

## “What Do I Do in Meeting for Worship?”

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The purpose of this essay is to talk about the meaning of Quakerism and Quaker Meeting in my life and to respond to the question I’ve been asked by several Friends when I’ve told them that I am a nontheist; “Then what do you do in Meeting for Worship?”

I came from a mixed religious background with much religious conflict and was raised as an atheist, with rejection not only of God but of the idea of religious experience. The image of God that developed in my childish psyche was of the Lincoln Memorial, but bigger and farther away. This was not at all a negative image. Lincoln and his memorial statue are very meaningful to me. Whenever I see it, I want to climb into his lap and be held and comforted. As appealing as this image is, however, I realized that it could not serve as a basis for a spiritual life.

I think I’ve always had a hunger for a spiritual life, a hunger that grew more pressing when my father died and the fundamental fact of mortality, which I had thought I understood from an early age, became real to me – no longer an abstraction. Not long after that, I attended my first Quaker Meeting. Like many other people, I had an immediate sense of “coming home”, to the quiet, to the peace, to the idea of inner light.

When I applied for membership, I explained that I was a non-Christian Quaker but I didn’t raise the issue of God. I haven’t been comfortable using that word to describe my religious experience. I felt able to translate other people’s talk of God into language that felt appropriate to me but wondered if this translation is based on honesty and integrity, or if I’m glossing over fundamental differences because I don’t want to acknowledge that I don’t belong in this place that feels like home to me. To what extent is the difference only a matter of the words we choose to describe a shared experience?

When I have heard Friends define God as the power in a gathered Meeting for Worship, I have responded by saying that I have also felt this power but wonder “Why call it

God?” One answer I have received is that the people with whom one shares this experience call it God and one wants to be able to communicate with them.

In talks with Quaker and some non-Quaker theists, I’ve heard a conception of God that resembles neither the Lincoln memorial nor an all-powerful being whose will determines everything that happens in our world. Still, the idea of will or purpose is the one place where I think there might be a difference beyond what words one chooses. I recently heard a rebroadcast of a radio address by Alistair Cooke in which he lovingly described a beautiful nature scene and then said “Whether you call it God or Nature or whatever term you are comfortable with, it isn’t there by accident. It is there for a purpose.” And here I have to disagree with Mr. Cooke. To me, the beauty of nature and the fact that we are alive and able to enjoy it are glorious accidents. I feel that religious experience, beauty, love are very real but are not the results of a divine plan. So it may be the case that I differ with some others not only in the words I choose to describe our shared experience but in the cause to which I attribute it. In any case, I do share in the experience and the belief in its importance and “realness.”

What do I do in Meeting for Worship? Sometimes I fidget. Sometimes I am unable to get extraneous thoughts out of my mind. And I think I share these problems with at least some Friends who are theists. But sometimes I am able to go deep and listen for that “still small voice”. At one time I might have said that a difference between me and others is that the voice I am listening for comes from deep within me while others are listening for a message from an external power. But I have come to understand that a fundamental aspect of religious experience – prayer, meditation, a gathered Meeting – is the dissolution of the boundary between the individual and the rest of the Universe. Then the distinction between inner and outer loses its meaning. So what I do in Meeting for Worship is not very different from what others do, whether or not we use the same words to describe it. And the fact that we are doing it together is part of what makes it so powerful.