

# Continuing Revelation At The Speed Of Light

By Dana Kester-McCabe

*A "Light" hearted look at how we meet the Spirit through each other in Quaker worship and practice.*

Some of you may remember a song that was on the radio about ten years ago or more. There was a line in it: "What if God was one of us? Just another slob on the bus..." I remember thinking at the time how funny it was that that line was so controversial because Quakers had based our whole religion on that idea. Our way of worship, our testimonies on simplicity, equality, stewardship and peace, our way of decision-making; all these stem from our belief that there is that of God in everyone we meet.

Every time we gather in worship together, we are showing our faith that God can say something worthwhile to us through our friendly assemblies. As Quakers we believe that God continues to reveal Truth throughout our lives, and especially when we gather in worship. We believe that God's profound wisdom is all around us. Sometimes we may laugh at it, ignore it, or we doubt it can happen in unexpected places. We shut our eyes to the Light every day. But in worship we expect the unexpected.

Think of the goofiest person you knew in junior high. Not necessarily someone who was popular. Remember the kid who always said the wrong thing? Remember the kid who thought the funniest thing to do was to bark like a dog at the most inappropriate moment? Most of us were very self conscious and unsure of ourselves in junior high. So the goofiest person we remember could in fact have been us. But usually there was at least one person that we thought was even more awkward or sillier than we were. If we truly believe that there is God in everyone, then even the goofiest kid we knew in junior high may have had a message from God for us.

Now imagine coming to worship with a room full of people just like that goofy kid from junior high. Imagine waiting in a room with the silliest people imaginable for an hour in hopes of Divine inspiration. What if those who spoke told inappropriate jokes or made rude noises? It could be hilarious or a horrible nightmare. What possibly could God be trying to tell us through such an assembly? If you have ever been to a junior high meeting for worship you may have experienced this.

A good friend of mine once asked me to officiate at her wedding. I told her Quakers don't do that sort of thing but I would certainly help her plan her wedding. I told her about the Quaker wedding where the guests could offer prayers and good wishes out of the silence. After some consideration she emphatically declined that option. "I couldn't possibly give my family an open forum like that. My family is too crazy. I can just imagine what they might say. I can't take that chance on my wedding day." I don't think she was afraid of them speaking their Truth. She was more worried about some sarcastic swipe that would be taken as true. Imagine if we came to weekly worship with such fear about what might be said there.

Sometimes what we hear in worship is perplexing or challenging. Sometimes a message may even seem ridiculous. But we have faith that even if the message isn't for us it is for someone there. Sometimes the message to be gained in worship is simply to take comfort and joy in the ordinary company of our gatherings.

In worship we have no expectations of time or even of what we might experience. We come and we wait. We may each have our own way of quieting our mind and settling into the silence. But past that we have no set or common process by which we expect to hear God communicate with us. It is an act

of faith in each other that God might speak through one of us and reveal some measure of Truth to us.

The Quaker mystic Thomas Kelly said; “In worship we have our neighbors to right and left, before and behind, yet the Eternal Presence is over all and beneath all. Worship does not consist in achieving a mental state of concentrated isolation from one's fellows. But in the depth of common worship it is as if we found our separate lives were all one life, within whom we live and move and have our being.”

This is one of the best descriptions of the act of worshipping in community that I have heard. In fact, community is what Quaker worship is all about. We could easily find a quiet spot to meditate and pray in hopes of having a transcendent experience of God. That is certainly possible, but in worship we have the opportunity to experience that “presence in the midst” of us. In worship we come prepared to meet God through each other. We come prepared to hear Truth (with a capital T) as it is revealed to us – through us.

The way we make decisions, “Quaker Process,” is also an opening to hear Truth. But, it is probably the hardest aspect of being a member of the Religious Society of Friends. This is as true for new members and attenders as it is for long time Quakers. In some cases, it can be mind numbingly boring, slow, and painfully contentious. Even in the best cases, it is dependent on the independent spiritual and emotional condition of each person in the room. It depends on our collective ability to check our own agendas at the door so that we may fully hear that of God in each other.

