

***Friends' Practice of
Group Spiritual Discernment***

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*This paper, prepared for the School of the Spirit,
is based on readings and interviews with several
Friends from Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting.*

For early Friends, a living sense of the Divine was central to who they were and how they conducted their outward lives. They were committed to living an integrated life grounded in God. As Quakerism gradually evolved into an organized entity, the same commitment to discern God's will for oneself became the bedrock for their group decision making processes. George Fox advised his followers in an epistle written from Worcester prison, "Friends are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business, neither in their men's or women's meetings, but to wait upon the Lord."¹

It has been the on-going intent of Friends, from the early days of the movement, to conduct our corporate life, whether in meeting for business, clearness and accountability (oversight) committees or other group initiatives, on the principle of spiritual discernment, of waiting "upon the Lord." In the 350 years since Quakerism's beginning, however, much has changed both within and without the Religious Society of Friends that merits review of our understanding of group spiritual discernment, including the conditions which promote our ability to spiritually discern as a group, what we see as the benchmarks of faithful discernment, and the potential roadblocks to this process.

Group Spiritual Discernment

All Friends everywhere, meet together, and in the measure
of God's spirit wait, that with it all your minds may be guided
up to God and to receive wisdom from God.

George Fox, Epistle 149²

Group spiritual discernment is the process by which we as Friends try to arrive at a sense of the meeting, a "shared understanding of the place to which the Spirit has led us" as described by one Friend. It involves rational processes by which we try to understand all the factors involved in a specific decision, it benefits from good planning (well prepared agendas and seasoned reports), and group process skills. However, it is also distinctly different from the decision making processes of the larger culture which seeks efficiency and relies on problem solving skills to reach a decision. For Friends, the unique and central ingredient is the belief that the Spirit is present, accessible, self-

disclosing and “communicable.”³ As Jan Wood wrote, “There is no system... It is only relationship”⁴ Group spiritual discernment assumes an interactive relationship between the participants and the Divine. We try to listen to the Inward Teacher both within ourselves and others. For Friends the ultimate goal of the process is not to come to a decision about an issue (although this is certainly desirable), but to be obedient to God’s will, to be a servant to that to which we are called. It has been described as “allowing the rational to combine with the intuitive and numinous.”⁵ One Friend has made the distinction between head discernment, heart discernment (which often feels good), and something even further down, implying that the Spiritual leading comes from deep within our interior being. Another writes that it is not legalisms, rules, but the “ability to discriminate, to see critically beyond surface appearances.”⁶

One Friend recently described his experience with group spiritual discernment as one in which “something unexpected often happens.” He related an experience in which his meeting was discussing what to do with an unexpected financial surplus. Various options were considered, including saving the money for unanticipated future expenses. After a period of worship, someone suggested that the surplus be given away and the meeting easily united with that decision. The Friend who related the incident said he “intuitively” felt that this was the correct action and found his own reaction somewhat surprising given the fact he might have made a different decision with his own personal finances.

For many Friends, spiritual discernment is ultimately a Divine gift resulting from our obedience to continuing revelation, not a “personal achievement.”⁷ This conviction, however, does not negate our individual and group responsibility in the exercise of spiritual discernment – issues which will be explored later.

In talking with Friends about this topic, several mentioned that we do not engage in spiritual discernment on those issues which simply require prudence and familiarity with how things have been done in the past. It is the hard issues which give us no choice but to seek Divine help. One person said, “it seems such matters let us see the insufficiency of our own wisdom and the need to ask God for help.” Another said, “our best times are our worst times – when a decision is easy we just do it and that’s okay. But when we deal with hard times we don’t have any choice but to pay real attention.”

What Factors Promote Group Spiritual Discernment?

Worship and the Role of the Clerk and Elders. The most obvious requirement is that we gather and center ourselves in worship, starting, of course, with ample silence to enable Friends to disengage from the preoccupations of their individual lives and move into a God-centered place. (Taking only “a moment of silence” does not generally contribute to creating an environment for spiritual discernment.) The clerk has the important responsibility of structuring the agenda in a way that encourages Friends to be open to God’s presence; the clerk must also assess and articulate the sense of the meeting. One writer has described this ability as a “gift”⁸. A Friend who served as her meeting’s clerk for many years commented that the clerk needs to be in a good place spiritually. She said that when people become unsettled, the clerk needs to call them back and encourage them to pay attention. A well grounded clerk models calm and focus and may her/himself stop to pray. Another former meeting clerk said he asks the meeting to settle when he feels himself getting agitated or when he feels the group getting agitated. One younger Friend, who clerks a meeting committee, said that she only recently realized she was not holding the work of the committee or her own role as clerk in the Light.

