

There's more to the Quakers than silence
March 21, 2021

Dear L6 Students,

You have adjusted quickly to Quaker Meetings, I have noticed. I appreciate that you have been open to trying this new way of Sunday worship, and I'm grateful to the U6 students for making a very different tradition seem normal, in a way that allows us all to have an hour of peaceful reflection and listening.

I'm sure some of you are wondering why we have this silent worship, though. There was a question related to this in the questions you submitted to Mai Andrew. I only gave you a quick explanation before our first meeting, so let me write a somewhat longer one here.

For Quakers, silence doesn't just mean not talking, it means actively listening. When you are silent during Meeting, you are listening for the voice of God and of truth, but the voice comes inside yourself and inside others. As you listen, if you feel that you have something important to say, then you can stand and say it, as you have seen some people do at Meeting during our first two weeks.

This structure is very different from a 'normal' church service. At most other Christian churches, there is a hierarchy, with one person standing at the front speaking and the rest of the congregation mostly listening. The assumption is that the pastor has greater access to the divine word than others, or is more skillful in interpreting it. Perhaps there are elders in the church who have a similar function. Quakers are skeptical of this. If God truly created people to be equal, they believe, then those people should all have equal access to God's word. And because everyone else can teach us something about the world, we should listen to all of them during Meeting, and occasionally contribute ourselves if we feel that we have something to teach.

The early Quakers also saw silence as a way of making a statement. That might sound ironic because statements are usually made out loud, but a group of early Quakers, back in the Northeastern US during the 1700s, were skeptical of the preaching that they saw around them. They saw congregations preaching principles like equality and respect for all people, while keeping practices that were clear violations of those principles.

Thus developed the Quaker saying "let your life speak." Quakers urged others to speak not by what they said in church or in public, but to show their beliefs by living their life in a certain way. If you believe in equality, then live in a way that is equal. If you believe in service, then don't just talk about it, but spend your life serving others. And if you want to see what someone else believes, then don't listen to them tell you what they believe, but look at what kind of a life they live.

The importance of action ties back to what happens in Meeting. The Sunday Meeting hour is a chance to reflect on the past week, and think about whether your actions measured up to expectations and values that you have for yourself. Many Quakers I know use the time to think about questions like 'did I treat others as well as I should have this past week?' or 'how could I have been better in some important way?' It's also a time to collect yourself and think about the week ahead, asking questions like 'how can I be a better friend this coming week, how can I do my work better, what can I learn that will help me going forward?'

And it may happen that you don't always have the answer, but others may be asking themselves the same questions. Be open to learning from others, either by listening to them during Meeting or by

watching their actions and seeing how they live, for these actions are their answers to the same questions that you may be wondering about. Thus we all, collectively, learn together and move closer and closer to the truth.

This is why Quakers believe in silence. Not just to be quiet but to listen, learn, and live.

Sincerely,
James