

**Notes:**

**Deep Listening for Unity in Quaker Meeting for Business**

**Western Friend Connect – Workshop Meeting Room – 3/9/2016**

**Participants:**

- Catya de Neergard – Strawberry Creek Meeting (Berkeley, CA)
- Cheri Smith – Reno Meeting (Reno, NV)
- Cybil Shroder – San Jose Meeting (San Jose, CA)
- Don Reinke – Bellingham Meeting (Bellingham, WA)
- Doug Smith – Reno Meeting (Reno, NV)
- Ellie Shacter – Ukiah Worship Group (Ukiah, CA)
- eric maya joy – Olympia Meeting (Olympia, WA)
- Georgiana Foster – Wyoming Friends (Sheridan, WY)
- Hilary Burwell – Sacramento Meeting (Sacramento, CA)
- Janet Nicholson – Media Meeting (Media, PA)
- John McCarthy – Strawberry Creek Meeting (Berkeley, CA)
- Karen Steen – Bellingham Meeting (Bellingham, WA)
- Lorina Hall – Bellingham Meeting (Bellingham, WA)
- Lucretia Humphrey – Montana Gathering of Friends (Great Falls, MT)
- Mary Klein – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Mary Ann Percy – Bellingham Meeting (Bellingham, WA)
- Nancy Wilkinson – Strawberry Creek Meeting (Berkeley, CA)
- Pablo Stanfield – University Friends Meeting (Seattle, WA)
- Paula Palmer – Boulder Meeting (Boulder, CO)
- Rachel Findley – Strawberry Creek (Berkeley, CA)
- Rebecca Senoglu – Chico Meeting (Chico, CA)
- Sharon Trent – Bellingham Meeting (Bellingham, WA)
- Shelley Tannenbaum – Strawberry Creek Meeting (Berkeley, CA)
- Talley Kenyon – Palo Alto Meeting (Palo Alto, CA)
- Virginia Herrick – Bellingham Meeting (Bellingham, WA)

**What practices do we follow in our Business Meetings to help Friends stay focused on God's will for the Group, rather than on individual's opinions and worries?**

- [A concern shared via email]: As it becomes increasingly difficult to find Friends willing and able to serve on Meeting committees, more and more of the work of the Meeting is being done by individuals, without benefit of corporate discernment in a committee. While these individuals may feel that they are doing work that no one

else is willing to do, their decisions are increasingly and inevitably idiosyncratic and ego-driven. Other perspectives become unwelcome when the person making the decision feels put upon and like they are stepping up where no one else will. I feel that this has become a feedback loop in my Meeting, where potential volunteers' voices are not encouraged, which discourages their participation, further reducing the pool of Friends to "do the work." This also ties in to my concern about speaking truthfully and with kindness, as we are often afraid to say when we see someone acting out of their individual concerns rather than seeking God's will for the group.

- Two of the best tools we have are: 1) "Clerk yourselves, Friends," and 2) ask for silence when things are getting overly unsettled.
- Yes, Silence is such a powerful source of calm and centeredness.
- A couple things work, depending on the situation. One is for the clerk to repeat what someone says to make sure they feel heard. Also, if things get cantankerous, make sure that people are directing their comments to the clerk, rather than cross-talking with each other.
- If the clerk has a strong or definite opinion, it derails the discernment process and causes disharmony.
- It takes intention to get people to pause and slow down. It helps to give verbal cues, like, "Let's take a moment to reflect."
- Good clerking is necessary, self-co-clerking by everyone. It can help to give "eldering reminders" of good process at the beginning of a meeting, also give clear process reminders at each step in the meeting. It also helps to stop and read decision minutes before asking Meeting to unite with them. I liked being in a Conservative meeting: The clerk took time before recognizing anyone to speak, and the clerk would make it clear what sorts of sharing would help the discussion forward at a given time, "I'm only take questions now. Now I'm taking comments. We need to stay on the question before us." And then he restated the question.
- We find unity by finding a sense of the deepness of our spiritual way together -- becoming one heart. It is from that place that discernment flows, God's discernment through us. Anything that helps us find that deep place, to center down, we need to teach those practices to newcomers. We need to teach them: Center, listen -- these help that presence.
- When one or two friends have a powerful concern that is not shared by the meeting, and calling for silence doesn't answer their concern, then what? Maybe a small ad hoc committee, including those friends, could be formed to give them time for discernment.
- An ad hoc committee sound like a wise approach for that type of situation. During an especially contentious issue at our yearly meeting's annual session (involving state legislation on gay rights), there were some passionate disagreements and some individuals were deeply troubled by the proposal. The individuals with the concerns met several times over four days with the Friends who'd brought the minute.