In addition to the clerk, those individuals who are particularly grounded in and gifted by the Spirit have a central role in helping the meeting pay attention and at times articulating the sense of the meeting. As one Friend said, “if the clerk fails to bring us to mindfulness, then someone else must do it.” Another Friend described such individuals as the Meeting’s elders, who speak from love and often to the process rather than to the content of the issue before the group. We intuitively recognize those individuals who have a history of experiencing God and we tend to defer to them. These grounded Friends are indispensable in group spiritual discernment and have a role in promoting calm and mysteriously centering people. Another individual said, “one person from a grounded position can change a meeting.”

Time and A Willingness to Wait. Group spiritual discernment operates on a generous time schedule, resisting the world’s perspective that time is scarce and decisions must be made expeditiously. George Fox advised Friends to “...wait to hear the voice of the Lord there, and waiting there, and keeping close to the Lord, a

discerning will grow...”⁹ When we feel rushed we tend to move toward consensus, rather than a sense of the meeting. Friends have to struggle against the inclination to hurry to fix a problem or quickly dispense with a painful issue which is causing anxiety or guilt among the participants. Paul Lacey writes that “perseverance” is critical to discernment, being willing to wait and reject those answers that do not address our condition¹⁰. He cites those complex situations where we find our testimonies in tension with one another and the importance of remembering “that we are gathered by our Inward Teacher...though the waiting will continue to be frustrating to us...what actions we are finally led to take will be better rooted, more deeply considered, more tender in their understanding, and possibly more significant”.¹¹

In interviewing Friends about their experience with group spiritual discernment, each person mentioned that having an abundant sense of time was critical. One Friend described a painful situation when his California meeting was trying to respond to a request from a lesbian couple to be married under the care of the meeting. He said it was critical that the meeting’s clerk did not hurry them to a decision. Some younger members of another meeting recounted a situation in which they raised an issue about pastoral care. This resulted in convening a working group to explore the issue. These individuals said that the outcome was both good and different from what they originally wanted and what was helpful in the process was the sense of time, of unhurriedness. Another Friend spoke of a very difficult issue facing the meeting’s Membership Care Committee in which two members were engaged in a painful marital separation. In spite of pressures, however, she felt that Committee stayed grounded and resisted being dictated by time constraints (although the slowness to action was not favorably received by the couple). One Friend said that from his perspective, the times that we have failed to discern spiritually have been times when we have not “given enough time to the process.” Another former meeting clerk commented that with “weighty, important issues” Friends often have a lot of “impatient energy” as well as “a sense of urgency.” When his Philadelphia meeting was dealing with the issue of same gender marriage, there was a great deal of pressure to make a decision, but he came to realize that “we need to take on suffering” in order to change people’s minds and hearts. And this takes time. This clerk’s meeting took seven years to come to clearness on this issue, but ultimately had a deep sense of being spiritually grounded in its decision.

Relationship of Members One to Another. Howard Brinton has written, "The Quaker method is likely to be successful in proportion as the members are acquainted with one another, better still if real affection exists among them".¹² In a community which we feel to be safe and trusting, it is easier for each of us to be vulnerable in the search for Truth as well as to be willing to engage in a long and sometimes difficult discernment process. One Friend recounted a difficult situation in his meeting and his belief that it was the members' care and respect for each other that made spiritual discernment possible. In this instance Friends made an attempt to understand each others' perspective and feelings, and resisted overriding those few individuals who did not share the majority opinion.

Another Friend, who participates in a national Friends organization, remarked that she feels helped in both centering and discernment when individuals take time to share about what is going on in their lives. She saw committee service in her meeting (a large urban meeting) as a gift in helping her to get to know others.

