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In and Out of the Silence: Connecting Waiting Worship with Transformative Care

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In and Out of the Silence: Connecting Waiting Worship with Transformative Care

Abstract

This essay offers an in-depth view into the transformative care experienced by four educators who found community and soul care through regular, online meetings framed around the Quaker tradition of silent, unprogrammed worship. The four colleagues were initially brought together through participation in a doctoral program, and began meeting online when the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the program's traditional face-to-face summer residency to a virtual format. They formed solid bonds and found deep meaning through the soul care provided by the weekly meetings. As a result, the group found that the transformative care provided for each other began to naturally overflow into each other's spheres of educational influence—at both the university and K-12 levels. A personal account of each member's experience is shared in this essay, as well as an overview of how caring for one another initiated an outpouring of transformative care for those with whom they work or teach.

Keywords

Quaker, silence, soul care, community, unprogrammed worship, online, COVID-19, pandemic, care, stories

In and Out of the Silence: Connecting Waiting Worship with Transformative Care

Neil E. Cantrall, Scot Headley, Catherine Stevens-Parry, and Jim Wilkins-Luton

We are a group of four friends who came together in a graduate educational program, joined together through a COVID-19-era worship experience, and continue together in a weekly meeting for worship. This is the story of our coming together, joining together, and continuing together in worship, and the influence of that worship experience on our friendship and our lives as teachers and leaders in our various organizations. We have reflected on our need for and realization of how caring for one another through worship has better prepared us for the work of transformative care in our professional roles as educators.

*caring for one another
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George Fox University, affiliated with the Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends (Quakers), has offered a doctorate in educational leadership for about 25 years. During that time, the program delivery has utilized a basic format of asynchronous online courses delivered in the fall and spring semesters and a face-to-face summer residency. Over the years, faculty modified the summer residency based on course and program assessment and student feedback regarding the value of the residency, challenges in travel and housing, and the need to have exceptions made to the residency requirement in order to accommodate illness and urgent family matters. However, regardless of the changes in the

residency faculty continued to believe that a face-to-face gathering was necessary to develop and maintain close personal relationships between faculty and students. A major benefit of the summer residency was the informal interactions among participants, shared meals, opportunities for worship, fellowship, and recreational activities for students and faculty.

A major disruption to the program occurred in the summer semester of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with most other schools and institutions of higher education, George Fox was constrained in its ability to deliver its typical educational programming and had to alter operations to comply with state mandates and health guidelines to keep students and staff safe. Faculty desired to continue offering the summer residency, and quickly shifted the planned program to a live and online format using tools such as Zoom, supported by course offerings and accompanying materials through Canvas, a course management system.

At the time, I (Scot) was serving as a faculty member in the program and volunteered to facilitate an online worship experience for faculty and students, implementing a traditional Quaker worship practice referred to as the unprogrammed meeting. This time of worship was available as the beginning session of each of the residency day's schedules. In a face-to-face setting, the unprogrammed meeting, generally lasting for

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45-60 minutes, has participants sitting in a circular arrangement, facing one another, with a format consisting of entering the space in silence, with a brief welcome extended by a facilitator. In many traditional Friends meetings for worship, participants gather in silence with no introduction or centering thought offered. In some meetings, including those offered previously for program students, the facilitator introduces the time of worship by sharing a centering thought, both on paper, shared with each participant, and read verbally once or twice. The facilitator instructs participants to sit quietly and practice waiting worship, that is listening intently for the voice of God. “‘Still waiting on God’ is the Quaker phrase for what Friends practice in a Meeting for Worship. As the group of worshippers sits in silence, a sense of unspoken community begins subtly to be felt by everybody present” (Durham, 2010, p. 6). For a more complete description of this form of worship and the theology on which it is founded, see Dandelion (2005) and Durham (2010). Additionally, participants are encouraged to discern whether what may come to their hearts and minds during the meeting time may be a message received from the Spirit, either to be shared with the entire gathering or simply reflected on personally. These messages, when shared with the group, are referred to by Friends as vocal ministry. The facilitator closes the meeting verbally and offers a handshake to the persons adjacent to her. Afterward, participants may share reflections on the time of worship and vocal ministry and then share prayer requests with one another.

