

## *Learning to Listen (Part One)*

BY SANDRA CRONK

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**F**or many generations Quakers, like Mennonites, were noted for their close-knit, plain communities, separated from many of the structures of the larger society. In this century Friends have faced assimilation into the larger culture. We have had to struggle with the meaning of faithfulness as our communities have become more open to both the needs and opportunities of our world.

### **Super-Parents, Super-Professionals, Super-Church Members**

One of the most unexpected dilemmas we have had to confront as the result of this cultural change is busyness. To live in the twentieth century, at least in most areas of North America, is to be overwhelmed with the demands on one's time and energy.

Commitment to the Friends Meeting today is often measured by the amount of time we put into a plethora of worthwhile committees, projects, boards, and programs. To do well in virtually any contemporary profession requires so much of our time, we wonder if there is any room left for the rest of our lives. To compound the situation we are bombarded from morning to night with a flow of words through newspapers, billboards, radio, and television. This barrage powerfully shapes our assumptions and expectations.

Our lives are lived against a constant backdrop of exterior and interior noise. In this psychic clutter, we have to sort out the important

from the unimportant, the divine leading from the culturally-expected activity. As the world demands more and more from us, we judge our success as human beings by our ability to cope with this multiplicity of requirements.

Paradoxically, it is the most caring and committed Friends who are often the most over-extended and exhausted. These sensitive people react to the demands by trying to be super-Moms or super-Dads, super-professionals and super-church members. All the while they have a nagging sense that something is wrong. In the midst of all this fine activity, they feel as though they have lost themselves.

Very often our society treats our discontent with this busy, over-extended life as though it were a psychological problem. If we cannot cope, there must be something wrong with us. Our culture provides many psychological fixes to relieve the dilemma. There is a proliferation of psychological self-help movements. Radio talk show experts on the problems of daily living abound. Many people escape into a world of expressive individualism, remaining content with getting in touch with their inner feelings and experience but finding no answer to their problem.

Friends have had their share of this kind of response—and found it wanting. We are now ready to acknowledge that the difficulty we face is not just psychological. It is spiritual and theological. Instead of God being the center of our lives, our activity is the center. We recognize the need to start anew. But how do we do that?

### A Quiet Place

Surprisingly, we are discovering that our tradition, which we had been rapidly abandoning, has a great deal to say on just this point. Quakerism has, at its heart, that quiet place where we listen to God. Through listening, our lives form a strong spiritual center and a clarity about our direction and purpose.

The most well-known Quaker practice is the unprogrammed or silent meeting for worship. This form of worship has no planned program of music, sermons, or scripture readings. Instead the worshippers enter with quiet prayerfulness into Christ's presence. The silence is

merely the outward form of our listening to God's still, small voice in our midst. Vocal messages and prayer may come out of the silence as God leads worshippers within the group to speak.

Friends in my part of the Quaker world still have this form of unprogrammed worship. But contemporary Friends are discovering that a meeting for worship once or twice a week is not enough. We need a deeper quiet and listening that permeates our whole way of being. We need to live a life that quiets down enough to be able to hear that still, small voice. An otherwise hectic life, with one or two hours of silent worship a week, is hardly conducive to distinguishing God's call to faithfulness from all the cultural and self-imposed expectations.

In an attempt to reflect more deeply on this dilemma of busyness, we Friends have been looking back into our heritage to see what earlier generations might have to teach us. The first thing we have learned is that Quakerism was not just adherence to a few distinctive forms such as the silent worship. Rather the worship was but one expression of a *whole culture* devoted to listening to God.

I can remember some of that traditional culture myself. As a young person I lived on the outskirts of a Wilburite community of Friends. (The Wilburites are the Old Order Quakers, to use the parlance of the Amish and Mennonite tradition.) Whenever I visited in that community I recognized that life was lived in a manner that honored faithful response to God's leadings. The ability to recognize and respond to these leadings grew out of a quiet center of listening and permeated the whole culture.

### A Silent Opportunity

When one visited in the homes of conservative Friends, the conversation might lapse from the usual give-and-take into a period of silence. No one filled in the silent space with small talk as we are apt to do in our culture. People looked forward to that point in a conversation when everyone became aware that we were gathered in the presence of the One who was our Shepherd and our Guide. Those precious times of quiet would bring our subsequent conversation and our relationships with one another to an entirely new depth.

I remember on one occasion visiting an old Quaker farmhouse. The family happily showed me the big bell outside the kitchen door. Usually they rang the bell to call the laborers in the field at mealtime. But that was not the function of the bell that was mentioned to me first. Instead the family said, "We ring the bell when the travelling minister comes for an 'opportunity.'"

An "opportunity" is an old Quaker practice of having an occasion of silent worship and spiritual conversation with an individual, family, or small gathering. It was a mode of spiritual nurture often undertaken by travelling ministers who were led by God to do this visiting not only in their home meetings, but often among members of far-flung meetings. "Opportunities" became occasions to step back briefly from the workaday world to hear what God might be saying about one's life-direction, problems, burdens, hurts, and fears. It was a time to let Christ be one's true shepherd, rather than just talking about Christ as the center of one's life.

The traditional Quaker communities also honored the practice of "retirement," setting aside time, now and again, from the immediate demands of daily life to hear Christ, the Word of God, who is so easily drowned out by all our human words.

In today's language, I suppose we might talk about times of retreat instead of "retirement." But retreat has the connotation of a formal occasion that requires special arrangements and facilities. Times of "retirement" did not require anything special, not even a travelling minister. One could take a quiet hour or a quiet afternoon for reflection or just "being" in the presence of the Spirit.

