

Wait & Watch

Meeting for Worship as Spiritual Practice

by John Andrew Gallery

When I first began attending meeting for worship I did not know what to expect. I knew that Quaker meetings were silent and that there were no ministers, but I'm not sure I knew much more. Perhaps I knew that the silence was occasionally interrupted by speaking, but I'm not sure I knew even that.

It was very easy to adjust to the silence as a result of my on-again off-again Buddhist meditation, and I quickly learned that people spoke—randomly it seemed, and mostly from personal experience rather than from the Bible or some other religious text. In the first few months of my attendance many messages spoke directly to me and to my spiritual search. And so I stayed and began the process of learning what it means to be a Quaker.

My initial understanding of meeting for worship came both from the experience of attending meeting and from some reading. From Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice*. I learned that the purpose of meeting for worship was to be in communion with God, and that this was achieved by stilling the mind and body and opening oneself to the Spirit. Other readings talked about meeting for worship similarly, in ways I could understand, but also in ways I found vague and unclear. It seemed that all that was necessary was to show up, sit in silence, try to eliminate distracting thoughts from my mind, and somehow as a result I would come into communion with God.

The one aspect of meeting for worship for which there were clear directions was knowing when and how to speak. I found many things written about this, almost as if this were the central issue on which I should focus my attention—determining when there was something I felt I should say and saying it in the proper way. An article in FRIENDS JOURNAL included a chart of questions to ask as a way to deter-

mine whether to speak or not; another later article described a meeting for worship as progressing through a series of stages and actually assigned times to each. I found these interesting and helpful, but too structured for me to actually use. And so I drifted along, learning from experience, feeling my own way.

My approach to meeting for worship changed after a Friend told me of her experience on a retreat at a Buddhist center. In her meeting with the abbot, he asked her: What is your spiritual practice outside of the temple? He meant, what other forms of spiritual practice did she engage in other than coming each morning to participate in communal meditation. This statement led me, as it led her, to ask what I did other than come to meeting for worship on Sunday. That was helpful, but the more important insight it provided was that meeting for worship itself is a spiritual practice—and I began to wonder what that meant.

"Practice" is an interesting word. My *Oxford American Dictionary* gives one definition of practice as an habitual action or a habit or custom. This is certainly a characteristic of meeting for worship for me; I make a practice (habit) of attending meeting for worship each Sunday. But the second definition offered defines practice as a repeated exercise in an activity requiring *the development of a skill*. As an illustration it says: to sing well needs much practice. To practice is to repeat something over and over again, trying to learn how to do it well before doing it, you might say, for real. There is singing practice and then there is the concert; there is batting practice and then there is the game.

When I started to think about meeting for worship as spiritual practice it was this second sense of the word practice that intrigued me. What am I practicing when I attend meeting for worship? What skills am I trying to develop? And what is the real situation for which I am practicing during meeting for worship?

Some of the Gospels tell us that Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives on the night he was arrested. His disciples accompanied him and remained outside except for three whom he took into the garden with him. Each of the Gospels that includes this story, and different translations of the Gospels, use slightly different words to describe the instructions he gave to them before he went off by himself to pray. In the King James Version, Matthew and Mark use the phrase "tarry ye here and watch." In Luke the phrase is "wait here and pray." Other versions use the phrase "remain here and stay awake."

I am not a biblical scholar; I do not know what the correct translation from Greek would be. But when I think of Jesus in that moment of his life, the words that seem most appropriate to me are "wait and watch."

My dictionary defines the word "wait" as meaning to defer action for a specific time or until some event occurs. It also defines waiting as to be expectant or on the watch, as in "waiting to see what will happen." Waiting is a kind of limbo state in which one form of activity has stopped and another has not yet begun. As a non-activity, it can often be frustrating, like waiting for the stoplight to change, waiting for the elevator to come, or waiting in the doctor's office for your appointment to begin. Waiting carries with it the sense of doing nothing. (What are you doing? Oh, nothing; just waiting.) And so we often try to fill the time with thoughts or activities that distract us. We flip through magazines in the doctor's office, or scan through the channels on the car radio, or run over in our mind the various tasks left to do that day.

But connected to the word "watch," waiting clearly is not a time to be doing nothing. To watch means to be attentive, to be observant, to be vigilant and in an alert state. It means to be on the lookout for something unexpected. And so to wait

John Andrew Gallery is a member of Chestnut Hill Meeting in Philadelphia, Pa.

and watch is to suspend other activity and be alert, expectantly on watch for something unexpected to happen.