In the online environment, a similar format was followed with some modifications. The meeting for worship was shortened to about 30 minutes, conducted through Zoom video conferencing, and the centering thought was shared through Zoom’s text chat function. Generally, in the shortened time frame, silence was maintained throughout the first 20 minutes, with some sharing of reflections at the conclusion of the silent worship. Alterations to worship services of all kinds during the COVID-19 pandemic have been written about by practitioners and scholars alike. Regarding the move of the Quaker unprogrammed worship meeting, Dandelion and Grant (2021) concluded in their study of British Quaker meetings, “What is

clear, however, is the way in which British Friends relatively quickly adapted to new circumstances and adopted what was for many new technologies to ensure that worship as the central element of Quaker community continued” (p. 289).

Dandelion and Grant (2021) illustrated in their discussion of British Friends meetings, and applicable more broadly, that worship is the central element of Quaker communities and that technology allows for worship to continue in the face of disruption and change of circumstances. While great difficulty may have occurred in other faith communities in adapting their religious practice due to the pandemic, Friends were quite adaptable, since the key element of the community is silent worship, which can be conducted effectively in the video conferencing modality.

Due to the level of participation by faculty and students in the online meetings for worship and the participants expressed satisfaction with the experience, at the conclusion of the summer session, we continued to offer the worship experience once a week in the early morning for faculty and students. The number of participants during the 2020/21 academic year varied from five to ten. In the summer of 2021, residency was again delivered live and online, and the worship meeting continued that summer and through the 2021/22 academic year. By the end of summer 2022, four participants remained, a community college associate vice president, a full-time doctoral student, an elementary school teacher, and an emeritus university faculty member who became a community college dean. This article presents the stories of these four educators and how the unprogrammed meeting for worship brought them together powerfully and uniquely, allowing them to forge deep bonds of trust and friendship that endure to this day, even though the four have only been together in the same physical space once when three of them graduated from the doctoral program in the spring of 2023.

Roots of the Meeting for Worship

The particular form of worship that we conducted is taken from the traditional Quaker meeting for worship. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) arose in 17th century England as a reform movement to the Church of England.

Friends developed a theology based on their belief that God is accessible to all persons, that all persons are made in the image of God, and that there is ongoing accessibility to God through the Spirit. They did not modify their beliefs or practices to distinguish between economic classes, gender, and religious upbringing. Quakers rejected hierarchy and the rites and rituals that accompanied hierarchy, such as showing deference to a higher class or ceding authority to a leadership figure, both within society as a whole and within their religious community, The Religious Society of Friends. Their community exhibits both deference to the individual and acknowledgment of broader accountability to the community. "...Friends, for three hundred years have taken neither the path of religious authoritarianism nor the path of spiritual privatism. Instead, Friends have always accepted both the possibility of individual truth and the obligation of corporately testing that truth" (Palmer, 1977, p. 29).

As a result of this view of God and mankind, Friends' worship rejected a formal liturgy with well-prepared sermons by a designated minister. Quakers believe that all persons are ministers and ministry within the meeting for worship is characterized by a speaking out of the silence by anyone in attendance. And silence was the ground in which worship took place. Their theology and their practices resulted in ongoing conflict with government and religious authorities, indeed leading to suffering and persecution in the early days of their movement. However, the constant return to the silence of the meeting for worship led to two important outcomes, a strengthening of the community and a resolve to bring the Light of Christ to the world in the form of feeding, healing, confronting injustice, and responding to the basic needs of humanity.

