

Meeting for Worship, Schoolchildren, and You

By Mark Franek

This piece originally appeared in the William Penn Charter School's internal document for faculty and staff called *P.C.P.D.* (Penn Charter Professional Development), September 2007, vol. 15, no. 1.

There is no manual for how heads of schools and teachers should lead—or follow—in meeting for worship. You won't find this info in your contract or in your Faculty Handbook. Meeting for worship, at its best, is like a great class. The ideas expressed below stem from my experiences in meeting for worship over the past ten years.

For the past 3 years I have systematically studied the *lived experiences* of schoolchildren in meeting for worship at Penn Charter. What impact, if any, did weekly meetings have on the students' perceptions of their intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual lives? As you can probably guess, I did not pursue this endeavor for fun, but as the main requirement for a doctoral degree at a local university. (A copy of my dissertation is located in the Gummere Library, but you will need at least a full hour and a strong cup of coffee to digest it.)

Since Penn Charter has a new head of school and a new dean of students, I thought it might be helpful if I used this space to consider the purpose of meeting for worship and what your role in it might be, assuming that you accept that meeting for worship is a moral enterprise and central to the life of the school.

First, a few caveats: The ink on my last Penn Charter paycheck is dry. I am not a Quaker, nor am I a convinced one. And, most importantly, I am not an expert on meeting for worship. Still, I hope you will find something in this commentary that will resonate with you.

Meeting As Metaphor

Howard Brinton, a celebrated Quaker scholar and philosopher, often compared meeting for worship to a budding flower: "Worship is an art in which some attain proficiency quickly and others slowly. In either case the success of the meeting is largely dependent on the quality of life which has preceded it. The flower blossoms only after the bud has slowly matured."

Allow me to extend Brinton's image to a full-blown metaphor (with apologies to the English department). Meeting for worship must be tended to carefully, like a garden, for benign neglect will not result in glorious bloom. Likewise, too much tinkering will stunt the meeting's natural growth. Weeds must be eradicated—but carefully. I know some students who have been "mentored" after meeting for sharing an awkward or inappropriate message, and have never risen in meeting to speak again.

Sometimes what looks like a weed is *not* a weed but the beginnings of a beautiful flower. Mind the garden in all its diversity and feed its talent. Be optimistic about its individual

and communal growth. The individual needs the group in order to grow and appreciate its growth. But the group also needs the individual, because the individual is often the source—or the conduit—of the Light/truth.

Balance is best, but sometimes risks must be taken. There are times when someone (the head of school, a teacher, a child) needs to nudge the group away from darkness and self-absorption and back towards the light. Paul Lacey calls this process “growing into goodness” in his book by the same name. A powerful, well-timed vocal message—like the wisdom of the group that arises from a meeting for worship for business—is like a garden in full bloom. You will know it when you see (hear) it.

Perhaps it’s time for a story to put this metaphor to the test.

A few years ago the administration decided to remove all the seat cushions from our meeting room benches and have them cleaned. That week, during meeting for worship, the bare benches became the sole topic of the students’ petulant vocal ministry. Several students that I interviewed for my dissertation recalled Dr. Earl Ball’s brusque reaction that occurred right at the close of meeting. The students didn’t like his response—even though, years later, they still remembered it.

Over the years Earl has used many tools to re-center or inspire the group. On this particular morning he used the rake. But he could have just as easily used the hose: “What might the missing seat-cushion-commentary this morning *really* mean?—for I have often witnessed members of this community act in kind and considerate ways.”

Earl almost never used the pick-axe or the shovel. (What would a meeting or a school resemble if the axe were used too often by adults in any context?)

That’s the thing about meeting for worship. Anyone can be a gardener. Some people are called by their inner voice, some are charged by outside authorities, still others stumble into their roles, unaware that they wield (or have always wielded) powerful tools. The great gardeners take their cue from living things. They know that the goal is long-term, positive moral growth. They can appreciate the power of a good story, and know that sometimes the best story is silence.

Meeting for Worship and You

There is no manual for how heads of schools and teachers should lead—or follow—in meeting for worship. (You won’t find this info in your contract or in your Faculty Handbook.) Interestingly, meeting for worship, at its best, is like a great class.

A great class is often marked by the absence of a *sole* teacher yet the teacher is still paramount (we’ve all had them before): The teacher quietly recedes into the background—but not so far that he or she can’t redirect or re-focus the discussion. It helps if the burden of leading (and following) during meeting does not fall too often or

too squarely on the shoulders of the head of school or on a few teachers, although I suspect that many good Quaker schools rely heavily on a few adults.

Ideally Quaker schools ought to cultivate good gardeners, both young and old. One way Penn Charter fosters this goal is with its Religious Life Committee, which takes the pulse of the meeting and periodically makes recommendations to the administration.

Any good Quaker school—if I can talk about the school as an entity—that takes its meeting for worship seriously knows that meeting rests on the hard work and good will of smaller groups, which ultimately rest on the faith of individuals. There is a secular component to all of this. At its core, meeting for worship is just good pedagogy and good citizenship training. Students learn a lot in and from meeting for worship, even though they often don't fully understand and appreciate these lessons and testimonies until they no longer have meeting in their schedule. Trust the process.

Of course, meeting for worship has a sacred side. At its core, meeting rests on the spiritual belief that there is something out there (or inside a person or a group of people) that is greater than the individual or the sum of individuals, and—here's the real kicker—it can be experienced each week.

So, gather your tools and use them wisely. A Quaker school's meeting for worship is always a group project. Dr. Ford may not need your help in this particular context, but your help will make the meeting more valuable and worthwhile for everyone.

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Mark's full dissertation study is "Friends first: The impact of meeting for worship on students at an urban Quaker school" (January 1, 2007). *Dissertations available from ProQuest*. Paper AAI3270862. <<http://repository.upenn.edu/dissertations/AAI3270862>