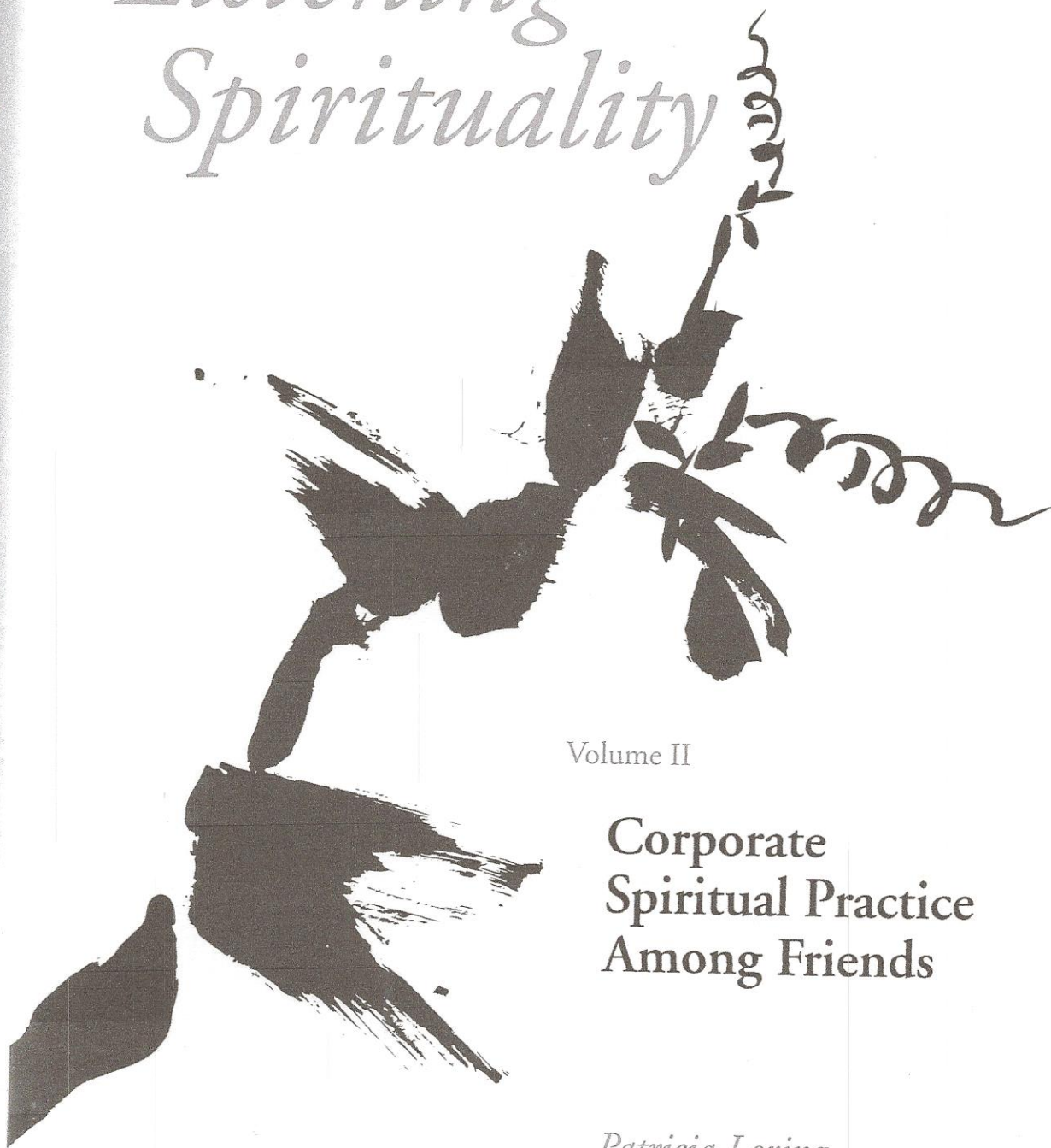


Listening Spirituality

Volume II

**Corporate
Spiritual Practice
Among Friends**

Patricia Loring



and resurrections, were experienced as the work of God in the meeting for worship over time.

Our response to God's work in worship

If worship is the dedication of ourselves to God, part of the listening exercise may be a simple, wordless turning of our being toward God, as in contemplative prayer. Open awareness, and the opportunity to remain in that stillness apart from discursive thought, may come as a gift. More often, it is given to us to attend prayerfully to what arises in our consciousness from our hearts and lives—always in relation to God, or to the fundamental orientation of our being in the direction of God (Volume I, pp. 48-51, "Intentionality").