Most of us treat this as a very serious business. That is probably rightly ordered. But if we only hold on to that perspective, we miss one of the essential mandates of all religious life. Religion’s primary function should be to provide comfort and joy for the faith community. From the beginning of time religions have sought to unify people and to help them cope with the turmoil of everyday life. For some a core expression of our religious belief is to work for social justice. We do this out of a desire to bring comfort to the oppressed. We feel joy when we do so. For most of us when we gather in worship, we do so in hopes of lifting up our own spirits and those of the others assembled. We not only seek God through each other but a renewal of our sense of joy. Why else would we return week after week?

So shouldn’t our meetings for business be filled with as much Light, comfort, and joy as our weekly waiting worship? Would it be so terrible if we had fun at our meetings for business? One of the best ways that Meetings keep things friendly is to have a potluck meal before meeting for business. It is much easier to be agreeable with someone that you have just broken bread with. So if meeting for business is difficult you might want to join your friends for that meal. If your Meeting does not have a potluck or even a bag lunch prior to Monthly Meeting, it really is worth trying.

(By the way, there are quite a few Friends who believe that it is good spiritual discipline to always say “Meeting For Worship With Attention To Business,” or some variation there of that rightly reminds us that it is a meeting for worship. Those monikers can be tongue twisters – so for purposes of this conversation I hope you do not mind that I will mostly refer to it as: “*meeting for business*”)

So how do we inject some much needed joy into our meetings for business? How do we help each other to “Lighten up”? Maybe we need to look at it with fresh eyes. First let us recognize some very human truths about ourselves. In recent times our religious society has sought to encourage us to be more process oriented, to be humble, and to resist judging each other. These are all good things. But human beings by our very nature are goal oriented, competitive, and judgmental. We want to win. We want to be the hero who wins or on the side that wins. And, we want winners to be recognized.

That reminds me of team sports. So I'd like, at this point, to use a sports analogy. Before I do however, I will say that I do so with a wink and a nod towards us having some fun with our selves. For those of you who have no interest in sports and are horrified at the idea of comparing Quaker meeting for business to a sport, I hope you will bear with me.

Did you ever wonder why sports are so popular across all cultural lines? Believe it or not, sports, like religion, can unify people into a sense of community and lift them out of the turmoil of daily life. Sure, in the extreme they can also make people prideful, and even violent. But sports have served civilization as a benign way of channeling aggression and distracting people from their problems. Sports can inspire self discipline and working for something greater than one's self. This is also because all people are to some extent - goal oriented, competitive, and judgmental.

Now, these could be considered flaws, everything that brings problems to our society. Or, they could be considered the qualities that have contributed to all the successes of human civilization. They are probably both. They are inescapable aspects of our human condition.

Imagine if you will Quaker meeting for business as a full contact college football game, with the crowd cheering and the band playing. Wouldn't that be fun? Maybe. I chose football for this discussion because it is the exact opposite of what we expect at meeting for business. Football is loud, raucous, and physical. We expect meeting for business to be quiet, sedate, and cerebral. When I thought of this, I was really amused by the prospect of Yearly Meeting sessions as a football game. It is such a farcical idea. I think it would be very funny to see every one playing and shouting. I know I would look hysterical in a football uniform or a cheerleader's outfit. It may not seem like football could have anything to do with meeting for business. Nonetheless, in an effort to help us think about meeting for business in a completely different way, I am going to introduce you to some characters of such a game. When you hear about them you may immediately recognize some people in your Meetings. You may also recognize your selves.

Sometimes a meeting community will divide into factions over an issue. Let's call them teams for now. Loyalties develop and when other contentions arise, the same groups reform. Sometimes those loyalties start to take priority over the matters under consideration.

In our game of meeting for business the clerk and other experienced Friends often act as referees, reminding folks of how to keep the good order: speaking when called on; speaking once on a topic, avoiding repeating what others have said; and avoiding side chatter when others are speaking. The ref's job is as tough as the behavior of the players. When folks play by the rules, the ref or clerk has a much easier job. I am sure there are some clerks out there who would love to occasionally use a referee whistle or call a penalty on the play.

In football the star of the game is the quarterback. When someone feels passionately about a topic, they may show leadership not only by speaking about an issue, but by organizing other "players" to help campaign for one side. George Fox was probably the original Quaker quarterback.