Because of this process, the minute was improved incredibly; it became something that people weren't worried by.

- I know of a meeting that holds a clearness/threshing session every month, the week before Business Meeting, so everything can be on the table.
  - That is a great idea.
  - Agreed!
  - But people then need to commit to two meetings a month to do the business. We have a hard time getting people to come to one!
  - That's always a problem.
  - True – But it's always there for people who have concerns. And it happens at a convenient time...
- I agree that getting people to talk and listen outside the Meeting for Business can allow things to move and settle in good ways.
- For standing committees, it is helpful to Business Meeting if committees prepare their reports so that they're clear: "This is the report and this is the action item." Meeting needs to remember to "trust the committee." Don't do committee work during business meeting
- Trusting the work of the committees is hard for my meeting. When a committee brings a minute to Meeting for Business, it's frustrating for a committee member to hear all the questions that people have about your work. It's almost like your committee meeting wasn't helpful.
- This is a big one for us. There are some friends who question the work of committees too much, and it deflates them and discourages them.
- How do people deal with THAT? That is one of our biggest issues.
- I have a hard time knowing how to clerk in these cases. I would like there to be more trust of the committees' work, but I also want everyone who feels they need to speak to be heard.
- I have tried sending those people with all the questions to talk to the committee outside of the Meeting for Business.
- To avoid that feeling of rehashing the whole committee meeting during Meeting for Business, one thing that helps is when the committee's report includes details of all the points they considered and the work that they did. This sort of report can help relieve concerns of Friends in the meeting who are hearing the information maybe for the first time.
- Committee preparation includes preparing a report: What the situation is, what you're asking, what the rationale is.
- It helps a lot if the committee reports all the things they've done in order to come to their recommendations.

- Expect the hard questions before they come up. If you've considered various options before, explain that. Tell what you rejected and why.
- It's a great idea to make sure minutes are complete while presenting them. It's also good to invite Friends who aren't actually on a committee to attend meetings of the committee.
- When our committee came back with detailed background reasoning and seasoning, Friends still really picked it apart.
- I think that is when the Clerk needs to step in and support the person making the report.
- It's worth having an assertive Clerk who can politely ask Friends to discipline themselves.
- It needs to be expressed to the whole meeting that the committee has come to unity of Spirit on what the meeting asked them to work on.
- This raises question about a range of views about the authority that committees hold. I find differing perceptions about this in my meeting.
- This difference in perceptions is really the issue. This continues to be an issue.
- Something else I've seen that helps improve the sense of good order in a business meeting: Once at annual session, our presiding clerk reminded Friends to speak only once to an issue. Some Friends felt irate that they weren't being called on; but this is our practice, to speak only once. This can be important even in a monthly meeting, much less at yearly meeting.
- Speaking only once to an issue helps to prevent arguing. At the same time, few issues are one-faceted. It's important to look at different aspects, which is not always a matter of arguing.
- It's not so much a matter of speaking only once. Rather, we ask friends not to repeat, not to say what anyone's already said. The clerk can call on your more than once if you have new light to share.
- Thinking about speaking more than once, I'm thinking about times I've decided to let go of the need to speak. Sometimes during consideration of an item, I can become entrained with own point of view. I can feel concerned that people see things the way I do (and understand me). What I try to do is let go and remember we're seeking God's will. It's a matter of relaxing and trusting that *someone* will shed new light; it doesn't need to be me. This is a big leap of faith, but it usually happens.
- I just felt that happening. Those comments spoke for me. We need to find a "turning over." How can we do that when we feel drawn to focus on people's hurt feelings? We need to broaden our focus away from those concerns and include God's will. We can turn people's hurt feelings over to Spirit.

