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Jacksonville Friends Meeting**

What makes all this possible?

We can see that this is as much a spiritual exercise as our Meeting for Worship. Although we do not come together specifically to 'worship' on this occasion – we come to do business – we do come in the same attitude of openness and receptivity, and we expect in the same way to be guided by the Spirit. (That shows we can be as spiritual in deciding an action as we are in contemplation. In fact it is part of our Quaker way to carry the insights we gain in worship into the life of action, into the everyday.) But for all this we have to take some responsibility to see that this happens. We have to put ourselves in a position where we *can* be open and receptive, both to the issues themselves and to the Spirit working quietly within us. So over the years Friends have developed a certain pattern of behaviour which can facilitate the process. You will see much of this recorded in *Quaker Faith and Practice* (chapter 3 mostly, as in Appendix 2 here, but it pervades the whole book). It will help, though, if I pull it together so that we can see it as a whole. What makes the Quaker way of deciding an

issue practicable, then, is that:

We pause between contributions,

not jumping in as soon as we get a chance, and not interrupting.

We speak to the meeting as a whole,

not to an individual in particular, especially not to the Friend who has just spoken.

We defer to the clerk.

Like the players in an orchestra, we wait till we have a cue from the 'conductor' that we are free to speak. In a large meeting this normally involves standing up or raising a hand and waiting to be called. In a small meeting a look or a nod may be enough.

These three could be summed up by the advice of George Fox, 'Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts'.⁷⁶

We listen attentively to everyone,

even the least articulate or knowledgeable.

We speak briefly and to the point,

avoiding the desire to make a speech.

We avoid rhetoric and manipulation,

which may persuade people temporarily, but not convince them deeply.

We may prepare our minds beforehand, but not our opinions!

The clerk has to bear that in mind too, since anxiety about an item on the agenda may persuade her to settle her own mind about it first.

These four can be summed up by Fox's words again: 'Let truth be the head, and practise it'.⁷⁷

We keep silent while the clerk writes a Minute.

The temptation is to chatter while the clerk scribbles quietly at the table, but she is trying to get 'the sense of the meeting', so she needs our quiet support.

We unite on a Minute, not on a vote.

We're looking to agree, not on the proposal that carries the day, but the form of words which expresses the sense of the whole meeting.

We delay till another meeting if unity is not achievable.

Even if only one member cannot accept the Minute, it will be better for the meeting, and the decision, if we wait until we can all accept it – whatever it then is.

We submit to the Minute once it is accepted,

which is a test of how seriously we take the process of being led by the Spirit.

These last four may be summed up briefly by Fox's 'Mind the oneness'.

These are not rules, in the strict sense. They are models of good practice. There are no sanctions against not following them, but our experience has been, historically, that if we do not follow the practice we shall miss out on the clarity and confidence that come with it. But Friends find that out for themselves. It is part of the experimental nature of our faith that we test our practice continually by experience, if only to confirm, sometimes, that we got it right the first time. Once we are (re)assured of this, we can commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the discipline, and hold on in faith when the process seems to be stuck or dragging on endlessly. Nothing is more heartening than to see it come right in the end.

What makes it difficult?

This needs to be added as a postscript really, because we have to admit in honesty that the process of communal enlightenment does sometimes seem to be impossible. This is most obviously the case when one or other of the above conditions cannot be met. For example, Friends *are* sometimes attached to their opinions and might find it particularly hard to let go if their favoured opinion is being attacked in meeting. Their usually wide

experience of doing business in the secular world inevitably establishes a habit of mind that is difficult to break in a gathering of Friends. Both these facts show how important it is to be silent before the discussion begins. My own experience of serving on the union committee of my university taught me a thing or two about how to get my own way: form a caucus of like-minded people beforehand and plan a strategy; make over-strong demands so that the inevitable compromise turns out to be exactly what you want; lobby the influential members beforehand to 'share your concern'; get agreement on overall aims and strategies so that you can use them later to exclude what others might want to do. I also learnt from this, much later, that this was also a good way of not making friends, and not making good decisions!

There is an individual equivalent to this bad committee practice. I can suppress voices in myself if I want a strong desire or fear in me to be met. This is a quite normal way of dealing with inner conflicts, as we shall see later, but it can also play mischievously in meetings and committees as well as in ourselves. Instead of dealing with the issues truthfully and honestly in a meeting, we dull our sensitivity and project our dark thoughts or desires onto the situation we are discussing, badly misrepresenting it. This is something which also takes discipline and watchfulness to deal with.

At the other end of the scale, a very large meeting of Friends presents its own difficulties. A Yearly Meeting in session can have as many as one thousand Friends present. How then do we 'hear every voice' that needs to be heard? How do we get to know them well enough to 'know where they're coming from' and learn to cope with the differences? Above all, how does the Yearly Meeting clerk discern 'the sense of the meeting'? It does happen, I know, but how? I have no real answers to these questions, but I hope this discussion will stimulate you to think about them.