

The Centrality of Listening

by Patricia Loring

Listening and gathering as patterning Quaker spirituality

By listening I mean the widest kind of prayerful, discerning attentiveness to the Source that is intimated within us, evidenced through others, and discernible through the experiences of life. This kind of listening is not simply auditory. It may be visual, kinesthetic, intuitive, or visceral as well, depending on the deepest attentiveness natural to the particular individual. It is my thesis that this kind of prayerful attentiveness is one of two major elements patterning Quakerism into what Lloyd Lee Wilson, in *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, has called a gestalt. A gestalt (the word is taken from the German) is an organic whole.

I think Quaker practice is not only a spiritual gestalt of unique wholeness and coherence, but that the organic whole is also holographic—the element of listening patterns all of its parts. When we are faithful to the pattern of listening, it forms and informs all the dimensions of our personal and corporate practice. The pattern of listening makes us more attentive and responsive to the Mystery within and among us, which gathers us in the love and life that is its very nature or being.

This gathering or felt union of the spiritual community in the love and life of God is the secondary element patterning the Quaker gestalt. It is experienced in “graced” or “favored” times of corporate worship. Gathering is secondary only in the sense that it is more apt to be a spiritual fruit or a gift of spiritual maturing in listening. It is what we hear, recognize, or experience when we listen at the most profound level. Both the longing for and the actual experience of being gathered and united in God’s love have shaped

our sense of right relationship within the spiritual community of our meetings. Where the sense of being gathered and united in God’s love includes the rest of humanity and the whole of the creation, it has formed our sense of right ethical relationships in the wider world.

Quaker practice shapes and expresses our listening for the presence and guidance of the Mystery at the heart of the universe and of each of us—and our unity in love in our personal lives, in our corporate life, and in ethical relationships with the world. Our “formless forms” help us to transcend forms and help us to be self-transcendent in our sense of reality and our place and work in it. I think we’ve never come close to realizing the possibilities inherent in the unique Quaker gestalt we’ve been bequeathed by generations of faithful Friends.

Listening to one another as a spiritual practice or discipline

It is a powerful discipline for a listener to try to listen without agenda, without the compulsion to help, abandoning the need or desire to appear knowledgeable, wise, or comforting. There may be no more tellingly difficult spiritual practice than the effort to receive hospitably what is being said by someone else, without editing, correction, or unsolicited advice. Yet it is this open listening that makes room for the Spirit of God to be present in the midst of the interaction, illuminating and guiding what is taking place. With grace, the Holy Presence is born into the space that we make by giving over our own agendas: God with us, a third presence in our encounter. In this way, such listening to another can become contemplative prayer.

The listening referred to is not merely auditory. It is more a matter of willingness to be receptive, even welcoming, on all levels of awareness—visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and intuitive—to what truly is happening in the present. It’s only possible with a humility that gives over efforts to set the terms on which we’ll admit

the divine into our lives, efforts to control outcomes, and efforts to define the roles or perceptions of participants in our lives.

As we listen in this way, particularly in the beginning, we often learn more about ourselves than we do about the person we are trying to hear. We learn the limitations of our hospitality. We learn where our resistances to the reality of the other person lie and how we require others to conform to our ideological structures and ways of expression before we will receive truth as they see it. We learn how unprepared we are to trust in the capacity of others to work out their own solutions with divine assistance. We see how little we are prepared to truly listen to another. We see how much of our usual listening is actually an inward imposition of our personal, comfortable structures of reality on the other person, simply waiting for a pause to impose those same structures outwardly as advice, fixing, converting, or straightening out the other person.

Part of our practice of listening to another can be holding both the utterances of the one we are listening to and our own inward responses together in the Light. The practice of listening to where our responses come from is, at the very least, instructive and humbling. Experiencing this practice may inspire our resolve to change in relationship with others. It may free us to be more compassionate and hospitable to others.

Our own resolve, however, is rarely sufficient for radical, internal restructuring of our capacity to listen to and be accepting of others. But with grace, it can be the beginning of being willing to give over our judgmentalism, self-centeredness, and neediness to God’s healing love. With grace over time, our willingness to acknowledge and to open our woundedness to the healing Light may be a kind of willingness to be changed—a receptivity to transformation and an acceptance of God’s love.

