

The Quaker Meeting

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND METHOD
DESCRIBED AND ANALYSED

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PENDLE HILL PUBLICATIONS
WALLINGFORD, PENNSYLVANIA

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The Quaker meeting is the heart and soul of Quaker practice. Only so long as the meeting for worship is living will the Society of Friends survive. To write about the meeting is difficult because it concerns what is so intimate and important. These pages adequately answer questions that are often asked of Friends today. Dr. Collier's approach to the subject of the meeting is that of an experimental scientist guided by scientific procedure.

This pamphlet is reprinted by Pendle Hill through a reciprocal arrangement with the Home Service Committee of London Yearly Meeting, some Pendle Hill publications having already been reissued in London. We hope that the day will soon come when English and American publications can again freely cross the ocean

Preface

I was a medical student when, early in 1914, I attended my first Quaker Meeting. It was not until many years later that I joined the Society of Friends. When the war ended I became a general practitioner and for some years my work absorbed my energies to the virtual exclusion of religion. About twelve years ago I began to lose interest in my work and to feel that the emotional springs of my life were running dry. I began to fear that I was losing my “soul” and becoming a machine. Once again I was led into “the silent assemblies of God’s people.” There I have experienced what I shall now attempt to describe.

Out of my own experience I can repeat Charles Lamb’s invitation to all who feel they need quietness or who long to possess the depth of their own spirits in stillness, “Come with me into a Quaker’s Meeting.”

No one will suppose that the higher experiences of worship can be learned from a book. Faith, hope, self-understanding and discipline are required also. Nor should anyone expect that every Quaker Meeting will reach the heights of adoration and of worship that are attained in some of them. But some degree of peace, some element of true worship will be experienced in every rightly-held Quaker Meeting. And that is something of value gained in a noise-filled world.

I write of my own experience: no doubt other Friends have different experiences. I express myself in my own words. Other Friends would express themselves in different words. I shall describe the discipline and method that has helped me to learn to meditate and worship. Many Friends doubt the need or value of any method. But nothing matters provided the end is reached, namely, to know God in worship experimentally (i.e. in experience).

My advice to the reader is, then, that he should take from the following pages whatever speaks to his own condition and leave on one side all those parts that are not lit up for him by the Light of Christ.

“It is not speaking true things that shall commend any man to God, but speaking from the pure, and to the pure in others.” (Isaac Pennington.)

I. The Nature Of Religious Or Mystical Experience

Anyone who has made a serious attempt to describe his own spiritual experience will understand me when I say that one of my greatest difficulties has been to select words that are accurate indications of my meaning and also generally accepted and understood. Personally I should prefer to use such words as meditation, contemplation, communion and worship; but, since these words are used in a wide variety of senses, I have attempted to get over the difficulty by using alternative terms; thus I speak of meditation or “waiting,” contemplation or “seeking,” and so on. I have used the word “worship” to embrace the whole.

The distinction between intellect, thought and the activity of “reasoning” on the one hand, and intuition, feeling and the activity of “reflecting” on the other, is clear and precise enough to give us a starting point. Even scientists recognize that intuitive thought plays a large part in the discovery of truth. Bertrand Russell, writing on “Mysticism and Logic” (*Hibbert Journal*, July, 1914) says: “Much of the most important truth is suggested by its means (i.e. by means of intuitive feelings). Even in the most logical realms, it is insight that first arrives at what is new.” He sees “an element of wisdom to be learnt from the mystical way of living which does not seem to be attainable in any other manner” and recognizes that “even the cautious and patient investigation of truth by the scientist ... must be fostered and nourished by that very spirit and wisdom in which mysticism lives and moves.”

In this book we shall be considering then chiefly the nature, practice and developments of intuitive feeling as experienced in religious worship. Such intuitive feeling is not irrational, nor is it anti-rational: it arises rather from a source of deeper, hidden reason that was a human possession long before “reason” had developed. With Russell

I hold that every *normal* person is capable of worship. Mystical experience is the mark of a healthy, uninhibited character: it is not a “morbid state.” That many of the “mystics” have been morbid, is evident enough; but so also have many rationalists! Moreover, speaking as a doctor I hold that worship can play an important part in the prevention and cure of all kinds of disease. I expect that the development of spiritual healing through worship will make a great contribution to the future of Medicine.

Starting then from two simple assumptions, namely that intuitive experience is normal and universal and that the experiences of worship are developments of intuitive experience, I shall next pass briefly in review those simpler every-day varieties of that experience, so that it may be possible for the reader to make a transition from the familiar to the less familiar, from the known to the unexperienced. As I do so it will be clear, I hope, that worship is the flower of a plant whose roots lie deep in ordinary daily life.

It may be that when we have been worried about some problem of conduct or have been faced by a difficult decision, we have seen — quite suddenly — the right solution or the right way. The early morning just as we first waken from sleep is, as a rule, the time at which our intuition appears to be most active. Hence we are advised to sleep on our problems. “Silently in the morning, the soul flies upward,” says the author of a book of Chinese wisdom. Artists, scientists, technicians and writers, each in their own way experience such moments of clear insight.

