

Thoughts on Intentional Silence from Quaker Worship

Worship begins when the first person enters the room and takes a seat. This means that if you are entering a room where people have begun to gather, you are entering a meeting for worship that is already in progress. Try to be quiet and unobtrusive within reason. It is OK to smile at someone you recognize, to whisper an apology if you tread on someone's toes, etc. But do not speak aloud or bang around if you can help it.

The practice of sitting together in silence is often called "expectant waiting." It is a time when Friends become inwardly still and clear aside the activities of mind and body that usually fill our attention in order to create an opportunity to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is not a time for "thinking," for deliberate, intellectual exercise. It is a time for spiritual receptivity, so it is important not to clog one's mind with its own busy activities. Nonetheless, thoughts will occur in the silence. Some thoughts will be distractions and should be set aside. (Make that shopping list later.) But some thoughts or images or feelings may arise that seem to come from a deeper source and merit attention. If you are visited by a spiritual presence, if you seem to experience perceptions that are drawn from a deeper well or are illuminated with a brighter light, then let those impressions dwell in you and be receptive to the Inward Teacher. Each person finds his or her own ways of "centering down," or entering deep stillness during meeting.

You are encouraged to explore ways to center down, until you discover what works for you. It may help to talk to others, or read personal accounts, such as the one linked above by Douglas Steere. However, there are **two common guidelines about entering worship**:

- To "come with heart and mind prepared." Worship will be more meaningful if you arrange to enter meeting in a relaxed and calm frame of mind, rather than in a rushed frenzy, and if you ready yourself during the week through prayer, contemplation, reading, or other practices; and
- To bring "neither a determination to speak nor a determination to remain silent." In other words, if you offer a spoken message during worship, it should arise from a spiritual prompting that happens during worship—one that you are ready for but have not planned.

From time to time, an individual may be moved to offer a "message" (or "spoken ministry") to the group. Spoken messages may occur many times during a meeting, or there may be none at all. Such a message is delivered by an individual, but is understood to be coming through that person from God. When such a message is delivered, no outward response is expected from you—in fact, it is not Friends' practice to offer vocal approvals, or even turn around in one's seat to look at the speaker. (It is more customary to laugh at humor. If a message is given in the form of song, others may join in the singing if the singer invites it.) Try to make yourself receptive to the message and let it reach you, even if you find yourself resisting it. There may be a kernel of truth in it that will speak to you. If that does not happen, trust that the message was meant for others, and return to your own worship.

If you find yourself "prompted" to offer a message, the first step is to ask yourself whether it is a genuine leading of the Spirit. Does the urge to speak seem to arise from a deeply spiritual motion, rather than simply being a desire to share your own active thoughts? Does it seem that the message is intended to be given to the assembly, rather than being personal guidance just for you, or something you may feel called to say to an individual later? Is your inclination to speak free of personal motives or "hidden agendas"? Does it seem that now is the moment that you are called to speak? (These are not easy things to discern, and it takes practice, including trial and error, to become confident. Do not be afraid to be wrong!)