The practice of listening to another has a number of phases as we seek to grow more fully into it. Some days are better than others. Sometimes it’s two steps for-

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ward and one back—or three back. As with other practice, persistence over time and praying for help are more to be trusted than what happens on the day-to-day basis, in which our ups-and-downs are all too clear. With faithfulness over time, we become quicker to recognize our most frequent resistances to—and projections or impositions on—others. We may also spot ourselves developing new resistances, projections, and impositions to take the places of those we've been freed of. With faithfulness over time, however, relinquishment becomes less a matter of grim self-restraint than a grace-given loosening of our compulsions, a blessed freeing from ideas and experiences that enslave us, and a God-given capacity to open or yield to what is.

As with many practices, what begins by feeling like keeping a sweaty grip on ourselves can become relaxation into God's own freedom, into liberation from the all-too-human need to manage the situation, to control outcomes, to be the savior, or to have the definitive, intelligent, wise, or good word on the subject at hand. We can begin to be simply present, open together to the Spirit of God between and among us, uniting us and stilling us into awareness of our union in love. In this way, our encounter with one another may also become an encounter with the divine. The distinction between love of neighbor, love of oneself, and love of God becomes less and less easily perceived.

When I give a first exercise in silent, one-on-one listening in a class or a retreat, participants often observe, "As I was listening I wanted to say a lot of things in answer to what I was hearing. It was so hard not to talk." Only once in my experience has someone said on the very first effort, "I felt relaxed. I realized I was simply praying for the other person as he spoke."

Listening as a form of contemplative prayer

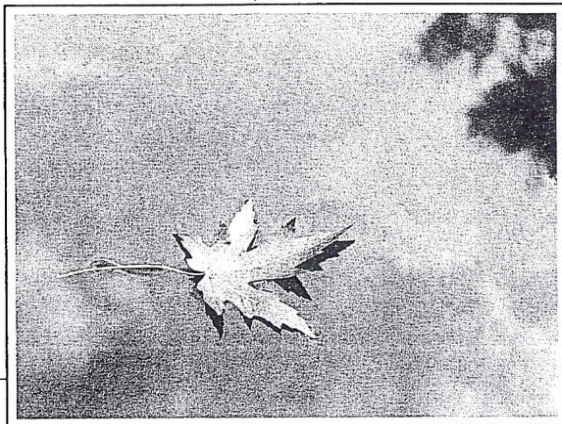
As the listener listens not only to content, but for the movement of the Spirit under the content, the speaker also may be drawn into awareness of deeper levels of her utterance. Held in this receptive, listening prayer, the speaker may begin to give over the need to create a particular impression, to entertain, to be interesting, or to evoke a particular response. She may begin to go below the usual, socially-structured level of discourse to speak more profound truths hidden or obscured by conformity to the expectations of others.

She may first become aware of how much there is in herself of those outwardly imposed expectations. She may also come to a new level of awareness of what really lies beneath those expectations: the hidden seed of the true self, planted by God; the stirrings of the Spirit drawing it forth into tendrils and ultimately into bloom.

Both speaker and listener may be drawn together into a silence that is the fullness of awareness beyond words. It can become contemplation of what is in the heart of the speaker or of the loving Presence in which both are held.

Contemplative prayer cannot be forced. It is a gift of God's own presence, already mysteriously hidden within and among us, to which we can hope and pray to be opened. I've sometimes felt like a camera lens, with an aperture that can be stopped down to admit just a little bit of light or opened wide to receive every bit of available light in the atmosphere. In this camera that I am, there is no mechanism to open the lens. Rather, I need to give over the tightened places in my being that are holding it shut, shutting out available light and restricting it to preselected levels.

The real, exhausting effort of our lives is not opening the lens but spending our energy holding the lens closed or stopped down. When we relax our grip on our defenses, on who we think we are, on how we want to be perceived, how we'd better behave, on what we ought to think, how we should see, on what is the right response, we are free to open to who and what is really there like flowers responding to sunshine. Simple, respectful, prayerful listening is at least as good for the soul of the listener as for the person listened to. □



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**Be a leaf on water,
the note the catbird sings only once,
the gold in the throat of the rose.
Be bread.
Be the holy egg thumbs make
when hands are laid lightly together.
Be blackgreen iron of spinach still gritty with growing.
Be what steadies the knifehand,
leans over the sleeping child,
opens to receive
the bitters of another's heart.
Be what says
yes
and yes
and yes.**

—Judith Cordary

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a member of Beloit
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