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Palmer (2004) stated, "To understand true self-which knows who we are in our inwardness and whose we are in the larger world—we need both the interior intimacy that comes with solitude and

the otherness that comes with community" (p. 54). This interplay between solitude and community is actually enacted within the meeting

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for worship and becomes a microcosm of the broader life an individual lives in rhythm between what Rohr (2016) described as contemplation and action, or as Jane Scott (1982), a British Friend described as the interplay between worship and service, recognizing God in worship and carrying out service afterward. We have found that our shared time of silent worship has strengthened our care for one another and has allowed us to see the connection between the transformations in our personal lives and the work of transformative care in our professional lives.

And the work of transformative care in our professional lives.

Individual Stories

The following stories are our perspectives as a testimony to the impact of the unprogrammed meeting and how God's guidance transformed our work and how we cared for others in our various spheres of influence. Our reaches extend into higher education and K-12, offering a diverse look into how our purposeful meetings shaped our views and practices of care.

Jim's Story

I joined the early morning online worship group during our doctoral program's intensive colloquium week in the summer of 2020, partly out of a desire for community with professors and classmates and partly out of curiosity about what Quaker-style silent worship was all about. My academic arc mirrors my personal spiritual journey fairly well: I have earned degrees from Presbyterian, Jesuit, and now Quaker universities,

with a year spent in doctoral study at a now-closed Lutheran school. In fact, a Presbyterian professor at the Lutheran university introduced me to books by the Quaker patron saint,

Parker Palmer, and it was this introduction that encouraged my decision to transfer to George Fox to complete my doctoral study. I have always valued work nurtured in relationships, and if both can grow within a broad, diverse, and accepting tent, all the better.

I can now laugh about one of my first-semester draft dissertation topics and how thankful I am for not pursuing it. The project's working title was "Introductions to Higher Education Administrative Leadership: Welcome to the Worse Case." The proposed project's premise was based on an observation that most new college leaders step into roles that are less than ideal and for which they are less than prepared. This described my own experience, and I wondered if most administrative open doors led to jobs nobody in their right mind wanted. Thinking about the topic and the things that then felt professionally overwhelming from this side of the pandemic, I feel a loss of innocence about academic leadership and what seem to have been simpler days.

At the time, however, I thought my professional sky was falling. I was serving in my fourth year as the dean of the largest academic unit at my community college, probably the largest academic unit in the state, and my institution had just completed its fourth consecutive year of significant budget reductions. While I remained undaunted and optimistic, the weight of difficult decisions was taking a toll; no matter how fiscally responsible, it turns out that eliminating the German, French, Reading, and Humanities departments was not a pathway to administrative popularity. It was also about this time that my face-to-face doctoral program announced that it would be closing its doors, effective the end of the term. A few weeks later, the COVID-19 virus struck.

Four out of the five adults living in my home were college students, and we wrestled and elbowed for quiet corners to join Zoom classes and work meetings. As my own institution pivoted fully online, I transferred to George Fox just in time to take part in a mandatory online summer intensive colloquium. I do not remember the exact words

the friendly, Grateful Dead quoting professor used as he pitched the early morning worship experience, but what came through was "Let's sit together on Zoom in silence at 6 a.m. like Quakers." I was intrigued. I have since found an email Professor Scot Headley sent to the department; my recollection was not even close, even though it still generally but accurately describes what we have done Friday-in and Friday-out over the past four years.

In the early days of the group, professors and students came and went, but over time a core formed, and what started as curiosity for me, quickly became commitment. As we waited quietly together, it became clear that there is value in consistently being together and still in the silence. I was not a new believer in Christ or in community, and my background had taught me to recite prayers, pray the Psalms, and delight in and depend on even the most free-form articulations of the heart, but Friday mornings were bringing something different. As we sat silently together, I began to understand what the 17th-century poet George Herbert must have meant when he described prayer as "Reversed thunder" (George Herbert's "Prayer," line 6). There was nothing especially programmed, impatient, or eloquent about what we were doing, but there were flashes of lightning and eruptions beneath the surface.

