

On Listening: To God and To Each Other

by Dorothy Steere

Dorothy Steere has been a member of the Society of Friends since 1932. She married Douglas V. Steere in 1929 and they have lived fifty-five years on the Haverford College campus. They have two daughters, Helen and Anne, and three grandchildren. Together she and Douglas helped a small group re-open Radnor Meeting after it had been closed for fifty years. Dorothy is now active on the Worship and Ministry Committee there and in Women Among Friends. Also a member of the Pendle Hill Board and the Ecumenical Institute of Spirituality, Dorothy gave this talk in 1983 for a retreat of the Quaker Studies Program, a Philadelphia Yearly Meeting experiment to foster the life of ministry among unprogrammed Friends.

In a sense all of life is speaking to us if we are attuned to listen, to be aware, to attend. In the gospel of Mark it says "If any man has ears to hear let him hear."

Listening to God implies that God speaks. This may put some people off. They have had no clarion calls like the ones which came to Samuel or to Saul. Friends usually refer to something less dramatic, more subtle: a sense of Presence; of the Inward Christ, the Inward Teacher or Guide. I doubt if anyone here has not felt over and over again a persistent inner tugging, an inner stirring or prompting, a sudden rapture or welling up of thankfulness, a comforting or encouraging which is not yourself speaking to yourself, or conscience (which has its cultural and moral content). There may be no audible voice, but there is a movement in the heart, a sense of Otherness that one is aware of. A friend of ours put it well:

The deep-lying truth in the Christian idea of Incarnation is that God is immanent in the flow of life. To be God-related is to be optimally aware of this flow within and around us. Hidden among the particulars of daily life are the openings into the way of God . . . these warm sensings over the months and years become new mind-sets or action.

Friends did not coin these words but they often speak of the "beyond that is within" – a recognition of both the immanent and the transcendent aspects of God. And so, God can speak to us in all of life if we are open. We can be reached by the awareness of Presence, of guidance, or quickening into life in many many ways.

It is a good exercise to look back over our lives and recall these inner movements of the heart that brought new

and sudden revelations about ourselves, about others in the world around us and our relationship to them, and our companioning and accompanying by God.

There are various qualities of being that provide a climate for listening to God in the midst of life: We have spoken of openness; then there is inner hunger; times of crisis and a need for guidance; longing for fresh insight; a growing awareness of our relatedness to all of life; a growing capacity to be still inwardly and to wait for wisdom; a desire to respond to the love of God and Jesus Christ, the Revealer, that we feel is being poured out upon us each moment of our lives.

Nature often brings an early awareness of "that Something far more deeply interfused" as Wordsworth says, that is there for us to discover. Nature can be an entrance, a threshold to worship. When our daughters were small we used to play a game of listening. We would lie on the grass and listen to all of the sounds of nature around us: the birds' songs, the wind, the rustle of the leaves in the trees, the stirrings in the grass; and then we shared these sounds with each other. I am sure that it made us all more aware of the beauty, mystery and wonder of the world around us. It surely raised questions of what lay behind it all. How did it begin? At a very young age our daughters caught a sense of the interconnectedness and interdependencies among all forms of life. Fenelon says, "How few there are who are still enough to hear God speak." Nature can bring us to stillness, wonder and awe which are "readiers" for worship and connectedness with the Creator.

God can speak to us through people. I recall people I knew as a young girl who were filled with tenderness and love. They had the capacity to listen to me. I sensed a secret knowing, and I began to realize that they were persons to

whom Jesus Christ was real and living. They counted on His guidance and they clearly were listening responders to God and to others whom they met. Some of these persons were Sunday School teachers and ministers in the Congregational Church in the small village in Michigan where I was brought up. But there were others: a teacher in high school English class, older family members and friends. I longed for what they had. They listened and they cared, and I loved them in response.

I have thought a lot about how important it is to learn to listen to each other in our families and to be sensitive enough to know when persons are likely to be ready to listen and when they are not. I can recall rushing out to the kitchen to share some beautiful lines of poetry with my mother when she was in the midst of preparing a meal. She did not respond as I thought she should and I was disappointed, not realizing that I was asking her to listen more than she could at that time. There are occasions when family members are busy with other things or in the heat of anger or annoyance or frustration with each other. These are rarely the times when we listen to each other well. How much better to wait until the time is ripe to share the hurt or the anguish – when persons are more capable of or receptive to listening!

