

John Woolman, who is sometimes referred to as an American Quaker saint, wrote in 1770, “The place of prayer is a precious habitation, where the prayers of the saints, as precious incense, arise before the throne of God and the Lamb. I saw this habitation to be safe, to be inwardly quiet when there were great stirrings and commotions in the world.”

Our first hymn is Green #140, “In Solitude I Come to God”

Our first reading today comes from the Book of Faith and Practice of Britain Yearly Meeting concerning the experience and nature of worship: “Worship is the response of the human spirit to the presence of the divine and eternal, to the God who first seeks us. The sense of wonder and awe of the finite before the infinite leads naturally to thanksgiving and adoration. Silent worship and the spoken word are both parts of Quaker ministry. The ministry of silence demands the faithful activity of every member in the meeting. As, together, we enter the depths of a living silence, the stillness of God, we find one another in the things that are eternal, upholding and strengthening one another.”

Our second reading comes from the book of Zephaniah 3:15-17: “The Lord, the Ruler of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. On that day they will say to Jerusalem, ‘Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands hang limp. The Lord your God is with you and is mighty to save. God will take great delight in you and God will quiet you with love.’”

A final reading comes from William Penn’s writing to his children in 1699: “Love silence, even in the mind: for thoughts are to that as words to the body, troublesome; much speaking, as much thinking, spends, and in many thoughts, as well as words, there is

sin. True silence is the rest of the mind; and it is to the spirit, what sleep is to the body, nourishment and refreshment.”

Our second hymn is green #142 “Mid All the Traffic of the Ways”

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—Into this space and silence we offer our worries and cares, our disappointments and joys, our best wishes and moments of accomplishment and defeat and loss. Here we find the many listening ears, connected to the many souls, and these to the source of Light and comfort. We listen for what is spoken and unspoken. We hold each other in our joys and concerns. Pour down blessings on all who listen, as the listeners so deeply bless us. We give thanks for the ever-responding hearts around us, and for a tender heart of our own that connects to the Divine in love. Make our hearts glad and light and filled with Light. After the storm comes the morning. Let us glisten. Amen.

Our third hymn is green #137 “Teach Me to Stop and Listen”

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other.

Message: There is a still point in this turning world. A Light within and a profoundly full and filled silence. The transcendent, by its nature, has no explanation, no description, no source and no completion. We seek and step into the eternal, into the sublime, the no time and all time. It is an embracing circle, not a destination and an illumination--a deep Truth--not an answer. Whenever I think of my love of music and of symbolism and ritual, I wonder about the practice of silence, and then I remember the Buddhists, and the contemplatives. This may be a demanding practice to some degree, but it is ancient and comes from many sacred traditions. The demands of Quaker worship make it hard to fake or to be insincere in one’s participation. We wait on God and we

listen. We anticipate the love that comes through the hearts and testimony of our Friends, both spoken and unspoken. We need to quiet this daily life to experience and know the meaning of life, even if just to sense it rather than understand or say it.

There are many times I am working on a prepared message like this one, or I give a message and some synchronicity turns up. This time, I had begun to plan this message around silence and sounds, and something turns up in my email asking if I had seen the article in the latest *Friends Journal*, somewhat humorous, about the importance of noise in the silent meeting. It made me think how, in many meeting houses, when the furnace comes on, I think of the breath of the Spirit. It is a thought that helps me take the interruption in stride and avoid annoyance. And then this morning, there is the deep blanket of snow and the very bright blanket of silence it projects. A cocoon that is both in the world, but not quite of the world. Tightly connected, natural, with the butterfly about to emerge. In silence we are always on the verge, yet also fully settled in. It is the universe, vastly empty and yet filled with stars, sources of light that travel forever. The nature of this unfathomable structure of which we are a part provides a true meaning of nothing and everything and where we are both so small and so vast. This is not meditation, but immersion. And, as William Penn observed, a time to rest our minds from thinking and tune into hearts. We still all language, both spoken and internal.

That stillness is precious in a world and a time period and a culture that encourages us to think and think and think. We are constantly expected to make choices. That was one of the deepest sources of culture shock for me when I first returned to the U.S. from my time of heading a Quaker school in rural East Africa. I came back to the U.S. to go to graduate school in Philadelphia, and an American Friend who lived at the Friends center in Kaimosi had loaned me her furnished cooperative apartment. I got there successfully, and then went to the local grocery store, one that was of a reasonable

size, but today would probably be considered very small compared to contemporary standards of Wegman's and Top's, to get food. I was overwhelmed walking the aisles looking at all the various types of bread and cereal and other products that had been invented over the previous six years. In over one hour, I had selected nothing, having read numerous labels, and I had to go back home and lie down. It was exhausting, coming from a place where there were only one or two types of each product. And only basic products. It is not just about calming and cultivating a quiet mind that is ready for the divine during worship, but maintaining an inner calm at other times that stays close to the inner Light.

There are other worship traditions that seek to impress or overwhelm the thinking mind with great noise or art, with music and ritual, display and awe. Those traditions can also be profound. It is interesting that it seems what silence is seeking to avoid is actually narrative. God is not a story. The Light is ever there, ever within. Christ is not born, does not die, but is present, which is why traditional Quakers had no Christmas or Easter, no baptism or communion. No separate story from us, but rather with us. We are not trying to connect the dots or figure out the puzzle, we trust that it is all there and accessible to all, to a child, to a prisoner, to a professor, to those of varied ability, to the despot, to the politician.

The simple can be so deep. One thinks of the Japanese zen garden or the fire, or the surface of the pond. So much in so little. The clear blue sky. When I settle into silent worship to wait for and with God, stepping into that healing pool at Bethesda, there are times that I close my eyes and easily hear or see nothing external. Those are times I feel most fully awake. Other times, I use a visual reminder of the world outside these windows, or the nature of the light, or the details of the carpet, or the pattern on the ceiling, or the flowers brought in by many meetings like ours, or the stencil high on the wall to find that settled mind, that relief from the constancy of word-filled thought. Sometimes I use or notice the

beauty of the ticking clock, another feature of many meetings, to note the space of eternity and the numbering of our own days in the huge processions of the saints. Likewise, the play and noise of children and the generations to come. All those many good Quakers who have found silence and solace here in this still room.

May our worship always lead to the calm refreshment of your hearts in these, and all times. Let words fall away and Light fill the great space, the grand vista, the broad and beautiful pathway on which we all travel together. Guided.

Closing hymn is green #136 “In This Still Room”

Pierre Lacout wrote in 1969, “In silence which is active, the Inner Light begins to glow—a tiny spark. It is by an attention full of love that we enable the Inner Light to blaze and illuminate our dwelling and to make of our whole being a source from which this Light may shine out.”