

This Sunday I visited the [The Asheville Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends](#), also known as the Quakers. I've long been curious and attracted to the Friends because of their commitment to peace and justice and their deep influence on American culture since colonization. Their practice of Silent Worship and Vocal Ministry seemed at once plain and mysterious.

Part way through my first visit I thought this post was going to be pretty short. It didn't seem like much was "happening". Before it was over I thought I might have to write a two-part series.

This is "no frills" worship — worship pared down to its essential elements. Though I'd heard and read that Meetings of Friends consisted of silent worship until someone felt moved to speak, I did not imagine how much this faith practice called forth from those who practice it.

I left with a deep appreciation for the power of this simplest of spiritual practices to not only sustain and grow a faith tradition for three centuries but also to influence the values and culture of a nation over that time. I began to understand how this faith instilled the kind of emotional strength and ethical fortitude that allowed individuals to defy that same nation when it's leaders and citizens attempted to force them to compromise their ethics.

The service is highly informal. The Friends don't have clergy – everyone is considered to be a minister and have a ministry.

Though most of the congregation arrives just before 10am for Silent Worship, the Meeting for First Day (Sunday) begins at 9:30am with Singing. There is no piano or other instrumental accompaniment to the Singing. A lady named Kitti who led us in singing informed those gathered that any of us were welcome to suggest a song.

We sang a few selections together from the "Quaker hymnal" (I am sure that is not the correct title) and then, as I was casually glancing through the hymnal a title caught my attention. The first few lines appealed to me and I suggested we sing that one. As it happens the song I'd turned to was from a patriotic poem called *Finlandia*. It's called "[A Song for Peace](#)" also known as "[This is My Song](#)".

Before we completed the first verse my voice was choked with tears and my heart was full of tenderness for the people of Japan in particular.

## **Worship**

Singing came to a close and Barbara stood to lead the Transition to Worship. She welcomed new visitors and Friends who've been away for a while and asked us to stand and introduce ourselves.

My fellow visitors included a grandmother who was invited by her grandson and a lady who had just returned from a trip to Kenya with the international Christians in Conservation organization, [A Rocha](#) where she'd helped protect endangered forests, estuaries and tidal flats, and train students in sustainable agriculture methods.

After a few more announcements Worship began. The Asheville Friends is an "unprogrammed meeting".

*Unprogrammed worship is the more traditional style of worship among Friends and remains the norm in Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and parts of the United States and Canada. During an unprogrammed meeting for worship, Friends gather together in "expectant waiting" for divine leadings. Sometimes a meeting is entirely silent, sometimes quite a few people speak. Meeting for Worship generally lasts about an hour.*

I have a daily meditation practice (well, mostly daily) and this morning I'd forgone my normal half-hour of "sit-still-and-do-nothing", thinking that I'd just do my meditation with the Friends.

Eventually in that hour I did receive a few moments of spaciousness stillness though for most of the

hour my mind remained restless and noisy. Nevertheless, I began to get a sense of the power of shared silent worship. As it turned out, on this morning the worship was entirely silent. No one rose to give Vocal Ministry.

At the end of Worship Barbara invited us to shake hands with our neighbors and greet them. Then we were invited to share any Joys or Sorrows “that they may be held in the Light” by the Friends gathered there. Finally we were invited to stay for refreshments and fellowship after Rise (the close of Worship).

I’d recognized a few familiar faces among the congregation including a couple of women I knew who’d come down from Ashe County and Facebook Friend I hadn’t met in person yet. My Facebook Friend encouraged me to stay for the Adult Enrichment portion of the Meeting which would follow the refreshments explaining that this sharing and dialogue time served as the “sermon” of sorts. He informed me that the topic of this week’s dialogue was “Worship” and that while Worship was sometimes completely silent as this one had been, most of the time at least a few people were led by Spirit to speak. He felt sure that staying for the dialogue would help me understand this faith better so I decided I would accept the invitation.

I am so glad I did. The dialogue that followed awakened my perception of this faith tradition as one of vigorous practice of Presence and mindfulness.

