

The listening place: Among Quakers

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [February 23, 2010](#) issue

An 18th-century painting of a Quaker meeting hangs in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. In it a figure, perhaps George Fox himself, stands speaking with such passion that his hand is clutching his breast. Around him are gathered members of the Society of Friends. A woman sits with her chin in her hand. A man's finger is laid alongside his cheek. Another man's hands are atop his cane with his chin resting on them. These people are listening with all their hearts, souls and minds. Even their bodies are bent to the task of listening. The painting captures something wonderful that I have found at Quaker meetings.

These people know how to listen.

Last summer my wife and I attended our first Quaker meeting. The worship was 60 minutes of thoughtful silence. A young woman broke the silence and spoke briefly. There was a gentle shift of attention to her and away from individual thoughts and prayers. People shifted in their seats and assumed various listening postures. One man intertwined his hands, leaving his index fingers erect like a church steeple. He tapped them thoughtfully against his lips. An elderly man inclined his good ear toward the speaker. Across the room a woman was knitting. Now and then she would halt her work and turn her face to the woman speaking. Then she would nod carefully and turn back to her knitting. I recognized in the Quakers the unmistakable signs of practiced active listening.

When the woman was finished with what she had to say, she sat down. There was a moment or two where I felt her words still alive in the room, still being considered. And then the Friends shifted back to their individual thoughts, prayers and meditations.

It was a fascinating and wonderful thing to experience. What impressed me most was the peaceful nature of it. There was a complete absence of anxiety in the room. In my own church experience—in the rare opportunities that laypeople have to speak in worship—there seems to be an unspoken concern that the person is somehow speaking for the community. If the person speaking says something that is

theologically suspect or in any way threatens the existing traditions of the church, some in the congregation become defensive and angry. Anxiety levels rise. After the service people will talk about the rightness or wrongness of what was said. The person who was speaking may have no power to effect change in the community, but somehow the congregation is still threatened and upset.

When the woman at the Quaker meeting first began to speak, I was aware that I became tense. I disengaged somewhat and looked to see how others were reacting to her words. My life as a minister has programmed me to do this. But I saw no fears or concerns on the faces of the Friends. An elderly man next to me, a leader in this particular Quaker meeting, stared peacefully ahead as she spoke. He nodded occasionally, indicating that he understood her. He seemed at peace with her words. More than that, he seemed at peace with her perspective on life and faith as a young woman.

That's when I realized that I was experiencing pure, well-differentiated listening. When someone speaks at a Quaker meeting, that person has no power to change the meeting or the rules or the nature of the community. If the gathered people sense the presence of the Spirit in the speaker's words, there are tried and ancient methods for testing that. But no one is threatened. Everyone is free to put his or her energy into hearing the person. Quakers are accustomed to seeking the wisdom of God in the words of a brother or sister. Sometimes a person just needs to talk. That's okay too.

It was the most refreshing spiritual exercise I've had in years.

We attended a second meeting. I was more relaxed this time and found myself entering into the spirit of the Friends. A man stood and spoke. Whether what he said was right or wrong, or whether those categories even applied, was not important. He felt led to speak. He was taken seriously. They heard him. I didn't understand everything he was saying. That was okay. I felt myself trusting the community. Those who needed to understand him would. His presence and willingness to speak became a backdrop to my own worship experience.

I felt both a wonderful connection to the man who spoke and a distinct disconnection from him. This too seems to be a truth about the Religious Society of Friends. Quakers are at once deeply connected and very disconnected from each other. The connection comes from being in community and listening to each other for years;

the disconnection comes from their refusal to claim ownership or responsibility for the way another person relates to the Divine.

By the end of our second meeting, I was beginning to trust the silence and the words of Friends led to speak. The rightness or wrongness of these words seemed above my pay grade. God and the community's ancient processes would take care of that. Letting go felt good for my soul.

In October I was asked to lead a retreat for a Quaker yearly meeting. I felt unqualified and said so. Being new to silence and listening, I wondered what business I had leading a retreat for Quakers. It felt like being asked to speak about rosaries to a gathering of cloistered nuns. But the Friends assured me that we had something to offer to each other.

"There are things we need to hear from you. We sense this, though we're not sure what they are. Perhaps we need to hear from someone who has experience with more programmed forms of worship. And maybe there are things you need that only we can give you."

I didn't exactly understand it, but Jeanene and I went to the retreat. It came time for me to tell my own story. I was in a room full of people who would listen to me, who would put everything they had into that act. I saw the same shifting of attention that I had seen at the San Antonio meeting. The same careful faces, considering my words but not judging them. They gave themselves to me. I could feel it. My heart broke open, and I spoke of my history as a writer and a minister plagued by doubts. I confessed things that are not safe to confess among my own people. I told of my sorrow and my joy. The Friends continued to listen as Jeanene and I spoke around a bonfire. In their calm, accepting presence, I felt a comfort and love that I have not felt in years.