The process of group spiritual discernment requires the meeting community to be respectful of and attentive to each individual regardless of what role that individual may have in the life of the meeting. One Friend spoke of an individual in her meeting who has certain cognitive and emotional limitations and whose speech is often rambling. Yet, the meeting community pays attention when he speaks knowing that he often articulates wisdom needed by the group. Another Friend pointed out that not everyone has the same spiritual insight at the same time. And furthermore, those insights may come from unexpected individuals.

The caring faith community also has an important role in helping each member grow in the Spirit, and in doing so, to better exercise discernment. George Fox wrote "And Friends, everywhere meet together... and watch over one another in that which is eternal, and see everyone, that your words be from the eternal life."¹³ (Underlining added). Paul Lacey also advises us "to help each other to be faithful to leadings; learn with and from one another's confusions and short-comings; persist in expecting the best from one another; practice speaking in love."¹⁴

Our Responsibilities as Individuals. In addition to the essential ingredients of group spiritual discernment - worship, a gifted and centered clerk, deeply grounded elders, a sense of abundant time, willingness to wait for clarity, and a caring faith community – what specific responsibilities is each Friend called to bring to the process? In response to this question, one Friend cited the query, “Do you come with hearts and minds prepared for worship?” We are each individually expected to give prayerful attention, to listen for the Spirit in ourselves and in others, and this is often hard work. One Friend told me that we come not only to listen, but to do so with “different receptors.” Listening both with head and heart, we try to follow Jesus’ admonition to “stay alert” (Mark 13:33). Listening, paying attention and having the intention to do so are critical. Marty Grundy has written, “Our meetings have a great responsibility to be gatherings of people who are listening to the Inward Teacher, helping each other listen, and learning how to listen together;”¹⁵ Sandra Cronk says, “...it is in worship and business meetings that Friends practice the discipline of listening together ;”¹⁶ and Pat Loring has written, “Discernment in this setting is taken in its widest sense of the listening that distinguishes the work of that of God in us from the work of all the other things we carry in us as well”.¹⁷ In order to listen well, we need to leave ample space and silence between speakers, and to bring ourselves back into prayer as need arises.

We are also called to be obedient, to move past willfulness, ego, and our own agenda in order to seek the Truth. We share our understandings and perspective with the group, and then try to cultivate an attitude of detachment, recognizing that we each only partially see the whole. George Fox wrote to Oliver Cromwell, “be still and silent from thy own wisdom, wit, craft, subtly, or policy that would arise in thee, but stand single to the Lord without any end to thyself .”¹⁸ When we are willful, we try to control the Mystery and this is not possible. George Burrough urged Friends in 1662 “...not to spend your time with needless, unnecessary and fruitless discourse, as a worldly assembly of men...but in the wisdom, love, and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, submitting to one another in lowliness of heart and in the Holy Spirit...¹⁹. Being obedient is being teachable and willing to see things in a new way. When there is lack of unity, each person should look inward and ask, “how well have I sought God’s will?” and “what elements of truth might there be in differing perspectives?”²⁰

If we are committed as a people of faith to corporately discerning the Truth, then we must also be committed as individuals to living daily in the Spirit: "... if we are to have power in our corporate discernment, we must be gathered as individuals who have already learned the way of obedience and practiced discernment...if we are not 'in the Life' personally, we shall not likely find ourselves 'in the Life' when gathered for meeting for worship on the occasion of business".²¹ Alistair Heron argues that corporate discernment is only as good as the "quality of practiced discipleship that each Friend present has brought from her or his daily life".²² A meeting clerk commented that the "absence of personal discipline diminishes our corporate discipline." Our corporate discernment is deepened and dependent upon our individual practices of inward listening, obedience, self-examination and prayer.

Standing In The Way. Because Friends believe that each of us can only know the Truth partially, we respect and give permission to the individual to stand in the way of decision, recognizing that this person's insight might bring us into closer alignment with God's will. But to stand in the way is a serious step, and the person who takes this position must be committed to being obedient and teachable. One Friend, reflecting on the magnitude of such an action, recounted with misgivings an occasion when he felt he should have stood in the way of a decision, but lacked the courage to do so.

When there is a lack of unity, the disagreement can become an opportunity for greater spiritual discipline, the exercise of love for one another, and the practice of patience. If, however, Friends come to group spiritual discernment wedded to a pre-determined position, then the exercise in faithfulness is undermined.

