

Why this distinctive practice?

The first point to make is that while other ways of making a decision may be quicker, they may not result in a better decision. If the decision is made by someone in authority or by an appointed committee, it may not coincide with what most people want or think. If it is made by a public debate in which the issue is thought through from both sides, it might still miss the real point. Reason, thought and debate are very useful and often fair, but they are also limited when it comes to the deeper questions of life. They don't cope well with people's feelings, either, or with the subtleties of personal relationships or group dynamics. These all have to be 'sensed' in a different way, as we saw with the question of God. So to get a clear sense of what is happening in our lives, we Quakers try to go deeper. We have to let go our active and fretful minds in order to do this. We go quiet and let a deeper, more sensitive awareness arise. We let go of our habitual self-concern as well, because this can distort our perception of what is going on. And certainly, reasoning and debating do not of themselves help us to overcome self-interest; they can even entrench it. When we feel criticized, for example, we can quickly go on the defensive and want to justify ourselves with reasons and excuses. If on the other hand we remain still and silent, the ego quieters down, and we can *see the truth of the matter*, irrespective of how it might affect us personally. And as we open ourselves to the truth, whatever it may be, we find we are being enabled to see. We are fully attentive, but we are not actively using our minds to solve a problem. We are allowing ourselves to become fully aware of it and the situation around it, in the hope of being able to see a way through. As we do, we become aware simultaneously of a source of insight and understanding within

us that is quite different from our normal, conscious self.

This is what we mean by 'Spirit'. It is not tangible or observable, and it can't be thought about directly, it's so deep and mysterious. But we know it's there because of what it does to us and with us and through us. It enables us to see clearly what is going on – starting with what we ourselves are doing and experiencing – and it enables us to see what we can do about it, perhaps what we *have* to do. If we don't like what we see we can always reject it, deny it, but then we will lose contact with the Spirit and we won't see things clearly any more; we'll be thrown back on our own ego-based resources. We'll have to thrash it out in our minds, with the pros and cons, force ourselves to make a decision, or whatever. So we have a choice here. It is our responsibility, as I've emphasized before, what we do with the Spirit when we happen to be aware of it. If we follow its lead, we will feel its effect in our lives. We will learn to recognize it, appreciate it and, most importantly, we will learn to trust it. We will never know its reality as a matter of fact, of objective fact, as something we can prove or disprove. But we can test it in our own experience, which is partly of course subjective. Yet when it is tested in a whole group, exploring an issue together, and tested over time by the results, we can feel that the workings of the Spirit are being tested very thoroughly. And that leads to trust, to faith.

Spirit is not a supernatural force that goes against the grain of our nature. It is not irrational feeling or magical manipulation. It is our own deep nature, so that when we get in touch with it we experience it as something entirely natural. And we experience it first of all as what enlightens us. As George Fox said:

The light is that by which ye come to see.⁶⁸
For with the light man sees himself.⁶⁹

So spiritual awareness begins with a very down-to-earth thing: we can see what's going on, whereas previously we were

deceived or hood-winked, or trying to kid ourselves, or simply fearful and prejudiced.

That is why the Spirit is so important for our regular Meetings for Business. And that is one reason why we do our business in the way we do: we want to know what's really going on so that we can do the right thing.

A second reason why we do business this way is that we recognize our limits as individuals. It is not only that we have our self-interest to think of, we also know that our experience and expertise are limited, and that other Friends have different experience, different kinds of knowledge. Variety in a group can often be seen as a disadvantage. How can people come to agree on everything if they are all so different, and from different backgrounds? Surprisingly perhaps, the Quakers see this as an advantage. Variety means we have a richer experience to draw on. It only requires that we really listen to one another, and to where we each of us come from, and we will have gained in insight from the process. If we don't do something like this, we will tend to associate with those who think as we do and dissociate from those who do not. We then have what Burrough called a 'controversy between party and party of men' (and of women, for that matter). We are polarized into opposite camps, because we can only see those who differ from us as opposed to us.

