

Thomas Sander, "The Tapestry of Meeting for Worship"
Friends Journal, August 2017

A Friend at Friends Meeting at Cambridge (Mass.) was recently asked by a non-Quaker why she didn't privately meditate instead of attending First-day worship. She responded by noting the importance of connecting with others in our meeting community.

While important, this hardly captures what makes meeting profound, special, and sacred, which has been revealed to me layer by layer, through decades of worshiping in meeting.

As a junior member in meeting for worship, the hour took an eternity to pass. The silence was a boring void from which I did my best to distract myself with daydreaming. The waiting for the next message always seemed endless, and when it came, I struggled to understand and derive its meaning.

Like the optical illusion that has a profile of two faces in the positive space or a black vase in the negative space, my relationship with meeting for worship magically flipped in my teens. The silence morphed from nothingness into a treasure to still me from life's busyness. But I remained a passive observer and participant.

In my 20s, I struggled to become Spirit's earthen vessel. I worked to slough off distracting thoughts and to center down, in hopes that Spirit might someday find me and speak to or through me. And I continued to listen to Spirit speaking through others. But worshiping in meeting was an individualistic centering, enlivened by the communal spice of others' ministry.

Over the past five years, I've uncovered and experienced a whole new dimension of meeting. I've learned that the deep place and the still, small voice that I am seeking is the selfsame voice and place that others in the meeting are seeking. We are deeply connected to each other through this centering down. "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10), and it is God (or Spirit) that connects us deeply to one another.

It's as if each of us brings a thread of silence to meeting, and it is only through our faithful worship (minding of the silence and praying into it when ministry doesn't come to us, being

both patient and obedient) that these threads are woven into a tight and beautiful tapestry through which we hear the Divine Presence. God binds us together, and we become God's vessels through this collective centering, patience, and openness.

This is perhaps why when someone rises to minister, we often have been hearing faint overtones of similar ministry, even though it came in a different tone or manner.

When these threads are especially tightly woven, we have a gathered meeting: Spirit speaks to us in harmonic convergence; something new about Spirit is revealed to us. The burning bush is kindled in our midst, and we stand on hallowed ground (Thomas Kelly). This is what Eden Grace calls Quaker's communion with God, and, appropriately enough, communion itself comes from a oneness in community. We are in communion with God because, as Thomas Kelly noted, our communication with each other is through the Divine Presence. This tapestry is perhaps what Francis Howgill experienced in 1672 when he wrote "[t]he kingdom of heaven did gather us, and catch us all, as in a net." It aligns with Kristina Keefe-Perry's vision that "the arms of the Holy Spirit, the arms of God [are] gathering us together" during worship.

While I can be still and listen for God at home individually, our communal tapestry amplifies Spirit's calling and enables us to test our leadings more deeply.

So Spirit, help us to be faithful and mindful weavers of this tapestry of silence—to learn that only by coming together and weaving this rich silence can we fully hear Thy voice.