

Benefits of sharing with one another

Early Friends needed one another in order to survive.

- *Anyone who rejected the parish church and refused to attend services or pay tithes was out on their ear. They would no longer be supported by the parish system.... Many thousands of people found themselves in this position in the mid-seventeenth century, mostly as a matter of conscience.*

In the North West of England...many of them banded together for mutual support and silent worship, waiting for a new prophet or teacher to show them the way. These were the Seekers whom Fox met when he first came to these parts in 1652.

- *Our practical needs may not be so urgent as theirs...but practical help is still needed, and it still binds us together. We also need one another socially, perhaps even more now than they did then.*

Our society is more fragmented and alienated than theirs...[so we] feel more isolated individually and feel a strong need to connect with other people who will have at least some sympathy with us and some understanding of our particular concerns.

We sense, rightly, that we cannot be fulfilled in our lives if we cannot share our lives with others, and believe we participate in something much larger than ourselves. (50)

We need others to mirror back how they see us and to affirm us.

- *Exposure to the light means we have to see ourselves as we are, to strip ourselves "naked," as Early Friends liked to say, and this, as we have seen, can be a difficult experience. Others can help us in this by reflecting back how they see us, and by accepting us as we are. There is no 'room for pretence here.*

On the contrary, the kind of affirmation and acceptance that each of us needs can only be received when we are completely open with one another about how we are. This is given practical expression in the way we sit together in Meeting. We sit facing one another. ...

- *This affirmation by others will help us in turn to affirm and accept ourselves, whatever it is in ourselves that we might feel to be unacceptable. And if we accept ourselves as we are, we are more able to accept others, without judgment or suspicion.*

The presence of the other is then included in our meditation. Indeed the face of the other in front of me may challenge me to "face up to" myself; my real self, or comfort me in the knowledge that I am accepted as I am. This affirmation by others will help us in turn to affirm and accept ourselves, whatever it is in ourselves that we might feel to be unacceptable. And if we accept ourselves as we are, we are more able to accept others, without judgment or suspicion. (51)

This openness becomes possible when we realize that we are heard and accepted, when we "find love," as the [British Friends'] Book of Discipline says, meaning a warm acceptance. This is what Patricia Loring calls "a listening spirituality." (52)

We each have a limited understanding and need one another to share our insights.

- *At a given moment, each of us is aware of a measure of the light. Early Quaker Samuel Fisher wrote: "By which light... in some measure, though not the same measure, he manifests something of himself in every conscience." (53)*

- Friends did not adopt the practice of other churches and ordain certain people to “the ministry.” They did not want to set certain people above others, since they wanted all to participate. Instead, they assumed every person had gifts, and they sought to recognize and affirm those gifts.
- *The “ministry” is then mutual, and the community grows, as everyone gains confidence in themselves to give what they can, and confidence in others to give what they need. This brings us to the next point. (54)*

We have different gifts.

- *We recognize a variety of ministries. In our worship these include those who speak under the guidance of the Spirit, and those who receive and uphold the work of the Spirit in silence and prayer. We also recognise as ministry service on our many committees, hospitality and childcare, the care of finance and premises, and many other tasks. We value those whose ministry is not in an appointed task but is in teaching, counselling, listening, prayer, enabling the service of others, or other service in the meeting or the world.*

Quaker Faith and Practice, Britain Yearly Meeting

Out of this openness and sharing comes an experience of unity.

- We find unity in our common humanity, but also—more importantly—in that shared inward knowledge that brings us together. As Ambler writes:
- *We belong together, ...we can trust one another and ...we can do things together we would never be able to do apart. Out of this knowledge comes strength, comfort, love and confidence to act.*

This is not a unity we have to create by artfully establishing common interests. It is already there, if we have the eyes to see it. The point is that, waiting in the light, we do see it; we lose our customary selfish viewpoint and see others as they are, without distortion: 'All they that are in the light arc in unity; for the light is but one.' (54-55)