Worship may be an occasion for self-knowledge, where we come to know what lies beneath the superficial movements of our consciousness. In the undefended quiet, we may become aware—with immediacy—of motives, implications and consequences of our actions, that have been concealed from us by the busyness of life, by the rationalizations of our conscious mind, by our efforts to maintain the face we present to the world. It may be a time to ask for, or to begin to permit, a purification of our motives; a time for recognizing and letting go of what stands in the way. We may see the implications of our insight for our relationships with others. We may feel the need to grant or seek forgiveness, to make amends, to change our attitudes toward or relationships with others.

It may be a time in which we become aware of the source and the implications of our deepest concerns and desires for ourselves and others. Holding them in the Light, we may see their purity, or see where they are clouded by self-centeredness or prevarication. We may be given strength and impetus to proceed; or we may experience that inner constraint Friends have referred to as "a stop in the mind".

It may be a time of sensitizing to movements of God in the heart, of becoming acquainted with the promptings of Love and Truth—which so much of our rationalist and psychological culture teaches us to discount. To sit in stillness, in openness, may carry us past not only the rationalism of discursive thought, but also past the scientific, psychological and material reductionism in which we have been schooled. When they

fall away in the Light, we may more easily become sensitized to the intuitive and feel motions of the heart in which early Friends found the movements of the Spirit.

We may need to learn to be much less controlling of what arises, much less quick to label something a distraction. Instead, we may learn to draw it intentionally *into* the Light in order to see it whole and clearly, to feel whether it may be a nudge into prayer or change. This relinquishment of our own agenda and our own criteria for what is and is not a distraction can be the beginning of allowing the unexpected to arise. It may permit us to be guided in directions we had not planned for ourselves. It is a recognition and an acknowledgement that we may not know, to begin with, what is being called for in our lives at their deepest level. William Penn asks,

When you come into your meetings, both preachers and people, what do you do? Do you gather bodily only and kindle a fire, compassing yourselves about with the sparks of your own kindling, and so please yourselves and walk in the light of your own fire and the sparks which you have kindled, as those did in the time of old whose portion was to lie down in sorrow?

Or, rather, do you sit down in true silence, resting from your own will and workings, and waiting upon the Lord, with your minds fixed in that Light wherewith Christ has enlightened you, until the Lord breathes life in you, refresheth you and prepares you and your spirits and souls to make you fit for His service, that you may offer unto Him a pure and spiritual sacrifice.

William Penn. D.R.

Notice the echo of the passage from Romans 12:1-2 that speaks of worship as offering oneself as a pure and spiritual sacrifice. Notice also the themes of “life” and “refreshment”, which were experiential terms for what was felt in worship and, at the same time, some of the Biblical terms that Friends felt pointed to their own experience. Many Biblical words and phrases—such as “living water”, “fountains of life”, “heavenly dew”, “heavenly rain”, “manna”, “leaven”—expressed the restful, yet enlivening and

nurturing, quality that arose in Friends when they were liberated from ordinary thought and from words of their own making. This same vocabulary also expressed the sense of the Source beyond themselves for the Life-giving nourishment and refreshment. It could only be received when they had "rested from" their "own will and workings".

To remain "fixed in that Light", to maintain such an intentionality, such a directedness of being, requires a focusing and refocusing of attention and of the heart. It is not unlike a time of individual meditation in which, without fuss, we simply come back to the Center each time we find we have wandered. Some feel that the refocusing itself is of central importance in worship. The repeated inner choice to come back to God, the practice of returning again and again to the Center, the iterated affirmation of the desire to listen in faithfulness, can form a habit of the heart that we can carry out of the time of worship. It can bring worship into the dailiness of all life, erasing the distinction between the secular and the sacred.

The interior corporate experience of the meeting

All of the above might remain a purely private exercise, undistinguishable from a personal time of retirement. But one difference between private meditation and corporate worship is the directionality of our listening, the quality of our willingness and holy expectancy, *in the context of a corporate search*. To be truly together, we listen for what the Spirit is bringing forth from us as a body, for what new thing God is bringing forth within us corporately, for how our communal life may be of service to God. We also listen for the Spiritual State of the Meeting in its responsiveness to the work of the Divine within it. This is an expanded or multidimensional version of our private prayer experience of being joined with the living ongoing stream of prayer, with the ongoing work of the Spirit, with God's will flowing through us and the universe—or being joined with the pain of the world.