Or we may be suddenly “invaded” by a sense of unity with Nature. About two years ago on an April morning, I felt ill at ease and unhappy. Life was difficult and the burden of the war weighed upon me. I climbed the steep path at the entrance of one of our Public Parks and stood beneath some cherry trees that fringe the crest of the bank. A fresh wind blew dark clouds across the green-blue sky. The white

blossoms shone and glistened in the sunlight. As I stood relaxed and still, I had the illusion that I was enveloped in light. I had the feeling that the light and I were one. Time and space slipped from me. All awareness of details vanished. A sense of unity with the world entered into me. I was tranquilized and steadied by the beauty, the stability of Nature. I do not suppose that I learnt anything that was new to me during this experience. But I believe I was taught something and that something happened in me. I returned to my work tranquil, and strengthened in faith and hope by my experience. Such experiences are, I hold, initiations into worship. It is true that the “objects” of such contemplation are “natural” and impersonal. Therein will be found to reside the essential difference between nature-worship and religion.

The second group of intuitive experiences arise from our intercourse with our fellows. At this level a purely human religion must forever be content to live. It cannot rise higher. The most primitive expressions of social and group intuition are experienced in crowds — the *participation mystique* in the herd. In family life, in social life, indeed wherever a sense of human comradeship is produced, the individual tends to merge into the mass and become integrated into a larger whole. At such times he feels, thinks and acts intuitively or by instinct. So easily do we pass into this condition of social participation that we do not always recognize what is happening, even when the identification is complete. Most people do not need to learn a special technique in order to produce this condition; although there are many techniques for enhancing it. The modern worship of the State is an example of the product of the purposive development of the sense of social participation. It is an expression of intuitive activity rather than of rational action.

Passing all these examples in review, we can isolate, I believe, a few of the more important conditions that have to be fulfilled before intuition becomes active, or any form of

worship can be entered upon. Firstly, *awareness of self* must be lost or held in abeyance, and secondly, in order that self-forgetfulness may be attained, our bodies must be *relatively quiescent*, and our minds must be emptied of *passionate and immediate concern for the self*.

A hungry man cannot perform Thy service.
I beg for a bed with four legs on it;
I beg for a quilt to cover me;
And then, Thy servant, will devotedly worship Thee.

It is true that fasting will help the well-fed to meditate, but chronic starvation, or an overriding sense of fear or of injustice, or of hatred, guilt or shame serves only to concentrate our attention upon the self and to arrest self-detachment.

Next there must be an *object* other than the self, towards which desire can be directed. Fourthly that object must be felt to be *AKIN to the worshipper* and lastly the intuitive experience (and especially the experience of worship) is one of *response* to and of mutual interaction between the subject and the object, between the worshipper and his God.

So much by way of very general introduction. I can now say “Come with me to a Quaker Meeting” without (I hope) being unduly misunderstood.

II. Meditation: “Waiting” Inward Stillness

Recent years have witnessed a great increase in the interest taken in what may be generically termed “psychic phenomena.” Not all of this interest has been healthy. Various “systems” of meditation have been widely recommended and practiced as means of mental healing. The wisdom of concentrating too much attention upon the self has been questioned — not without reason. This

objection does not hold, I believe, to the practice of meditation as a *part* of the Quaker Meeting for worship for the following reasons. Firstly, the meditation is only a preliminary to the contemplation and adoration of God in Christ: it is not an end in itself, nor is it complete in itself. The “solitary” mystic may pursue and attain only personal and even selfish ends. The member of a Quaker Meeting meditates together with others and he is necessarily pursuing a social purpose. One of the immediate and important objects of the Quaker Meeting is to create a Christian “fellowship.” If we go to meeting to get what we can out of it, we can be sure of getting very little. If we go to share in its service we shall not come away empty. Finally, the Quaker Meeting for Worship is not an isolated act of worship. It is or should be an integral part of the life of the Society of Friends. That life is active, as well as contemplative, practical as well as “religious.” If the Quaker Meeting never produced any other results save those arising from an increase in human friendship, the meeting would be justified. In fact, of course, the Meeting for Worship is, to use a medical analogy, the heart of the Religious Society of Friends and the source and support of all its practical activities.

The first lesson in corporate meditation will have been learnt when the body and the active, “out-going” elements in the mind can be so far brought under discipline that they can be made to become restfully passive and still, whenever we so desire.

There are, so far as I know, no set rules and no rigid technique that are infallible. Some people need no teaching; others find the lesson hard to learn. The child-like often enter the Inner Temple whilst the learned and the “tough minded” are still knocking at the outer gates. If, then, I attempt to outline the technique that has helped me, I shall not be misunderstood. When all has been said the most skilled of us is only a novice in the art of meditation. None

of us is too skilled to profit by the experience of others or too ignorant to be unable to help someone.

The Meeting The meeting really starts as soon as we get up in the morning. We must prepare the mind and heart for meeting. We should allow plenty of time to get to meeting so that we shall not be forced to hurry thither. We enter the room and quietly sit down in our seat. One by one Friends will come in and sit down around us. Our first task is to collect our wandering thoughts and to silence the most insistent clamours of the everyday world. Like a shepherd at nightfall collecting the stray members of his flock, so must we draw into the circle of stillness all our wandering thoughts, fancies and desires.

