

Minimalist Ritual: Waiting in Silence

A creative nonfiction essay on the Ritual Process

A first-time attendee at unprogrammed Meeting for Worship as practiced by the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) may come to a numinous experience but, more likely, will miss the full impact experienced by those for whom it is a way of life. An old Quaker joke has such a newcomer sitting in the silence of Meeting for maybe 20 minutes, then hesitantly whispering to the weighty Friend next to him, "When does the service start?" The Friend replies, "When our worship is ended."

My experience of silent prayer in other venues, such as Protestant worship, has been of a very short period of silence that becomes increasingly uncomfortable quickly, with little rustling noises as people shift slightly in their seats and wonder how soon it will be over. Perhaps we voice words of prayer in our heads, silently and quickly, but this silence differs from the Silence of Meeting for Worship in its brevity and intent. Praying in silence is a *doing*; waiting in Silence is a *being*.

I offer the Silent Meeting as an example of a group Ritual Process in which the elements of *doing* are minimal, leaving the framework of *being* for analysis, under the hypothesis that examination of the framework will illuminate attributes common to the overall Ritual Process.

The Logistical Framework

The basic logistics were named in my earlier paper, "Ritual: Reordering Self".

Meeting for Worship can be held at any time and place, for any duration, but is most commonly of one hour's duration on Sunday morning.

Preparation: specify time, place, and duration. Assign one Friend to conclude the Meeting.

... Meeting begins when the first Friend (or attendee) enters the specified place and begins sitting in silent waiting. As others arrive, each sits and waits in silence.

When someone feels guided ... to share an insight or message, she stands in her place and speaks. When finished, she resumes sitting and waiting in silence. If another feels guided to speak, it is considered appropriate that the message not be a direct answer, refutation, or comment upon the earlier message, and a "decent" interval should elapse between messages. One message per person per Meeting is expected to be the limit. Many times, the entire allotted period will elapse with no one rising to speak; this is considered quite acceptable.

When the time has elapsed and the assigned Friend feels guided that Meeting is over, he shakes hands with the person next to him, ending Meeting. Everyone then shakes hands with everyone else in reach.

These logistical aspects of the framework of the ritual process address the essentials: *who*, *where*, *when*, and *how*.

The Spiritual Framework

The remaining essentials of the ritual process framework are *what* and *why*.

These are not addressed, as a matter of course, in the Silent Meeting; rather they arise from history and practices originating in the founding of the Religious Society of Friends as the “extreme left wing of the English Reformation” [Brinton, 1949] in the mid-1600s. Friends of any length of conviction and many people whose introduction to Quakerism came from popular media had some association with the basic principles. Friends reject dogma and have no set creed; history enumerates Friends who have taken effective stands in favor of inclusion, rejecting war in any form, and speaking Truth.

The Basic Assumption

Since its founding by George Fox in the 1600s, the central understanding of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) has been that the Divine – God – is present in each person. Fox spoke of “..that of God in every one” [Fox, 1656]. Divine guidance is available to each person. Awareness of the guidance, referred to sometimes as the Light, is enhanced when Friends gather in awareness of the Divine in ourselves and in each other and wait.

The intent of the ritual called Meeting for Worship is to provide a means for Friends and others to gather and wait silently on the Light and Divine Presence, sharing aloud any guidance which includes the imperative to share, and emerging better ordered, refreshed to face the week to come.

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives Thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise.

Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.

Breathe through the heat of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

John Greenleaf Whittier

Varieties of Ritual Experience

For this examination of the spiritual framework, I look to the qualities and attributes of four hypothetical participants, as people are the ultimate independent variables, bringing their own nuances of framework into the Silence with them.

- **The child** brings the parents’ behavioral expectations with the beginnings of a spiritual vocabulary;
- **The first-time attender** brings a framework of past experiences and current expectations;
- **The experienced Friend** brings a framework rich in Quaker testimony, life experience, and expectations of the numinous;
- **The riser**, being an experienced Friend charged with choosing the appropriate time to end the worship, also brings the logistical framework as an imperative.

The Child's Framework

A children's book, *We're Going to Meeting for Worship* by Abby Hadley [Hadley, 1972] presents a beautiful depiction of a child's experience of Meeting for Worship. The text, in the voice of a child, tells the story:

We walk in and sit down. Why do we have to be so quiet?
In Meeting people just sit. I have to sit here too.
I can think of things to do ...Like make shadows with my fingers, or see who looks asleep.
I look around and find faces I know.
Some people look sad; some look happy; others – how do they feel?
Now the silence seems to be deeper ...like a pool.
I remember other times and places ... when it was quiet.
I remember bad times too ...when no one would listen to me; and other times when I hurt inside.
Those were bad times, but now – in the quiet – I can think about it. It doesn't hurt so much.
I think about my best friend; he listens to me, and I listen to him.
People here at Meeting are listening, too!
Someone is going to speak ... She tells us something important to her.
Before she spoke, she was sitting here with us, quietly. I wonder, is God here listening?
Meeting is over when we all shake hands.

The child whose voice is the text has clearly been prepared for the logistical framework. His spiritual framework has the language of the basic assumption: God is here. Deeper lessons are reinforced: other people are like me; listening to people helps them; bad times feel less bad when someone listens to me about them; people listen to me; I can listen, too.

