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What is essential to the practice?

Much of the answer has already been implied in our reasons for having it. But I want to set it out in order, so that we can see the whole picture.

The first essential has to be *silence*. Once we are gathered together, with a clerk that has gone over the business we need to deal with, we sit still, in silence, to centre down. If the business meeting follows the regular Meeting for Worship, the 'centring down' will be easier, that is, we will be more able to let go of our everyday concerns and become really open, spiritually, to the matters before us. But we want to keep that openness and sensitivity throughout the meeting. It might be all too easy to get embroiled in some issue that concerns us and start leaping to our feet to get our voice heard. Or we might get bored with time being spent on 'this trivial question', and fidget or murmur to 'get on with the business'. So we need to have silence, if only a brief moment, between contributions. If the clerk feels the meeting is getting heated, or even that one Friend is, she can call for us all to be silent and centre down again.

A second factor is the need in all of us for *honesty*. This is part of what early Friends meant by 'pursuing the truth', which was not a merely intellectual affair, but a moral and practical commitment to being truthful in whatever they said or did. We can see how important this is when Friends have to weigh up our individual contribution to a meeting. They will need to know

what kind of experience we are speaking from, what expertise or authority we might have on the issue in question. They will have to assess our strengths and weaknesses, so if we are not to fool them we will have to be honest with them. All this may take place subconsciously, of course, but the subtle interactions and impressions at this level can make all the difference to the outcome, and to how we live with it afterwards. Morley even recommends that we should have a moment of 'release' for any strong feelings we may have about the subject.

Tears, harsh words, raised or shaking voices, difficulty with articulation – any of these might accompany release. Friends who release their feelings should be listened to lovingly... Sometimes we need to get something off our chests.⁷⁰

I'm not sure about this. If feelings are aroused, or simply arise, in the course of a meeting, they should be welcomed, certainly. It may be part of the truth of our situation that we all have to face. But I'm not sure this should be expected or encouraged. Morley seems to be confusing the clarity that comes from waiting in the light with the insight that comes from allowing ourselves to feel, and to express the feeling. But expressions of strong feeling disturb the silence, and therefore confuse the clarity of the meeting. Better this, of course, than actively blocking or suppressing our feelings. When Sheeran undertook his research into American Friends during the 1970s he observed that Friends seemed to maintain their collective discipline by *not* allowing feelings to emerge.⁷¹ To do this inevitably distorts the picture of reality we all of us get. However, from my own experience of Friends in America during the last 20 years I would say that many of them have now overcome any and every restraint they may have felt before! Is that really so much better? I asked them that once, knowing full well how restrained some of us 'Britishers' feel! What *is* better, I'm sure, is that we deal with our

feelings before the meeting; and if this proves difficult because we are blocked or ashamed or fearful of feeling, we can gather a small group of Friends around us to help us deal with it. Sheeran is right, surely, when he sums up Friends' attitudes as follows:

Friends are not opposed to emotions, not opposed to their having an important bearing on decisions. What seems important to Friends is that emotions be both deep and frankly recognized as emotions... I must know what my emotions are if I am to cope with them. So, too, must a group be aware of the feelings of its members... Although many Friends do seem to stifle their feelings, then, the mores of the meeting urge them to channel these emotions rather than to suppress them.⁷²

But the point of all this is not to assess how we all individually feel about the issue, so that we can move on to how we all collectively feel about it. Feelings give us clues, markers, indications as to the reality we are facing. Once we recognize them as such we can move on to the next stage, which is to *see* the reality clearly. This then brings us to the third point, which, I hope we can now see, is central to the whole process. *The aim of the Meeting is to get beyond our individual and self-centred viewpoints to one we can all see to be valid, i.e. 'the truth', 'the best possible solution'.*

Let me quote again from Morley:

When I am able to set my ideas aside, and you are able to set your ideas aside, doors are opened which allow solutions to enter on a shaft of Light.⁷³

It needs good relations between us for this to happen, as Burrough made clear. Not in 'the way of the world', he said, not as 'party and party of men':

but in the wisdom, love and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, submitting one to another in lowliness of heart... by hearing and determining every matter coming before you in love, coolness, gentleness and dear unity.

We recognize these virtues in our everyday relationships with people, but Burrough is saying they are crucial too in the way we make decisions. It takes more than tolerance and patience to hear someone with a very different point of view. It takes a love which can encompass their different way of being in the world, and an humility in recognizing that our view is after all only our view!

But these are part negatives. There is a huge positive in this. When we are big enough really to hear one another, a space is created in which new understandings can emerge. A view might arise that no one had thought of before, and perhaps would not have been able to think of. Mixing all these different bits of life together we create the possibility of something quite *new* arising. It is a creative process, and to experience it is often quite awesome and amazing. We know then that the Spirit really is at work.

