

BEYOND CONSENSUS
Salvaging Sense of the Meeting
Pendle Hill Pamphlet 307
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Annapolis Friends Meeting for Learning 8-13-23

Opening Silence

Introduction:

To begin, it is apparent that this topic is arcane and poorly understood, so much so that, asking many folks in our meeting, a puzzlement response seems to be the norm. In learning about how Friends make decisions within our meetings, it is important to note that we never use a consensus, a vote or a dictum to decide upon a direction, a goal or a pathway whatever the issue. It is with God's grace that we move forward with a plan that is proposed by those gathered within our meeting. This guidance comes from the Light, God, the Holy Spirit, Allah, goddess, love, Christ, the I Am, but many call it Agape. It is the discernment that emanates from divine love, to us as the most elevated manifestation of guidance. So we do not place undue concern over the 'naming of God' or even in being theists or non-theists, but in encouraging one another 'to distinguish the language of the pure Spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart.' John Woolman. It was a teaching Rabbi who said to 'place our blessings on our hearts.' When asked by his student, why not in the heart, he replied because upon the heart, we wait for our heart to break, so they can fall into our heart.

I.Never Consensus

"Sense of meeting is a gift!" It comes from our commitment to continuing revelation. It is the light that leads us to move upon corporate decisions. The light we carry, each one of us, is special and present in everyone without exception; the light within our meetings for worship is one light particularly when joined with God's will, not our will. "It is both a true rarity and a rarity of truth." "Friends commit themselves to discovering and implementing the will of God... What we call 'the Sense of the Meeting' is not the collective wisdom of those present, but the collective discernment of God's will...Our bold affirmation is that God does indeed have a will for us, that God is actively trying to communicate that will, and that we are capable, through corporate or singular prayer, to discover that will. A sign that we have achieved our goal of discerning God's will, is the experience of Unity which is recognized and affirmed by those gathered." (Eden Grace, "An Introduction to Quaker Business Practice.")

Query #1 If I were to notice the sense of meeting, within our Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business, exactly what would I notice and how would I respond?

Last month we were blessed with a profoundly beautiful teaching of meeting for worship; in that same context, the sense of the meeting comes from worship, from a commitment to our testimonies and from the truth passed down to us from generation to generation. We are not alone in our worship in silence, nor are we alone in the use of the sense of the meeting for decision making, but it is rare. Some aboriginal peoples use it, even today, but their practices have been poorly studied, not widely understood and even more rarely reported.

Query #2 If we are called Friends, of what are we friends?

The pejorative term - Quakers, was applied due to our emotional, often tremulous response to the revelation of God within and among us. It is not a term of affection or even of accuracy, today. Therefore, being called The Society of Friends of Truth has been shortened to Friends, much preferred to the term Quakers. Just as this shortening of terms has come to gloss the true meaning of our worship, we have become more comfortable with consensus than sense of the meeting. This oversight is very unfortunate when conducting our Meetings for Worship with Attention to Business.

Most of us are familiar with Alcoholics Anonymous in which the first understanding is the realization that they, and many of us, are powerless over our addictions. Therefore we turn our addictions over to a 'higher power'. In the very same way, we Friends, turn over our decision making to a higher power, which knows so much better, what, when and how to proceed.

Query #3 When have I used divine guidance to make a decision?

Even in the midst of daily life, to stop, to reflect and to turn attention to the present moment, it is evident that there is an intervention from the light that assists us in proceeding. This process is often termed 'mindfulness', a recently popularized term from which many among us strive to function. Of what, however, are we mindful? How is it that we make difficult decisions in daily life?

II. *Allowing the Process*

If we are to embrace the sense of the meeting, then we must be able to listen carefully to those among us who speak harsh words, who demand attention to lecture or direct. We must be able to swing wide the doors of darkness to invite the light. Remember that God does not keep time; decisions are not time sensitive. We must create the time to hear and consider all of those gathered among us. Release of emotion, tears, or outbursts is to be encouraged and even appreciated, particularly if this release demands more meetings to allow all to be heard.

In this listening, which may be difficult, a helpful process is to engage 'long focus'. Often this important process can be described as seeing from a high tower. The overall attention is to the whole body assembled among us, including the overarching light within and around. Looking beyond ideas and outbursts, take a blurred focus which softens sharp edges so that the light becomes more apparent. Transitioning to the light becomes apparent, God's voice is heard and we are brought closer to understanding the peace and process, leading us toward a decision. Thereby, our Clerk calls for silence and a sense of the meeting encloses the decision, which is then, and only then brought forward to us, the gathered seekers.

Query #4 How have I been motivated after attending a meeting for worship? What, therefore, did I do differently, because of the light within?

