

Ways of Centering Down to Enter Quaker Worship

We speak of centering down to enter into Quaker worship, yet few, if any of us have ever been actively taught how to do this. We are expected to find our own way. This is far from helpful, and the experience of trying to (or being forced to) sit through Quaker worship without the benefit of knowing how to center down needlessly turns many seekers off, losing the gift of their presence.

So what does it mean to center? What state are we after? We are looking for entering into a place of being relaxed in body and mind, and open in spirit. When we are centered, our brainwaves actually shift. We are looking to find a state where we are open in heart, and unattached to our thoughts. We actually seek to get to the space beneath our thinking, to create a space in which the Divine Spark within can find voice. We can't find that when our mental space is full of chatter or interesting reflections.

I once thought worship was something I do, but for many years now it has seemed as if worship is actually a state of consciousness which I enter, so that I am immersed into a living, invisible stream of reality which has always been present throughout all history.

~Bill Taber, *Four Doors to Quaker Worship*

I'll include below some different techniques for finding the gift of this state, but techniques will only get you so far. This is something we can't make happen. It is grace.

"True contemplation is not a psychological trick but a theological grace. It can come to us ONLY as a gift, and not as a result of our own clever use of spiritual techniques."

Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*

God is not a pinball machine in which we insert quarters to get a certain result. Humility and a surrender of self-will will get you further than any technique. That said, here are some ways to help you focus, making space for that grace to happen.

1. Focus your heart on awe, bringing up past experiences or present things which take you to a place of genuine awe.
2. Focus your heart on gratitude, opening to the many things in your life you are grateful for.
3. Open your heart to the Divine, and when your thoughts intrude, keep bringing your focus back to the bodily sensation of an open heart.
4. Follow your breath. When thoughts arise, go back to focusing on your breath.
5. Memorize a prayer that helps you center and pray that at the beginning of worship. There are many. Use one that speaks to your own heart or draft your own. Here are some examples:

Give me a candle of the spirit, O God
as I go down into the deep of my
own being
Show me the hidden things. Take me
down to the spring of my life, and
tell me my nature and my name.
Give me freedom to grow so that I

may become my true self – the
fulfillment of the seed which you
planted in me at my making.
Out of the deep I cry unto thee, O God.
Amen

George Appleton

Open my heart
Let Holy Love flow through me
Center my soul
Upon the path of peace
Make of my life
A melody of Love
Singing Hallelujah, Thou Great One
Hallelujah

Patricia McKernan Runkle

(This one can also be sung as a chant. It's in *Worship in Song*, the Friends Hymnal.)

Here's a traditional prayer, used for centering by the Desert Fathers and Mothers 1700 years ago. While the language in this one might be a theological stretch for many Quakers, it might help if you understand the meaning of sin to be separation from God, and Christ to be that of the Divine which preceded time and existence and is of the same substance as the Inner Light or Inner Christ as experienced by Friends.

Jesus Christ
Son of God
Have mercy upon me,
A sinner.

The practice of this prayer, known as "Prayer of the Heart," is to breathe in on the first line, out on the second, etc. The goal in the Eastern Orthodox Church in using this practice was to move this prayer down into the heart, so that it is active there all the time. I know some Friends who use this prayer with modifications to make it harmonious with their own language for, and experience of, the Divine.

God, I offer myself to Thee, to build with me and do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help, of Thy power, Thy love, and Thy way of life. May I do Thy will always.

Third Step Prayer of AA

6. Centering Prayer:

Centering prayer is a seven-hundred-year-old practice where the intent is to keep bringing the mind back to a space of open attentiveness without attachment to thoughts or emotions. This effort at consistent return is understood as "consenting to God's presence and action within." (The Cloud of Unknowing). In that respect, it mirrors the centered state sought for in Quaker worship. There is one difference, though. In centering prayer, one uses a sacred word of one's own choosing to as a reminder each time one returns from one's thoughts to one's focus to being attentive without attachment. This word is not repeated like a mantra, over and over again, but is only used in the moment of returning one's attention.

7. Mantras and Chanting:

Mentally chanting a mantra, or a short chant set to music. As these techniques are designed to “fill up” our mental space in order to initiate a state of being centered, they should be discarded once one has entered a centered space, to allow room for the Divine to be present.

8. “Letting Go” Breathing:

Engage in a “letting go” breath pattern. First, become aware of your breath. Then, allow your throat to open and relax, and breathe deeply, all the way down into your belly. Take long, slow intake breaths, hold for a brief pause, and then release your breath all at once. Each time you exhale, let your body slump just a little bit, releasing any tension, just a hair more with each breath. As you breathe in, envision breathing in Light and Love, and when you exhale, allow yourself to release any tension, anxiety, or fear carried in your body.

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