The First-Time Attender

Unlike the hapless questioner of the earlier Quaker joke, a first-time attender probably has a basic instruction in the logistical framework supplied by whomever has facilitated his attendance or from one of the helpful pamphlets made available for such purpose. Expectations of the spiritual framework may be high, as Whittier's verses from *The Meeting* are often quoted on the cover of those pamphlets.

The actual experience of the Silence, however, may be unexpected. Particularly during a Meeting where spoken messages are few, an hour is a very long time to sit quietly with inner thoughts, like those of the child:

"And so I find it well to come
For deeper rest to this still room,
For here the habit of the soul
Feels less the outer world's control;
The strength of mutual purpose pleads
More earnestly our common needs;
And from the silence multiplied
By these still forms on either side,
The world that time and sense have known
Falls off and leaves us God alone."

John Greenleaf Whittier, "The Meeting"

- Looking around at the others gathered and speculating on what is going on in *their* heads;
- Wondering if you are doing what you are supposed to be doing;
- Inwardly reciting prayers or text;
- Trying not to fall asleep;
- Thinking about what you might share, if you were to stand and break the silence;
- Contrasting and comparing this experience with previous religious encounters;
- Wondering what time it is and how much longer this will go on.

Someone trained in meditation techniques may be quite comfortable in their first Meeting; another might find it an ordeal.

In the end, our hypothetical newcomer has: expanded the wealth of his personal experience; spent some time alone with his thoughts; vicariously experienced some numinous moments and perhaps raised his ideal for future experiences; and experience being part of a group where sharing the basic assumption is the norm.

The Experienced Friend

In my observation, no matter how thoroughly their lives are infused with Friends' ideals, testimonies and practices, Quakers enter the meetinghouse on First Day as into a world set apart, with its own norms, customs, and language. Even though plain dress, in Friends' parlance, is rarely seen in today's urban meetings, people dress a bit carefully, being conscious not to "dress up" even if it means "dressing down" from their weekday preference in attire. People tend to use a Quaker-oriented vocabulary, in addition to omitting expressions they might use without thinking in the rest of life. In short, they present themselves in keeping with their own perception of a Quaker ideal, reinforcing their own adherence to that ideal.

The meetinghouse and the worship setting are familiar and, to many, beloved places. Friends settle themselves in their favorite spots on the benches, compose themselves for the duration, and look around the room at familiar sights and familiar faces. The time between entering into the silence and the settling of the last of the latecomers is often spent acknowledging the distractions as well as the familiar, letting them fade into the background.

This time of grounding and centering is the beginning of the ritual process of alignment with the individual's paradigm of the best and most important of Friends' faith and practice – putting oneself into the framework of one's own understanding. Of an hour's silent meeting, the first twenty minutes may pass in this manner, with the little rustling sounds of people settling into place, inwardly and outwardly. Spoken messages in this period are often those prepared somewhat ahead of time.

The rustling silence eventually gives way to a deeper silence, as Friends follow their individual leadings and openings. Spoken messages seem to float on the silence, becoming inspirational to some and fading into the background for others. This is the

time when the trappings of speech, dress, décor, attitude, format, and role trigger reminders of Friends' teachings and testimonies over the centuries: that of God in every one [Fox, 1656], walking in the Light [Fox, 1643-1648], liv[ing] in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars [Fox, 1651]. Seeking Truth.

In the deepest of the silence lies the opportunity to align or realign one's thoughts and inspirations with one's best of intentions, to discover associations among previously-unconnected strands of thought, and to experience a oneness in the presence of all gathered that opens to include All.

Eventually inner cues of biology or external cues of increased rustling call attention back toward the hard benches and the familiar sights and sounds, so the ending of meeting by shaking hands all around does not come as too much of a surprise.

The experienced Friend comes away refreshed, with a clearer eye toward the order by which he chooses to guide his life, at peace.

The Riser

One experienced Friend, present throughout Meeting for Worship, bears a ritual role that precludes entering into the deepest of the silence. At the appropriate time, usually an hour after the scheduled beginning of Meeting, the riser (from the Quaker terminology "the rise of Meeting" denoting its end), noting that no one is speaking and sensing no one is about to rise to speak, turns and shakes hands with the nearest person, signaling all present to do the same. After this, the riser rises – stands in place – to voice a welcome, request introduction of newcomers, and entertain announcements of the community.

Our hypothetical riser comes away with the satisfaction of duty done, a growing appreciation of the dynamics of his familiar gathered community, and gratitude that the riser's job rotates among experienced Friends.

The Ritual Elements

Meeting for Worship, a group ritual experience polished since its introduction by George Fox in the 1600s, contains the essential elements:

- Logistical framework of time, place, script, roles, and personal conduct;
- Spiritual framework of a worldview known to and shared by the experienced participants;
- Intention or expectation of each participant of some inner refreshment from realignment with their chosen worldview.

In the heart of the Silence, the framework created by intent and by history gently calls the worshipper to align with the principles the worshipper associates with it, as one of a community of understanding, without constraints of form or substance..

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