Other members of the group were clearly experiencing something similar. Each of us can talk about times when another brought a centering thought that resonated deeply in our academic, professional, or family lives. You can imagine how three dissertation-weary doctoral students would receive Paul's exhortation to Corinthian believers about commitment-making and completing what you have started: "So now finish doing it as well, so that your readiness in desiring it may be matched by your completing it out of what you have. For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have" (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, 2 Corinthians 8:11-12). I had read these verses at least a hundred times on my own over the years, but in a quiet, focused 20 minutes of slowing down and listening to what God wanted to say to me and the group, my understanding of God's economy shifted and deepened, not just in terms of financial giving or personal accountability to the public good, but in all things: "...if the readiness is there [the

willingness in the NIV translation], it is acceptable..." I understood in a new way that if I am ready and willing, what I am, bring, and give is acceptable: acceptable as a student, colleague, friend, father, and husband. I realized that I do not need what I do not have. Reversed thunder erupted, the message struck home, and my life changed, within and without.

In the days since those first summer meetings, many challenges have arisen and much has changed for me. I have moved from the Dean's office to Associate Vice President, to serving a year as the Interim Vice President of Instruction. I have completed doctoral study, written a dissertation, and received an EdD. I have watched my children complete their degrees, find meaningful jobs, and leave home. I have watched my mother suffer cancer, heart surgery, kidney removal, a brain tumor, and broken bones; and I experienced the loss of a sibling. Through all of this, the Friday morning group has been there, supporting me, listening in the silence, and being faithful to the Still, Small Voice. Through all of this, my friends and God have been faithful.

I am especially grateful for what the group has meant to me professionally over the past year or so. If life were a movie script, I would write about how the Friday morning group continued to faithfully listen and wait, and support me through that year as the Interim Vice President of Instruction. I would write about a year in which the college opened and closed faculty contract negotiations amicably and in record time; I would write about hiring and onboarding an entire academic dean team, including a dear friend and former professor as the Dean of Business and Health Sciences; I would write about navigating the largest instructional budget reductions in college history without a single person losing their job; I would write about federal and state grants sought and awarded and strategic plans drafted and adopted; and I would write about ending the year by successfully becoming the college's Chief Academic Officer in a permanent capacity. But life is not a movie, and if there is one thing my ever-faithful Friday morning Friends have taught me, it is to listen: to the silence, to the Still, Small Voice, and to my own heart. All of the items listed above about the last year are true except the last, and when the year ended with an invitation to continue in the interim role for another six months and reapply next time, I waited, listened,

and acted. I returned to my first professional love, the classroom. I doubt I would have been able to confidently make this choice if my heart and inner ear had not been so finely tuned in the Friday

morning silences of the past four years.

Much of the world has returned to a comfortable face-to-face normality now that the pandemic appears to be behind us, but the circumstances that brought us together and our digital adaptation now seem less important than the simple, silent pleasure of "zooming" quietly together every Friday morning, centering our hearts and minds, and listening to what the Still, Small Voice has to say to us. For me, this group has been an anchor, a lifejacket, and a compass as I have navigated tides that would have otherwise pulled me under. This group has taught me that there are bigger maps and provided me the confidence to stop hugging the shore and head into deeper, less certain waters. If God has been present, compassionate, and equipping in the silence, he will most certainly continue to be so as we present ourselves, listen, and respond to the silence, the Still, Small Voice, and each other in the days ahead.

Katie's Story

This last year (my first in my current building) I had the profound blessing of landing in a school with many other believers. Inspired by the time I spent in prayer virtually with my colleagues-turned-friends, I hoped for a similar peace and hope to spread in our building, so a building colleague and I kick-started a weekly meeting.

Discussing prayer in the public K-12 environment often evokes immediate reactions of a political nature. Presumably, this topic is something a prudent educator should keep entirely separate from their work life to avoid adverse consequences. However, while caution should be taken to not include or encourage prayer as part of instruction, the educator can pray during any breaks, before or after school, and privately during their day (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). This allows opportunities for educators to encourage each other or find camaraderie in their faith, and for the peace of God to be more complete as it carries cohesively throughout one's life.