At this early stage most of us will require to pay particular attention to the proper disposition of the body as a preliminary to meditation. If we fail to do this, discomfort leading to restlessness is bound to assail us just when we wish to be most quiet. The beginner will almost certainly need to spend some time in learning consciously to relax the muscles and to pose the body in such a position that before many minutes have passed he has lost all consciousness of his body. In an appendix I have discussed this matter at some length. Some people may wish to practice bodily relaxation in their own homes.

The next step in meditation is to achieve an equal degree of mental relaxation or the cessation of *discursive* thought, "the thinking, busy soul," says Isaac Penington, "excludes the Voice of God." To many this is a novel, almost incomprehensible, suggestion. Nevertheless, what we usually term "our thoughts" must be quietened. "Be still and cool from thine own self ..." said George Fox, "and then thou shalt feel the Principle of God to arise within thee." Or in the words of Jacob Boehme, "Cease from thine own activity, steadfastly fixing thine eyes upon one point. ... Be silent before the Lord, sitting alone with Him in thine inmost and

hidden cell, thy mind being centrally united in itself and attending (i.e. waiting for) His Will in the patience of hope.”

No one with practical experience of it would suggest that this is an easy discipline to learn. In a second appendix I have tried to give a few practical hints that have been useful to me.

If our attempts to reach bodily and mental quietude have been at all successful, we shall suddenly realize that the entire meeting has sunk into a profound stillness. The meeting has now reached the first critical point in its development. It is as if a crossroads had been reached. One road climbs up the hill towards contemplation or seeking while the other descends into a valley of deadness which is akin to sleep. Sad to relate, Quaker Meetings sometimes go dead; they may become “cold” or restlessness may develop within them. There are (I believe) several common causes for this lethargy. It may be that the meeting has taken the wrong road, or it may be that someone in the meeting has been “unfaithful” and has failed to share a message entrusted to him by the Spirit of God. But I believe the commonest cause of lethargy is the failure of the worshippers to achieve in themselves the critical transition from “passive waiting” to the questing activity of contemplation, about which I shall speak in the next chapter.

Whenever such a state of lethargy or restlessness appears in a meeting, it is the duty either of one of its members to call the meeting to a fresh act of recollection, that is to say, to make a fresh start, or else every member of the meeting must “centre down” into an even deeper silence. A prayer or a Bible-reading delivered or read “under concern” may help to achieve the reawakening of the meeting. It is impossible to say how long a particular meeting will require to spend in meditation before real mental and bodily stillness are attained. In my experience it may vary from a few minutes to half an hour.

I close this all too brief discussion with a quotation from the writings of John Bellers, who was a notable Quaker of the second generation. When I say that he was notable, chiefly for the important contributions to the *practical* life of the Society and to the social life of England during the early eighteenth century, the significance of his words may be more fully realized.

The silence of a religious and spiritual worship is not a drowsy, unthinking state of mind but ... a withdrawing of it from all visible objects and vain imaginings ... But except all excesses of the body and passions ... of the mind be avoided by watchfulness, the soul does not attain true silence.

III. Contemplation Or "Seeking"

There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition. — George Fox.

If the Meeting for Worship does not become lethargic, passive waiting soon gives place to contemplation or seeking. The "hidden mind" (that is to say, the heart) of the worshipper turns towards Christ with intention and with desire. Deep within the heart of every man and woman, an "image of God" lies hidden: this is a psychological fact. The image is, of course, only a faint reflection of Transcendent Reality; none the less it constitutes the point of contact between ourselves and God in Christ. It is therefore towards this central image "in the heart" that our seeking spirits should be directed. Who can tell which among the myriad facets of His Being will catch our veiled attention? — His Beauty, His Truth, His Goodness or His Love? I believe that, provided the mind be emptied of passion, it is Christ who determines for us what shall be presented to consciousness as a subject for contemplation during worship. That is to say that the

“subject” for our contemplation should not be deliberately *chosen* by ourselves but waited for from Christ, who “gives” it to us.

Catching some gleam of light directly from the Mind of Christ, the spirit of the worshipper awakens to an active and above all a searching state. The activity is imaginative rather than logical, pictorial rather than formal. The world that opens before our inner eyes is the world of values, longings and desires — the world of the artist rather than the photographer, of the poet rather than the critic, of the prophet rather than the preacher. This is a region of experience unexplored by most modern people and feared by many: yet everyone of us hides a poet or a prophet in his heart!

But some will object (as I once objected) that they cannot contemplate a Christ whom they have never known or seen. And others will ask what do you *really* mean when you assert “Christ” is the object of your contemplation? Taking the second question first — by “Christ” I wish to convey every meaning that can be contained within the words, the “Christ Spirit.” I mean every experience in personal or social life that might be due to his activities if once the assumption were made that the Spirit of Christ is in fact active within human experience. I mean moreover all that can be conveyed by the words Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus Christ of the New Testament, the Christ of the Historic Church, the Christ of Inward Experience — or in a single phrase I mean The Eternal Christ.

