

On Speaking Out Of The Silence

by Susan Shaughnessy

Some Hints for New FCRP Attenders

Welcome to meeting for worship, a central part of our time here together at the Friends Conference on Religion and Psychology.

If this is your first Quaker meeting, you will notice right away that our form of worship is based primarily on silence. It is a rich and living silence, which connects us to each other and to our Guide by leading us to a deeper, more centered inner place—the place where the Light shines most clearly.

In this silence, surprising thoughts and feelings will find their way to you. They are to be cherished. They are the rain on your soul's growth.

From time to time, you will see people rise and speak. You may wonder: How do they know when to do that? Should you share some of what you are feeling and thinking?

The answer to this question requires reflection. First, be assured that a completely silent Quaker meeting is not considered a “failure”—quite the contrary. Such meetings can be the most exciting and memorable ones you attend.

Second, there is value in not speaking. The message arising in you may be for you alone. Spoken too soon, it may dissipate and escape you. Cherished within, it will gather other spiritual energies to it. This is sometimes called “seasoning.”

If you find, after a time of inner seasoning, that your message is one that should be spoken, test it with these two Friendly questions: 1) Is this an authentic message from the Holy Spirit? and 2) Is this a message for others present, or just for me?

If you urgently feel your message is for others as well as for you, rise and speak. It is best to leave time after another's message so that the meeting may absorb it and be free to turn its attention to yours. A third test might be considered: Are you sure enough of this message to speak quite loudly and clearly, so that the most distant person in the room may hear you?

Try to be brief. It is easy to go into a reverie when speaking. You will have much to reflect on when you sit down again. Not all of this material is meant to be shared aloud. One last custom to mention: it is not the Quaker way to comment on the messages of others. We especially do not rise to correct others in public in the atmosphere of meeting for worship. Speak privately and gently to the person whose message did not ring true for you. There may be the seed of a valuable friendship there.

A meeting in which many people speak rapidly in turn is called a “popcorn meeting.” These meetings are interesting, but they are not worship. Join in helping us to keep the lid on the popper as much as we can. You will learn that the nurturing silence bears a unique message of its own.