

Place of Privilege (unabridged)

by Ann Clendenin

Give over thine own willing, give over thy own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee and be in thee and breathe in thee and act in thee; and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of Life, which is its portion.

– Isaac Penington, 1661

Recent discussions among Friends related to the use of electronics to connect with F/friends who cannot be physically present for Meetings and Meetings for Worship with a Concern for Business have triggered, for me, memories of other conversations, over my 41 years of membership, regarding community, and Friends' conceptualizations of "us". I cannot help wondering whether many of our discussions aren't prioritizing the "I" over "You".

Spirit is not in the I but between I and You.

– Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

I am old enough to remember Friends coming to awareness that people who have limited mobility could not access our meetinghouses, and discussions related to installations of ramps and lifts, widening paths, altering restrooms to accommodate wheelchairs and walkers, and the installations of sound systems when a number of elders could no longer hear vocal ministry well enough to feel included in Meetings for Worship. Friends were able to recognize that "us" included those who are aging and differently-abled. Some Meetings came to that recognition significantly later than others, but the movement seemed generally non-controversial, perhaps because elders carry substantial responsibility for the lives of most Meetings.

Full access to Meetings remains a controversy between Friends of Color and majority culture Friends, as Meetings continue to wrestle with the vestiges of racism. Belonging became a long struggle for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ) folks, as well, and the argument over definitions of "us" vs. "them" became heated. Meetings split. Some LGBTQ and Black/Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) people left, never to return, while others (and their allies) continued to push for majority culture Friends toward a fuller reckoning with the influences of bigotry and sexism/homo-and trans-phobia in Meetings and Friends' organizations. Much of this, I believe, reveals an ongoing struggle with true power sharing between minority and majority culture Friends. We talk about "inclusion", when what marginalized people want is the power to co-create (and possibly transform) this Society, taking seriously the observations of early Friends that revelation is ongoing.

What the COVID pandemic exposed in Friends Meetings is the lack of access with which some Friends have been living (in some cases, for years) to Meetings for Worship and business. Friends who were previously forced to accept that the activities of Friends were out of reach due to their particular circumstances (geography, lack of transportation, poverty, health concerns, etc.) were granted an opening for re-establishing connections. Many privileged Friends assumed that, once the pandemic was managed, things would return to “normal” in their Meetings, and that the integration of technology was merely a temporary response to unusual circumstances. When those who benefitted from this sudden access responded to projections of its removal with dismay, many Friends responded with assertions that what distant Friends were experiencing was not “actual” Meeting for Worship, and that only those who were physically present could claim to have experienced that.

The problem I see with centering the experiences of Friends whose physical abilities, health, access to transportation and geographic location in this discussion is that we are not really hearing the Friends and attenders who long for connection, felt that need met and now do not wish to lose access. The collective “we” (those who can attend Meeting in person) vs. “they” suggests an unexamined imbalance of power that deserves our attention. The ability to define experience, and the assertions of privilege to do so are prime examples of that imbalance. Friends who center their own experiences have begun to talk of separate Meetings, so that the purity of their experiences of worship are unencumbered by the distant “they”. On the face of it, the argument seems logical enough: “I get what I want. You get what you want, and I don’t have to endure any changes.” What that argument does not offer is the perspective that says, “This Meeting belongs to all of us. How do we make it possible for as many as possible to participate?”

Friends voice concern that being unable to “feel” another human being’s presence will adversely affect their ability to worship. I’m skeptical of that argument as a therapist who, since the start of the pandemic, has been seeing most of her caseload online. What I know is that when I am doing my best work, it matters very little whether the person is in the room with me or on a computer screen. When I have a session and am able to be fully present, I sink into a place in which my heart and soul are open, and I am ready for deep listening. That is my work in therapy sessions, and I do not experience any qualitative difference between that and the spiritual work of being fully attentive in Meeting.

It is my experience that when we, indeed, “sink down to the seed”, we are both joined with those who are physically present, and connected deeply with all who seek from that deepest place. My Quakerism was shaped in the Meetinghouses of IYM(C), where I felt not only the presence of the many Friends who gathered for Half-yearly and Yearly Meetings, but of the ancestors whose spirits lingered in the walls, the handmade rag rugs and wood of the benches. Those experiences have prepared me well not to dismiss the claims of Ukrainian Friends who report that those joining them in online Meetings for Worship around the globe are felt and appreciated.

I ask Friends, as we work our way through questions related to granting access of distant Friends to the lives of our Meetings, to consider the following queries:

In what ways do my thoughts regarding the use of technology in Meeting activities spring from the privileges I hold?

In what ways does my Meeting *actually* work to consider the needs of all who count themselves among our community? (This query is intended to make sure that we test the things we claim we should and might do, and, in fact, do not.)

Does my use of language deny Friends the lived experiences of others whose membership in this community is as legitimate as my own?

Has your Meeting asked Friends who cannot physically attend Meeting activities how they experience online access, and how your Meeting might improve their access to Meeting life and feelings of connection?

Every controversy in the Society of Friends signals, it seems to me, an opportunity to reassess the ways in which we hold and deploy privilege, and how we define “us” and “them”. The evolution of Meeting access has been one of gradually recognizing that there are those among us who could be physically with us, if only we removed physical and social barriers. COVID has now thrown light on barriers to attendance that we once accepted as inevitable, just as we once considered the loss of members’ attendance due mobility issues. It also reminds us how very new considerations of issues of privilege and power are among Friends– particularly as they pertain to defining community.

Authentic community requires that we ask each other how assertions we make with regard to participation in our communities signal roadblocks erected from unconscious privilege. The next and best possible response is to listen deeply to one another, and endeavor to move from “I”, “You” into “Spirit [that] is not in the I but between I and You”. Thus might we begin to identify challenges raised by the less privileged among us as gifts– openings to deepening our capacity for love– and so that the lessons available from the margins of our Beloved Community may move us closer to wholeness.

Ann Clendenin is a clinical social worker practicing in Tucson, AZ, and a member of Pima Friends Meeting.