And in answer to the first question I should say if the word Christ has no meaning for you or is an “obstacle” to you, “choose whatever or whomever” you have known as “The Best” and place that within the empty circle as you move from passive waiting to contemplation. Start with the known and proceed towards the unknown. You will discover (if my experience be any guide in the matter), that your

“Best” is gradually transformed into a true “Image of the Christ.” Perhaps you will awaken suddenly to a realization of what has happened to you and will be able to say truthfully, “My Lord and my God.” Universal experience shows that the process by which our idea of the Best is converted or changed into a living Image of the Christ is greatly helped by a disciplined study of the New Testament, by attempting to live according to its standards and by entering into a Christian fellowship. So much concerning the “object” of our contemplation. Let us proceed.

Imaginatively alert but “mentally passive,” we wait to receive some “word of life” from Christ. No one can say to which member of the meeting that word silently may come; indeed, it may come to several people in the meeting. But when an impulse from the Divine Life does enter the meeting, it comes invested with “power and with authority” and I am moved by it. In my own experience the word comes as a fully-formed conception or picture, symbol or saying into my mind; sometimes I experience the emotion in an entirely indefinite and empty form. In the latter case it frequently means that some other member of the meeting is about to take a vocal part in the ministry of the meeting. A few personal examples may perhaps make this highly-generalized description of this aspect of worship more easy to understand.

I was seated in meeting one hot summer day when there came suddenly into my mind out of a deep silence, some words recorded in St. John’s Gospel. I seem to recall that at that period I had been thinking a good deal about the problems of “Divine Guidance,” and personal responsibility. Was it safe to trust the “Inward Light”? Suddenly the words formed themselves in my mind, “And I know that my judgment is true, because I seek not my own will, but the Will of Him Who sent me.” It was as if a key to a closed door had been presented to me.

“In so far as we are actively seeking to do and to know the Will of God for us,” I reflected, “to *that* degree at least our judgment is true and trustworthy. But what is the Will of God for us? It is revealed through many media — the Gospels, the historic witness of the Church, the witness of the Society of Friends, the enlightened guidance of our personal friends, and our parents. But the enlightened conscience, disciplined by subjection to the Will of God, is always the final authority and the final guide, upon whose judgments we *must* rely. Conscience will not betray the highest that we know *through* these other means. None the less our personal judgment must always be open to the correcting influence of a still deeper insight into God’s will — otherwise our “freedom” will degenerate into licence.”

It seemed to me that I knew all this in a moment. It was as if a pattern had suddenly appeared amidst confusion. All moments of creative inspiration possess these qualities of conviction and authority: they reveal to us the hidden connections and relations that exist between things. They are flashes of truth.

Creative contemplation is psychic work: it is not a vague imaginative activity. It arises from the imaginative activity of the mind; but that activity is controlled by and centered upon a desire to know God and to do His will. Since creative contemplation is the product of intuition rather than of reason, we find that pictures, images, symbols, rather than chains of ideas or thoughts, arise in the mind during worship. Glimpses of forgotten persons, scenes and pictures; half-remembered verses or sayings; forgotten sounds and scents sometimes take form within consciousness, just as we sometimes suddenly see new beauty in a familiar picture. Sometimes they arise very suddenly, at other times more gradually. When first they arise in the mind, they may appear to be quite meaningless. There may be a long succession of such images which come only to pass on into oblivion. But

as we centre down (i.e. concentrate) more deeply, one particular image may recur and become fixed and at the same moment we may feel that sense of subdued emotion of which I have already spoken. Whenever this occurs, it is probable (in my experience) that that particular word or image is important either to the person who perceives it or else to the meeting as a whole.

I must guard against misunderstanding. I do *not* mean that these experiences come to me during every meeting for worship. Many meetings pass in almost unbroken inward silence, but some at least of the experiences of which I have spoken usually occur to me.

Supposing then that the worshipper has experienced some inward stirring of the Power in his heart, what next? It is necessary above all for him to hold on to the Power. He must rest in it. The word or image may have come to him only for his own personal correction or encouragement, or it may be a “word” that ought to be shared with the meeting.

At this stage, the cardinal error is to rush into speech, moreover the coming of the Power is the commencement and not the end of the spiritual exercise. If I rush into words, not only do I lose the sense of the Power but I dissipate the Power in the meeting: I do not increase it.

The following examples may show what I mean firstly by a message that was to be shared and secondly by one that was personal to myself.

During the early stages of a certain meeting, a vivid picture of an abandoned rowing boat, stranded upon a sandbank in a wide and open harbour presented itself to my mind. Gulls screamed in the air, a strong wind blew, the racing waters of a rising tide seemed about to draw the boat into the stream and to destroy it. The “physical basis” of this vision was no doubt a forgotten experience that happened to me many years previously in Poole Harbour. When this vision came to me with Power, it seemed to possess

neither significance nor meaning, either for my own condition, or in respect to the “exercise” of the meeting. But as the meeting proceeded the significance of the picture became clear to me. Another member of the meeting spoke of Jesus asleep in the boat upon the storm-tossed lake, and how, when the disciples called to him, he rose in the boat and said, “Peace, be still.” The boat in my vision had been empty and stranded and therefore in danger of destruction, and was in fact a symbol, not only of my own personal condition at that time, but also of the state of most people during the early days of the war. At that time, many of us were in danger of being swamped — of losing both our Faith and our Guide. Since the message so regarded seemed to form an integral part of the “exercise” of the meeting, and to have come to me with Power, it was shared.

