

Love, Admiration, Respect: Meeting for Worship in the Classroom

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What is Meeting for Worship in a Friends school? What is worship? A dictionary defines worship as a verb that means to love, admire, respect greatly. Worship in a Friends school provides the opportunity for this kind of communion—an opportunity for the gathered school or classroom community to sit together in a space of admiration and respect, wonder and awe; an opportunity for reflection, for mindful awareness of self and other and the larger picture of others in the world.

Children in elementary grades and younger don't have the same kind of definitional boundaries that adults frequently have between time for work, time for play, and time to be connected with a sense of wonder and awe. For them, work, play, and a sacred space or sense of wonder are all the same thing and it doesn't have to be named—it's just living. The boundary that children define is between engagement in meaningful activity and boredom. And Meeting for Worship, when it is seen as a time when one just has to sit still, be quiet, and count ceiling tiles for twenty minutes, is boring! Introducing and participating in worship in a way that is meaningful, not boring, can be quite simple. This essay provides some thoughts and concrete tools that can be used by elementary school teachers in preparing for worship with children in the classroom.

Questions to Start

The place—physical, temporal, emotional—that a classroom makes for Meeting for Worship can vary quite a bit. Teachers new to Quakerism may shy away from it altogether. Others may include it as a matter of daily scheduling with no further thought. Some teachers may labor over it; some may feel they simply don't have the time or the permission to include worship. Wherever one is coming from, it may be helpful to consider some basic questions about classroom Meeting for Worship and ideas for implementing it. If some of these ideas feel too church-y or New Age-y for you, don't use those ideas. Find something that feels comfortable to you.

What is classroom Meeting for Worship?

- It is time spent in the classroom centering down and reaching inward to that which unites each of us. It is time to focus on the wonder, joy, and love that fills the world and all that is in it.
- It is a moment of silence to refocus on what is important.
- It is time to appreciate the gifts and presence of each individual in the class.

Does it have to be silent and still?

- No! Sing! Make something! Dance, go for a walk, tell stories, play with clay, write a poem, play a game, draw, build!
- Parker Palmer writes, "One does not apply worship to life. You make it your practice until worship and life become one." This describes children and worship beautifully—it is exactly what young children already do.

Why should I squeeze one more thing into my crazy-busy day?

- Because your day is crazy and busy. And so is the kids' day. Is crazy-busy really what you want your classroom life to be about?
- Because you can focus more effectively in the midst of busyness if your mind and heart are settled.

When is a good time to have Meeting for Worship in the classroom?

- Every morning to start the day.
- Every Monday to start the week.
- When the class is struggling with something important or difficult.
- On a child's last day of school when they are transferring.
- To focus before a test, a performance, or an athletic event.
- When kids are overwrought.

Where?

- In your classroom.
- With another class in their room.
- In the Meetinghouse.
- In the library, auditorium, or gym.
- Outside in a field or a grotto or under a tree, in a garden or on a walking path.

- In a special classroom, such as art or music.
- Change your space once in a while. New settings are inspiring both for your planning ideas and for the kids' experience.

Set up?

Make the space special; mark the time as something out of the ordinary. You can do this just by adding a little something that you don't usually have in your room. Doing the same thing every time helps set this time apart as its own special event. For example:

- Ask the children to be silent as they enter the room.
- Light a candle.
- Sing a particular song to start or finish.
- Put some seasonal flowers in a special vase.
- Try some incense.
- Ring a bell, tap some wind chimes, or play an instrument to start.
- Take your shoes off.
- Sit on the floor if you are usually in chairs, or vice versa.

How long?

- 30 seconds; 5 minutes; 30 minutes. It depends more on the age of the children and the context of the worship than an outside standard. Traditional silent worship will likely be shorter than worship through stories, discussion, and art.
- You may want to have an expectation of how long silent worship will be from the outset. On the other hand it can be powerful to simply worship as long as you are led to. Feel for the right moment to end it—not by how long the wiggliest child can stand it but by what seems right in the center of your self.
- Allow one of the children to determine when to break worship by shaking the hand of her neighbor. Being the one to determine when is the right time to end worship makes one have to pay very close attention!

Inspiration for Planning?

If your goal is to make space to live out of the Spirit for the duration of worship, then the plans for the structure of that worship need to come from the same place. Use all the additional resources you like, but start by taking time to sit quietly, centering yourself. Use

your heart to listen for guidance about what to do to make a space for connection, reverent communion, and inward reflection in your classroom. Then, if you need to complement or support your leadings with resources, turn to friends and co-workers; stories; books about worship, centering, meditation; craft resources.

Introducing Centering to Children

Wherever you are led to go with your class in worship, whether you lead a simple minute of traditional silent worship, include a story and discussion, or create a whole community service endeavor rising out of worship, the experience needs to start from a centered, spiritual space. That traditional “moment of silence” needs to be a meaningful centering into the wisdom and love that unites and feeds us.

