

Meeting for Worship: Developing Reflective Practice in Friends Schools

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John Fothergill, an eighteenth-century British Quaker educator, posited that a goal for Friends education is “to habituate children, from their early infancy, to silence and attention,” and that this habit will form “the ground-work of a well-cultivated understanding.” All Friends schools hold Meeting for Worship, a regular practice in developing the habit of silence, attention, and reflection. From the Quaker viewpoint, Meeting is a time period in which the school community gathers together in silence with intention to be in a reflective, receptive mode, open to the divine spark within each person. Viewed through the lens of mindfulness practice, Meeting is a regular opportunity to practice centering, focusing attention with an alert and relaxed mind, developing the skills for expanding awareness of all that is present in the mind, spirit, and the gathered community.

Even though Meeting for Worship is predominantly a group experience of collective silence, the Quaker aspect of Meeting includes inspirational speaking. When a person feels “led to speak,” he or she stands and offers the message in a clear voice. The message may be in the form of a contemplative thought, an image, a song, a poem, a memory, an observation, a question. The group is expected to settle into a period of silent reflection before another message is offered. Occasionally, one person’s message may prompt others to offer a message, and sometimes a theme emerges within the group. Meeting ends with each person in the group shaking hands with his or her neighbor.

Kim Hays’ research on Quaker high schools shows that, from a student perspective, Meeting for Worship is a time for self-reflection and relational reflection. Unique to Quaker pedagogy is the cultivation of an ongoing habit of personal reflection and shared community reflections. Because Friends have neither doctrines nor dogma, they place most emphasis on the manner in which people lead their lives and treat one another. This aspect, as well as the sense of genuine inquiry, allows young people from all religious traditions (or none) to feel comfortable together during the silence of a Friends school Meeting for Worship. A chance to imagine, to dream, to wonder, to solve a problem, to

relax, and to listen to one another's thoughts awaits members of a school community during Meeting for Worship. Meeting provides an opportunity for everyone to gain fresh perspectives on daily life.

In Friends schools, the school community (or division, or classroom) generally gathers weekly for school Meeting for Worship. Sitting still in silence can be difficult or uncomfortable for children and teenagers if there is no orientation to the practice. Teachers in Friends schools use many techniques to prepare their students for the experience of Meeting and spend time talking with them about ways to use the silence, how to center, how to listen. The goal is to cultivate an understanding that the silence is alive, that it is a time for settling and clarity, and that it helps to create a sense of community. Both the individual and the community grow within the silence as clarity is developed. Some simple strategies, as illustrated in the examples below, can support students in developing the core mindfulness skills for centering and reflection during Meeting for Worship. These skills are also key to learning. These strategies can be used in any classroom, whether or not in a Friends school, as activities to develop reflection, concentration, awareness, observation, and centered relaxation. The ideas came from educators at Friends Council workshops and in the Education Concerns Group of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

Very Young Children and Elementary School-Age Children

These practices are for short periods of silence each day that can support children in developing a tolerance for sitting still.

- Begin the day by having everyone hold hands and “pass a squeeze” while they all sit quietly. The length of time can be extended each day.
- Practice “building the silence” by having the class sit or stand in a circle in a darkened room. Pass a lit candle from one to another, carefully listening to the silence and focusing on the light while the candle makes it entirely around the circle.
- Use a jar of muddy water (with some glitter thrown in!) on a sunny windowsill. Shake the jar and suggest that our minds are like the jar of muddy water; we must let our busy, wild thoughts settle to let the Light shine through with clarity. Remind students that it takes time and practice. Alternatively, with children sitting in a circle, shake a jar of sand and water and place it in the center of the floor. Ask the students to settle themselves while the sand settles itself from the water.