On another occasion, long before the present war, as I sat in meeting, there came quite suddenly out of the silence of the meeting — like a stone falling into a well — a sentence from the Gospels. No sooner had the words emerged into consciousness than I lost them again. Whenever an image or a word comes to us with Power, there is certain (in my experience) to be some significance in them. Sometimes the difficulty is to discover their significance. If, as in this instance, the words are “forgotten or lost,” it is most likely that for some reason, we are unwilling to *admit* their meaning to ourselves. Knowing this to be the case I remained very still and waited, expecting the words to reappear in my mind. After a while they did so. When I recovered the words for the second time, I thought I had fixed them firmly in my mind, but since they possessed no evident relevance to the central theme or exercise of the meeting, I had no cause to share them with others. The meeting followed its own course. When the meeting was over, I was surprised to find that I had entirely forgotten the words once again. All that I could recall was that they were spoken by Jesus a short time before

his death. During the following days I hunted for those words both in the Gospels and in my memory. After a search I discovered that they were, in fact, very familiar to me, being the rebuke of Jesus to Peter in the Garden: "Put up thy sword in its place." At once I knew quite clearly their significance for myself and why I had forgotten them! I did not *want* to face them. In connection with a certain problem of personal conduct, I had been inclined to strive for certain supposed personal rights. Christ's message to me — indeed the deeper hidden wisdom of my own better self — was "Put up thy sword" — "Cease to strive for selfish ends."

Whilst it frequently happens that personal guidance comes to us in this fashion, it is more usual for it to come to us (or so my experience seems to show) through the spoken words of some other member of the group. It is important therefore to learn how to attend or listen to spoken messages given in the meeting. I try to resist the tendency to listen critically with the ear of reason; I seek rather to listen appreciatively, that is, I try to feel after the hidden sense of the message, seeking to discover what is the significance of the message for myself, what God is saying to me through His servant. It almost always happens that some phrase or picture will "light up" for me and will sink into my unconscious, where it may lie like a seed in the soil, and in due time produce its fruits in altered character and conduct. Whenever we feel compelled to share a message, we must hold firmly to the central point that we have to convey. We must never fear brevity or go on speaking after we have lost the impulse that brought us to our feet. Nor is there any need to say everything that *can* be said about the matter — we need only concern ourselves with what *must* be said *by us personally*. The whole exercise of the meeting should make a unity of which our contribution is only one small part. The exercise of the whole meeting should be to produce a complete unity out of the various contributions of the

individual members. In a completely silent meeting we may experience a sense of creative achievement without any words having been spoken aloud.

IV. Corporate Worship: "Unity" Fellowship In Christ

I have been writing hitherto chiefly about the experience of the individual as an individual in the Meeting for Worship. I shall now attempt to describe the experience of becoming an integral part of a worshipping group. Much of what has been described hitherto applies equally well to the practice of private prayer and meditation. What I am about to describe cannot be experienced in solitary worship.

At some point during the meeting — it may be quite early, — a sense of "unity in fellowship" develops within the Meeting for Worship. Everyone will agree, I think, that a period of passive waiting always precedes the more "active" phases of contemplation and worship. But I am not at all sure that anyone can foretell when the sense of unity is likely to be achieved. Until that sense has been achieved, the meeting remains incomplete and, it may be, dull. After a period of waiting, then, a movement of Power visits the meeting which proceeds to "gather itself" into a still deeper silence. If corporate unity is about to be achieved, it seems as if some force draws us out of our isolated selves and merges individual consciousness into a non-individual or corporate awareness. Perhaps this state may be described by saying that we are aware of the others; but are conscious neither of them nor of ourselves. The "I" begins to feel as "we." This is an experience the like of which has been unknown to many modern people since the days of their childhood and youth. "Except ye become as little children ..."

Nevertheless this experience of communion with our fellows during worship differs somewhat from the child's

sense of “belonging” to his family. It differs chiefly because the unity in worship takes place beneath a “Cloud of Glory” under which the meeting is “gathered.” As this sense grows, each one should seek to enter into communion with his fellows, to sense the nature of the spirit that animates them, to perceive their needs or to share their burdens or their joys. Little by little the “weight” of our own personal cares and anxieties is insensibly lifted from our own shoulders. It seems, in literal truth, as if the group as a whole had taken upon its broad shoulders the burdens of the individual. Howard Brinton in his Swarthmore Lecture, “Creative Worship,” gives a profound analysis of this remarkable process. I propose to quote at length from his book.