On the other hand, I think parents need to be aware of how vital it is to leave everything to answer a young child's reaching out to you to "come quickly" to share a sunset or the beauty of a discovered wild flower, or the trick of the pet dog, or to listen with full attention, no matter what seems prior on your agenda, when children burst into the house from school eager to have you listen to a tale of woe or a triumph they have experienced during the day. There is little question that if as a parent we have not taken the time

really to listen to children when they are young, listened not only to their words but to their feelings behind the words, they are unlikely to want to come with their sharings in later life. Learning to listen to each other in families can help to make us better listeners to others and to the Inner Guide.

We can be spoken to through books: autobiographies, biographies, poetry, devotional books, the Bible and others. Modern Friends are not known to be well acquainted with the Bible, and we need the Christian frame of reference which the Old and New Testaments give us to test our own experiences of the Inner Light, a term we use that can be largely subjective. At each point in our lives the Bible can "speak to our condition" if we let it. Our own experience needs to be linked to the historical revelation.

John Sanford has written a book called *Dreams – God's Forgotten Language*. In my own life a dream coming at some time of inner crisis has seemed like a message from God which helped me to see myself and my situation in new perspective. Fritz Kunkel and Carl Jung have served as messengers of insight into my own being and doing. It is an impossibility to come to know, understand and be open to others if we have not been helped to know ourselves. Both pain and joy can be revealers if we let them, and so can illnesses of ourselves or those we hold dear. What is God saying to us in and through these situations? How can we discover their positive meaning? Dreams and psychological insights can be handmaidens to the growing life of the spirit. We are diminished if we neglect what we can learn from them.

Prayer and meditation and the inner dialogues we have with God in the course of them can help us to discover who we are – the darkness and the light in us and how we might

be led to deal with both of them. How wonderfully the 139th Psalm puts this: "Oh God, Thou hast searched me and known me . . ." Prayer often reveals to us how we relate to others and to the world's needs and what part is ours to take in meeting them. There are so many kinds of prayer; each one has a longing behind it; each one is accepted by the Eternal Listener; and if we can wait beyond our own wills, even the most limited and seemingly self-centered prayer can be transformed.

Corporate worship is surely a place where we often feel strengthened by the common longing to be near to God and to each other as we wait and listen in the silence. I shall never forget my first Friends meeting for worship in Germantown Meeting, Coulter Street, which Douglas took me to in 1928, the year before we were married. We arrived when the meeting had already gathered. As we entered I was struck by the sense of reverence and awe I felt in that large assembly. I was aware of a people gathered in listening prayer – in waiting for the Living Word. I had been a church tramp in college, listening critically to many words from the preachers. Here seemed to be a place where one could be ministered to in a Living Silence filled with Presence. I couldn't believe there could be such a place of worship, and I felt immediately at home.

It seems clear that listening to God and being listened to by God can take place under many circumstances. Frederich Buechner says.

There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always suddenly, always leaving room to recognize Him or not to recognize Him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly . . . Listen to your life. See it for the fathomable mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch,

taste, smell your way to the Holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments and life itself is Grace.

Listen with all your senses and your heart. In a conversation with another, discover how important eyes are, as well as ears and touch and facial expressions. A sensitive person listens with every part of his being to all that another reveals both hiddenly and openly.

I would like to accent a little more the conscious times and places when we come into the presence of this "beyond that is within" – in our meetings for worship as well as in our personal prayers and meditations. How do we come? Do we come before the Presence with thanksgiving and praise? Yes, sometimes. But often we come out of the hurry-scurry of life – "the whirlwind" – often almost overwhelmed by the discordant voices within and without that make it hard to discern "the still small voice". In the Quaker meeting for worship God is both the Listener and the One who speaks to us, and in the course of worship both aspects of God can be there. Perhaps in the early part of meeting for worship we are so full of our own involvements that our prayers are often petitionary and we reach out to a receptive God who will listen to our needs. As we move past this there may come the stilling, the open waiting for wisdom, the waiting for guidance, the longing to be spoken in rather than to speak, and we become the listeners.

It takes practice and discipline in stilling and listening before it can become a part of us – a natural stance that we cannot be without. It is our tendency to talk rather than to listen to God. How can we expect to find it easy to center down in a Friends meeting for worship when we haven't had times of prayer, inspirational reading and meditation during the week? How much regular attendance at the cor-

porate meetings for worship, where we feel the support of the group as we seek the Presence, can help us to attend to God during our daily round! Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God* makes it clear that Brother Lawrence was less likely to have felt God's presence in his kitchen among his pots and pans without the daily Mass and the daily offices of the Church that kept reminding him of the incarnational aspect of the One in whom he believed. The personal and the corporate sides of prayer and worship seem vital to each other. The one feeds the other. Together they can in time prepare us for the continual undercurrent of communication with God in the midst of all of life.

