

Being Present

Give not way to the lazy, dreaming mind.

—George Fox²⁴

Even today . . . few people can sit through an hour of silent Quaker worship without a wandering mind which dodges painfully away from steady reflection. The first efforts at stillness begin to show a person his inadequacy, emptiness of purpose, or well-buried guilt.

—Hugh Barbour²⁵

Unprogrammed Friends' worship may seem to be a time for uplifting reverie, for cultivating inspirational thoughts and pleasantly soothing reflections. Quaker worship then appears in the guise of a subdued escape into an attractive fantasy world. However pleasant (and however widespread) such a use of the silence may be, it is surely not what Fox and other early Quakers intended, not what "waiting upon the Lord" is about. Their

writings emphasize not merely physical stillness, but even more, a stillness of thought and will. Isaac Pennington's words above provide a brisk clinic for clarity: "Give over thine own willing; give over thine own running; give over thine own desiring to know or to be any thing, and sink down to the seed . . ." I must drop the strivings of my small self if I am to surrender to the presence of Christ within.

Those who have attempted to still their minds for more than a moment will have discovered how difficult it is to do so. Some Asian traditions speak of "monkey mind," jumping uncontrollably from here to there to elsewhere without any repose or tranquillity. Zen teaching compares an untrained mind to a wild ox that requires many years of taming to become docile. Referring to "temptations and troubles," George Fox puts his finger precisely upon the two primary sources of this agitation of the mind—desire and fear. Craving this, fleeing that, I build elaborate mental fantasies. Seeking to avoid distress and arrange my life more pleasantly, I obsess about the past and future, rehearsing this and that possible scenario. In contrast, the discipline of stillness tells me, "do not think but submit." Eminent Quaker scholar John Punshon writes, "The stillness of a Friends' meeting is a state of great attentiveness, not of abandon."²⁶ Rather than drifting with "the lazy, dreaming mind," committed silent worship calls me back from my fantasies to the immediacy of the present moment, to "Stand still in the Light and submit to it."

Knowing Myself

The central spiritual insight that inspired 17th-century Quakerism was that Christ has come to teach his people himself,²⁷ that "The God who spoke still speaks."²⁸ And if God is speaking to me, should not I be listening? Many Friends will ruefully report

that when they listen inwardly, all that they hear is themselves—their fantasies and fears, their mental arguments and rehearsals, their distractions and preoccupations. Fox saw that such listening is not a failure of worship, however, but a necessary first step in worship itself. In order to hear beneath the chatter of my mind, I must first awaken to the chatter itself. "See your thoughts and temptations," says Fox. Expanding upon his advice, the weighty 18th-century Friend Samuel Bownas declared that "It is . . . highly needful for us to learn to *know* ourselves, and to keep in it daily, and not to forget and lose the sense of the imperfections and defects in the natural constitution of our own minds."²⁹

As my own experience makes all too clear, a true encounter with oneself can be far from comforting. Leading Quaker scholar Hugh Barbour observes of early Friends, "The light that ultimately gave joy, peace, and guidance gave at first only terror."³⁰ Yet to see our thoughts and temptations, to know ourselves, is not to wallow blindly in our troubles while we await a magical rescue from above. Fox tells us to "take heed of being hurried with many thoughts but live in that which goes over them."³¹ After I see myself, I should "stand still in that which is pure," "be stayed in the principle of God." What do these directions mean—and how am I to follow them?

When I am sitting in stillness, struggling with my obsessions, I may seem to have only two options—to become caught up in my distress, or to push it aside and force my mind to dwell on other things. Fox points to another way, one in which I attend to my inner turmoil without descending into it:

What the light doth make manifest and discover, temptations, confusions, distractions, . . . do not look at [them] but at the light that . . . makes them manifest. . . . For looking down at sin, and corrup-

tion, and distraction, you are swallowed up in it; but looking at the light that discovers them, you will see over them. That will give victory; and you will find grace and strength; and there is the first step of peace.³²

Seeing my thoughts, cravings, and fears without being drawn into them, I move from self-preoccupation to awareness of a larger, encompassing reality. This liberating perspective is the Light—not a glowing object of inner attention, but rather that which enables me to see my troubles while freeing me from immersion in them. “Standing still in the Light,” I yield to expansive openness and presence, to “sweet experience” and “contentment.” As early Friend Elizabeth Hendricks writes, I aim to “keep close to the Light, and feel the Power of God, and abide in it, and let it be [my] daily care, to remain in the Awe and Fear of God continually . . .”³³ Perhaps no phrase is more characteristic of the ministry of George Fox than his simple words, “Live in the Life of God, and feel it.”³⁴

The Moment of Truth

Walk in the Truth . . . stand all naked, bare and uncovered before the Lord.

—George Fox³⁵

Because this process is uncomfortable—I am, after all, experiencing the very parts of myself that I seek to ignore—great patience and courage are required. Worship is a form of cleansing, as I lay myself open to God without reservation. John Punshon puts the point uncompromisingly: “I must be willing to open my heart completely, give everything I have and hold nothing back in my own secret places. I must, in a word, be willing to be

searched myself.”³⁶ Margaret Fell counsels fellow Quakers: “Now, Friends . . . let the Eternal Light search you . . . for this will deal plainly with you, it will rip you up, and lay you open . . . naked and bare before the Lord God, from whom you cannot hide yourselves.”³⁷ As noted by Howard Brinton, Friends’ silent worship has much in common with a spiritual practice made famous by a simple Catholic monk, Brother Lawrence, “the practice of the presence of God.”³⁸ When I sense that every action I perform, every thought I entertain, is seen through and through by a Divine eye, I have no recourse but to release my clinging, to surrender fully, and to risk all in holy obedience.

Vulnerability to God is also vulnerability to each other. The gathered worship of a true Friends meeting is not merely a cover of silence under which individuals quietly “do their own thing”; it is a shared endeavor in which many wills simultaneously yield up their separateness so that all may “come to know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being.”³⁹ In such an act of corporate submission, the meeting opens to the power of Truth.

Early Friends’ concept of Truth was thus no mere correspondence of a statement with a state of affairs, nor simply a bold reporting of the facts, but rather an alignment of the whole being with an electrifying Reality, a riveting, enveloping Presence. Describing George Fox as he rose in meeting to pray, William Penn conveys some of this power: “The most awful, living, reverent frame I ever felt or beheld, I must say, was his in prayer. And truly . . . he knew and lived nearer to the Lord than other men . . .”⁴⁰ Such an alignment may signal itself by dramatic shuddering of the body, or more gently by a wordless sweetness stealing over all who are present, as described by Francis Howgill: “As we waited upon him in pure silence, our minds out of all things, his heavenly presence appeared in our assemblies, when there was no language, tongue, nor speech from any creature.”⁴¹