this unity that goes beyond words or the need to give expression to it to which they referred, and every unprogrammed meeting knows this in its own experience. But in modern circumstances it is sometimes difficult to sustain where the basis of a Friends meeting is essentially intellectual or psychological, rather than being grounded in a