My view of Jesus is that he was not able to predict the future. At that moment he knew that the Temple priests were unhappy with him, he knew that Judas had gone away to do something, but what that was or when it might happen was not clear to Jesus. Nonetheless, he was aware that something could happen and so he was cautious and guarded and wanted someone to keep an eye out while he prayed. If his disciples had asked "What are we waiting for, what are we watching for?" I don't think he would have said, "for Judas to return." It is more likely his answer might have been, "I don't know." Or he might have said "for God's direction for my life to be revealed," for that after all was why he came to the garden to pray. He asks them to wait and watch because that is what he is doing himself.

There is no real indication in the Gospels that God ever speaks directly to Jesus in the way the Hebrew Scriptures portray God as speaking to the prophets. The baptismal voice of God is presented in many ways—one suggests that only Jesus hears the voice, another that John and others present hear the voice, but whether Jesus does, too, is unclear. At no time are God's instructions for his ministry made known by the type of direct communication God used to tell Jonah to go to Nineveh and preach. Some might say that as the incarnation of God all knowledge was already available to Jesus. But if he already knew the outcome, why would he go into the garden and ask for God's direction at this moment? He waits and he watches in a state of uncertainty.

These two words—wait and watch—have come to define the way I approach meeting for worship. I believe this is consistent with the early Quaker view of meeting for worship. Although we refer to it as silent worship, they described meeting for worship as



Andrea Mantegna, "The Agony in the Garden," ca. 1450

silent waiting. "Turn thy mind to the light and wait upon God . . . wait in the light." In meeting for worship I am waiting in silence with the firm expectation that something will happen, and watching for God's presence to be revealed.

Waiting and watching require certain skills and it is these skills I try to develop in meeting for worship. The first skill I practice in silent waiting is being present—being fully aware of the present moment. This is often referred to as being centered, but I think that the Buddhist term of being present or "being here now" is more accurate and more helpful. To be present is to be expectant or on watch, as the dictionary defines the words wait and watch.

My mind is constantly full of distractions. Even in my normal daily life I am often so engrossed in thought about something else I walk by people I know or fail to hear someone say hello to me as we pass. Sorry, I say, my mind was elsewhere, and the elsewhere is usually not a place so much as a time, past or future, never present. If

my mind is elsewhere—distracted by thoughts of the past or planning for activities in the future—I won't hear God even if God shouts.

I find that it is impossible for me to be present in meeting for worship if I close my eyes. The darkness becomes a movie screen onto which my mind projects images, ideas, thoughts. To be alert and aware of the present moment means for me to be observant but detached. I find this easier if I keep my eyes open and notice everything, but focus on nothing. I allow my eyes to float around the room, allow my ears to be open to each passing sound, but let each vision or sound pass through my consciousness as smoothly and with the same detachment with which I watch the clouds pass across the sky. I see each thing, hear each, acknowledge and observe each, without trying to judge which is more important than the other. If my vision and my hearing are filled with the present moment, then there is no room for the past or

future to creep in and block the awareness of God's presence.

The second thing I practice in silent waiting is patience. I do not know how long the silence will last, perhaps for the full hour. I do not know how long it will take for God's presence to be made known, perhaps not until the last few minutes of the hour, perhaps not at all even though I know that even in silence God is present. But whether I am learning to listen for God in meeting for worship or in the daily course of my life, patience is a skill I must develop. Lao-Tzu says: "Are you prepared to be like the puddle and wait until the mud settles?" I must have that much patience.

There is a third skill I practice in silent waiting, which I call remembering God. Remembering God is a Muslim phrase. I find it to be a more useful and more functional concept than the phrase "loving God," because I find it hard to associate the human quality of love with the intangible essence of God. But in silent waiting

I can try to remember that my purpose for being there is to be in communion with God. I can try to remember that God is present, in the room, in the people, in myself, in the natural environment I can see out the window—God is everywhere present if I allow myself to remember.

But meeting for worship is not always silent. When someone speaks, if I am to hear what they really say and discern God's voice behind it, then I need the skills that waiting and watching imply. I need to be present—aware and alert—to have patience, to be open to the unexpected, nonjudgmental. And so when I listen to others speak I practice all these skills.



