

Let Us Call Each Other IN!

by Joyce Zerwekh

Have Friends' meetings for worship and business become places to go to experience "a spiritual practice for *calming* our own nerves, like going to a spa" (Laurie Childers, *Western Friend*, March/April 2021)?

We certainly have much happening in our world that keeps us from being calm. What is the role of Friends in these urgent times? Do we still seek to listen to the "still small voice" and respond? Or are we unable to hear that voice and instead speak out of anger, fear, or self-righteousness? Or do we fear speaking out at all?

In 2013 I published "The Wrong Kind of Silence" in *Western Friend* which described Friends' fear of not speaking up in Meeting for Worship and Meeting for Business. I am still trying to understand this. Often Friends' silence originates from a deep spiritual connection to the divine. But might it be a desire to foster a calming sense of harmony that requires silencing truth to maintain a surface peace? Such placating is not peacemaking.

Keeping a surface *calm* during conflict is a widespread human coping style. It allows us to live every day without constantly stirring up "bad feelings." Harvard business professor Chris Argyris studied how organizations learn and change. In times of fear and uncertainty, Argyris said, organizations typically seek surface peace rather than truth. They develop "don't speak" rules. Do Friends have undercover "don't speak" rules? There are countless examples to illustrate the dangers of failing to speak. For instance, nurses in the Nazi era, nearly all graduates of Christian nursing schools, intentionally killed over 10,000 children and adults who had physical and mental disabilities. They starved and poisoned "useless eaters." Hesitance to speak out, even in life-threatening circumstances, seems endemic within the health care community. In 2005, the American Association of Critical Care Nurses published their study, "Silence Kills" based on surveys and interviews of 1700 nurses and physicians. Many reported that they did not speak out about behaviors that endanger patients. One in five physicians had seen patients injured as a result of errors they witnessed, but they did not say anything. As a nurse and professor of nursing, I have witnessed innumerable cover-ups.

American Quakers live in this society afflicted by widespread deception. We live in the face of perpetual war, environmental degradation, shameless racism, growing poverty, and loss of democracy. Livability of the Earth is in question! Given this context, how can Friends come together to speak about our fears instead of silencing to maintain surface *calm*. As vulnerable human beings, we avoid speaking about the "undiscussables." We can't face being put down, being accused of being judgmental, being scapegoated, being discredited, being isolated.

And there are those who are quick to point out the errors in others, as if by calling out someone else's issues puts us on a higher moral plane. It is so much easier to see the faults

in others than to look deeply into our own hearts and see all the work that still lies ahead to truly live a life of integrity and peace that promotes community, equality, and justice.

Recently I have discovered the insights of Loretta J. Ross, a Black feminist human rights activist, who challenges the contemporary “calling out” culture that has gripped contemporary society. (See Jessica Bennett, 2/24/2021 *New York Times*) ‘Calling out’ publicly shames another person for behavior considered unacceptable. It assumes the worst in another person and is so alienating that it results in attack and fear of speaking up—the wrong kind of silence. Call out culture presumes guilt. It assumes ill intention of “the other.” Ross proposes that we figure out how *to call each other in rather than out?* How can Meeting call each other in to address individual habits of self-silencing that maintain surface *calm*? Queries help difficult truths to be spoken:

Do you hesitate to speak when difficulties arise? What experiences have you had that might cause hesitation or support courage to speak??

Are their concerns in our meeting/organization that are unmentionable and need to be spoken?

Are there ways we speak to each other that encourage connection, broaden our understanding, and help build a more caring and just community?

What could be done to promote healthy truth-telling in ways that are consistent with our testimonies?

Friends do have tested strategies to promote truth-telling that can call each other in:

Worship dialogue, Quaker roots groups, Alternatives to Violence, nonviolence training, sensitively facilitated threshing sessions, and of course Meetings for Worship and Business.

Add your own list of old and new Quaker tactics ***to call each other IN rather than out.***

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