Our building meeting was outside contract hours but on campus. We met for about 20 minutes to share a verse or centering thought, pray silently for a few minutes, then discuss or pray over specific needs we

noticed in our group or school. It was both synchronous and asynchronous, as we have met on campus weekly with an average of three to five individuals able to attend on a given week, but also in a text group of about 20 individuals who committed to reading the weekly focus thought and to pray for their students and each other if they could not attend the in-person meeting.

As I participated in both the virtual and in-person meetings, themes of being bearers of peace were often brought forward and confirmed as a spiritual need in our work environments. The rate of trauma impact on students in K-12 schools has become significant (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2016; Van Der Kolk, 2014). In my career, I have worked for two suburban districts, both of which profess to value trauma-informed care. However, I was offered little in the way of professional development towards these ends, especially not training that was building-wide to create a cohesive system with predictable outcomes. Most districts have a program or system they ascribe to that allows pertinent individuals to be trained to safely de-escalate difficult or dangerous situations or behaviors.

General education teachers are often not trained in these programs, while paraeducators, counselors, and special educators may be offered training so that they can respond to incidents in the classroom. This leaves the classroom teacher with whatever classroom management instruction they have received in their prep programs and their experiences to help them calmly avoid or deescalate dysregulation that arises in their room (Honsinger & Brown, 2019; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Having been a special educator previously, I had been given professional development in trauma-informed practices and the de-escalation of difficult behaviors, in addition to building authentic relationships and utilizing opportunities for social-emotional learning. The context of special education often requires supporting self-regulation for a student in the moment. The adult identifies the student's emotion and models calming strategies while remaining outwardly peaceful to counterbalance

the student's feelings of upheaval—like an anchor in their storm. This can be difficult during mid-lesson turbulence when the dysregulation is impacting other students, or if the adult themselves is dysregulated.

As an example, a former student whom we will call Trent came from a very tumultuous home life with parents in and out of the home and relationship with him. There was also a significant trauma event unfolding in his life as he entered my class. He was generally fed and clothed, but the care for his mental health and development was virtually nonexistent, and it showed in his interactions with others. In the first 10 minutes of any lesson, like clockwork, he would need an adult to sit with him to coregulate. Without individual support, any challenge or frustration would cause emotional dysregulation that resulted in yelling at others, throwing desk items, or running out of the room.

I prayed for this child. In the dysregulated moments, I prayed for the ability to maintain peace and a calm attitude so that I could create a stable space for him and build a relationship. At our virtual meetings, we prayed for him (and other struggling students) and for my peace as I worked with him. I found that these practices allowed for an increased focus and intentionality in my efforts with the student, and a permeation of God's presence and peace in my thoughts and actions. By mid-year, Trent was able to have a brief check-in when starting work, then continue independently and request help as needed alongside his peers. He trusted me with his missteps, knowing that I would not become upset at him. He sought to stay in the class during some break times, and incidents of elopement were almost non-existent.

Setting aside time to pray for those I interact with, to soak in the presence of God, and to listen to feedback on my own spiritual life profoundly impacted my attitudes, emotional well-being, and sense of peace-bearing. This theme flowed forward and was expressed as a need in my building-based group as well, as disruption of bureaucratic and behavioral systems was on an uptick mid-year. It has transformed the way some of us interact with and support each other, and how we discuss and serve our students and community.

Neil's Story

Returning to academic study after a time of being away can be daunting, especially for those who have begun careers and left their studies unfinished. Students who take on these challenges are widely considered to be non-traditional in the sense that they do not embody the characteristics of those who attend university within a year after graduating high school. Amid varying life circumstances that have taken students away from their initial path of study, there can be many additional challenges such as (but not limited to) having low socioeconomic status backgrounds, a disability, backgrounds underrepresented ethnically and racially, and behavioral or emotional problems (Munro, 2011).