Much better to see everyone's experience as relevant, however limited it might be. After all, we all have some relationship to the matter we are thinking about, otherwise we wouldn't be here. And, to say the least, we can all be aware, as we wait in the Light, of the other people in the room and what is happening between us. Perhaps the women will be more aware of this than the men - that is often the gift of women. Some men may be totally absorbed in the issue to be discussed and so not be aware of the people around them - and that is their gift! So we each have something to contribute. On some matters, we have to say, one or two Friends may know a good deal more than everybody else.

They may be on the committee that has already gone through this with a tooth comb. They may be professionally trained in handling money, or bricks-and-mortar, or little children. But they need the recognition of this from the rest of the community to make their contribution helpfully and fruitfully. It is part of our job in coming to decisions that we *discern* who knows what, and what each one knows. We might say in fact that the whole process of coming to a decision is one of *discernment*. We ask ourselves, What is this really about? What are the facts of the case? Who is being affected by this, and how? Who knows what's going on, or has gone on, in cases like this? What do each of us know and/or feel about this thing? Then we can discern, finally, what is the best way forward, or what this situation requires of us.

I went through this process once in a way that impressed me deeply. It was in my old meeting in Birmingham, back in the nineties. We had just received advice from Friends House (our central body) on how to comply with the Government's new law on child protection. Anyone who is given responsibility for children in any organization must have a police check on their past record to see if they have ever been found guilty of abusing children. The advice was that we should draw up a policy to see that this was done. But it raised some of our hackles when it was presented to us in meeting. One male Friend wanted nothing to do with this interfering legislation, which implied that we trust no-one in our organization, and suspect everyone as a possible child molester. Another Friend was very nervous about the implication that we *might* have such a molester in our midst, and was all in favour of implementing a tough policy. I didn't like the idea, because it seemed like we were being told what to do in our own meeting, over-riding any discernment we might have. Shouldn't we perhaps resist the State on this occasion by refusing to comply with the law? It was a heated discussion, as you can imagine, and we were not going to get a uniting Minute on this occasion. We called a Special Meeting. This time we sat in a circle without the

table, and asked every one in turn – there were 10 or 12 of us – what we *felt* about the issue and what the background was in our experience that led us to feel that way. It was most enlightening. The male Friend told us of his experience as a social worker, when he had been deeply hurt by a false accusation (in court, I think it was) that blamed him for the mishandling of some children. The accusation was withdrawn, but he didn't want to have to go through such an event again, or have it dragged up in the meeting. The woman Friend admitted that she felt very nervous with children anyway and was terrified of being asked to look after them herself. Her nervousness made her feel that 'looking after children' was a dangerous and dodgy business, so she was glad to have a test run on everybody. I said I didn't like being told what to do on this matter, and, on reflection – I surprised myself saying this – I didn't like being told what to do on any matter! When we had finally gone round the circle there was a sigh of relief. We knew now where we were all coming from. We saw no reason to disagree. Instead, we found a policy that would feel right to all of us. We asked the Nominations Committee to find names for a 'children's committee' from a list of Friends who said they would be happy to work with children and happy to go through a police check for the purpose. We had a Minute to that effect, and it resolved the issue on our minds.

This then leads to the final reason why we adopt this practice. Resolving an issue this way produces great confidence in the decision and commitment to it. You can believe me when I tell you that the issue of a child protection policy didn't arise again in my old meeting. We all knew we had dealt with it properly.

We should compare this approach with what frequently happens in organizations that rely on voting or consensus. The rapid and efficient process may at first seem good. But as time goes by the people who were *out-voted* on the issue may feel at odds with the organization and resent the policy that is now in place. Those who had to compromise to achieve a consensus,

which might include everybody, will feel at least slightly dissatisfied with the result, and they may harbour the wish one day to overturn it. What do the countries of Europe now feel with their new treaty for the Union? I guess they are pleased they have a treaty at all, and mildly dissatisfied that they had to surrender so much to achieve it. So what next?