Our *Quaker Faith and Practice* urges us to take this creativity seriously and to accept the understanding that comes from it. It does so in that excellent section (3.02-3.08, see Appendix 2 here) which deals with 'the sense of the meeting':

The unity we seek depends on the willingness of us all to seek the truth in each other's utterances; on our being open to persuasion; and in the last resort on a willingness to recognize and accept the sense of the meeting as recorded in the minute, knowing that our dissenting views have been heard and considered... In a meeting rightly held a new way may be discovered which none present had alone perceived and which transcends the differences of the opinions expressed.

This is an experience of creative insight, leading to a sense of the meeting which a clerk is often led in a remarkable way to record. Those who have shared this experience will not doubt its reality and the certainty it brings of the immediate rightness of the way for the meeting to take.⁷⁴

I will give you an example, from Barry Morley's own meeting in America. At the end of a business meeting the clerk asked if there was any other business. A woman Friend, Linda, stood up to say that she had recently walked down the lane to the meeting house... but she broke off her story to cry. Friends waited. She then, a little more composed, resumed her story. It had been Memorial Day, and she saw men with guns in the Quaker graveyard. Another Friend tried to explain:

'There are people buried in the graveyard who served in the military. The men were honoring them.'

'But they were in my graveyard with guns', Linda said through tears.

Other Friends expressed sympathy with her distress. Others expressed anger that such a thing should be allowed. But once again the situation was explained:

'They're from veterans' groups. They decorate the graves of veterans every Memorial Day'.

'After all', someone added, 'we knew they had served in the military when we allowed them to be buried there'.

This looked like stalemate. Then a Friend said:

'If a choice has to be made between Linda feeling as she does, and men with guns in the graveyard, that is not a difficult choice'.

Linda's feelings, and those of others too, had now been taken note of and recognized. An older Friend asked Linda:

'Do you have strong feelings about the veterans being remembered?'

Having been heard, and hearing the others, Linda was able to reply:

'No. I have no objection to the men being remembered.'

'Might we allow them to decorate the graves but leave their guns outside?'

suggested the older Friend. Another Friend supported this:

'I can approve of that if it is acceptable to Linda'.

'Yes,' said Linda, 'I would find that acceptable'.

The meeting fell silent, and then adjourned.

A year later, quite unexpectedly, Linda reported to the meeting that she had visited the graveyard on Memorial Day to check on the veterans.

'They left their guns outside when they went in', she said.

'The silence that followed', comments Morley, 'amplified the sense of unity we had felt a year earlier'.⁷⁵

That is a good example of creative resolution. We may wonder why Friends did not seem to pick up on the moral rightness of what Linda was saying, and focused on her feeling, but that is how the dilemma was presented to them, and they found a way through it. Perhaps the most important move was that they were able to understand and sympathize with Linda's strong feeling, even if they didn't all share it, so they created a bond of unity. And when the creative solution was proposed – you can see that it was more than a compromise – Friends were able, as they say,

'to unite on it'. And that unity, as Morley recognizes, gave them the assurance that they were making the right decision.

That, as it happens, indicates the final point I want to make about what is essential to the practice. *We know we have the right decision when we have unity*, having avoided (or overcome) polarization and conflict. It is the skill of the clerk in a meeting to recognize, not only the sense of the meeting, but the unity that it brings. She may discover this by 'trying out a Minute', to see what objections or reservations there may be to it. She is also, in this testing, trying out the form of words that would best express this understanding. When the final Minute is written and accepted by the meeting, it then has authority in the meeting. It is not simply a record of 'what we have decided', which we might conceivably change if we change our minds. It is a record of how we, together, have been led to act by the Spirit within us.

What is the purpose of the Minute?

The purpose of the Minute is to provide a record of the meeting's decision, and to provide a means by which the meeting can be held accountable to its own decision. The Minute is a statement of the meeting's understanding of the Spirit's leading, and it is a statement of the meeting's commitment to act in accordance with that understanding. The Minute is a statement of the meeting's unity, and it is a statement of the meeting's authority. The Minute is a statement of the meeting's decision, and it is a statement of the meeting's commitment to act in accordance with that decision. The Minute is a statement of the meeting's understanding of the Spirit's leading, and it is a statement of the meeting's commitment to act in accordance with that understanding. The Minute is a statement of the meeting's unity, and it is a statement of the meeting's authority. The Minute is a statement of the meeting's decision, and it is a statement of the meeting's commitment to act in accordance with that decision.

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