I work on a team of four elementary education professors who teach aspiring teacher candidates who come from many of these backgrounds and are also labeled as non-traditional. Our students come from diverse home lives and cultural backgrounds. They began their college courses at younger ages, but for a wide array of different reasons, they abandoned their path to a four-year degree. A large majority of our students have children and have begun working in different careers. However, despite their differences, they all have two common goals: to be an elementary school teacher and to receive their bachelor of science degree.

Non-traditional students face unique challenges when considering degree completion. Attending classes on campus is not possible for many as they live in more rural areas, or are employed full-time in different jobs. Additionally, these non-traditional students are considered a minority at the university level, with a need to overcome many societal, institutional, and personal barriers (Brewer, 2010; Webber, 2014). My fellow professors and I provide online coursework and once-per-week live, online class sessions. These classes are offered in the evenings and are continued throughout the week by way of asynchronous material pertaining to the content delivered in the live sessions.

The challenge is creating an environment of belonging, care, and meaningful learning

Our greatest challenges are not delivering the content, preparing material, or assessing progress; the challenge is creating an environment of belonging, care, and meaningful learning while at a distance. Transformative care at our university is what we call "being known"; in fact, it is a promise extended to all who are accepted. How do we ensure our students feel "known" while in our program? How can we speak into the lives of those whom we may never meet until graduation day?

The following narrative describes my experience with one non-traditional student—who will be referred to by the pseudonym, Matt—who changed careers and found belonging while at a distance.

One of the key elements of feeling known is hearing your name. In fact, there is a wide range of literature that shows there is unique brain activation specific to hearing one's own name in relation to the names of others (Carmody & Lewis, 2006). While this seems simple, consistently using my students' names allows for a breaking of boundaries and an increase in familiarity. I always try to greet each student by name as they enter our online sessions, just as I would if we were meeting in a brick-and-mortar classroom. Matt always appreciated being greeted by name and would return the greeting by using my name.

Matt was in the process of leaving a career of nearly 20 years—a career that involved much risk and determination. He knew the value of teaching and learning, and through watching his own young children experience significant ups and downs in the classroom, he knew this was the correct career path for him. He chose our program because of the flexibility, accessibility, and timelines offered for students coming from non-traditional backgrounds.

These types of conversations broke barriers

I continually try to learn about my students by strategically tracking their likes and dislikes, previous academic experiences, and feelings toward education in general. I do this with ice-breakers, breakout room conversations, and

sidebar chatter that takes place during work times. Gathering this type of information allows me to be specific when talking with students about material and aspirations. For Matt, it was something that led to a great feeling of trust and belonging when I asked about his children's current academic situations and how he felt about them. These types of conversations broke barriers within other students as well and opened up an environment of trust and care during class sessions.

*And opened up an
environment of trust and care*

I would receive emails from Matt where he would affirm my relational approach and give me feedback on how it helped him (and others) in their understanding of the course content. This was not only affirming for me as the professor but also interesting to see how targeted, relational approaches to learning can help students become more at ease with difficult course content.

*I believe we can create an
environment of transformative
care.*

Being known at our institution can take on many forms. For Matt, it was being seen as a real person, a professional, and a father. Non-traditional students face a myriad of challenges. By taking the time to learn about them and know them more deeply than just surface level, I believe we can create an environment of transformative care. Ultimately, the goal for these students is to leave our program with a degree and a teaching license, but through instructors taking the time to know them, albeit at a distance, students leave with much more than that. Meeting Matt and his family face to face for the first time at graduation was a wonderful experience, one that I will carry with me for the rest of my career. As someone who is only two years into this type of instruction, I feel confident that transformative care will continue to be one of my top priorities as an instructor.

The Friday morning meetings with my three friends continue to give me a deep perspective of how practicing meaningful, virtual meetings can be both nourishing and empowering. Through our consistent conversations and times of silent centering, I have come to understand some different relational practices that I can use in my online courses such as leaving space for silence, providing a scriptural focus, and prioritizing personal connection. Despite the barriers present with distance learning, the Spirit of God can be felt; our Friday morning meetings serve as a space to equip me to bring Christ into my work.

