

LETTER 3

Silent Worship and the Inward Teacher

Dear Pat,

Thank you for your last letter. I am pleased that you resonate with the idea that a group of people can find deep spiritual unity and wisdom, even if they don't always hold identical beliefs about what you called "the big cosmological status of Jesus." This is done among "my" stream of the Quakers, just as you say, by turning toward the Inward Teacher together in silent waiting worship and opening ourselves to the direct experience of divine love and guidance as a group.

For me, silent Quaker worship is one of the loveliest wildflowers in the garden of the world's spiritual practices. It sounds like you are interested in learning more about it. I will try to answer your questions as best as I can. Yet, I encourage you to experiment with Quaker worship firsthand and attend some Quaker meetings for worship in your area. Direct experience is almost always preferable to words on a page—as helpful as words can be. If you are interested in doing this, you can find the Quaker meetings in your local area by going to the Quaker Finder website at www.quakerfinder.org.

Also, before I try to explain what I can about Quaker worship, I have to offer a big disclaimer here: "results may vary when using this product!" I'm only half kidding. For example, both the early Quaker theologian Robert Barclay and I had very deep spiritual experiences the very first time we visited a

Quaker meeting for worship. This is not true for everyone. Margery Post Abbot, for example, describes this situation in her book on the Quaker way.

The silence of Quaker Meeting for Worship has always been a part of my life. In the 1950s and 60s, as a child I sat each Sunday in the large Meeting room in Philadelphia, watching the sun filter through the blinds, listening to the words offered in worship. . . . Between Sundays and the Friends' school I attended on weekdays, I learned much about the Bible and Quaker history as I absorbed the culture around me. . . . Still, I did not know how to listen to the guidance of the Inward Teacher. Such prompting seemed only for the saints, or for those gifted in a way I was not.

This missing mystical element of Quaker worship finally broke through for Margery in 1991 when, "without warning," she says she was "suddenly confronted with the reality of the Eternal Presence" during a meeting for worship. Up until then, she had defined her Quaker faith "in terms of action: what Friends call the testimonies of peace, simplicity, equality, community and integrity." For her, "Mysticism was an abstract concept." Yet, this very important element of Quaker worship became vivid and alive, and is now a transforming experience at the very center of her spiritual life. I love how she describes this breakthrough:

As soon as someone rose to offer vocal ministry, something inside me cracked and the tears flowed. . . . In that hour, my life-long sense of worthlessness was consumed in all encompassing love as I sat, enfolded in God's arms.

Today, she says, "my faith calls me to encourage all people to wait and to attend on the still, small voice which transforms the heart." This is an experience of Quaker worship that is common among many Quakers. But every person's story is unique.

Some newcomers have to overcome some unconscious assumptions that get in the way of fully experiencing the spiritual breadth and depth of Quaker worship. A great story about this comes from contemporary British Quaker Jim Pym's experience of meeting for worship. As Jim tells his story, "I was born and brought up in the Roman Catholic Church, and it was thought by all concerned—including myself—that I was going to be a priest." However, Jim soon started asking challenging questions of his childhood faith and ultimately left the church in his twenties. At this point, he started looking for an alternative philosophy and soon found Buddhism and learned to meditate.

This was not the last stop on his spiritual journey, however. When his first Buddhist meditation group folded after a year or so, a friend suggested that Jim attend a local Quaker meeting for worship. As his friend put it, "They have an hour's meditation on Sunday mornings." Jim started attending his local Friends meeting and felt remarkably at home in the weekly meditative silence of Quaker worship.

The first several Quaker meetings for worship he attended were entirely silent, so Jim reports that it came as "quite a shock when someone first stood up and spoke in what I later learned was called 'ministry,' and which is one of the things that differentiates Quaker worship from Buddhist meditation." This was a jarring reminder that he was not in a Buddhist group anymore, even though so much of the experience was similar. Jim decided that if he was going to keep coming to meeting for worship he needed to learn more about Quakers. He took advantage of the meeting's learning opportunities, read books, and asked questions.

Jim was increasingly drawn to Quaker worship, and he began to see it as an astonishingly simple "practical mysticism for ordinary people." He writes, "a meeting for worship occurs when two or more people come together to sit in silence, and

wait to experience the presence of God.” And, he’s right. It can happen any place and any time. Many informal or special meetings for worship are held at different times and places for healing, witness, personal support, family prayer, or to honor and celebrate community events like weddings, births, and deaths. Meetings for business and committee meetings are also conducted within a meeting for worship.

