

‘Centering and Settling into the Silence’ with Quaker Children (Ages 7 – 12)

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Introduction:

While lying in bed at night, as a child of 8 or 9, I was given an inward place of comfort and stability to retreat to in the midst of a chaotic family life. It was a safe place to bring my fears, receiving comfort, insights and pure love. Since those early years, and finding Friend’s Meeting for Worship, accessing this space within and quietly resting there with God has progressed from being set in motion by desperate need to being entered into willingly, with desire and joy. At present, and for as long as God grants it, my ‘Centering and Settling into the Silence process’ can be instantaneous, as can the gifting to me of messages.

There are two broad steps in the process. The first is Centering or quieting, to the greatest degree possible, distractions and external thoughts. This is simply described in *From the Center Out*,

“To be in touch with our spiritual center, we must take time to quiet our bodies and minds from distractions, and this process is called ‘centering.’ **Centering** involves relaxing our bodies and awakening our senses so we can be **listening** to our spiritual center.” (3)

The second step in the process is Settling into the Silence. I cannot give a definitive definition of this step, except to inadequately describe my experience of it. When I Settle into the Silence I seem to be embraced by wings, offering warmth, safety and love. Everyone who has had the experience will describe it in their own unique way. Because of this, I found I could not offer guidance to the children beyond bringing them to the ‘door’ of the inward teacher. Once there, I trust that the love and comfort awaiting them will not only allow them to knock on the door, but that they will do so with great joy, fearlessness and anticipation.

My own ‘Centering and Settling into the Silence process’ most often is simply sitting down and going to, or arriving at, that space within where I wait in silence. I physically feel the location at the top of my head. The Centering part of the process has

most times proven to be unnecessary to me. However, when it is necessary a line of scripture or hymn facilitates the process.

After two boys in our Meeting (ages 10 & 11) showed a heightened awareness of their spirituality, I asked their parents how they were helping their children find that special place within, where they could engage with their inward teacher. I discovered that while a few of the parents had some experience with centering or relaxation techniques, most were not able to settle deeply into the silence.

Reflecting on how important my centering and settling experience was when I was young, although I certainly did not call it that, I decided to explore the available curriculum to use in guiding my Children's Religious Education (CRE) Class (ages 7–12) towards experiencing both. After conferring with our CRE teachers and a few middle elementary Quaker school teachers, I found some inspiring ideas to reflect on, and some very helpful guides on centering in the Yoga/Zen traditions. I was not able to find any lesson plans, or guidance, that would move us from the centering phase to the sitting in silence with Spirit phase. I now know that moving from the 'ante-chamber' to the 'room' can be presented but not taught.

Talking with individual Friends in my Meeting, and getting enthusiastic feedback from both the Ministry & Oversight and CRE committees, I decided to introduce the process of Centering and Settling into the Silence to my CRE class without knowing the specifics of how I would proceed from one lesson to the next. The goal would be to at least help the children become aware that they could experience the sitting in silence which would initiate their individual connection with God. I trusted that each session with the class would inform the direction of the next. Augustine of Hippo gave me some hope when he stated, "I believe it is possible to examine our subject matter through a glass of tenderness as well as through the glass of reason." (O'Reilly, 82)

Some Things Considered:

Is the subject age appropriate? In my limited experience, it has seemed appropriate with children between the ages of 7 and 12 who are able to sit with their eyes closed and relate what they felt or experienced. Elizabeth Brimeflow wisely advises,

“Since it is a matter of growth and since Friends’ meetings are not all the same, no tidy timetable of learning can be suggested.” (37-38)

Is the topic appropriate for middle-school children? It is at the heart of being a Friend, therefore I think it is not only appropriate but a necessary one to address. Peggy J. Jenkins concurs when she writes, “..... take a few minutes for the children to still their minds, go within, and feel that cord of love, peace, and perfection.” (15)

Is it not taught because it’s thought improper to do so, or because it’s considered a personal, spiritual practice? While some Friends believe it is a matter that should be learned strictly by experience in Meeting for Worship, without some guidance in the beginning it is possible that the process could get off on the wrong foot or just not tried at all. In the *Friends Journal* of July 2007, which was devoted to Nurturing Younger Friends, Kat Griffith brings up a number of points which, while beyond the scope of this paper, might open up discussion on why we do not expose our children to settling deeply into the silence.