Scot's Story

During the time I was teaching in the Doctor of Education program, I found myself seeking personal connections with my students. First, because I usually interacted with them at a distance through technological means and relished the opportunities to get to know them more fully as people, and also because my students were often in similar roles as teachers and leaders as I was, and I relished the opportunity to learn from them. One way in which I was able to make meaningful connections was to host meetings for worship during our summer residency programs.

During these morning gatherings, I was able to connect with students in a way that I had been connecting with my fellow worshipers in Quaker meetings for years. While I had not always considered myself a Quaker, about 25 years ago, I found myself discovering that the distinct commitments or testimonies, of the Quakers (see e.g., Concord Friends, 2024), including peace, equality, and simplicity were all attractive to me and consistent with personal values I had held since my youth. Additionally, the basic theological stance of Quakers, that personal experience of God through a commitment to seeking God's presence in the inner life and in creation, was quite meaningful to me. What was most attractive to me about the Friends was their emphasis on silence in their meetings for worship.

Eventually, and to this day, I found myself fully at home in the unprogrammed meeting, a form of worship that was new to me and a bit challenging at first. However, now I realize that silence is where I worship God and hear from God and where I experience communion with God and my community.

By introducing this form of silent, waiting worship to my doctoral students, I found that some were blessed by the experience and drawn to it.

By introducing this form of silent, waiting worship to my doctoral students, I found that some were blessed by the experience and drawn to it. COVID-19 brought radical changes into the summer residency, and I continued to offer the meeting for worship, but now by virtual means through Zoom. We had meaningful times with the meetings, and I chose to continue weekly meetings early Friday mornings. When I retired from George Fox in the summer of 2022, there were four of us who continued to gather together in the Zoom-based meeting for worship.

Jim, Katy, and Neil had been my students, and now, they are my friends and fellow worshipers. They became my support group as I retired and ventured out into a whole new career in community college administration. Moving away from a Christian institution and to a state-funded college actually seemed like a good move for me at the time. I wanted the opportunity to learn how to work with, serve, and love people who were quite a bit different than me, especially not sharing the same faith perspectives or practices. As I embarked on my journey as a community college dean of instruction, our weekly meeting for worship was a time of contemplation and refreshment that I looked forward to. They were times of nourishment and equipping as well so that I could go out and do the work of serving and providing care to faculty members and students. Near the end of my first year as a dean, I was able to attend my friends' graduation from the doctoral program; in fact, to my recollection, it is the only time that the four of us have been together in the same physical place at the same time. I was also changing institutions.

My story reflects the rhythm of going into the silence of the gathered meeting and coming out with a renewed sense of resolve and responsibility to care and to act in ways to demonstrate care, not just to my fellow worshippers, but to the world

around me. Regarding the care we gave to one another, we provided encouragement and emotional support through major life transitions. We alerted one another to open positions and offered to serve as references for one another. Regarding being equipped to care for others outside of the group, I found a true sense of call to community college administration. I realized that there was a unique opportunity to love people where they were and to provide practical help, emotional support, and mentoring as they navigated new positions, dealt with assessment concerns, and work-life balance. While I served as an instructional dean, I found myself seeing the leadership position in a pastoral light. Yes, I was there to represent the institution to the faculty, staff, and students, but when opportunities arose, I gladly shared personal experiences, listened to challenges and pains, and extended grace to those in need.

I was recently asked by my supervisor to consider taking a new leadership position within the college. It was an attractive opportunity for me since it involved working within the field of my doctoral work, professional technical programs. I thanked my supervisor for the opportunity and told her that I wanted to remain in my current position. I told her I loved my role and I loved the people. It took me almost a year to develop trust among our team and I did not want to give that up. Was that selfish on my part, or was it a recognition of a call and me being faithful to that call? Questions like that are ones that come up

as I worship. A centering thought, for example; Romans 12:1-2 (New International Version Bible, 1978), can be a prompt to examine current questions of discernment and call.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2 Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

Am I giving my body, my physical body, my will, my desires, my body of work as a living sacrifice? Am I willing to step outside of the expectations of

how our society defines leadership and professional life? Am I allowing myself to be transformed so that I can carry out the work of transformation in the corner of the world where I live and work?

