



Foundations for Children in Quaker Worship

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In thinking about children and worship, I go back to the same foundation I start with for myself as an adult: quieting the self in order to listen to God. I also recall my experiences of worship as a young child. I remember feelings of joy, love, and indescribable warmth. I also remember a feeling of connectedness to God, the larger world of people, and the natural world. So now as a parent of a young child, past clerk of First Day School and present clerk of my Meeting, I wonder: how can I help make room for children to experience joy in worship? How can I hold appropriate expectations and boundaries for my child while not making worship feel like a punishment, something to endure?

One starting place in answering these questions about Meeting for Worship, is in the time leading up to worship. Something that's helped me is paying attention to fostering my child's noticing those feelings of joy and connectedness, sometimes following his cues instead of expecting him to follow mine. For example, my 2 year old son was beginning to resent family mealtime worship. Why should we just sit here in silence when there's food RIGHT THERE waiting to be eaten? We now have, in addition to quiet thank-filled worship, a sung grace followed by clapping and exclaiming, "Yay, God!" The clapping was introduced by Tim and we joined in. It's now a permanent part of grace. My son seems to have that feeling of joy, love, and connectedness during grace now that I remember from my childhood and which is also part of my adult experience of worship. And it's okay, too, if he samples some of the food while giving thanks for it!

A similar example from my childhood comes from Preschool Bible School. I still remember vividly one of the prayers we used. It went like this:

We lift up our hearts to the Lord in thanks.

It's GOOD to be alive!

And we all got to jump up into the air on the word 'good.' What a true expression of praise for God!

This exuberance and connection are the same experiences I hope for our children to find in Quaker Meeting for Worship. To get there, I believe we need to offer children two specific supports: tools to use in Meeting for Worship and active welcoming of children in worship by the whole Meeting community.

I want to explore the importance of offering children tools for their spiritual toolkit. We don't expect adults to rely solely on their own spiritual gifts, and it doesn't make sense to place that expectation on kids. Sometimes it feels as though we expect our kids to absorb Quaker ways purely through osmosis, but I think that some instruction is necessary. Tools don't replace worship itself, but they can help us enter worship.

My upbringing equipped me with a well-stocked spiritual toolkit. Some of those tools include prayers, Bible stories, examining my conscience, concepts I know by heart (such as the fruits of the Holy Spirit, the mysteries of the rosary, the stations of the cross), and songs – both traditional hymns and more contemporary “church music”. These tools often help me quiet my mind when it is brimming over with excitement and have sustained me through dry spiritual spells and difficult personal times. I use them in Meeting for Worship to step into that place of connectedness. They are not an end in themselves.

I want children to have such tools available to them, too. With elementary school aged kids in First Day School, I did a lot of sharing stories and songs. One time, we made “Quaker rosaries” – a string of ten beads to use as prayer beads to help focus: think of ten things I am grateful for, ten people to hold in the Light, ten things I want to ask for God’s help with, ten things to ask forgiveness for (or turn over to God). We would then have some “practice” time when we all tried one of these practices together. With my toddler, I feel more like I am laying the groundwork in our daily life together – lots of singing hymns and telling stories so that these things will become part of his ordinary, daily vocabulary and will be there for him when he needs them – that they’ll be as familiar to him as the Happy Birthday song and the ABC song will be.

The second offering we need to give children is the Meeting’s true acceptance of its responsibility for welcoming and supporting children in Meeting for Worship. I thoroughly believe that a big part of passing on a love for Quaker worship is simply having our kids in worship with us. Kids and adults both learn the practice of worship by *doing* worship. I wish we had an open conversation about this so that parents don’t have to guess how much noise and movement other people in worship can tolerate. Meetings need to have a clear message about what they expect, tolerate, and will struggle with. From conversations I have with other folks after worship, it seems that parents usually guess wrong when they try to figure it out on their own – Friends are generally more tolerant of the noise and movement than most parents realize. But then there may be a few friends in the Meeting who consistently voice a desire for less noise and movement from children. It will strengthen the Meeting’s understanding of itself if each one takes time to discern and articulate a corporate understanding. Such a process will also allow parents to join in the worship rather than spend the time agonizing about their children’s wiggling (agonizing about wiggling is one of the lesser effective tools for adults and children!).

And for Meetings who do put this on their agenda, I’ll offer a practical observation from my viewpoint as a mom. I’m finding that my son changes and has different needs, abilities and challenges with each new developmental stage he hits (and he’s just begun!). The latest challenge is becoming verbal but not having much volume control. He will get chatty and a little louder than I think he ought to be, but he’s still okay to be in worship otherwise. I would love to hear how parents deal with this. I have one friend who gives her school-aged daughter a piece of gum to chew. I have resorted to raisins – it’s hard to talk while you’re

chewing raisins. It seems mundane, and sometimes like I'm bribing him with food, but then again I wonder if it's not that much different from friends who knit during meeting for worship for business.

In my own meeting, we often want to welcome children in worship but don't always know quite how to do it. I hope that we will all continue the conversations and keep trying, remembering that perhaps adults and children have more in common than different when it comes to experiences of God and worship.