- Give children a piece of colored string as they enter one of the first Meetings for the year. Suggest that each color denotes an idea, such as brown for the earth, white for peace. Encourage children to focus their thoughts on their string's color and share what comes to mind.
- For four-, five-, and six-year-olds, read *Daniel Goes to Meeting*, which describes Meeting for Worship and thoughts a small boy has and what he does during Meeting. Then try sitting in silence for a minute or two. After the main Meeting for Worship, students can write what they thought of and did during Meeting. Young children can dictate to teachers and then make an illustration. These sharings can become a class book.
- As a class group, on the way to Meeting for Worship do a walking meditation around school grounds (use a bell to stop every two to three minutes to observe). Stop and listen in silence to the natural sounds in the environment and observe the details of nature.
- For young children, present Meeting for Worship as a listening time. Have students imagine that they are out in the woods somewhere with animals such as deer and rabbits nearby. Ask them to get their bodies still enough so that the deer or rabbit would walk by not knowing that they were there. As they begin to get still, ask them to listen for sounds in the room. Then ask them to listen to the noises and the silence out-of-doors. Can they hear traffic? Wind? Finally, ask them to listen to their own breathing and notice how it is going in and out. Point out that once you get very still you can hear a lot of things you would not normally hear. Explain that in a silent meeting you might be able to hear messages within you that you would not normally hear.
- For second- and third-graders, stop all classroom activity 15 minutes before Meeting for Worship. Introduce the word *Listen* and then rearrange the letters to spell *Silent*. Next, read part of *The Other Way to Listen* by Byrd Baylor.
- For kindergartners, read aloud *Everybody Needs a Rock*. After the story, pass around a box of rocks and have each child select one to hold while they think about the rock and the story during Meeting for Worship. After Meeting, invite the children to share impressions. Various tactile objects can be used for handling and focusing, such as pieces of colored beeswax, yarn, telephone wire, tiny fabric squares, things with interesting textures.

- At the beginning of the school year, read *We're Going to Meeting for Worship* to the class. Then, visit the Meetinghouse and sit in the class' assigned spot to practice getting comfortable. Practice having Meeting, but for a brief period of time.
- Give each child a natural object, such as a leaf, a horse chestnut, corn kernel, bean, or twig. Invite the children into ten minutes of silence to study their object and be ready to describe and identify it when it is put in a pile with all the others. After ten minutes, ask children to put their objects together in the center of the circle. For the next step, the children try to identify their own item. Discuss how they knew it was theirs; could they have picked it out without the help of the silence?

Middle School and High School Students

- Invite each student in one class, such as eighth-graders in middle school or seniors in upper school, to memorize a poem. Open every Meeting for Worship for the year with one student reciting a poem.
- Invite sixth-grade students (middle school) or ninth-grade students (upper school) to take turns closing Meeting by initiating the end-of-Meeting handshake. This student can then invite others to share their "After Thoughts"—anything that the students had been thinking about during worship but had not wanted to share. This practice increases the number of voices heard and builds confidence for speaking during Meeting for Worship.
- Reflect upon Meeting for Worship after returning to the classroom. Teachers may ask if anyone had wanted to speak but was too afraid and ask him or her to share the message in class. Older students and adults can be invited to talk about how they have used Meeting and what it has meant to them in their lives.
- Invite the class to do reflective writing prior to Meeting for Worship, such as five minutes' free writing on "What do I bring to Meeting for Worship?" Follow by discussion.
- Talk about Meeting for Worship as a unique opportunity that is not afforded to many people: the chance to sit quietly and notice thoughts and feelings without having to be on the way somewhere or trying to accomplish anything is quite special. Encourage students to try to find moments outside of school to practice this kind of contemplation.

Faculty

Appropriate modeling by the adults is always important. Teachers can have important, simple messages to share, and one does not have to be a Quaker or a member of any religious group to speak during Meeting. Teachers are encouraged to use the time for silent reflection to resist the impulse to scan the group of students with an eye toward student behavior and resist the temptation to use Meeting as a platform for teaching. A teacher who has truly used Meeting for Worship well will come out refreshed.

For new teachers, Friends schools provide a brief in-service on the background and value of Meeting for Worship to Quakers and in a Friends school. Seasoned faculty members can give a description of a typical Meeting.

- At a faculty meeting, ask teachers to reflect on times when silence has been important to them and why, and ask them to share these experiences. Then, settle into a period of silent worship for about fifteen minutes and close with a handshake.
- Invite faculty to share with each other using these two queries for reflection: How do I make time for reflection in my classroom? How do I introduce silent meeting to students in my class?