Like Jim, I agree that a Quaker meeting for worship is fundamentally a group spiritual practice, even when only two or three are gathered together. Yet, I have sometimes sat in silent, expectant waiting worship all by myself, sometimes during the most difficult moments of my life. I remember one night in particular a few years back when I had a horrible fight with my wife. It was late at night and Katy and I were angry, hurt, and bitter. We had yelled some hateful things at each other and were lying in bed next to each other in a sullen, stubborn silence. After what seemed like hours of hell, Katy got up and left the room, slamming the door behind her. She was carrying her pillow and blanket, so I figured she intended to sleep on the couch.

I lay in the dark, feeling helpless and still fuming and aching inside. Thoughts ran through me like, “She’d better come right back now and apologize, or else we’re finished.” And “I sure as hell am not going out to her. It’s her fault, and it’s her move if she wants to save this marriage. I am so sick of these fights.” I was desperate and lost, and in complete despair. I needed a shot of salvation, big time.

Out of nowhere, I had a crazy thought. Why not quiet my angry “monkey mind” (a term Buddhists use for our busy, reactive thoughts), and center down in a one-person meeting for worship right there in a dark bedroom in the middle of the night. I was lost, but I knew enough to turn to the Inward Teacher for guidance. I then sat up without turning on the light, put my feet on the floor, got comfortable, quieted my breathing,

calmed myself as best I could, and I began settling into silent worship. Into this silent, expectant waiting, I prayed, "Please, Dear Spirit, show me how to make a way out of no way."

As I sat alone in the silence, I felt a question emerge that seemed like an answer. Yet, it seemed so trite and clichéd that I pushed it away for as long as I could. Finally, though, I let the question in: "What would Jesus do?"

My first answer came some minutes later, and it was both challenging and calming. I remembered that Jesus was pretty down on men divorcing their wives. OK, step one: don't divorce Katy. It actually felt good to have at least one thing settled. I kept sitting in the silence, however, wondering if there was anything more for me to discover in the midst of this unusual meeting for worship.

After a while, just breathing in and out, I also remembered how Jesus once said that both the sunlight and the rain fall on the just and the unjust alike. I'd always thought that this bit of scripture means that God's love is unconditional no matter how far someone misses the mark. That gave me hope. I felt it was just possible that I could love Katy even though she was so completely wrong. Thank you, Jesus!

After an inner chuckle that felt really good following all my anguish, I was reminded that Jesus had also admonished his followers not to take the speck out of another's eye until they had taken the log out of their own eye. At that moment, I didn't like that recommendation at all. My breathing got faster and tighter and I tried to argue with Jesus there in the middle of my darkened bedroom. Yet, I continued sitting on the bed in silent worship, finally letting this troubling bit of scripture drop like a stone into the deep pool of silent worship. My breathing slowed down once again.

Somewhere inside I finally felt my guard drop and I admitted, "OK, I might have done a few things I shouldn't have as the fight got more heated between us, and maybe I missed some

opportunities to do a few loving things I should have done before things got so ugly and out of control." At this point, another glimmer of hope dawned in me: if I'm part of the problem, then I might actually be able to change something in my behavior and help shift us away from our angry impasse, at least a little bit.

Still, I didn't have a clue about what to do. Then, I remembered that Jesus didn't just rely on what he read about the great prophets or sages in his sacred scriptures. Instead, Jesus went directly to the spiritual headwaters of our faith tradition. Jesus prayed to God. He would sit in the wilderness, or in a garden, or alone in a dark room in the middle of the night (just like me) and open his torn and tempted heart to the love and guidance of the Divine Spirit in which we live, move, and breathe. Jesus and I had the same Inward Teacher.

I resisted this idea for a while, but I soon centered even deeper into the prayerful silence of worship and handed it all over to Spirit. Crazily, after several minutes, I felt a wave of profound love and compassion come over me and then I got my answer: "Dude, just go out to the living room, sit beside her, and tell her you love her, that you want to live with her for the rest of your life, and that you are absolutely sure you both can figure out the problem in the morning. Then, tell her that you want to sleep with her tonight and you want to hold her in your arms." I sat quietly for a little while longer until I felt that my odd little one-person meeting for worship was over. Now was the time to take what I experienced in worship into the world—or at least into my living room.