Together, we may come to a deeper sense of the gifts, trials and purposes of being drawn together in this particular meeting, at this time. Occasionally, one of us may be favored with vocal ministry to articulate a sense of God's work among us or to pray for a corporate willingness or capacity to respond.

Friends have also found that there is help in being with other people similarly directed to God. This help is not only a matter of mutually supporting one another by our intentional companionship. Over, above and through the presence of others, we often experience the presence of a Light, Life, Power and Guide at work, a Presence that is as personal as it is cosmic.

Friends have felt that "Presence in the Midst" to be a fulfillment of the Biblical promise that "Where two or more meet in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:20, *NJB*) This understanding is expressed visually in the nineteenth century print, "The Presence in the Midst", which shows a translucent Jesus standing in the middle of a traditional meeting. This print was one of only two visual representations that might be found hung in almost any meeting house. It expresses the experience of Presence as the Spirit of Christ that filled and fulfilled the life, words and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

Such a corporate exercise differs from private prayer. Friends' worship may be seen as a kind of nonverbal liturgy—or "work of the people"—that is sometimes called "a service". One way in which coming together for worship may differ from a "time of retirement" is in special and intentional awareness of, attention to and care for the others with whom we worship—both individually and together. Sometimes it seems right to attend to each person in turn. At other times, as we wait, one face or another may draw us to feel a concern whether we do or don't know of any cause. Some people incorporate this prayer in a time of inward greeting of others as they arrive. For others, the greeting may follow a time of centering. Still others wait on a particular inner prompting. What matters here is the intentional embrace of our partners in worship, rather than the exclusion of them.

Another difference from private meditation and prayer is the concern for the quality of the communal worship. Some outward practices that support this concern have to do with arriving punctually and entering—without fuss, noise or conversation—into the creation of a climate of prayer and worship that will support those who will arrive later.

Some Friends feel a special leading to pray for the corporate spiritual life of the meeting. This may take the form of praying for its centering, or praying that all present may know the presence and guidance of the Spirit. Prayers may be offered that each person present may be fed according to her or his deepest need. It is helpful to pray

that the meeting may receive the vocal ministry most needful for its nurture, and that those whose ministry is required will heed the prompting to speak, while those who may be moved to speak from some other urge will feel restrained. Finally, we can pray that the meeting may experience together the gift of "gathering", or "covering".

Those who experienced a special calling to, and gift of, prayer for the meeting were traditionally recognized as elders. Those of us who no longer recognize elders may feel moved, at least occasionally, to shoulder this particular care for the meeting. Some feel that we will surely languish as a meeting if no one undertakes this care. We will inevitably be richer as a worshiping community if we undertake this work together.

The heart should be as open to the unpredictable movements of the Spirit in worship as it is in times of private prayer. Part of the exercise is the attempt to attend to what is happening within and to discern what is of the Spirit, what is of something else—and how to bring that "something else" into the Light for illumination, transformation, or whatever God is calling for. Interestingly, the movements of the heart in worship may be quite similar to those that are ritualized in the liturgies or orders of worship in other churches. The difference is that the Quaker worshiper waits for confession, contrition, petition, intercession, praise, thanksgiving or other movements to be brought forth in herself by the Spirit.

There is no expectation that all of these movements will take place in a single period of worship. There may be only one. Where there is more than one, the sequence may differ from that of an order of worship. It should arise naturally from the deep interaction of the soul and God, rather than from an agenda. Where other churches attempt to express the major ways of relating to God and to help the worshiper to enter them, Friends leave that work to the Spirit in the heart.

Relying on the Spirit is both simpler and vastly more complicated, without the support of a creed or a verbal liturgy. It means we worshipers are responsible for directing ourselves Godward; for being sensitized and sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit in that direction; for being faithful to however the Spirit is moving us in the moment. The risk in liturgical traditions is that repetitions of words and gestures may become mechanical and lifeless. For Friends, the risk is that we may become lost in our own woolgathering or thought processes, or lost in pursuing our own agendas. We may mistake our thoughts or agendas for the movement of the Spirit, or we may become so involved in them that we are oblivious to the motions of the Spirit.