Sometimes one or more Friends will feel so strongly about an issue that they will seem to verbally tackle those who oppose their team. These are our linebackers. Have you ever been on the receiving end of such a tackle? Maybe you've thrown a few blocks yourself?

The running back is the person who is willing to take an issue farther than anyone else, no matter the gauntlet they have to run through, even when the rest of the team can't keep up with them. People like John Woolman and Lucretia Mott could be described as Quaker running backs. They kept giving their ministries even under threat of being read out of Meeting.

There are many people who hang out on the sidelines at a game and at our meetings for business. Even though they show up for the game, the bench warmer sits on the sidelines. Maybe they feel like they are not good enough to play or they are waiting to be called in as reinforcement. They feel it is important to be there even if they do not get to play. Speaking up in meeting for business is very hard for some people, but yet they come and hold the Meeting in prayer. In our game the bench warmer is probably as important – sometimes more important – than the quarter back. When they take the field sometimes miracles happen.

The coach is someone who guides and teaches others sometimes behind the scenes. We'll talk a little more about them later. Like the players and the coach, there is no doubt where the cheerleader stands. Their main focus is cheering on their team not necessarily addressing the details of the game.

Also on the sidelines is the fair-weather fan. This is the person who only shows up when they have a reasonable expectation that things are going to go smoothly or their team is about to win. You might also have an alumni donor who may or may not show up to the game but has a personal desire to see their team win and that the money they donate, be spent the way they want it to be spent. I don't mean to denigrate these folks. Colleges and our meetings depend on the generosity of their friends.

Finally we have the reporters. They do not join one team or another but get in on the action by talking to and about both teams throughout the contest. This can be helpful or harmful depending on how accurate the reporter is, or if they have their own agenda.

The old sports adage is certainly worth mentioning here: "It isn't whether you win or lose. It's how you play the game." Growing up I was terrible at sports. I was always one of the last to be picked for a sports team. But school sports teach children how to play nice and work well with others. It teaches us about some of life's realities: winning and losing, and playing fair even when others don't. Likewise, what we learn during meeting for business can help us to develop spiritual skills, which we can make good use of in other situations. It is not just about sportsman like behavior. It is about regaining a healthy sense of play. Sports are not just about effective strategy or gamesmanship. They are about taking risks and having fun. They are also about losing a contest yet remaining friends. So too is our practice of Quaker process. In fact that is where being process oriented rather than goal oriented comes in. It isn't that you should be one way or another. It is about balancing the two.

When early Friends developed the structure of our Religious Society they did so out of necessity to make decisions about things like helping the families of prisoners of conscience. The matters that come before our meetings for business are no less important to us, but usually we have both the luxury and the curse of not having to make decisions that are so critical to our own daily lives. Quakers today have a bit of false pride. I hear people say that something or someone is not very "Quakerly" and I wonder: "Who appointed us saints?" We are not perfect because we are Quakers. We are just ordinary human beings. We all have some measure of the Light and the opportunity to shine that Light. Sometimes we get it right; sometimes we don't. Quaker Process is a practice – just like the athletic discipline of team sports. It requires that even though we may feel pride in who we are and what we are doing, that we place humility and teamwork over self gain.

So, why would God call us to be in competition with each other in our meetings for business? Why would God call us to use a process which does not provide easy solutions? It may just simply be that we are called to be in community with one another and these are the natural consequences of that calling. When we are honest about our own humanness, we can recognize and forgive it in others. That means recognizing that sometimes we will be at odds with one or more person in our community. Are we willing to disagree with good humor and love? When we are willing to both win

and take our losses with grace, we are embracing the beloved community we seek to create. When we turn our community and the “game” over to God, we embrace that Light which can teach us.

So what does it mean to “win” as a Quaker? If we allow ourselves to truly love that of God in those whom we disagree – or compete with – then we all win. Again, if we turn the “game” over to the Light – then we all win. That means accepting that the Light is not predictable. Nor is the speed at which the Light works. When Quakers say that we are making progress at the speed of “Light” we are not necessarily being complimentary.

