

## Worship Sharing

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*"The contemporary Quaker group practice, par excellence, that cultivates both interior and outward listening is worship sharing. It differs from what is called 'faith sharing' in other religious bodies by being more intentional and formal in distinguishing its manner and attitude from conventional modes of conversation and discussion."*

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The word "worship" in its name relates it to our experience of intentional listening for, waiting on the divine. In worship sharing, we remain mindful and expectant of the presence and potential emergence of the Spirit. The word "sharing" indicates that – unlike in times of worship – we do not need to wait on a special prompting of the Holy Spirit to speak. The expectation is that we probably (but not necessarily) will speak to whatever is the subject of the occasion. We will, however, speak in a more disciplined manner than in conversation. Worship sharing is an occasion for each of us to speak our minds and hearts on a particular subject, in the spacious context of listening for the movement of the Spirit.

Worship sharing can be one way of observing the ancient Quaker injunction "to seek to know one another in that which is eternal," by sharing the innermost dimension of our lives that is rarely given an opportunity to be voiced. Worship sharing is an occasion for each of us to hear how the Spirit is moving in the hearts and minds of all the other members of the group at a level of yieldedness, without agenda, without coercion. For that reason, we generally take some time in silence first, to allow the busyness of our minds to subside, to center in the Spirit and to focus on what we are being moved to say in the particular context. In the stillness of mind and clarity of our own understanding, we are then free to actually listen to each per-

son as they speak, without rummaging through our own thoughts for what we'll say when the time comes.

The character of what we have to say may continue to shift as we hear others speak; but we needn't keep reconsidering it if we've established our starting point and given over trying to make an impression or maintain a position. It's possible to be fully present for each one. For the period of listening we can be disciplined to give over our own view, to be hospitable to, rather than critical of, what we hear. We can listen at the most profound level for what is being expressed, seeking points of unity rather than of difference, sinking past irritability and defensiveness to a place of gentleness and tenderness for one another.

Like Twelve-Step groups, worship sharing discourages cross-talk that can lead to conversation in which the underlying, prayerful intention is lost. Answering one another can tempt us either into display of self or into patronizing the other, reducing the other to an object to be healed, fixed, saved, converted or straightened-out. It can interfere with the speaker's movement to a deeper openness. In any case, replying almost always engages us at a social rather than a spiritual level. It is this hospitable, nonjudgmental, non-reactive dimension of worship sharing that can also make it a helpful way of coming together when meetings find themselves at an impasse over some issue. Whatever the circumstance in which it's used, worship

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sharing is an occasion of safety for everyone's views to be received without comment, defense or attack.

In order to leave room to take in what each person has said, we leave a period of silence between speakers. Sometimes utterances can only be fully heard when they are completed. We may need to explore our resonances with and resistances to one utterance, before we are ready to open to the speaking of yet another person. How much time there is to do this is a function both of how many people are present and of how much time has been allotted for the exercise.

In a large group, these silences can lengthen into something approximating worship. If there is a clear intention to remain in worship sharing rather than worship, it's usually necessary to proceed around the circle in order to have enough time for each person to speak. A circle ensures that no one takes a back seat, feeling either left out or without responsibility for his part in what is coming forth. In a smaller, more intimate group, it is possible to wait on each person to speak as moved without being concerned about running over the allotted time or stopping before everyone has had time to speak.

To receive one another in this hospitable way is not just a matter of self-restraint, although it may feel like that – or come down to that – in the beginning. Again, this is the work of a lifetime. It's important not to expect we'll get it perfectly at once, or every time. The "worship" dimension of worship sharing means that we are seeking to enter the deepest, widest spaciousness within ourselves that we sometimes call "the Light" and to carry with us whoever is present, whatever is said, whatever is happening within or outside us.

In that Light, not only what is said, but our own reactivity, resistance or resonance may be seen just as they are. The sources of our motivations and responses may be illuminated. We may learn more than we want to know about why we tighten up, set our jaws, feel threatened or "see red" when certain people speak. We may find that the causes do not all lie within the other person. With grace and time, we may find there is enough space and enough illumination to allow us to let go of whatever casts shadows, whatever stops down the lens to receive less than fullest Light.

In worship sharing we try to find a mode of

being together that is expressive of the life we are undertaking together. We are present to really hear one another and to be heard in ways that anticipate or hope for the emergence of some movement of the Spirit, some dimension of spiritual reality, that would not arise were we not all together.

Together we are a larger wholeness in God than we are alone. Friends have experienced that the wisdom of God may manifest itself more fully in the midst of the larger wholeness of the faithful group than when we are alone. We can also hope to be drawn into a living sense of unity in a somewhat different way than we are in our more usual practices of prayer or worship. It is not perfect – any more than we are; but the fact that we try and try again to give ourselves to this process, to give ourselves to one another in this way makes it at least our mode of becoming together. Experienced, even in a partial way, worship sharing can nourish our hearts and our resolutions for the future.

Ongoing worship sharing groups can help members of meeting intentionally keep in touch with one another's spiritual lives and struggles in a way that might not emerge in ordinary after-meeting conversation. In that sense worship sharing can support our pastoral care of one another. It is another way, in addition to worship, for Friends to come to know one another "in that which is eternal" as it manifests in their temporal lives. In that sense, it can help us support one another on the path.