III. *The Great Testimony*

Through the experience of God's grace, we are transformed in the process of 'sense of the meeting'. We are changed as much as those taking Holy Communion are changed, as much as

those in marriage are changed from two to one. It is truly a unification with each other, and with the power of the light of God. This process is awe inspiring and undeniable. And yet, many of us are not aware of the power found in this process; It is when our deepest yearnings lie with process not product. It is then that we sway from Fox's admonition to take away the occasion of war, not to stop war. For in taking away the occasion, there would be no war, not this one or any one. Impatience forces us to move toward a resolve without recognizing that God's grace is the overarching light that allows us to move. "Rather than feel the Spirit that delights to do no evil nor to revenge any wrong, we pursue economic and political solutions." Clearly this sentence will irritate many among us, today, who are bent upon using these strategies to 'change the world'. However, in the spirit of Friends of Truth, our focus is not secular but spiritual. Let no one turn a blind eye to injustice, but let no one lift the hand of anger against another. Peace is not the absence of war but a sense of internal harmony. Therefore, no manipulation of external conditions will bring peace, because peace is not an external condition. Sense of meeting is such an internal collective harmony, which manifests in collective outward harmony.

Reminds me of a man in a skiff, making his way on a river, and runs into another boat, speeding along at breakneck speed. The man assumed he was seen and heard, as he had loudly called out 'beware, beware!' He was rip roaring angry, shouting profanities into the air as some damage had been done to both vessels. His anger abated only when he peered into the boat and found it was entirely empty, without a master, and it had just drifted into his path. How often is our anger voiced at unintended consequences? How much rage is expressed at those people or things that just don't have the consciousness we expect? With internal harmony, anger is abated and we accept what is, just as a part of our present moment.

In the beginning of this meeting we spoke of the gift of the sense of meeting; our gift of love, of and from God, hovers over us, sustains us and nourishes us. It is love that comes from internal harmony, for who among us can love with anger in our hearts? We were all fed as infants or we would not have survived. Some were even suckled by women who were bid to do so but they were not their mothers. How many of us were fed, generations before formula was available, by women in bondage? Could you imagine that you were not given love by these surrogate nursing women? Can you even fathom that God, spirit, or light was not involved with this exchange? We survived with nourishment AND love. We as Friends proceed through the trials of decision making through process AND spirit - not one, not the other but both. Those among us who do not recognize this gift of spirit, overarching with light to join in the process, are really missing the whole point, and, the whole gift of Friends. It is with compassion, love, respect and understanding that we listen to each other. Remember that God does not keep time, so that the man in the skiff could have taken the time to turn around and row the other way to avoid collision. We live and interact in a world of very few actual time sensitive emergencies. If it takes this meeting 2 or 5 or 10 years to understand how to fund and to deliver our intentions for reparations, remember that it has already been 300+ years without even a tiny apology for the abuse fostered against those in bondage, that was suffered at the hands of the patriarchs.

Questioning the process:

When in the course of moving forward or not moving around a decision, there may be those who are not able to see the way forward. Friends then may stand aside, allowing the unity with God and those present to proceed, inviting our recording clerk to name or not name those standing aside. Similarly, Friends moved to stand in the way of a proposed decision, may choose to be recorded by name, or not. Either instance requires devout discernment from the gathered seekers and the clerk, as to moving forward, finding a better way forward or stopping

for further prayer, meetings or threshings. “In challenging cases... there is a hint or a threat that a person (questioning) will leave our meeting if that person does not get (their) way.”

(Lon Fendall, Jan Wood and Bruce Bishop, *Practicing Discernment Together*, p. 141)

We need, then, to pray and encourage an audience for that person, invite them back with genuine sincerity and listen again and again to the complaint or opposition. Welcome them into our meeting or our homes. Assure a sense of ‘heartfelt’ welcome. To have courage is to use heart, not tongue.

Addendum:

“Queries for Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business:

Have I truly listened and heard and understood before I respond?

Are my comments furthering the business or taking us off-task?

Am I laying down the law or speaking with humility?

Have I already spoken to this issue and do I need to leave space for others to speak, or silence

to invite Spirit?

Am I giving little side comments to the person next to me or am I actively listening?

Are my comments really Spirit led?”

(Quaker Process for Friends on the Benches, by Mathilda Navias, p. 206)

Adios by Naomi Shihab Nye

It's a good word. The rolling of the tongue,
no matter what language you were born with.

Use it!

Learn where it begins.

The small alphabet of departure.

How long it takes to think of it.

Then say it, then it will be heard.

Marry it.

More than any golden ring, it shines, it shines.

Wear it on every finger 'til your hands dance,

touching everything easily,

letting everything easily go.

Strap it to your back like wings of a kite tail,

or the stream of air behind a jet.

If you are known for anything, let it be the way you rise,

out of site, when your work is finished.

Think of things that linger, leaves, cartons and napkins,
the damp smell of mold.

Think of things that disappear.

Think of things you love best,
what brings tears into your eyes.
Something that said 'adios' to you before you knew what it meant,
or how long it was for, later, perhaps, lessons following lessons,
like silence following sound.