First we received from the one of the facilitators a little piece of paper with the “unwritten rules” of Worship among the Friends, which I’m sure will be helpful to others who are thinking of visiting. Here they are:

- Be on time (before 10:00 am or at 10:00am)
- Wait to enter the worship space if someone is giving vocal ministry
- Stand up to give vocal ministry if you are able to do so.
- Leave space and time for reflection and deepening of the message after vocal ministry, take inspiration from it and discern whether you are led to give another message.
- Speak only once during a meeting for worship.
- Honor the messages of others even if the message doesn’t speak to you.

The dialogue began with insights on “Preparation for Worship during the week”. In order to make ourselves ready to receive any messages from Spirit on First Day, we benefit from practicing that readiness throughout the week.

One of the most distinctive principals of this faith is that Vocal Ministry does not arrive “where and when we will, but where and when we are moved thereunto by the stirring and secret inspiration of the Spirit of God in our hearts”. The Light may call us at any moment to be bless another with a message or to stand in witness to someone’s struggle. Without a consistent practice of quieting the inner noisiness and listening we can easily miss or dismiss such “stirrings and secret inspirations”.

Next, Kitti, who had led us in the Singing, offered her thoughts on “First Day Morning Preparation”. Not surprisingly, she uses singing to prepare herself for the First Day Worship.

“Aha!”, I thought to myself, “perhaps this is the why I had such a hard time settling my busy mind during Worship.” Instead of sitting for my normal meditation, I’d decided to let this service be a short-cut, as I had done on many Sunday mornings I had to admit.

I had to smile at the subtle but profound blessing of this insight. My tricky old Ego Mind looks for any excuse for me not to meditate. “You’re going to an hour long meditation. You don’t need your personal practice today”. Very clever. How might my attendance at worship services be enriched by preparing my mind and spirit beforehand with personal meditation? We shall see.

Then Barbara opened a dialogue about “Centering During Worship” with the questions she’d asked herself while preparing for the service. “What is centering during worship?” By making ourselves “permeable to the Light by yielding ourselves up to it” answered a beautiful quote she shared from potter and poet M.C. Richards’ book *Centering*. “As I open myself to the presence that faces me, it enters me. It is union. It is communion.” (Richards taught at [Black Mountain College](#) in the 1940’s, by the way).

Barbara went on to ask “Why do it?”, “Where can it lead?” and “Will it always be attainable?”

Here are the answers I received: “Because it stays with us during the week, available when we need it”; “It can lead to spiritual poise and peace of mind”; and “Spirit responds to our faith in it and our patient practice” .

Centering alone gives rise to Vocal Ministry, the “divine leadings” that are shared in Worship . A woman in the group reflected that something she loved about the Quaker tradition is that “it’s all on us. You bring yourself and that’s all. Other bring themselves. Whether worship is flat or deep it’s all ours”.

Finally, Katherine brought us to dialogue on Vocal Ministry itself. She felt adamantly that Vocal Ministry could not be separated from the practice of *listening*. “The soul is a shy animal”, she said. We listen “not to critique, argue or refute, but to hear at the most profound level what is on one another’s hearts.”

Katherine asked the group, “How then do people make the decision to offer Vocal Ministry?” I heard responses like “unless I am practically shaking, feeling *charged*”, “when my heart is pounding and my skin is tingling”, “if I’m moved to tears but then I ask, ‘is this for me or the meeting?’” The early Quakers got their name because their powerful vocal ministries made their bodies literally *quake*. These Friends sounded committed to waiting for similarly unmistakable clarity.

How quickly would peace be at hand in our lives if we committed ourselves daily to practicing this kind of deep listening? What if we were committed to speaking only when we’d challenged ourselves to a disciplined restraint from voicing our opinions and positions and critiques? What if we were committed only to speaking when we were sure the Light was speaking through us?

I heard from these Friends the expression of a faith that demands this very vigor and discipline. This is the discipline of Presence, Mindfulness, Connection, Listening and Courage. A practice like this is revolutionary and evolutionary. With a practice like this one is able stand firm in one’s ethics. With practice like this we can face the challenges of our time. We can solve our problems on a level higher than the level at which they were created.