“The Quaker Meeting ... approximates to the characteristics of a living organism. A nice adjustment of individual and social values is arrived at, so that the whole does not dominate the parts nor do the parts go their own way regardless of the whole. Each determines and is determined by the other. The power which controls and directs — which is sometimes called the ‘life of the meeting’ — permeates the group and harmonizes the deepest will of every member.

“Intellectually it is a paradox that parts knit into a living whole may retain their individual freedom, but we know from our experience of life that such is the case. As fellowship deepens and the spirit of worship grows, a new and higher synthesis silently quickens the individuals into a united whole... .

“Whittier describes the influence which quickened waiting hearts

... till haply someone felt
 On his moved lips the seal of silence melt,
 Or without spoken word, low breathing stole
 Of a diviner Life from soul to soul
 Baptizing in one tender thought the whole.

“Friends have sometimes used the term ‘a gathered meeting’ to indicate that this common life has been realized. There is, to use another traditional term, a ‘covering’ over the meeting. If words are uttered which are ‘in the life of the meeting’, this means that the words spoken express in a measure the exercise of the whole. There is a wide difference between a meeting in the life and a ‘lively meeting’ ... a meeting in the life may be held in complete silence.

“... In worship, God binds together both the warring desires of the soul and the dissociated units of the meeting into one lively whole. This event is analogous to the creative process as it takes place throughout Nature. God binds together through His Love the scattered and disordered elements on one level of existence so that a new unity emerges on a higher level.

“The achievement of corporate unity through fellowship is the gathering of scattered and disordered individuals so that a new unit of personal and social life emerges upon a higher level of existence. The achievement of Christian fellowship is the coming of the Kingdom of God for all those who partake in it ... It is a creative process.”

My personal belief is that the “new unit” of life for whose birth our world is now in travail is the integrated group of Friends in Christ — man and woman, youth and child, bound together by the common attitudes, common aims and mutual service which can only be built, I believe, by the practice of corporate Christian worship.

Robert Barclay, the early Quaker apologist, has expressed the heart of the matter in the following words: “Our work then and worship is, when we meet together, for everyone to watch and wait upon God in themselves and to be gathered from all visibles thereto (i.e. into ‘God’). And as everyone is thus (gathered) they come to feel the good arise over the evil and the pure over the impure, in which God reveals Himself and draws near to every individual and so

He is in the midst in the general whereby each partakes of (his own) particular refreshment ... (and) is a sharer in the whole body ... having a joint fellowship and communion with all."

Again he says: "As many candles lighted and placed in one place do greatly augment the light and make it more to shine forth, so when many are gathered together in the same life there is more of the Glory of God and His Power appears to the refreshment of each individual for that he partakes not only of the light raised in himself but in all the rest."

V. Adoration Or Communion In Corporate Worship

At some point in every meeting "held in the life," contemplation (as such) ceases and a new type of "soul-work," namely communion, is entered upon. There is no means of predicting when this final transition will occur. I have known meetings of almost unbroken communion with God; but the meeting usually reaches its height during its second half. I have experienced much difficulty in writing this present chapter. Cold prose is not a suitable medium for my purpose: even the language of poetry — were I able to use it — would fail me. But Quaker communion can be judged by its fruits in character and conduct: by that standard it must be adjudged to be valuable. Perhaps what cannot be expressed may none the less be conveyed to those who are ready to hear.

We have seen above that a critical phase seems to separate contemplation or waiting from meditation, or "seeking." I believe that a similar critical phase occurs between communion in worship and contemplation. I rather think that the "achievement of unity" is the critical point that creates the bridge between seeking and communion, but that may be only a personal opinion. The tendency during the first crisis in the meeting is towards "lethargy": during

the second crisis the tendency is towards talking or thinking *about* Christ, instead of being open to receive him in the midst of the unified fellowship. A meeting that has followed that direction becomes dispersed and restless.

There is yet another important preliminary to worship about which perhaps I should have spoken earlier. Few people can have attended many Meetings for Worship without realizing with a shock (as I have done many times) how far they are from conforming in feeling, thought and act to the Mind of Christ. It is as if a mask of pretence and sham were being torn from our face and as if we had seen our actual selves for the first time. This experience is as salutary as it is humbling — even humiliating. It is an experience through which, I believe, everyone must pass. It is like a very low door in a wall giving entrance to a garden: only the humble can enter the garden. When Peter cried “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord,” he was very close to an experience of worship.

On one of the many occasions during which an acute sense of sin has oppressed me in meeting, the words of Jesus to Peter came into my mind with amazing force. “Simon, Simon,” said Jesus, “the Adversary has desired to have you that you might be sifted, as wheat is sifted. *But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have come to your true self, strengthen the brethren.*” “*I have prayed for you.*” It is the Eternal Christ who speaks. It is he who raises up those who are cast down. Silently and surely the dawn of Hope breaks through our darkness. The prayers of the Eternal Christ are not mere words; they are holy and creative energies; they are power that, entering into us and becoming one with us, gives to us the ability to change, to grow, to be renewed in character and conduct. So Christ comes to us asking only for a response *from us*: when that response is made the act of worship is achieved. Then the door on which he knocks is open. He comes to us at all

times and in all places: in street, workshop and in our homes: but he comes most frequently and surely to me in the silent assemblies of God's people. Coming thus in power he builds yet another small measure of his Spirit into the structure of my very human personality. As sunlight to the flower, so is the Prayer of the Eternal Christ to the human personality. What can words say more save that we are buried in Christ, thence to arise renewed?