“Sometimes our own childhood experiences of being force-fed unpalatable doctrines seem to have made us unwilling to share with our children any religious or spiritual beliefs at all.” (8)

“We may even believe that Friends are found, not made; that there is nothing we can or should do to influence the spiritual course of our children’s lives.” (8)

As noted, we have a number of adults of all ages in our Meeting, including some of the parents of the children in my CRE class, both new and long time Quakers, who have never found their “personal” way of experiencing the silence deeply. If they had at least a preliminary introduction to the subject, they might have explored it further with success. I think it is wonderful these Friends faithfully attend Meeting for Worship, but I am disappointed that they are not able to enter into our communal practice of sitting in silence with Spirit. Some adults have expressed a desire to explore settling into the silence and have asked for classes to help them with this process, possibly as a result of these children’s classes. As Stanford J. Searl, Jr. noted while doing research on Quakers and the silence,

“As one research participant said directly, the point of Quaker worship is to wait upon the Spirit, to settle into the silence created by Quakers, and to allow the potential for participants to realize how the worshippers are connected.” (2)

How can we expect children, or adults for that matter, to participate in the life of the Meeting if we don't guide them in learning how to worship in the manner of Friends? In Meeting for Worship, Business Meeting, and committee meetings, we often settle in silence together to bring issues to Spirit. To insure a divinely directed outcome, we must make sure more and more of our Friends learn how to wait in silence with God. How wonderful we have the opportunity to start with the children in our Meeting. We long for them to join us in bringing issues to God, to be a part of the “sense of the meeting.” Or, as Kat Griffith states it in *Friends Journal*, July 2007,

“Many of us claim that our social/political/environmental witness grows out of our faith. Why do we think it's right to talk about the fruits of our faith, but not the roots? Why do we think it's right for our kids to know our deepest convictions on racism and nuclear arms, but not our deepest experiences of God?” (8)

This goal was eloquently described in *From the Center Out*,

“As Quaker parents, teachers, and Meeting members, we hope to show our children that their ‘knowing’ or ‘feeling’ about God is something special and can be developed throughout their lives in a personal relationship with God through prayer and quiet and contemplation. We invite the children to be a part of the living silence in Meeting for Worship. But have we adequately prepared them? Often children are not ‘tuned in’ when Meeting starts on Sunday morning. Instead they are waiting for the time to pass when they can go out to their activities. We can prepare our children by talking with them about what ‘happens’ in Meeting for worship and how to center into the silence.” (2-3)

As teachers, or guides, we should keep the following in mind:

There are many tools, or aides, that can be introduced by the teacher to help the children experience centering. What are the tools you have used? Ask the children for ideas for ‘tools’ of their own, once they understand their use. (Pictures; personal

drawings; centering phrases or words; lines from hymns; movement; repetitive crafts like weaving or knitting).

The use of tools in centering is not the end of the process, but just the beginning. I believe intention is very important to the entire process. If authentic, after arriving at the door of the Inward Teacher and knocking, we will be embraced and enter the Universal Stream of God where we will join other Friends who have settled into the silence. Here we will wait, listening together for Divine leadings.

Since everyone feels this centering process in different ways, we must listen carefully to each child's personal expression of what they have seen or felt and, if appropriate, integrate their terminology into ours in order to encourage them to continue their journey.

Over time, whatever tool is used to begin the centering process may no longer be necessary. The students need to know that this is a possibility, so they do not consider their success unsuccessful because they did not use their 'tool.'

There is no right way or wrong way. Guiding and encouraging the children to find that place within is the goal.

Can you teach this, as described above, without ever having experienced it yourself? I do not see why not. However, I strongly feel that you must be aware of where you personally are in the process yourself. Then you can be authentic in imparting your experiences to the children. There is no shame in telling a child that you are waiting at the Inward Teacher's door. Be prepared with an answer to the obvious question, "Why haven't you knocked?" Again, intention is the key.

