

Worship sharing (and the empty plate)

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Mostly when we have been introducing Experiment with Light, facilitators have concentrated on the ways to worship share, rather than what it is. Recently, while looking at my thesis[↓] for a reference, I was reminded of what it is: “the art of listening to God, to others, and to oneself.”[♥]

Since 2017, each time we facilitate the Experiment with Light Retreat: Deepening the Practice, Andrea Freeman and I have been using the following quote from Douglas Steere to introduce our work. Douglas wrote:

“To listen one another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be the most important gift we can give one another.”

I was introduced to the quote by American Friend Deborah Shaw at Swarthmoor Hall in 2017. It is interesting to note that Patricia Loring was in Deborah’s Meeting in USA – Patricia wrote the *Listening Spirituality* series of books,[♦] which are among the resources Rex Ambler recommended when first introducing Friends to the Experiment.

By having Douglas’ words prominent in the room where we work, we emphasise the central part worship sharing holds in Experimenting together. Worship sharing enables us to carry our Friends’ experience with us and for our Friends to carry our experience with them, without comment, comparison or judgement. But when worship sharing is not done well, where comments are made or confidentiality is breached, it can lead to our Friends’ process being interrupted, to personal hurt and ultimately to the demise of a Light group.

On introductory workshops and retreats, we lead Friends through how best to worship share – and often during the course or retreat we repeat the advice. Some Friends find it hard to remember and follow and, in the worship sharing group, they forget, so Andrea and I have expanded the advice from what *Quaker faith and practice* 12.21 recommends and the full explanation goes something like this:



[↓] Available online: <https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/3076/1/Meads11PhD.pdf>.

[♥] *Quaker faith and practice*, 12.21: <https://qfp.quaker.org.uk/passages/12-21/>, accessed 18 February 2019..

[♦] Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality: Volume I* (1997) *Personal Spiritual Practices Among Friends* & (1999) *Volume II Corporate Spiritual Practice Among Friends*, Opening Press, Washington DC, USA. Both are usually available from The Quaker Centre at Friends House, London. Douglas Steere’s writings are amongst Patricia’s sources.

- we are witnesses to each other's experience – the Light does the work for our Friends, we do not;
- strong worship sharing, based on *Qfp* 12.21 is the way to provide the best experience for us in our Experimenting together;
- we begin and end in silence;
- we treat our Friends' sharing with absolute confidentiality (of course we can talk about our own experience, understanding and sharing with whomsoever and whenever we feel led, but our Friends' sharing remains in this place at this time);
- we allow all spoken contributions to arise out of and fall back into the silence;
- we leave space between spoken contributions;
- we speak only from our personal experience in the meditation, in time alone and in producing any visual images;
- we speak without commenting at all on any other Friend's sharing, nor do we lapse into discussion;
- we listen to our Friends with attention;
- we give each other a lovely gift of upholding;
- sometimes it is hard to bear others' experience, but we must allow that experience;
- sometimes unmindful sharing can contain indirect interpretation on a Friend's sharing, so focus only on your own experience;
- do not speak a second time – there may be a reason something did not occur to you when you spoke and you can learn more from sitting with that further understanding and asking yourself why it did not form part of your spoken sharing;
- if you are tempted to comment, ask yourself why, ponder what it is that is going on for you instead, and resist that temptation.

In addition, on a residential retreat, we advise the small worship sharing groups to remain sitting in silence until the end of the allotted time. Thus, more can occur to us in the silence and be brought into our practice in the next session for, as we know, the process of the Experiment goes on in the hours, days, weeks, months and sometimes (as happened with dear Isaac Penington in the seventeenth century) years afterwards.

There have been occasions when, in spite of this preparation, a group has not followed this best advice. In the moment of sharing, we all have the right to remind our Friends of the discipline outlined above. If that has not happened on a retreat, Andrea and I have used something we now call 'the empty plate'.

The Empty Plate

When we facilitated a day retreat at Huddersfield Meeting, one participant had not brought her lunch (the event was publicised as 'bring your own lunch' not 'bring-and-share lunch' but the particular participant had not been at Huddersfield Meeting and had missed that information).

We therefore put out an empty plate and all of us who had brought lunch put something of our lunch on our Friend's plate. As a result, she had the best lunch of any of us.

When we were faced with the breakdown of the worship sharing discipline during one retreat, we started the next session with my asking each participant including Rae, our Accompanying Friend, and (last in the circle) Andrea to tell the group what they remembered of the earlier introduction to worship sharing. Between the whole group all the points above (except the last one, which I added) were aired. The last one (*if you are tempted to comment, ask yourself why...*) occurred to me when I pondered why anyone would be led to comment.

The empty plate exercise rehearses what Friends have learned, reinforces to each member of the group the best way of worship sharing and is more powerful because we have all spoken and been heard: a shared endeavour. The empty plate also comes back to Douglas' words, in that by listening to one another we learn and we give a gift:

“To listen one another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be the most important gift we can give one another.”

Such sharing and listening gives space for the Light to work in our lives.

I hope that Friends will find our learning from the Retreat work helpful in maintaining best practice in Light groups, introductory workshops and quiet days.♥

♥ The image included in this article is of a collage Helen produced on the day retreat at High Flatts Meeting on 6 October 2018, based on George Fox's words: 'I saw a great people to be gathered.'