I regularly attend the same meeting and am familiar with many of the people who speak. I confess that there are some whose messages I tend to think of as being less interesting to me, or who speak in ways that I find annoying, or who speak longer than I think they should. It is easy

for me to give only half my attention to them if I am not careful or to think that their messages will not interest me. But I have learned over the years that it is often the person I think of as the most boring or the total stranger who walks in off the street for the first time, who brings a powerful message from God. To be open to the unexpected is to be nonjudgmental of both the messenger and the message; to learn that God's truth comes from unexpected sources, in unexpected ideas; and to be careful not to dismiss too quickly something that seems irrelevant or contradictory to my beliefs.

But the skills implied in waiting and watching are most critical to me when it comes to determining whether or not God is calling on me to speak. Although the traditional Quaker guidelines and testing questions are helpful, they are no longer the key tests for me. My two key tests might be called circumstance and foreboding.

In the Gospel story, the three disciples find the task of waiting expectantly and watching alertly to be too much. They fall asleep. Jesus returns and chides them several times to no avail. But he is waiting too, and watching. He goes into the garden and prays, waiting patiently for an answer. Nothing comes; he waits, tries again, and again nothing comes.

When he returns from prayer for the third time it is he who sees the soldiers and Judas approaching. And Jesus, alert to the moment he is in, finds God's answer in these circumstances. The soldiers are God's messengers and their arrival is God's message that the cup will not pass. His larger group of disciples outside the wall could easily have blocked and delayed the soldiers, giving Jesus enough time to escape. So could the three inside the garden with him. But to take that course would have been for Jesus a denial of God's answer regarding the direction for his life, a denial of God's leading. So it is Jesus who goes forward and greets Judas, and it is he who gives Judas the kiss of welcome by which he is betrayed, for he knows through these circumstances that this is the path to which God has called him.

In a similar way, I have found that in meeting for worship God speaks to me through circumstance. Messages, leadings, directions do not usually begin within me; they begin with something outside myself that makes a connection with

something I didn't know was there. I watch, quite literally, for a sign that will tell me what to do, when to speak, and what to say. The circumstance, the sign, might be a message someone else gives that creates a reverberating response in me. The circumstance might be something I see or hear coming into meeting; it might be the presence of another person in the room or the interaction between a child and a parent during opening silence. But whatever it is, it is always an external circumstance, something that happens then and there, in that very moment, not some interesting thought I've carried around and nurtured all week and brought to meeting hoping to find the right opportunity to deliver.

To hear God's voice in circumstantial events means I must have all the skills waiting and watching provide: I must be fully awake, present, alert, open to the unexpected, nonjudgmental. These skills, practiced as I silently wait or silently listen as others speak, prepare me to discover when to speak myself and what to say.

Once, at the start of meeting for worship, a young boy entered the room. The week before he had announced that he was participating in the AIDS Walk and would be collecting money from sponsors. Immediately upon seeing him I felt "something" ask me what AIDS might mean to him versus what it meant to me as a gay man, living with the possibility every day of my life. I had not expected to speak that day—or any day for that matter—of what it meant to live like that, to have friends and lovers die and to try to maintain the sense of God's goodness through all that. And yet it was clear that this was what God was asking me to do. The circumstance of seeing the young man was the sign through which the message came. After I spoke I thought the message seemed too personal. But later one of the First-day school teachers told me my message had prompted much discussion among the children, and so I learned why I had been called to deliver that message that day.

Once, while seated in the corner of the room, I noticed an old friend enter and sit in the far corner opposite me. He was not a member of the meeting and this was his first visit. When I saw him I realized that a small incident had left us estranged from one another for many years. It was clear to me in that moment that though I thought

the fault was his it was I who had hardened my heart to him. I felt a compelling need to speak about forgiveness—not forgiving, but asking for forgiveness, being the one who leaves his sacrifice at the altar and goes and finds his brother and initiates reconciliation. The interesting thing about this was that although I made no specific mention of our situation when I spoke, he knew exactly what I was saying. When the meeting ended we went up to one another and asked for forgiveness. It was the circumstance of his presence through which God spoke.