What are the Indicators of Faithful Spiritual Discernment?

For Friends, unity has always been an indication of faithful discernment. The Truth is consistent, it does not contradict itself. If we are seeking the Inward Light, we will eventually come to a place of unity. Friends believe that the same Spirit is active in each heart and that the "hallmark of Quaker spirituality is the conviction that if the community is open to divine guidance, then unity will emerge".²³ We seek for that "deep, interior unity which is a sign the members are consciously gathered together in God and may therefore trust their corporate guidance".²⁴

For many Friends, an exercise in faithful group spiritual discernment is also a mystical experience, one in which they corporately “experience something beyond themselves.”²⁵ Some have described it as God’s presence settling over all. One Friend said, “Something was just laid on us and we found ourselves empowered to do things.” Although each person may interpret this experience in different theological terms, it is the experience itself that is important to Friends – not the interpretation.

Faithful group spiritual discernment is a transformative experience for both the individual and the community. Many Friends mentioned the fruits of the Spirit as described by Paul in his letters: peace, love, joy. We are given the gift of greater connection with each other, greater mutual love, patience, and a sense of harmony. Some have described it an energizing experience. Mathias Drake has written that, “Such experiences have empowered Quaker groups to do God’s work in the world.”²⁶

Finally, it should be mentioned that early Friends often looked to the Scriptures for authentication of their decisions. Was there consistency between their behaviors and the Bible? While they did not see the Bible as a substitute for the Inward Teacher, they considered the writers to be divinely inspired. This approach, however, proved problematic since many passages in the Bible are contradictory. Today, many Friends, unlike their predecessors, are not grounded in the Bible and would not think to turn to scriptures as a means of evaluating their discernment.

Potential Roadblocks to Group Spiritual Discernment

Lack of a Shared Theological Framework and Language. Early Friends were deeply rooted in the Bible and shared a belief in a transcendent Christ with whom they had a personal connection. God was perceived as active in the world and accessible; each individual was capable of hearing and obeying in a way that went beyond conscience and reason. Today, many contemporary, “liberal” Friends who have joined the Religious Society of Friends, come from a variety of religious backgrounds. Some of these individuals have been wounded by their previous religious affiliations and are drawn to Friends because of our inclusivity and our belief in the universality of the Light. In our desire to be respectful and inclusive, we often avoid talking about our spiritual expectations and experiences; in addition we are hesitant to use spiritual language out of concern that others may find it hurtful. Consequently, our expectations about

discernment may be very different from one another depending upon how we perceive the Divine and our relationship to the Other. Furthermore, in as much as we have disengaged ourselves from our Christian roots and at the same time failed to explore with one another our spiritual grounding, we may be in danger of undermining the bedrock of our faith community, group spiritual discernment. We need to be wary that our commitment to Spirit-led discernment does not slip into a humanistic approach of good decision making. Wilmer Cooper quotes John McCandless, "when it is asserted that some Friends are 'not Christ-centered, but are God-centered, or Spirit-centered or Light-centered,' the question immediately arises: in which light, what spirit, what 'god' are they centered?" ²⁷

Some Friends with whom I talked about this issue thought that the lack of a common framework was more significant than differences in terminology. The question, one Friend posed was, how can we lead people to the shared and deep experience of Spirit-led discernment? She recounted an experience at her Yearly Meeting, where people talked about a Spirit-led meeting, but her experience was that the meeting was a good one but not a Spirit-led one. She asked, "how can we get people to a place where they recognize the difference between 'brass' and 'gold'?" By not making a distinction between a "good" meeting and a "Spirit-led" meeting, do we not devalue the whole process? Another Friend spoke with frustration about how it seems to be "in" to refer to all decision-making as "discerning this...discerning that." He felt strongly that all not all issues require spiritual discernment and that we misconstrue and undermine the process of spiritual discernment by our imprecise use of language.

Another Friend spoke of the power of words and how they shape our reality. If we use less powerful words, we may have a less powerful reality. He felt we need to reclaim the words that empower us, "when we talk in spiritual terms, it connects me to something greater than myself ... to a larger entity." Another Friend said our failure to use the language of the Spirit, as opposed to the language of the world, cuts us off from our heritage. She was also concerned that this failure moves us closer to conformity to the world and away from being a faith community.

