

WHO OWNS TIME?

The practice of detachment, which we know as simplicity, is relatively easy to understand with respect to material things. We readily recognize that to fail to distinguish between material wants and material necessities is to lose sight of our spiritual goals. As our imaginary needs keep expanding, as we become agitated by grasping after material things, our spiritual progress dwindles.

The bad effects of the quality of grasping is sometimes less easily understood with respect to intangible things like time. We often act as if we own time. We speak of saving time, finding time, making time, having time. Actually, we do not own time; time is the Lord's. Our effort must be to bring ourselves into harmony with the cosmic rhythm of seasons and of hours. If we come to see a sunrise and arrive only five minutes late, the sun is not going to re-rise for us, nor will noon occur a little later because we turned the clock back.

We do not do things only when we may feel like it, but when it is time to do them. There are occasions when it is time for something, whether we like it or not. The whole concept of service, for example, evaporates if it is assumed that we only do things when we "want" to do them, rather than when the need arises. The decisive moments of our day come in those acts of obedience when, like the Medieval monks, we put our pen down without dotting our i's or crossing our t's because time is not ours, and the moment has come to do something else.

Our practice of inner silence is an attempt to free our awareness from the noisy claims of our own private agendas and to make a space within ourselves so that the voice of the universal and eternal things already within us can begin to be heard. Thus our silence always has a quality of listening. It is not a dead silence, not the silence of a morgue or library, but an alert silence, the silence and the listening we might experience when in a mysterious forest.

In seeking to attune ourselves to some universal truth and some universal good, we want not only to hear, but also to obey. In our lifelong process of listening, we try to learn to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. We try to listen and to respond. The divine Word which is whispered to us out of the silence should change what we say and do. We should become transformed. The idea that a Quaker Meeting is a place for people to come in order merely to be affirmed in whatever spiritual state they were in when they happened to arrive is simply a profound misunderstanding.

A key to this transformation is to recognize that there is no such thing as a low priority search for spiritual truth. True worship cannot be something wedged haphazardly into a clutter of other concerns. We acknowledge this essential truth by arriving at meeting for worship on time. The community as a whole will be careful

to arrange that First Day School is open early enough so that parents can have time to settle their children and still arrive in worship at the correct hour.

There may be occasions when, in spite of our very best efforts, we simply cannot get the children ready and therefore show up late; there may be occasions when, having allowed an extra twenty minutes for the usual vagaries of traffic on Route 340, there is an extraordinary gridlock somewhere which makes us late anyway; to become agitated over extraordinary and unusual situations like this would not be a form of inner silence, either. But a Meeting which tolerated widespread and casual laxity with respect to punctuality would no longer represent a "society" of Friends, but rather would come to epitomize the anarchy of Ranterism.

There is nothing particularly sacred about the hour of 10:00 a.m. on First Day morning. The hour was, perhaps, selected by a committee. The discipline of punctuality simply provides us with an occasion, no matter what time the committee has picked, to practice the listening and responding which should be a life-long habit, to practice detachment with respect to "our" time and "our" agenda. It is no more likely that people who are practicing inner silence will come late to Meeting than it is likely that monks who are practicing the presence of God will wind up living in a cluttered or slovenly monastery.

The discipline of punctuality can thus be seen as an integral aspect of our testimony of simplicity and of our practice of silence. There is really no way to marry an authentic Quakerism with insensitivity to issues of time and punctuality. Anarchy with respect to timekeeping is a form of Ranterism or Antinomianism from which Quakerism, since its very earliest days, has been very careful to distinguish itself.

Daniel A. Seeger
Wallingford, Pennsylvania

October 23, 1991