Once, I attended a meeting for worship for racial healing called by a few African American Friends. There were six of them and perhaps 50 or 60 white Quakers in the room. After opening silence, the messages came rather quickly from the white Friends. It seemed to me that they all expressed concern about the racial prejudices of “them” (people not in the room) versus “us” (those white people present). As I listened I grew impatient with this talk and tried to figure out how to create a message that would tell these folks that none of us were truly free of racial prejudice. At one point I turned and looked at the African Americans in the center and wondered how they were hearing these messages. And in that moment of looking a specific message came so quickly that I stood without quite realizing I was doing so. The message I spoke was one that arose out of God’s asking me to consider what the African American’s present needed to hear for racial healing. And the message I spoke was addressed to them and not to the others. It was the circumstance of their presence, in the context of the previous messages, through which God spoke.

If messages come to me from external circumstance they are not mine and therefore it is never possible for me to begin a message with the word “I.” I try to use the phrase, “It comes to me from the Lord”—for that is what the experience is for me. If I can’t use that phrase, or at least to use it in my mind, and if I can only begin with the word “I,” then I am suspicious that the message is merely my own and not appropriate to speak. I also try to find the larger spiritual meaning in the message. I find I can’t just toss something out as if to say, see what you make of this. In some way I have to find a clear spiritual content; and if I can’t find it,

then I wonder if it is there at all and often remain silent.

But these tests don’t substitute for the strong feeling in my gut that the words are being pulled out of me. The actor Daniel Day Lewis, when asked how he knows when he’s going to take a role said: “I get a sense of foreboding . . . the sense that this thing cannot be avoided and so I’d better just go through with it.” I have the same feeling when being called to speak; I have the feeling I am being dragged to my feet against my better judgment. Most of the time I feel like Jonah who, on being asked by God to deliver a message, turned and went in the opposite direction until God was so insistent that Jonah had to relent and give in and speak. When I rise I feel as if I am saying to God, “Okay, okay, I’m getting up, stop hounding me!”

I’ve often read and heard others speak of the feelings experienced before speaking, but few things I have read describe what happens afterwards. For me this is a far worse experience. If I am inspired to speak, if it is the word, the breath of God that moves through me, that breath that to a mere mortal can be like a hurricane moving through the tropics. After I speak I am left trembling in the aftermath of the storm that has rushed through me. I am fragile, vulnerable, and drained; and I often feel the need to leave meeting immediately before anyone has a chance to speak to me. If someone speaks to me I say no, it wasn’t my message, I don’t know where it came from, and I flee. “Thee was well used, Friend” is the only proper comment to make in these circumstances, and to be used by God can be both a wonderful and terrifying thing.

Meeting for worship is the place where I practice these skills, these skills of waiting and watching. But I practice them in the safe confines of the meeting so that I can later take them out and apply them in my daily life. My goal, after all, is not to be a spiritual person in harmony with God for only one hour on Sunday morning, but to be so at all times in my life. So meeting for worship is practice for the main event: living my life.

At a certain point in my life, I grew tired of the work I was doing. I wanted to change, but did not know what I wanted to do instead. I did not have the financial resources to simply

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stop working and pursue civic or spiritual interests. Yet I was deeply unhappy. During a week sojourning at Pendle Hill in the middle of a huge winter storm, I realized that I had to take a “leap of faith”—if I was to find what God wanted me to be doing at that point in my life, I had to first stop doing the work that was making me unhappy. And so on my return I announced to my partners that I was taking a sabbatical leave of absence, with no idea how I would support myself in doing so. I simply went home and waited and watched.

A few weeks after I had packed up and moved out of my office a friend of mine called to say the nonprofit organization she ran was expanding and experiencing difficulty, and could I come and give them advice? Although what she asked was a continuation of the type of work I had just left, I went because she was a friend, attended a few meetings, and had the sense that I could help. I casually offered her my assistance, and as a result I spent the following three years commuting every other week between Philadelphia and Boston, helping to guide the expansion of her organization. It was one of my most rewarding and challenging work experiences. It is not something I would have even considered doing when I decided to take my sabbatical. But I felt that the circumstance of her calling for assistance at the precise moment when I was able to offer it was the sign that God was calling me in this direction.

I do not mean to suggest that meeting for worship is simply a means, merely a place to develop skills. The inspiring thing about meeting is that it is both means and end, both practice and performance. For if I practice the skills of waiting and watching during meeting for worship, God’s message is often revealed.

Meeting for worship as spiritual practice can help us discern God’s leading in all aspects of our lives. But it will only do this if we are willing to wait: to practice silently waiting on God, with patience and in trust; and if we are willing to watch: to be alert and open in the present moment to the unexpected circumstances through which God speaks and thereby transforms our lives.

Wait, he said, and watch. □