Worship sharing groups may also be part of a study group, in which a text is prayerfully turned over together and different facets of its meaning emerge through the lens of each individual. Other uses of the basic worship sharing form are for groups that seek to share and to support one another in their prayer experiences. The openness and restraint of the listening also make it extremely helpful in situations requiring conflict resolution.

### **Keeping Our Spiritual Intent Clear**

One way of encouraging greater inward stillness is to give over our accustomed modes of speaking analytically, speaking quickly, first or frequently – all those conversational modes that are valued and rewarded in our highly verbal and competitive culture. This means

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going contrary to conventional wisdom about what constitutes good group interaction. We don't try to have a lively, intellectual discussion, confrontation or debate. We eschew adversarial methods of trying to come to Truth.

We also struggle to give up many of the social responses usual in discussion, such as:

1. the need to demonstrate that we have something intelligent, clever or profound to say;
2. the need to "straighten out" people whose viewpoints differ from our own or whom we perceive to have deficient information;
3. the need to demonstrate by encouraging remarks or relation of similar or pertinent experience that we are actively listening, responding to and caring about what is being shared;
4. the need to heal people who are in pain or difficulties by any means other than simply being present for them.

In short, worship sharing is an effort to learn and practice a kind of prayerful listening to one another that is as attentive to, responsive to, and respectful of the work of God within another as within oneself. With grace, we may even experience the very special kind of unsentimental tenderness and non-effusive love that can arise in the context of such disciplined sharing.

### **Time and Discipline**

Another discipline of the tongue necessary to worship sharing is to mind the time. Among the earliest Friends, worship and preaching simply went on until everyone knew it was over. Our generation is more enslaved to time. It is generally felt to be necessary that our time be limited. Consequently, each person must be disciplined about how much experience she or he shares, in order for every person to have time to speak.

Those who speak with greater difficulty may need to cultivate a greater discipline in being faithful to small interior nudges of the Spirit to speak, in cooperating with the love which can cast out fear, in not waiting for others to fill in the spaces and supply what they think is being called for.

Those who speak more easily and volubly need

to be especially disciplined and respectful of those who hesitate to speak, who speak more slowly or who speak only after considerable preparation or waiting. We need to recover the sense that it is not necessary to fill in all the spaces. Something precious may happen in the stillness if we do not rush to fill it.

### **Confidentiality and Privacy**

The discipline of confidentiality is also crucial to the development of trust in a group. Trustworthiness means refraining from either quoting individuals or telling interesting stories about one's worship sharing experience – even to spouses or others closest to us, even out of concern for the well-being of members of the group. Openness is difficult to practice if one is unsure where or how one will be quoted or misquoted, if people outside the group are apt to approach with unsolicited advice or intrusive comment.

In addition, this is not a therapy group that demands total self-revelation. There is no requirement to share with others your most intimate, precious or profound experiences. Select what you feel is most comfortable and helpful to share with others. Ponder or cherish the rest in your heart as Mary is said to have done. Remember that it may be helpful to take some risks because the group will benefit and be strengthened from hearing each person share honestly and openly; but worship sharing isn't meant to coerce anyone to speak when they do not feel comfortable in doing so. If you are not comfortable to speak, let the group know quite simply so they can move on to the next person.

### **"This I know experimentally" (Fox)**

Friends have historically felt that the truly spiritual life is "experimental." Another discipline of worship sharing is to stay close to the experiential in what we share together. In worship sharing we don't spend time discussing or sharing theology or "ideas about" the spiritual life. Instead we try to let go of what George Fox referred to variously as "dry and windy notions" or "heady, brain-beaten stuff" in speaking of spiritual matters. We try to stay close to our own experience, to what we "know experimentally."

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*The above guidance may be condensed as follows:*

*Guidelines for worship sharing*

1. Whereas in worship we come purposing neither to speak or not to speak, in worship sharing we come aware that we probably will speak.
2. However, no one should feel compelled to speak. A person may defer his/her turn until the end of the round or pass altogether if that feels right.
3. Those who speak will speak only once, distilling the promptings of the Spirit on the subject into a single statement.
4. Those who speak will speak from their own experience, avoiding ideas about the subject – especially the ideas of others, even if they have embraced them.
5. When we speak, we will not answer another person, discuss, dispute, disagree, correct or straighten one another out. We will speak from and for ourselves.
6. While others are speaking we will not be preparing what we will say when it is our turn.
7. While others are speaking we will not be listening critically for error, points of disagreement or places where we could improve upon what is said. We will lay aside our critical listening skills which serve to separate us from one another and from what is said.
8. While others are speaking, we will try to listen to

each person as a unique child of God, a unique gift of God to us. We will try to hear how God might be speaking to us personally in the other's words, in their situation, in their very being, even – and especially – when we find ourselves resistant to them.

9. When someone has finished speaking, we will take a time in silence so that we may really take in what has been said, be sure we have heard it, begin to identify our resonances and resistances before the next person speaks.

10. As we listen, we may also be mindful whether any pattern seems to be emerging in what is shared, whether it reflects any movement of the Spirit among us.

11. We must do this as though we had all the time in the world and yet be mindful of how much time we do have. If we divide the allotted time by the number of group members, we will know roughly how much time each person has for silence and for speaking. Each person can be responsible for disciplining him/herself to keep to the allotted time – mindful that to run over is not only to deprive another of an opportunity to speak, but to deprive the group of hearing what might have been said.

12. Everything we hear is to be held in the strictest confidence, from spouse, partners, friends, even overseers or ministry and worship, unless we have been given express permission to speak