Well, I did just what the voice told me to, and doing it the Inward Teacher's way worked a miracle. Katy and I cried together, we hugged, we told each other how much we loved each other, and we finally went back to bed and fell asleep in each other's arms, saying we would figure everything out in the morning. Jesus says that the Community of God can grow like

a tiny mustard seed into a large bush to feed the birds and offer shade to the animals. Katy and I slept in the Community of God that night, under the moon shade of that mustard bush, and I will never forget it.

Please keep in mind, Pat, that different people often experience Quaker worship in different ways. As Margery Post Abbot explains:

This opening of the soul to the Divine Comforter is at the heart of Friends' encounter with the Light, whether it be by sudden, mystical experience, by a steady sense of the Spirit beginning in childhood, or by a gradual growth into awareness of the gentle nudges on the soul often named as intuition.

I have experienced all three types of healing moments in meetings for worship. I have also experienced meetings for worship that have felt spiritually dry or flat to me. Yet, even in these dry times, I still find worship a calming and useful part of my week. I am mindful in those times that a deeper, more moving awareness of divine grace and challenge returns to me often enough in Quaker worship that my life is regularly enriched with Spirit and I am made more tender and whole. That is what my wife says anyway, and she should know.

There are many different ways to describe Quaker worship. A friend of mine once said that Quaker worship is a lovely combination of Zen meditation, ethical Jewish prophesy, and a prayer gathering in the name of Jesus. Even some of my atheist friends seem to enjoy going to meeting for worship from time to time. It nurtures mindfulness they say. For me, meetings for worship—at their best—are akin to what I imagine as the sublime moments experienced by a group of people sitting in a club and listening to the inspired live jazz improvisations of John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Charlie Mingus, or Thelonious Monk.

I remember my high school art teacher inviting me over to his house and playing John Coltrane's *Meditations* album for me on his record player. At first, it all sounded like a confusing wall of sound to me, just like the noisy internal chatter of random thoughts, judgments, and impressions in my "monkey mind." But then, suddenly, I was inside the sacred music, loving it, tearing up and laughing, and rocking back and forth. I got it. And, in that moment, I said to my teacher, "This is exactly the shift that happens to me in Quaker meeting."

This is not "exactly" what happens to everyone in Quaker meeting. In fact, I have never heard any other person describe meeting for worship as wild, improvisational jazz. Nonetheless, there is an improvisational element to Quaker worship, which builds on the many standard spiritual "melodies" that worshipers in Quaker meetings riff on week after week. I guess that is one reason why I like to visit other Quaker meetings for worship when I travel. I also like attending the week-long annual gatherings of New England Yearly Meeting or Friends General Conference. There I can worship out of doors with a small group of Quakers early each morning before breakfast and also worship with several hundred Quakers in a big conference room later on in the day. In such large group settings, the people who are moved to give vocal ministry stand up out of silence and wait until a microphone is brought to them so everyone can hear their message. This is very different from the much smaller scale and informality of our weekly meetings for worship in Putney, and even more distant from the tiny house meetings for worship I experienced as a young teenager in Galesburg. Yet, all these kinds of meeting for worship have become precious to me.

I have recognized, though, that Quaker worship is not for everyone. I still laugh when I remember my mom's best friend barreling out of the special meeting for worship for marriage held by the DeKalb Friends Meeting on the day of my wedding

It was Sally's first and last Quaker meeting for worship. She marched up to me after the wedding, hugged me close, and said, "Steve, I love you, but don't ever make me sit through anything like that again. It drove me nuts!"

Yet, unlike Sally, most of the other participants did have a profound and moving experience that day, including many who were experiencing Quaker worship for the first time. I heard from many friends and family members that they delighted in sitting together silently in a circle, closing their eyes in meditation about the sacred relationship of marriage and about our particular union. They relished the simplicity when I and my spouse ultimately rose out of the worshipful silence and exchanged promises directly to each other without the aid of a minister, and without my wife being "given away" by someone else. They also loved how the silence returned and then several people, including a couple of young kids in our meeting, spoke out of the silence to share their own heartfelt and spontaneous vocal messages to the whole group. As happens frequently at Quaker weddings, several of these first timers felt moved to stand and speak at this special meeting for worship.

It is possible, maybe even likely, that the experience of Quaker worship would be meaningful and spiritually important to you. What do you think? Could this be a valuable spiritual practice for you? Are you interested in listening to improvisational, spiritual jazz?

Affectionately,
Steve