### **One Weary Applicant**

Because my own Quaker community still kept many of the old forms of quiet worship, I had not realized how far we had drifted into the fast-paced, activity-centered style of living until several years ago when I first applied to teach at the Quaker study center where I now live. The interview process was an amazing feat of endurance. I had to speak with everyone living at the center; the dean and the teachers, the cooks, the maintenance and housekeeping people and the

office staff. Since we are all part of one community, all have the right to help decide on applications from those who would like to join in that community.

On one level the interview process was a fine testimony to community life. But the net result of this demanding process was a frazzled applicant. I could hardly think straight after explaining to thirty different people my philosophy on education, my understanding of Quakerism, and my views on life in a religious community.

Just when I thought I had finished the last of the conversations, the dean came by to say there were Friends from a Wilburite community on campus. They wanted to interview me too. I struggled to gather what little strength remained and walked across campus, reviewing in my mind what I could say about teaching and Quaker community life to these visiting Friends.

But when I reached the visitors, something strange happened. After a pleasant introduction all around, they said nothing. They asked no questions. I was beginning to wonder if I should launch into my own ideas on Friends' schools and Quaker theology when I realized what was occurring. We were in the midst of an opportunity.

These Friends did not want to know what I thought on various erudite subjects of theology or educational philosophy. They wanted to wait upon the Lord. They wanted to know if I could listen to God. After all, philosophies change; experience broadens and deepens. Those were not the central issues for these Friends. The heart of the matter was living a life in a listening relationship with God and being obedient to God's leadings.

That opportunity was a breath of fresh air. It was a time to recupeate from the demands of the interview process. More importantly, it allowed me to remember who I was and whose I was. My rush of activity and my rehearsal of my own views began to recede from the center of my mind. Now I could listen to the true Center.

In the quietness I came face to face with the realization that persistent busyness is the result of an exaggerated sense of pride in human knowledge, activity and skill. We live in an era when human beings consider themselves masters of the world. We have at our disposal such tremendous knowledge and power: military might, technological

tried to respond to this call, we have increasingly recognized the role of quiet listening as the heart of faithful community life. Opening ourselves to our history and heritage has been of enormous help in this process. Our communities have not imitated the forms of earlier generations; we have been drawn to the same Divine Source.

### Community Listening

We have also learned something important about the place of community in the process of listening. Listening is not simply an individual spiritual discipline. Most people do not have the power to live apart from the busy, activity-oriented world by themselves. We find we must be part of a committed meeting-community which provides alternative structures of living and gives support and encouragement to its members to live in and through those alternative structures.

Moreover, in our experience the individual spiritual disciplines alone are not sufficient. Simply adding a quiet time periodically to our personal busy schedules is not adequate by itself. That only makes the quiet time another activity to add to an already over-burdened schedule. Such a discipline does not challenge the basic structure of an over-crowded, hectic life. It is this structure which needs to be challenged.

In recent years Friends Meetings are again making a commitment to a life of listening, quiet, and reflection. We use some wonderful, time-honored practices and some new forms as well. For example, meetings and small groups have the traditional meeting for worship and newer modes such as worship-sharing groups, quiet days, and silent retreat weekends. Many Friends are once again undertaking spiritual nurture work as travelling ministers, and the number of opportunities is growing rapidly.

Not all forms of listening need to be done in groups. Our communities give encouragement to those who plan personal times of retirement: a daily quiet time, a retreat day each month, a hermitage weekend a couple times a year.

Of course, these are not the only ways to listen to God. Other religious groups may develop other forms that are particularly

power, economic and political power, even the subtle power of psychological and religious insight.

We are so caught up in our knowledge that we have not been able to use it wisely. Militarily we have come to the brink of nuclear holocaust. Our technology, while bringing many advances, has also raped and polluted our earth. Our economic and political might, while preserving many fine values, has also participated in a system which systematically helps impoverish the Third World. Madison Avenue uses the knowledge of the human psyche to create a culture of illusory wants and materialistic desires. Somehow we have used the very gifts God gave us to distort and warp our world.

At the very heart of the problem has been the way we put our human powers and wishes at the center of our lives. Our activity then becomes a way to destroy rather than to redeem. It happens on an international scale and in our own personal lives. We have forgotten how to listen to God.

### Climbing a Spiritual Pyramid?

We create the same problem in our spiritual lives. We often act as though the religious life were a pyramid to climb. We "advance" by mastering techniques of prayer and meditation. We increase our activity in the church or in our professional work, thinking it is a sign of our mastery of God's way of love and caring. But, in fact, we succumb to the temptation to put ourselves in charge of our own salvation.

When we stop the excessive doing and over-extended busyness, we enter again that quiet place where we can hear God's voice. It is an act of repentance. There we learn that we are not being called to be masters of our world. We are being called by One who would master us. Our master came as a Suffering Servant and calls us to follow the same path. Only then will our own activity have its proper direction, purpose, and pace.

The Holy Spirit has been moving powerfully, bringing similar understandings in many Quaker communities in the last few years. We are being called back to a life truly centered in Christ. As we have

*A Lasting Gift*

appropriate for their circumstances and their members. Whatever the forms, we believe that a corporate commitment to a life of quiet listening and renewed discipleship is a powerful prophetic challenge to our world which has lost itself in its own human demands and busyness. In that quiet place we can again receive God's Word of chastisement, forgiveness, healing, and direction. Our lives, our activities, and our words can go forth, grounded in the Word, Christ, answering that of God in everyone.