Douglas and I so often feel that we give attenders and newcomers to our meetings for worship so little help in finding their way into worship on the basis of silence. I am sure that many come to it naturally and easily, but there should be more times when older members might share with newcomers some ways that have been helpful to them in entering into the silence. All of us could be helped by some honest exchanges about the difficulties and the joys of this form of worship. We come to meeting for worship in whatever state we are, and I believe that God accepts us as we are. The Eternal Listener (as Douglas calls God) listens within our beings and, if we are open and hungry, gently draws us beyond ourselves and our preoccupations with ourselves. It takes a while to learn to still the body and to still the mind and spirit in order to be capable of listening. So often we come filled with worries, frustrations, angers, fears, problems of all kinds. To fight them is hopeless. Admitting and greeting them and then quietly letting them go as the living silence reaches through to us seems to be a good way to deal with them. We really can choose what to do with distractions. A minister in my home church used to

tell us as young people in Christian Endeavor meetings, "You can't keep the birds of the air from flying over your heads, but you can keep them from making nests in your hair!" Last summer we had a fourteen-month old girl who came with her parents for lunch. They placed her at the table in a little seat which they had brought and asked if we had lots of newspapers to put underneath her place. Soon we learned the reason why! She had a way of selecting out very consciously what she wanted to eat and gently throwing what she did not want over her right shoulder with a jaunty gesture! Perhaps that is what we can do with inner and outer distractions that are bound to present themselves to us – imaginatively throw them over our shoulder and go on with what we know we want!

What a tendency we have to give ourselves exclusively to rational dealing with our problems – "mind-solving" them! This has its place, surely, but how much we need to learn to wait in silence for the Spirit's quiet direction and help – to wait in faith for guidance. One of the old Quaker advices in London Yearly Meeting read: "Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts which are the leadings of God."

What are some of the things that keep us from listening to the Guide within us – the Christ Within, the Living Christ, or whatever term is real for you at this point in your spiritual journey? We have spoken of the difficulties in stilling the body, of the inner and outer distractions that keep our minds and spirits preoccupied, of the lack of practice in listening prayer and fresh awarenesses of God in our daily lives. I believe that one of the things that keeps us from listening to God is that we are afraid of what may be asked of us. The risk of change is too great, the demands too high and costly. Remember the stories in the Bible of the

rich young ruler and of Nicodemus, who were intrigued by the life and the teachings of Jesus but felt they asked too much of them. We, like they, are too comfortable to change our life-styles, to be simpler, freer from cumber. It is too risky to withhold our taxes that go to the military; the cost might be too great. "To come near to God is to change", and change is hard. So we set up barriers of non-listening, of turning off our spiritual antennae. We are so accustomed to our prejudices, our angers, our sense of superiority or inferiority, our own forms of security, our lazy "stay as you are" mentality, that these things become a part of us, a part we fear to have removed. Gerrard Groot was a Hollander who lived in the 14th century and founded the Brethren of the Common Life from which the famous devotional book, *The Imitation of Christ*, came. This is a book which has meant much to me through the years. Gerrard Groot had his whole life changed when a stranger tapped him on the shoulder as he was watching an athletic game and said, "Thou oughtest to become another man," then slipped away in the crowd. Gerrard Groot heard the words not only with his ears but with his heart and mind and did become another man, a changed man, in the way he lived from then on.

Another tendency which can keep us from turning to the Guide within us is thinking that we ought to be adequate to manage our own lives without the help of others or God. We cannot bear to think of any kind of dependency besides on ourselves. Dependency is so often thought of as weakness, as demeaning rather than strengthening. The One upon whom we depend is trying to aid us in fulfilling our own highest potential. It is apparent that there is an increasing realization among Friends and others of our need to help each other in our inner journeys. Worship-sharing

groups are one example of this. Spiritual friends and spiritual guides are others. We are coming to see the great companioning we can experience when we learn in various ways how to listen to each other with love and caring. There is no doubt that this kind of sharing or learning to listen to each other helps our capacity to worship and to minister in meetings for worship.

Learning to listen with attention and caring keeps us from indulging in the critical stance. Open, understanding “listening with the heart” to persons who minister in meetings for worship whom we may not appreciate or whose points of view we may dislike helps us. God listens to all kinds of speaking and we can be participants in this kind of open listening if we will. What is said might even be what we need at that very moment!

It becomes quite clear that listening to God and to each other takes practice. Learning to listen in one situation helps us with others. As we open ourselves to discover what part listening has for us – listening to ourselves, listening to God and listening to others – we can be assured that there is an “Eternal Listener” present as we speak or as we listen, a “divine assist”, a loving third party that longs for our wholeness and our sensitive response.

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