My Approach to Children's Religious Education (CRE):

Attendance is voluntary, entered into by the children and their parents. The children are a vital part of the future of the Religious Society of Friends. The Meeting not only imparts knowledge of our religion's past to our children, but we also provide an opportunity for the children to build community with each other, the Meeting's adults, the wider Quaker fellowship, and most importantly a way to corporately worship in communion with God.

I participate as a teacher in the Meeting's CRE program to assist the children in their community building and to help them explore various aspects of their spirituality. I also attempt to ensure that the children's experiences while they are with us are filled with joy and love. If, of their own choice, they wander away from our Quaker community I am trusting they will remember the values we shared for their entire lives. I also trust that Spirit will lead them back into the Quaker Community later in their lives. A reflection of this hope by Susan Corson-Finnerty concerning her own children, in the July 2007 issue of *Friends Journal*, in part reads,

“....., it was never entirely clear to me that they would choose to be Quakers as adults.” “... (*as adults*)----- they claimed and began to possess as their own the faith in which they had been raised.” (2)

This is not to say that we neglect the teaching of Quaker theology in our classes. However, the theology is treated not as a separate entity, but is integrated into the whole of growing up in the Quaker tradition. The package also includes worshiping together, sharing meals, sharing each other's joys and sorrows, and taking each other into our hearts. Augustine of Hippo expresses it this way:

“... to talk and laugh and do kindness to each other; to read pleasant books together; to make jokes and then talk seriously together; sometimes to disagree, but without any ill feeling, ... to be sometimes teaching and sometimes learning; to long impatiently for the absent and to welcome them with joy when they return to us ...” *Confessions of St. Augustine*. (O'Reilley, (78).

We experience, we learn, we smile, and we laugh heartily. .

Format currently being used in Children's Religious Education (CRE) at Alexandria Friends Meeting, Alexandria Virginia.

The following format is generally used:

- Opening Circle (10 minutes)
- Class (30 - 35 minutes)
- Closing Circle (5 minutes)
- Meeting for Worship (10 minutes)

The Opening Circle:

Holding hands, the new students are introduced, news is shared, announcements are made, a song is sung, and one volunteer sends love around the circle by squeezing the hand of the person next to them.

The time spent in class:

Some type of craft project is included with each lesson. The lesson itself should not under most circumstances take the entire allotted time, unless the craft part of the session is integrated into the lesson.

Each student has a three ringed binder in which to keep their notes, handouts, and drawings. The Journal concept was the children's idea.

The Closing Circle:

Holding hands, we use this time as a reminder that the children's parents, and our other Friends, are sitting silently in the Meeting Room lovingly waiting for us to join them.

A volunteer sends love around the circle.

We proceed to the Meeting Room door and quietly listen before entering the Gathered Meeting, making sure we do not interrupt a spoken message.

Overall curriculum and goals:

Identifying the primary purpose for which Friends sit together in Meeting for Worship and learning how we can participate. (Settling into the Silence – the Universal Stream of God - and actively waiting for Spirit and possibly guidance.)

Discussing Friends' process in accomplishing their primary purpose.

Beginning the process of learning and experiencing what Friends in Meeting are experiencing while silently waiting on the Spirit.

Practicing and refining the way, or ways, which will lead us to our inward teacher, or at least to its threshold.

Sharing our experiences with each other and the entire Meeting.

Please note:

Because of scheduling, I was able to use this teaching module at most once or twice a month. Since the students do not attend CRE on a regular basis, a steady progression from one step to the next was not always possible. Often, the lessons were repeated and reviewed before progressing to the next step.

It quickly became apparent to me that the children's response to this teaching module would be as individuals. From the first time they closed their eyes and told of their wildly different experiences, I realized that within the class framework of mutual support and encouragement, progress would be individual and not at the same pace.

Flexibility is important. Stopping to address individual experiences is vital for the individual's understanding of what is happening to them inwardly, and as a teaching tool for the rest of the class. Always be aware to direct the class back to the point of the lesson, if it still remains relevant. Do not be afraid of putting the lesson plan back into the folder and going with the flow. Just do not give up being the guide.