The Process Itself. Paradoxically our Quaker process creates opportunities for manipulation. One Friend pointed out how the process "encourages people to go on ego

trips because we hand out a great deal of power to everybody – and it is very tempting to yield to that power.” Michael Sheeran noted that in many situations, “externals may be observed...(but) the dynamic of seeking higher unity through receptiveness to that of God in the other was only minimally at work”.²⁸

Changes in some of our historic practices may also undermine group spiritual discernment. One Friend complained about our failure to read minutes during the meeting in which they were created. Her experience has been that at a subsequent meeting Friends will say that the minute did not accurately reflect the sense of the meeting.

E-mail is now also creating challenges. Absent Friends are increasingly using this technology to question decisions. Corporate spiritual discernment occurs when we meet in worship, open ourselves to the Truth and share with one another in love and patience, and listen with attentiveness. Those who are absent from this process do not have the benefit of experiencing the movement of the Spirit in the group's deliberations.

Summary

The process of group spiritual discernment is an intrinsic part of who we are as a Religious Society of Friends. It is a sacred gift that we as individuals and as a corporate faith community must prepare ourselves to receive through individual discipleship and group worship, attention and listening. We need to guard against conforming to the world's view of decision-making, against listening only to our own message, and against the manipulation of others. Group spiritual discernment is grounded in a caring and loving community that seeks to know and be obedient to the Inward Teacher, the Other.

Footnotes

1. Michael J. Sheeran, *Beyond Majority Rule*, (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1983), p. viii.
2. George Fox, *Quaker Spirituality, Selected Writing*, ed. by Douglas Steere, (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), p. 131.
3. Alistair Heron, "Waiting Upon God," *Friends Consultation on Discernment*, (Richmond, Indiana: Quaker Hill Conference Center, 1985), p. 2
4. Jan Wood, "Spiritual Discernment: the Personal Dimension," *Friends Consultation on Discernment*, (Richmond, Indiana: Quaker Hill Conference Center, 1985), p. 8.
5. Suzanne Farnham, Stephanie Hull, and Taylor R. McLean, *Grounded in God, Listening Hearts for Group Deliberations*, (Harrisburg, Pa.: 1996), p.76.
6. Johan Maurer, "Spiritual Discernment: The Personal Dimension," *Friends Consultation on Discernment*, (Richmond, Indiana: Quaker Hill Conference Center, 1985), p. 17.
7. Patricia Loring, *Spiritual Discernment*, (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1992), p.3.
8. Sheeran, *op.cit.*, p. 101.
9. Fox, *op.cit.*, p. 129.
10. Paul A. Lacey, *Leadings and Being Led*, (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1985), pp. 8, 9.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 29,30.
12. Matthias C. Drake, "Beyond Consensus: The Quaker Search for God's Leadings for the Group," *Friends Consultation on Discernment*, (Richmond, Indiana: Quaker Hill Conference Center, 1985), p. 27.
13. Fox, *op. cit.*, p.130.
14. Lacey, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
15. Martha Paxson Grundy, *Tall Poppies Supporting Gifts of Ministry and Eldering in the Monthly Meeting*, (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1999), p.29.
16. Sandra L. Cronk, *Gospel Order, A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community*, (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1991), p. 9.

17. Patricia Loring, "Group Spiritual Guidance," *What Canst Thou Say*, (Number 19, August 1998).
18. Fox, *op.cit.*, p. 87.
19. Michael L. Birkel, *Silence and Witness*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), pp. 67, 68.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
21. Dorothy Reichardt and Richard Sartwell, "Participants/Observers Summary Report, *Friends Consultation on Discernment*, (Richmond, Indiana: Quaker Hill Conference Center, 1985), p. 59:
22. Heron, *op. cit.*,p. 5.
23. Birkel, *op. cit.*, p. 58.
24. Loring, *Spiritual Discernment*, p. 8.
25. Sheeran, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
26. Drake, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
27. Wilmer A. Cooper, *A Living Faith*, (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1990), p. 65.
28. Sheeran, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

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***Interviews with Members of
Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting of Friends***

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