

Learnings from “Four Doors to Meeting for Worship”
Worship Sharing, February 15, 2009, prepared by Jean Pfefferkorn

All quotes below are drawn from Pendle Hill Pamphlet #306 “Four Doors to Meeting for Worship,” by William Taber. Copyright 1992.

Because vocal ministry is to be treated in a separate meeting for learning, Taber's insights on the topic were not included in these quotes.

The heart of worship is communion with this invisible but eternal stream of reality in which is the living and eternal Christ. Worship, then, is something that can be entered at any time of the day or night when we are ready to step into that stream, either through the grace of God or through our own great desire (which also involves the grace of God)

One way to enter the stream is to imagine passing through a series of four stages or doors which lead into and through the meeting for worship.

The First Door: The Door Before

The first of these doors is the Door Before, or those moments when we find ourselves in a worshipful state of mind at any time during the week, whether day or night. It is almost axiomatic that once we become serious about the spiritual journey, about seeking God, we discover, sooner or later, that the once-a-week worship hour on Sunday is not enough to feed us, and so we discover the importance of the Door Before. ...Quaker journals and letters tell us that earlier Friends often went through the Door Before many times a week so that when they took their seats for Sunday or midweek meeting, they were already deeply prepared for entering the familiar and living Stream.

Each day is filled with countless opportunities for going through the Door Before, for dipping into brief moments of communion with that eternal yet ever present stream...Even the busiest life can usually provide a few minutes for unhurried contemplation of a Bible passage or a few paragraphs of inspirational reading, some active prayer and a time of quietly being present before God. Beginning and persisting in some form of this discipline seems to be one of the most important steps toward real spiritual growth and toward experiencing a more solid and meaningful meeting for worship.

The Second Door: The Door Inward

...the opening moments of traditional worship services appeal to many senses and sensibilities in order to help lift people out of their everyday preoccupations into the communal and wider state of consciousness we call worship. In contrast, the opening minutes of a Quaker meeting can seem pale and casual until one begins to realize that a Quaker meeting requires each worshiper—and not the just the minister and his or her liturgical team planning the service—to give the same kind of loving focused attention to this transition from one level of consciousness to another.

Some Friends develop their own special “rituals” to help them enter into worship, while other Friends may use a variety of methods, using whichever ones seem appropriate at any given time....most of these approaches include three important qualities. The first is desire, a profound yearning to be in the Presence; “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.”..The second is focus...And the third is trust, a synonym of faith, for it takes trust to go out into the deep water; it takes trust to let go and rest or float in the deep and Living Water of the Stream.

The Third Door: The Door Within

This experience of being united with a group which is “waiting on the Lord” can be described in many ways, even though no single one of them is adequate alone, and even though no single person will experience all of them, at least in the same meeting. For many people it feels like having been lifted or expanded into another state of consciousness which enjoys an inward, effortless quietness. At the same time the mind slows down into a reverie-like state, akin to, though not quite the same, as the reverie one falls into when sitting by the seashore or by a mountain stream, when time drops away or becomes irrelevant. Some may experience this as an effortless flow of images across the mind, which pauses now and then with an image which seems to have special significance. Others may experience an effortless flow of logical thought about some problem which has surfaced in the mind. Or perhaps scenes from the past week may pass in review, with an occasional pause before any episode which troubles us or about which God has something to teach us. Or we may be drawn into an effortless flow of prayer.

This experience is similar to being in a stream of water because, just as we never have any doubt about when we have stepped into a stream of water, so an experienced worshiper usually comes to recognize what it feels like to be in this living stream. Like an earthly river, this special reality seems to have no beginning and no end when we come upon it, even though we know that this stream also flows from its Source to the Eternal Ocean.

In this living Presence it becomes safe for the ego to relax, allowing us to realize that the sharp boundaries of the self can become blurred and blended as we feel ourselves more and more united with fellow worshipers and with the Spirit of God.

For some, the Inward Work of Christ may bring a strong sense of inward healing, accompanied with joy, peace, praise for the wonders of creation, or even a comforting sense of the great inner space and emptiness before God. For others there are no words at all to describe this timeless experience, other than “unity, unity, unity.”

The Fourth Door: The Door Beyond

..this privileged experience of nourishing oneness must end sometime, and we must proceed through the Door Beyond, shifting back to the more “normal” state of everyday consciousness. Even as the levels of consciousness begin to shift, we know that there are consequences from our having been here.

...we may leave the hush of the meeting with a heightened sensitivity to the injustice, violence, and pain all around us. Yet we can hope (and Quaker history seems to bear this out) that the same Power which allows us to suffer increased sensitivity to social evil also empowers us to reach out more creatively to touch the right spot or to pull the right handle to begin healing in lives and situations around us and to start a process of social change. Fortunately, the same Power which makes us more sensitive to evil and pain also makes us more open to an increasing awareness of earthly and spiritual resources which can enable us to be faithful followers of the Way of which Jesus spoke.

And so as we shake hands with the people around us, we know that each handshake is a token, a promise, a “symbol, sign and seal” of our new or renewed openness to God and of our commitment to go forth into the world with new eyes and a greater faithfulness in all that we do.

Queries for Worship Sharing

- In what ways do I prepare my heart and mind to receive the power of Presence and Love?
- How does worship deepen my relationship with God?
- How is this inspiration carried over into my daily life?