If any individual experience gets too intense, be prepared with anything to diffuse the situation - a group hug, a snack, a craft project, a book, or a game.

Because of the fluid nature of this topic and the children's responses to it, I have noted the general curriculum I used and how it actually played out. I came to the realization that I would not be able to break the material down into tightly organized lesson plans without major manipulation of the actual experiences. What I said and how the children responded is not always verbatim. Where memory or notes failed, I have paraphrased. The odd formatting is used to clarify the children's responses to my contributions.

My CRE class has not completed the curriculum goals as outlined above. It is an ongoing, lifelong lesson plan which we will revisit once or twice a month or whenever possible.

Integrated Curriculum and Log: from March 25, 2007 through October 25, 2007.
Participants: Olivia (8); Miranda (10); Nora (11); Elise (11); Tanner (11); Julian (7); Maddie (12); Nicole (9); Becca (12); and John (CRE teacher).

(After most sessions, the class was given an assignment to take into Meeting for Worship. Something to observe about the Meeting or something to use in centering. The children and I met individually during lunch to discuss what they experienced during Meeting for Worship.)

Children, let's outline what our CRE class schedule is on First Day. How do we start?

("We circle, tell about ourselves from the last week, hold hands, sing a song, send love around, go to our corners for class.")

And after class?

("Circle again, send love around, go into Meeting.")

While in the closing circle, does one of the adults say anything? What?

("Yes, they tell us we are going into the quiet room, where our parents have been waiting for us to join them.")

And what happens next?

("We tiptoe to the Meeting House door and listen to see if anyone is talking. If someone is, we wait until they are done. If not, we go in and sit with our parents – at least I do." "I don't. I sit with my friends.")

Read out loud: Abby Hadley's, *We're Going to Meeting for Worship*

In the story that was just read, what caught your attention?

("It was funny when he looked around to see if someone was sleeping." "I liked that he thought about a quiet place.")

Everyone here has gone into the Meeting Room at the end of worship for about 10 minutes, right?. What do you think has been happening in the Meeting Room during the 50 minutes, while you were out here in class?

("The adults are sitting." "They're sleeping." "They're waiting for God to talk to them - individually." "If God talks to them, they will get up and tell everyone else what God said." "They're bored!")

If they are really bored or constantly falling asleep, do you honestly think they would keep coming back to Meeting each week?

(“No!” “Good point, John.”)

Between the physical act of sitting down, getting comfortable on the bench, closing their eyes and waiting with God, a process is taking place. From the moment your parents and other Friends decide where to sit, a process, or transition, begins. Everyone who is in the Meeting Room will feel what goes on during this process differently, even if only slightly. In order for you to experience what I am talking about, let’s close our eyes and keep them closed until I ask you a question.

I hear – I forget
I see – I remember
I do – I understand
-- Chinese Proverb (xiii)

What did you experience while you had your eyes closed? What did you see or feel?

(“Animals – my pets.” “A lot of things – all messed up.” “Food!” “The homework I have to do when I get home.” “Which nail polish I’ll pick for my nails.”)

Have you ever seen a small globe with snow in it with a scene?

(Everyone had owned at least one. They were described in detail!)

What do you do with it? How does it work?

(“You turn it upside down and the snow flies all over the place.”)

Okay. Let’s each of us shake the globe, put it on the table and describe what happens.

(“It settles at the bottom.” “It takes awhile.” “The snow gets deeper at the bottom.” “You have to hold it very still or some of the snow flies up again and you have to wait until it settles down.” “To keep the snow at the bottom, I have to be still, calm, careful, treat it gently.” “I gently put it back on the table and watch it.” “I don’t hold it. If I held it, I would have to be concentrating very hard. I would get tense and have a headache.”)

Is the table part of the process of getting the snow to settle down?

(“Yes, otherwise I wouldn’t be able to do it.”)

Describe the steps involved from beginning to end.

(“You pick it up and shake it.” “You put it back on the table.” “You watch the snow settle.” “Fall asleep.”)

Should we include falling asleep in the process?

