

# HOLY SILENCE

. . . . We made our way across the grass, through the front door, over the wood floor, and settled onto the benches. No modern, padded, or comfortable church pews for us simple Friends. No central heating, either. A black wood stove clanked, stoked for Sunday Meeting. Afghans and comforters sat stacked on one of the benches for those wanting to ward off the chill. Sunlight softened by old clear, wavy glassed windows filled the room. As did God's glory.

It was a traditional Friends service<sup>1</sup> — conducted in silence. This small group numbered less than a tenth of the Quaker congregation we normally worship with in Indiana. There was no bulletin, no paid preacher, no choir. There was an old pump organ, but it sat tucked in a corner and needed dusting. Any music or message would arise out of the silence — but only if God's spirit led someone to sing or share. The preacher in me looked for a clock — it always hangs where the parson, if not the congregation, can see it. There wasn't one. In spite of that, we all fell silent at about the same time. Some of us bowed our heads. Others wiggled on the benches for a moment, searching perhaps for a comfortable hollow in the bench worn by someone's backside. Exterior sound fell away, save for the ticking of the warming wood stove, the popping of burning wood, and the occasional stifled cough.

I looked and saw Nancy, backlit by sunlight through the window. Her head was bowed, blue eyes open, and hands folded in her lap. My gaze returned to the wood-planked floor between my

feet. I took off my glasses and closed my eyes. Soon interior noise fell away. Thoughts of the late afternoon flight to Indianapolis, worries about work waiting for me at the office, and the flood of minutiae that swamps my mind when outside noise stops, slowly vanished. They dropped into a well of holy silence. I let myself be guided into the deep waters of the soul.

That is when it happened. The only thing I can compare it to is the Catholic belief that in the “celebration of Mass. . . Christ is really present through Holy Communion to the assembly gathered in his name.” It is the same way with silence for Quakers. Friends believe that Christ<sup>2</sup> is actually present — except we Friends have no host to elevate or priest to preside. Rather, we believe that when our hearts, minds, and souls are still, and we wait expectantly in holy silence, that the presence of Christ comes among us. That October day, on the side of the Green Mountains, Jesus was good to his word: “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I.” In the silence, where outer and inner noise ceased, we became a gathered meeting — gathered together and with Jesus. We sensed this in the electrified air. I felt charged with an awareness of the miraculous — the marrow of my bones hummed in holy recognition of the One who had stood at the dawn of creation and called the world into being. And, it did not just happen to me.

The presence of [the] Christ among us changed the hour. Instead of enduring sixty minutes of stagnant silence dragging by, we felt that the first chapter of John's gospel had come to life in Vermont: “The Word became flesh and made his

dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” As if something had been lit deep inside and now shone from their faces, we saw grace and truth reflected in the people around us. It was a true Sabbath — free from noise and busy-ness as we worshipped and were fed. Though no outward words were spoken, no formal prayers recited, no music played softly in the background to set a mood, God had worked a way into the deepest parts of our hearts and out to our fingers and toes and noses.

Then, too soon, Meeting ended. Don, the person next to me, shifted and shook my hand. No loud amens or formal benedictions that day. Instead we smiled. For a long while no one said anything. No one wanted to break the holy moment. But then our humanness broke in. Small talk broke out. Friends asked for news of mutual acquaintances back in Indiana.<sup>3</sup> Huddled by the wood box, three men discussed who should close off the woodstove. Still, even in this after Meeting chitchat, we sensed that we were now a part of each other and God in a way we had not felt just an hour earlier.



1 George Fox and other early Friends worshipped in the sphere of silence, permitting and encouraging a direct relationship between the worshipper and the divine.

2 Friends of the 17th century used the name “Christ” not only to mean the physical person of Jesus, but also to convey the image of the light, the seed, the universal divine personified by him and reachable to and present in all peoples.

3 A state where there are 105 “pastored” meetings and just 12 which use only the sphere of silence in their meetings for worship.

Nancy and I had come to Vermont hoping for some respite from eldercare and work. We were leaving with spirits rejuvenated from an experience that had nothing to do with fall foliage. The Creator had breathed a blessing upon us.

Even as I tell that story, I am struck by the absurdity of trying to write about silence. Who needs words about silence?<sup>4</sup> Why not just keep silent? Besides, how do you put into words something that is unlike words?

The only justification for trying is that Friendly silence speaks — yes, speaks, oddly enough — to the hunger for silence that we see in people all around us. Look at the rising interest in silent retreats and contemplative reading. Something in our souls tells us that getting quiet is a good way to meet God, no matter whether our souls are settled or not; swamped by insecurity or swathed in peace.

This holy hush is about meeting Jesus in an intimate way. Quaker silence encourages us to relax into the love of God until we hear the Spirit's voice whispering softly in our soul's ear.

That is why Christ comes to us when our hearts and minds are silent and still. Quaker silence is pregnant with holy expectation. It is filled with anticipation that Jesus will be there. And not in some abstract, vaguely spiritual feel good way, either. The deep silence of the soul is our Eucharist. Rufus Jones, a Quaker mystic and writer of the twentieth century, said of sacramental silence, "It may be an intensified pause, a vitalized hush, a creative quiet, an actual moment of mutual and reciprocal correspondence with God. The actual meeting of man with God and

<sup>4</sup> Robert Rodriguez, an occasional essayist once said, on PBS' News Hour: "Silence expresses the inexpressible, expressively."

God with man is the very crown and culmination of what we can do with our human life here on earth."

This actual meeting of us with God and God with us, as Jones defined it, makes Quaker silence different from other silences.

The psalmist urges us to: "Be still, and know that I am God." Friends believe that this inward, mystical union is more likely to happen if we approach silence expectantly. Even though the old Quaker joke calls us to, "Don't just do something, sit there," holy silence is more than just sitting there.

Silence is something we do, not something done to us. It is a participatory act. It engages our heart, mind, soul, and body in listening for the voice of the Beloved. Quaker silence is not passive. After all, how could Holy Communion, which deepens our faith and fills us with passionate love for God, ever be inactive?

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