You may have had the experience of walking into a worship service, whether Quaker or not, and feeling deeply that there is something electric or binding moving through the room. The worship pulls you right into the center of it. However, a classroom (or a Meetinghouse) full of children who are not experienced in worship in the manner of Friends is not likely to start at such a powerful place. So we can provide a bit of a map to guide ourselves and our children to be open to the Spirit. Following are a few suggestions of landmarks for your map. Teaching landmarks to the children and starting with the same routine every time will help them learn how to use the time and eventually to sink naturally into worship as soon as they start to gather.

The first several times you worship with a class (more for younger children, less for older, but always more than once), be explicit, in language meaningful to you, about what Meeting for Worship is about. Keep it simple; for example:

- We’re going to listen with our hearts.
- We’re going to let go of everyday thoughts and concentrate on what is most important deep inside of us.
- We’re going to be still and feel the love that is inside and all around each of us.

By not getting too specific, you allow the children to recognize love by their own understanding. By using words you may not use all the time, such as love, you set this time apart as something special.

Teach the children explicitly how to sit. Here's a way to explain appropriate posture during worship:

The way we respectfully and reverently hold ourselves physically is significant. We do not sit all slouched over like we do when we're watching any old show on TV. We sit up, in a balanced way. When our bodies are balanced, it helps us find internal balance as well. Sitting with straight spines, relaxed and regal but not stiff like soldiers, allows our breath to be natural and deep.

I like to draw attention to hands. As soon as I start talking about sitting straight and centering down, children start holding their hands in traditional Buddhist meditation positions and then they start giggling. When I ask them what they think about when they do that the answers are frequently about cartoons. I explain that serious meditators hold their hands in different ways because hands are powerful and when they put their thumb and forefinger together it means something to them. To the kids, however, it just means cartoons. So I show them how I hold my hands in a way that is meaningful to me: open in my lap to remind me to be open to any gift of a thought or idea or feeling or song that may be waiting for me in worship. This also helps children to be aware of restless hands in worship and gives them something to do with them.

The older children are, the less they want to close their eyes. The benefit of closing one's eyes is that every movement and every friend in sight does not catch one's attention; rather, attention is drawn internally. An alternative is to look down at the floor a foot or so in front of oneself.

Centering into silence is made easier with a focus on breathing, a natural process. Suggest starting with a deep breath. It is amazing how relaxing and cleansing and centering such a simple thing can be.

Using the God Word with Kids

It is not unusual for teachers to hesitate to bring up issues of spirituality and divinity with students. Those who have had experience in public schools have learned that it is inappropriate to bring up such matters in the classroom. On the other hand, Friends schools have made a commitment to supporting the spiritual growth of children, typically both in their written statements and in their actions. For this reason, teachers are invited to explore ways to bring the spiritual into the classroom explicitly and implicitly.

- That which is Divine has many names. Use the ones that are comfortable to you:

Love

Spirit

Force of Good

Divine

Light

Creative spirit

Nature

Source

Encourage the children to use the names comfortable to them.

- If you share your beliefs, do it very briefly. Your speaking *briefly* guards against their absorbing your beliefs as their own, without doing the spiritual work they need to do.
- If students are asking questions that feel too personal to you, don't hesitate to tell them that your faith is personal and you choose not to share more than you already have. Allow them the same option.
- Encourage them to speak with their family about what their family beliefs and traditions are. Make space for them to share with each other what their beliefs and traditions are.
- Some kids don't believe in Spirit. Their beliefs need to be welcomed as safely as every other religious belief the children bring into the classroom. This is one reason for using names for God that are less connected to religious traditions: Love, Wisdom, Truth (all names Quakers like to use!).

Living from the Center

In the beginning of this essay, I stated that children don't separate regular, everyday space from sacred space in their lives. Now I've written a whole essay about providing support for making one part of the day, worship, sacred. This is a segmented way of perceiving worship and it may be used in that way. Alternatively, however, worship can be understood as one more part of the life-filled day where particular care is given to recognizing that life. Next on the daily schedule may be math class, which is also part of the life-filled day where particular attention is given to numbers and their patterns. Regardless of the content of one's

interactions (numbers, music, places and events, centering), the life that courses through and unites each of us in a fundamental, unseen way is present. The reaching and the searching are truly something that can be part of each breath we take.

On a very long car ride across several states when my daughter was four, she announced, "I'm God and you're God and that tree is God, we're all just different shapes." Less than a minute later, with just as much gravity, she announced, "Wouldn't it be funny if walkie-talkies were phones that walked?" In her perception, walkie-talkies, trees, her self and God are all of a piece. Math, language arts, and social studies are of that same piece. The way in which we approach these subjects and our friends who are learning about them is just as much a matter of making space for perceiving the Divine as is worship. Children already do this—in this way the children can be our teachers.