(“No. I was just fooling around.”)

What you just told us visually describes what happens in Meeting for Worship when you sit down, close your eyes and wait for God.

(“I don’t like to close my eyes. There’s too much going on in my brain.”)

A Quaker Friend of mine doesn’t like to close her eyes either. She stares at the back of the bench in front of her, or a spot on the floor. Would that work for you?

(“I’ll stare at a spot on the floor.”)

Generally, attending Meeting for Worship is visually a similar process as shaking the snow globe and watching the snow settle to the bottom. Walking into Meeting for Worship and sitting down is represented by picking up the globe off the table. Shaking it and setting it back down on the table is like taking in a deep breath and exhaling. The snow flying all over the scene reminds us of all the thoughts that are going on in our heads – like homework, food, family, pets or friends. The snow slowly, quietly, settles into a resting position at the bottom of the globe, which represents us waiting in a quiet place within for God. What might happen with the globe next?

(“It gets knocked and the snow goes flying again.”)

Let’s see if we can experience this feeling of the snow flying, settling at the bottom and then flying again, when we close our eyes. Snow flying – thoughts flying. Snow settling – thoughts quieting. I have brought in some pictures from magazines and calendars. Pick one you really like and put it on the table in front of you. Why did you pick the picture you did?

(“The scene is peaceful.” “I love animals.” “My Mom and I made an Indian costume like this one for a school play.”)

I am curious why none of you selected the modern art style Coca Cola ad with the pinks, blues and greens in the background, or the close up of the evenly spaced balconies of a modern apartment building. See the balcony pattern repeating over and over again?

(“They were disturbing.” “They made me feel uncomfortable.” “Edgy.” “I didn’t like all those boxes. They scared me. I thought I would be trapped in them and wouldn’t be able to find my way out.”)

Let's close our eyes again, but this time let's follow a different process. After we close our eyes, we'll take in a deep breath, putting as many of our thoughts in a bag – a windbag - as possible and slowly let the breath out taking the bag of thoughts out on our breath. Okay, close your eyes. Take a deep breath in. Load the sack with as many thoughts as the bag will hold. I'll bet there's room for one more thought in the bag. Let's squeeze it in and now slowly, quietly exhale. Keeping you eyes close, now think of the picture you selected. Okay, open you eyes and share what happened this time?

("I thought of the animals playing in the yard in the picture." "It was peaceful, but then I started worrying about my homework." "My Mom was fitting the costume on me.")

Let's try it again, only this time when thoughts about homework, problems, etc. come into your minds, let's gently return to the beautiful picture and think about it. If it helps, you can slowly open your eyes briefly to look at your picture, close your eyes again, enter into your picture and explore it. Let's close our eyes, slowly breathe in, let all those thoughts flow into the sack and slowly breathe out taking the sack out with your breath. If you need to, gently look at your picture again. Go into your picture and enjoy it. Open your eyes. Did you experience or feel anything different?

("I imagined the dogs were playing and I called them. They came running over and we rolled in the grass together." "I like this scene. It reminds me of a quiet farm out where my Dad lives. I went and sat under the tree and closed my eyes." "I was sitting in my Mom's sewing room and sewing on my costume.")

What happened to all the distracting thoughts like homework, nail polish, etc?

("They're in the windbag by the side of the road." "I forgot about them.")

Isn't that amazing? Because the bag is just a 'windbag,' and not a real bag, the thoughts may find their way out of the bag and visit you again. If they come back, while you have your eyes closed, what will you do?

("Yell at them to leave me alone." "Hide, so they can't find me." "I'll open my eyes, look at the picture, close them and breathe in and out." "I'll shove them back in the bag again.")

When we think about it, if we do anything with the thoughts that is not gentle, it will be like running with the globe in our hands. The snow will never settle down and we will not

find that quiet place where God is waiting for us. If it becomes a shoving match between you, the thoughts and the bag, you will not make any progress that day. (Lot's of laughter now, with dialogue of shoving the thoughts back into the amorphous bag as other thoughts escape out the other side, Casper the Ghost style.)