**What practices do we follow in our meetings to encourage the healthy, open airing of disagreements, forgiveness of hurts, and reconciliation?**

- [A concern sent in via email]: Sometimes we are so afraid of hurting someone's feelings that we don't say what we mean or what we need to say, and other times we say whatever we want without any regard for the person on the receiving end of our words. Some of us seem to have lost the ability to speak kindly to each other, while others seem to have lost the ability to hear different points of view without having our feelings hurt. As in our society at large, we don't seem able to speak civilly with one another. I feel this is hurting our ability to hold one another accountable, is leaving Friends with emotional scars, and is blocking faithful discernment.
- I've learned this from my spiritual friend: she gives her upset to Spirit, even if it is intense. She is then able to express her message in a way that moves things forward. Be honest with Spirit about the rawness of the hurt, and trust Spirit to give you the words.
- There are also people with psychological issues. We need to not get hooked on them. We can't heal them; only Spirit can do that. There's a good pamphlet from FGC about this: "Dealing with Difficult Behavior in the Meeting." Meeting for Business is not a therapy session.
- Our meeting's Oversight Committee set up a clearness committee with a two Friends who were having a disagreement. I wasn't sure a clearness committee was best approach, because the point of conflict seemed petty to me. But if you have the right people, a clearness committee is a good and formal approach that can be helpful. This was a situation with harsh words, strong personalities, practically to the point of name-calling. I didn't think a clearness committee could resolve it; but it seemed to do some good.
- We have a conflict resolution process that suggests that when there is a conflict, a Friend should first go and talk to the person one-on-one. Then if that doesn't resolve the issue, ask one or two friends to go along with them to talk to the person. However, we have heard from at least one friend, that when you are feeling hurt or vulnerable, you are not always able to go directly to the friend and speak one-on-one. Especially when there are differences in power or privilege, that first step might never happen. In fact, the person might just never speak.
- We did a workshop on "How do we love one another?" We talked about the "wrong kind of silence." This really raised awareness in our meeting, and I think some of the old hurts have been addressed, but there is still healing needed.
- Formal conflict resolution provides a skeleton for those who are shy or scared, a situation that they can feel safe in.
- We have people in our meeting who are resistant to forms from outside of Quakerism. Like Nonviolent Communication (NVC), for instance.

- It takes being brave to hold the pain. NVC-style communication is helpful. But strong emotions in a conflict between two people can be scary. Clearness committees can be great if the people want it.
- Restorative Justice Circles are an effective reconciliation process. There are skilled trainers who can bring a workshop to you.
- It's strange how we want so much the beautiful resolution, and yet struggle to hold the unresolved space. Wondering how Spirit holds that. Perhaps the time that takes and the complexity of when things remain unresolvable is the power beyond human limitation.
- Yes, hard to live with that tension of irresolution.
- One of the things we have to work on in all of our meetings is trust and love that reduce our fears. We live in a world filled with violence. We no longer have a Quaker Culture that allows most Friends to feel safe. What can we do to help newcomers feel safe and not sorry?
- Yes to the feeling of safety. I know that my Spiritual Friend who has learned to let her words be guided by Spirit does this in a program where she knows that what she shares there will be held with care. That does not happen in our Business Meetings.
- We had a situation in our meeting where a Friend was very distressed about how things had been handled by the meeting with her husband's death. We had an awkward stumbling to arrange his memorial. She also felt hurt from the time before he died, how she handed things with him. She happened to open up to another Friend during a weekend that our meeting was together. That person has skills with restorative justice circles. She felt this was a concern that should include the whole meeting – fifteen or twenty people. So she held a restorative justice circle between all of us and our Friend who was hurt. We heard our Friend speak about her hurt, then we each wrote on a card one or two words of what we brought to that moment, after she shared. Everyone had a chance to speak about those notes as we gave them to her. It was a powerful experience. Those notes went home with her, and she has kept them ever since. There was a real resolution. We didn't know about her hurt before we did this.

There have been other occasions when we attempted this technique when we had an intense conflict between two friends. The technique does provide some airing of concerns and usually reaches some agreement to make some changes. But we often find it doesn't really work to help two strong-willed people who need more healing than we have the ability for. We can't go into one of these restorative justice circles with too high of an expectation of a good outcome.

- How do we love one another? How can we stop and say, "I know I'm not being loving"? We need to be tender with each other.