I find myself content with my professional life and the opportunities it affords me. I also realize that the bond that my friends and I have established through the meeting for worship has given me contentment in my heart as well. Though we all are educators, we do very different work in different settings. We are connected on a weekly basis through the meeting for worship and it has become an integral component of my life.

Closing Reflections

It is unclear how far the impact of a group of four friends will extend through our work. We may never know the full effect of intentionally taking our personal reflections, convictions, and communal worship experience into our distinct corners of education. Much like what is often seen after a time of silence, a few key themes have seemingly emerged when reviewing our stories together.

One theme was “trust the process.” A faithful commitment to meeting, listening, and reflecting appears in each story in some way. Through trusting the process of quiet reflection and centered meetings, the impact begins to show itself in our professional lives, as well as in our relationships with friends, family, and colleagues. The four of us agreed that rising early on those dark, winter mornings is challenging, and at times the desire for extra sleep is tempting. The accountability shared, however, gives us that needed push to join the call. Both accountability and communal trust carry over into our professional roles as we work to infuse these into our student meetings.

Another commonality found across the stories was the way the meeting served as an anchorage or steady place in the midst of our various transitions and upheavals that occurred in the last few years. Each member of the group experienced upheaval or major professional or personal transitions—from international moves to roles at a new institution—during which the consistency of meeting and seeking the Light and voice of God amongst friends served as a treasured anchoring

point that centered our decision-making and steadied each course.

The noise in our culture is pervasive and silence is a rarely-sought experience.

Another emergent theme was “embrace silence.” The noise in our culture is pervasive and silence is a rarely-sought experience. Could it be because when we are silent, we are alone with our thoughts? Do we tend to run from dealing with what the Spirit of God may be trying to tell us? Our group has found the answer to both questions to be a resounding “yes”; this is a large part of why we continue to meet together. Any change we would like to see in our various settings would need to start with the individual. We need to be willing to consistently and faithfully set aside our knowledge and presuppositions to encounter the voice of God in silence and through each other. Much like the Friends, we must each be responsible for our attention to the silence, and faithful to testing the truth we hear corporately in our meeting. Sometimes we may not like what we hear, but we must be willing to hold onto that anchor while we quiet the storm and join the silence. Stirling (2020) spoke about the joy of seeing the sacred in silence and discovering that encountering the sacred happens during ordinary moments. Through our experiences, the four of us confidently claim this interpretation to be valid.

A final theme that emerged can be best described as “carry the peace.” Transformation starts with the individual in whom peace and joy dwell. Our responsibility as believers in the field of education—not to discount other fields as well—is to extend peace to those around us, not keeping it to ourselves. We can build relationships and trust with colleagues and students by holding closely this truth and peace, which is often something that must be supported supernaturally. It is another thread that binds us together as we inch forward in faithfulness, sometimes in the face of institutional culture or bureaucracy.

As we take the topics and insights we contemplated in the morning forward into the following week, it shapes our relationships, attitudes, and the work we choose to take on. We

circle back to the relationship—mentioned at the beginning of this paper—between solitude and community. Rohr (2016) referred to it as the synergy between contemplation and action. And we continue to find truth in contemplation and worship transforming into action, as shared by Scott (1982). We each had the support of our friends praying for and listening alongside us, and the consistent time to listen to the Spirit. Our time together enables us to carry forward the light and peace, and it is meaningful at all levels of our various areas of work in the education system.

This idea of carrying our peace and light forward points back to Palmer's (2004) mention of interior intimacy, which is naturally coupled with solitude and the otherness that comes with community. Settling into the silence is purposeful and intentional. Leaving space for the Spirit to permeate our thoughts and mold our attitudes prepares us for the work and care that we are each called to do.

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