Let's try something slightly different and gentler. Let's close our eyes, breathe in and out, but this time talk with your distraction(s) and tell them that you have some real important work to do. Ask them if they would please go someplace else and wait until you are finished. Open your eyes. Where did your distractions go?

("Into the pocket of my Indian costume." "They went into the barn, and some went behind the rock." "Into the dog house.")

Thinking about the snow settling in the globe, there are other tools besides pictures that we can use to help us put our distractions aside and get to that settled place. Can you think of any you might use in the same way besides the pictures I brought in?"

("Music." "A verse from the Bible." "A poem." "My cat purring.")

These are all wonderful suggestions. Over the next weeks, we will try these and other tools or aides. You may find that using tools like pictures, music, a verse from the Bible, your purring cat, will help you center into your silent space for many years to come. You may decide to switch tools from time to time, say from a picture to music or maybe something you have written. You may find that in time you will not need a tool. What do you think about that?

("Cool." "I don't understand." "How does that work?")

So far, you have been using a tool to keep distracting thoughts quiet for a bit. You all have felt that at least once. When the thoughts are momentarily quiet, sort of out of the way, that space you are now in is where you can extend your hand to God. Remember that God is within you, knows what is bothering you and what you need. God may give you an insight helping you with a problem or a decision you have to make. Once you experience, or feel that place where you can be embraced by the Spirit, or God, you will be able to find that place within yourself again and again. Some Friends think of this as having a conversation with God. What do you think?

(“That’s scary.” “That would be great.” “I’m not sure I’m going to like this.” “How will I recognize God?” “I hope God doesn’t jump out at me.” “Will God have a loud voice?”)

Read to the class: *The Berenstain Bears and the Big Question*.

Repeat these lines from the book: “Mama, what’s God?” “All you need to remember is that God made everything.” “Did God make questions?” “Mostly questions.”

You have heard us say, “That of God in us.” Remember, God has always been within you. That hasn’t been frightening to you before has it? That of God is within all of us and has been quietly waiting for you. As soon as you acknowledge God’s presence, God will fill you with warmth, love and peace. God will not be scary, or unrecognizable, loud, or jump out at you. Sometimes I feel an all embracing silence. Old friends do not need to be chatting all the time. They can rest together in complete silence and not say a word. Everyone feels or sees God in a different way. Think about how you see or feel God. God has always been within you, so how can God be scary?

(“Okay, not scary.” “But a surprise.” “I have to get used to this.” “Funny idea.”)

The original students in my class have progressed up to this point. The new students are in various stages of this process.

(Ideas of how to proceed)

When you sit down in Meeting for Worship, you have a choice of what to think about. To help you with that let’s separate what I call internal thoughts and external thoughts.

Which do you think would help you connect with that of God within you, your new hair color or your friend in the hospital?

Elizabeth Brimeflow: “There aren’t really ‘Sunday Meeting thoughts’ but in the silence together, one might as well try to give attention to things worth thinking about, of importance in life.” (42)

Let's say that your new hair color is an external thought and your concern about your friend in the hospital is an internal thought. Let's list some examples of internal and external thoughts.

I think we can turn most of these external thoughts into internal thoughts, just by refocusing them. Let's try a few.

Try some other centering tools in class and in Meeting, noting reactions to them:

Line from a hymn

Proverb or saying

Verse from Scripture

A line from a poem

A prayer

Something you have written

Mantra or sound

Let's go over each of the tools. Which ones appeal to you? Let's write them in your journal and number them 1 – 7, in order of which worked best for you.

We'll progress to making ourselves available to God during the periods of relatively few distractions. We will need to work with gentle sayings, etc., such as one that I use a lot, "Not my will, but thy will be done." Or, the first line from a hymn such as, "'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free."

Jill Bottum; *Finding My Quiet Voice Within* (poem);

"With my parents, I join the circle of Friends
And in the silence
learn to listen to my quiet voice within."

"With my parents nearby, I am part of the circle of Friends
and in the silence
learn to listen to my quiet voice within."

"I hope and pray that I can give my children
the gift my parents have given me.

I once again settle into the silence
and I listen to my quiet voice within.”

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