Friends in and by their meetings bear witness to the experience that here on earth the Creator meets the creature and that a personal relation of action and response — nay! of love and being loved — is established between them — beneath a Cloud of Glory.

During worship, our Father is not banished to the remote confines of Time and Space. He is at hand, His Presence can be felt and known. He is at work within His World and in ourselves. So, in awe, gratitude, reverence, love, and adoration we bow our heads and breathe “Abba, our Father.”

Moreover in worship He ministers not only to the whole but also to each individual, just as Jesus did, when he took a towel and water to wash and wipe the feet of all of his disciples. No love could be more humble. In this manner and repeatedly we experience in the Meeting for Worship Christ's ministry that speaks to our *particular need*. His ministry flies like an arrow pointed directly at us, whose barb buries itself deep in our heart. Friends have come confidently to expect such ministry in their meetings. All of us could give many examples of it from our own personal experience. “There is One, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to *thy* condition.”

Friends' manner of corporate worship is not a new discovery. The first meeting of this kind of which we possess a record is described in the second chapter of Acts. On the day of Pentecost the disciples were “met with one accord, in

one place. And lo! a mighty rushing wind filled the whole house.” Then we read “they saw tongues of what looked like fire and on the head of each person a flame alighted.” “And they were filled with the Holy Energy of God and began to speak ... as the spirit gave them utterance ... and every man heard them speak in his own language.”

I hope I shall not be thought to be disrespectful to the Early Christian Church if I say that in strict measure similar experiences are still enjoyed in some Friends’ Meetings. It seems to me to be possible that the physical basis of the events recorded in the Acts was a sudden sharp storm of wind and rain which shook the house and passed almost as suddenly as it came. Then as the cloud passed from before the face of the sun, bright shafts of sunlight lit up the meeting room and appeared, to some at least of the worshippers, as tongues of fire playing upon and around the bent heads of the others. It is evident that the whole meeting was profoundly moved and in a state of spiritual exaltation. Firstly we read that they were met in unity *with one accord*. Secondly the rushing wind has always been a symbol of divine inspiration and the flame a symbol of divine illumination: so we read they spoke “as the spirit gave them utterance” and they were heard by each listener in the *native language* of his own secret heart. Have we not, in measure, experienced all of these things in meeting?

Be that as it may, the plain truth is that during corporate worship, the Lord of Life has often ministered directly to my need and to that of my friends, as I know full well.

Finally, it may be in silence or in speech, prayer or thanksgiving completes the exercise of the meeting and a wonderful sense of achievement is experienced. With a handshake and a smile the circle of the act of worship closed.

After meetings such as I have described we emerge into a world renewed, and pass upon our way. Neither the world

nor we ourselves are ever quite the same again. But soon we must take up our daily tasks where we had laid them down. We must wrestle with stubborn fact both in ourselves and in the world. In one sense therefore the meeting is ended; in another sense it has just begun. One summer day in childhood I sat for hours, perched high upon a rocky headland of the Cornish coast and watched the great Atlantic rollers as they swept past my feet on their way to the far distant shore. I saw wave-crest as it followed wave-crest, in unending sequences of rise and fall. The wave is a true symbol of the harmonized life; worship is the crest whilst action is the trough; both together make "a life." Life is rhythmic. The privilege of worship always brings a new responsibility in its hand. Every new freedom involves a new discipline. As William Penn said, "No Cross, no Crown." But of a truth, the life of the Spirit brings its own reward. So let all take courage and press towards the Light. But let no one suppose that this manner of life and worship is a broad and easy road. The gateway to it is narrow and the pathway rough. Indeed the shadow of a Cross falls right across it, since to enter upon it and to persevere in it, we must die daily to self-will and to self-desire. But the Hand that causes us to bend so low is the same Hand that desires to raise us up again. Moreover, that Hand can raise us higher than our former state and plant our feet more surely upon a road whose bourne lies in eternity. In corporate worship says Barclay, "there is an inward travail and wrestling," but, as we abide in our measure of grace, there is "an overcoming of the power ... of darkness" in us "and we enjoy ... the holy fellowship and the communion of the body and blood of Christ by which our inward man is nourished and fed."

Or in the words of Pennington, "Our worship is a deep exercise of our spirits before the Lord, which doth not consist in exercising the natural mind to speak, hear or pray

according to what we comprehend of our (own) needs: but we wait ... to hear with the new ear what God shall please to speak ... and we pray ... as God pleases to quicken and open our hearts towards Himself ... Then is sweet communion enjoyed and sweet peace reaped ... (Then) our Father is felt blessing us and planting (in us) the seeds of life ...” What more can I say — except “Come with me to a Quaker Meeting”?