Light speed in science is very fast. It is almost incomprehensible to the human mind how fast a beam of light can travel from point A to point B. Quaker Process at the speed of God’s “Light” may seem like it is very slow. However, it is not so much slow as it is deliberate. We give ourselves over to that measure of the Light that others have in order to hear the Truth and make a Spirit-led decision.

Certainly in regards to speed, Quakers could stand some improvement. Sometimes, we use time constraints as an excuse not to make a decision thereby effectively deciding against something. And, we sometimes allow ourselves to get bogged down discussing process rather than coming to terms with the issue before us. Sometimes, we hold ourselves to the artificial standard that a decision made too quickly is not truly Spirit-led. If we believe there is that of God in everyone then we have to trust that both a hasty decision and one that took a long time has some measure of the Light in it.

Quaker process by its very nature is supposed to be organic. It grows and changes over time. A subject that is seemingly closed right now, may need to be reopened at a later date. That is a perfectly acceptable condition because we believe in continuing revelation. We believe that God’s Truth will be revealed to us as we are able to understand it. The Truth – with a capital T – does not change over time, yet our understanding of it does.

Going back to the sports analogy, in any given game or sport there is a beginning and an end. The goal line and scoring are clear. When Meetings set clear timelines to make a decision, our process is more effective and has much more clarity.

We can also learn from sports about defining roles. The roles of the people involved are pretty clear. Everyone knows what their job is. In a game, a player is only replaced if they really mess up. Even if there is disappointment or discouragement, it is rare that they are kicked off the team. Trust is vital to any form of teamwork – and to our Quaker process. By asking people to take on clearly defined jobs and then giving them the space to do them, we show our love and trust in them. It is important that as a community we support them through good and bad performance.

Performance is a pretty scary word for many Friends. It implies judgment. A lot of us come to Quaker Meeting because we believe that we will not be treated with the abusive criticisms served up in other churches. When we do it right in Quaker Meetings, judging another person’s performance is called eldering. This is the job of the coach: to encourage and to teach, to give the player hope. None of us performs well all the time. We make mistakes. We have bad days. Yet judgment need not be dismissive or cruel. All our Meetings have recognizable coaches. In fact, we all have the capacity to be a good coach. Successful athletes will tell you that they have benefited greatly from their willingness to listen to and learn from their coaches. And coaches always say that they learn from their players.

Another way we can learn from sports is to intentionally recognize and celebrate our successes and grieve our losses. Defining success in our meetings for business might seem perplexing. It may simply be speaking our gratitude for the gifts shared at the meeting or that a clear decision was made. Do we shake hands at the end of meeting for business, or hug, or stand in a joyful circle of prayer together?

What other ways could we celebrate? When things do not go well – wouldn't it be a good idea to acknowledge that and stand in prayer together in hopes of improving next time?

We should not wait for trouble to brew before looking into these things. We should be intentional about how we nurture our communities and our decision making process. Sports teams often gather in prayer together before a game. In some Meetings a space is provided for anyone who wants to do this before weekly worship or meetings for business. They call it kindling.

Our weekly worship and our meetings for business may not be games to be played, but they can be joyful. Our meeting communities can be our extended family if we let them. Families are like teams. We may be individuals, but we have common aspirations, and mutual responsibilities. In weekly waiting worship our aspiration is to hear God's Truth revealed through each other. Our responsibility is to wait patiently and listen carefully. Our aspirations and responsibilities for our meetings for business are similar. During them we are further charged to act on that which has been revealed to us, to nurture each other, and to celebrate one another. We should not be afraid of our humanness. Go forward and be joyful even when there is confusion, competition, or conflict. The way we work it out is the way we Love one another. We should not worry at how fast or slow it is taking, for this is the speed of Light. God's Light.

#### **Discussion Questions:**

*Can you recognize yourself, as well as others, in the characters described in the football game? Do you have other characters you might suggest? Other games?*

*What team do we play for? Our friends? Our Meeting? Our Religious Society (the Quakers)? The Christians? God's team? Humanity's Team?*

*What ways can we make our Quaker process more joyful? How could you help yourself or others to "Lighten up?" How could your meeting celebrate together or provide more comfort and joy?*