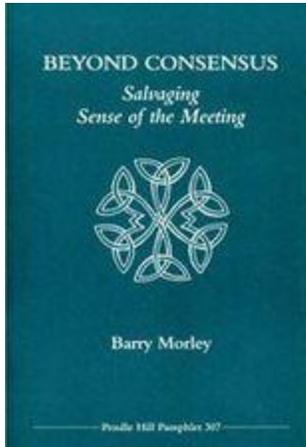


# Beyond Consensus - Excerpt from Pendle Hill Pamphlet 307



In his classic pamphlet "Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting," Barry Morley makes the case that *'Reaching consensus is a secular process. In Sense of the Meeting, God gets a voice.'*

Barry discusses three components that he believes are essential to the process which leads to a sense of the meeting: **Release, Long Focus** and **Transition to Light**, all of which are nurtured by worship. We invite you to read more about these three elements of Sense of the Meeting, plus an amusing and instructive baseball analogy!

"Three components are essential in the process which leads to a sense of the meeting; and since none is independent of the others they are likely to overlap and intertwine:

**1. Release.** After an issue has been presented to the business meeting, Friends should allow Friends whose feelings have been aroused to release those feelings. Tears, harsh words, raised or shaking voices, difficulty with articulation—any of these might accompany release. Friends who release their feelings should be listened to lovingly. No effort should be made to intervene—to correct, argue, analyze, criticize, clarify, or explain away. Sometimes we need to get something off our chests.

Release should be encouraged and appreciated. It clears the air. It is part of the process which enables us to arrive together in the silence of Light accepted. By emptying themselves of anguish, anxiety, fear, anger, perhaps even joy, Friends open their minds for an inpouring of Light. I remember a young staff member in a business meeting at Catoctin Quaker Camp who interrupted the process only a few sentences from completion. With tears of excitement in her eyes she blurted out, "It really works, doesn't it." This outburst of her joy of discovery sweetened the silence when it settled.

Loving encouragement allows feelings to emerge at any point in the discussion. Tender attentiveness is the meeting's gift. Those who release feelings, in their turn, give a gift back to the meeting. "I am safe in this place," is the unspoken message; "otherwise I would not allow myself to do this." That sense of safety makes the business meeting safe for everyone. And that sense of a safe haven is essential in reaching for the sense of the meeting.

**2. Long Focus.** [To me,] sense of the meeting is the object of business meeting. Thus we should focus our attention beyond the immediate discussion, toward the sense of the meeting. People fresh from a background of vote taking and consensus-making find this difficult. Even experienced Friends sometimes forget. In my own case, when ideas or positions become really important to me, I am inclined to invest myself emotionally. I shorten my focus and interfere with progression toward Light.

Strong feelings, really important issues, personal investment—these push us toward forging a consensus. Though release of my strong feelings is appropriate, fighting for their supremacy is not. Ideas and quality thinking are essential to the process, but ideas in competition shorten focal length. There have been times when my ideas have prevailed. But getting what I wanted has never worked out to be as fulfilling, even though it might seem so momentarily, as joining together in consciousness of Light.

I once watched a softball game with a friend. "Did you see what the third baseman did on that play?" I asked.

"No," came the reply, "I was watching the play at first." "So was I," I said.

"How can you see both at the same time?" asked the friend.

"Watch the next play," I said, "but don't look at the game. Focus your eyes on that tree just beyond the right field fence."

My friend did. "Did you see the play at first base?" I asked. "Yes," my friend responded.

"What did the third baseman do?"

## Beyond Consensus - Excerpt from Pendle Hill Pamphlet 307

"He came in for a bunt."

"What did the shortstop do?"

"He covered second base. This is amazing. I never knew you could do that. It's a little hard on the eyes. Everything is a little out of focus."

"It's a paradox," I said. "By focusing on something in the distance you can see more, even though everything closer is a little out of focus."

It's somewhat [like] looking out from a mountain at the towns, farms, woodlands, and roadways below. Your eyes take in so much. There is an order, a symmetry, as if the whole thing had been laid out by plan; as if it were given to you to see the plan. None of this is evident from studying the parts close up. The short view includes the rivalries, pettiness, bitterness, struggle, conflict, and inequities that generate ugliness. But the long view, like a great painting, has a quality of timelessness. From the mountain the only visible motion is traffic which moves slowly, as if no one were ever in a hurry to get anywhere. Sharp edges are blurred. The pain and ugliness, though we know they are there, are transcended by distance. We have now seen that the earth, viewed from space, is magnificent.

Experienced Friends who treasure sense of the meeting stand on an inward high place and look beyond the ideas being discussed. From this vantage point ideas lose the sharp edge of immediacy. They are easier to examine for their real worth. A Friend recently said to me, "I don't go to business meeting anymore; it's become too contentious." I suspect this Friend might return if focal length were longer.

A period of silence is sometimes suggested when discussion gets difficult, angry, or competitive. This enables us to focus on the tree beyond the right field fence. By fuzzing the close, sharp edges, we might be led to see more clearly.

If clarity is still not forthcoming, it is appropriate to lay an issue over. Because there are always Friends among us who retain long focus even between business meetings, clarity might come during the next week or month. Someone who is quietly walking the dog, or listening to the rain fall, or waiting for sleep to arrive may suddenly be opened. The epic balcony dispute [at Sandy Spring] was laid over many times. After three years, clarity finally came during meeting for worship.

Letting go of competitive decision-making within the familiar framework of debate is not easy. But it is essential. Contention and compromise, though sometimes appropriate in early stages of discussion, narrow our focus.

**3. Transition to Light.** As we continue to address an issue, as we lay aside any need to win, as we turn increasingly inward in order to transcend differences, long focus brings us to the Source of resolution and clarity. It is in this Light that God's voice is heard.

From the Light we sense an influx of enveloping harmony. Peace tinged with triumph settles upon individuals and over the meeting. When we feel the Presence settle among us, and silence overtakes us, we have arrived where we want to be. Silence is an inward and outward sign that the process has been completed. A sensitive clerk will allow the silence to linger.

Transition to Light makes possible a gathered meeting. This is why Friends consider business meeting to be an extension of meeting for worship. The process of reaching unity in Light brings us close to the peace that passeth understanding."

From *Beyond Consensus*, Barry Morley, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 307, copyright 1993, Pendle Hill. This excerpt (pp. 16-19) is provided by permission from Pendle Hill. You can purchase your own copy of *Beyond Consensus* by calling the Pendle Hill Bookstore at 610-566-4507. We highly recommend this pamphlet!