Appendix A: On Bodily Relaxation And Poise

If we wish to achieve real bodily inactivity during worship we must discover a method of sitting that can be maintained for the period of an hour. We should sit erect, the back more or less erect. The lower part of the spine and the region of the shoulder-blades need to be supported. Many people require a cushion or padded seat to sit upon, and those who are short in stature require a hassock for the feet. The feet should be disposed in such fashion that, when the muscles of the legs are relaxed, the knees do not fall apart but remain steady. This can be accomplished either by crossing the feet at the ankles (this is the best posture for tall people) or by resting the feet side by side upon the floor. The legs should never be crossed at the knees. The hands should be lightly clasped and should rest upon the thighs — or some prefer to sit with lightly folded arms. Many find that the most restful attitude is for the upturned palm of one hand to support the back of the other hand, while both the wrists rest upon the thighs. The head (especially during the early stage of meditation) should be held relatively erect. It must certainly be *balanced* upon the axis of the neck. It should neither droop forward nor be strained backward. Most people (but not all) close their eyelids. The eyes *in either case*, should be directed forwards rather than downwards. During the later stages of the meditation the

head usually inclines forward and downward supported by the neck. It never droops. The whole body is generally relaxed and sinks into quiescence and rest. In general it is best to avoid sitting with the face towards a bright light — especially if the eyes are sensitive to light.

As a rule it is necessary, at all events for the beginner, to give particular attention to the state of tension in his muscles. We seldom realize how tense and stiff our muscles remain even when we suppose that we are resting quietly. Real muscular relaxation is (I believe) an essential preliminary to meditation. It is easier to show what is meant by muscular relaxation by actual demonstration than by words; but the following description of relaxation may help some. Take the left hand in the right and raise it a few inches from the table. Let the left hand and arm hang “like a log” supported only by the right hand. If the left arm is fully relaxed it will hang heavily, and when the right hand is quickly removed, the left will fall on the table “like a dead weight” and with considerable force. That arm is relaxed. A relaxed muscle “feels soft” when grasped by the hand. With a little practice, it becomes quite easy to detect the presence of muscular tension in a muscle group, by noting the sensations that we feel whenever we direct our attention to it. As I write I can perceive the muscular tensions of my right forearm, hand and fingers. I can contrast that feeling of tension with the relaxed feeling that is present in my left hand as it rests idly upon the page.

When we have been seated for a few moments in meeting we may feel that we are slow in reaching inward stillness and calm. In that case we should pass the attention rapidly over every part of our body, noting whether there may be a sense of strain, tension or fatigue in any part of the body. The neck, legs, back or shoulders may be cramped and stiff. If that be the case, it is necessary *consciously* to relax the tense muscles even if a slight change of position is

involved. Special attention should be paid to the muscles of the head, face and neck. The “muscles of expression” are placed in the face and these are specially liable to obstinate tensions during all states of heightened emotional feeling, such as anxiety, fear, doubt, etc. The jaws are often clenched when the rest of the body is relaxed. (How often people are kept awake at night by spasm of the muscles of the jaw!) The eyelids may be firmly instead of lightly closed, the lips may be tense and continuing to form words long after the rest of the body has reached a passive and relaxed state. Finally, the muscles of the tongue, voice-box and neck may reflect by their subtle almost imperceptible movements the continued activity of the mind and reason. With a little practice, a state of generalized muscular relaxation can be achieved in a matter of minutes or seconds. It is worth while taking some trouble to perfect our ability to relax, not only because it is a practical aid to contemplation, but also because it can be used in everyday life, as a means of obtaining sleep when needed, and also because a few minutes of muscular relaxation has a remarkably refreshing effect when we are fatigued, anxious, irritable or emotionally disturbed.

Appendix B: On “Ceasing From Thought”

Following the above technique a real degree of bodily and mental relaxation may have been attained. But there may yet remain two bodily activities which are still to be quieted. These are “thinking in words” and irregular and improperly controlled breathing. We have already noted the importance of the muscles of the tongue and neck in keeping up muscular tension. If you choose a text of scripture for the “fixation point” of your mind, you may find that you are silently repeating that text to yourself and that the muscles of the tongue, voice and lips are in almost unceasing (if

slight) movement. A stage is soon reached therefore in which the attention must be disjoined from the words and redirected to some image or picture that “symbolizes” the chosen words for you. For example, you might use the words “I am the Way” as a fixation point. If you repeat these words your lips will become tense as you form the word “Way.” So imagine a way, form a picture of it. As the stillness deepens, even that picture will fall away from you and you will reach the borderland of Inward Quiet.

Experience shows that the regularity, depth and nature of our breathing greatly affects our ability to relax and to remain relaxed. The most common mistakes are shallow, rapid breathing (i.e. chest or thoracic breathing) and irregular breathing. We should breathe deeply with our abdominal muscles, keeping our chest muscles almost entirely inactive. (Lay your hand upon the front of your chest and breathe deeply *without* allowing the hand on the chest to move. This will show you how to breathe with the abdominal muscles.) As you sit in silence let the breaths come and go easily, gently and regularly without strain or fuss. You will feel that this “exercise” has a stilling effect both on mind and body.