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A QUAKER CENTER FOR STUDY AND CONTEMPLATION

MEETING FOR LEARNING:

Education in a Quaker Context

Parker J. Palmer

Whatever else Pendle Hill may be, it is a place of teaching and learning. These are staples of our life together, whether we meet in seminar, at work, in personal relations, or at any of the other stops on our daily round. More than that, we teach and learn within a context called Quakerism which, at its best, offers images of life to inspire and question the way we educate each other. If these Quaker images were merely parochial I do not think I would be drawn to them, for I am not a Friend. But I find in some of them a universal quality. They shed, for me, a deep-searching light on this thing called education.

Education has occupied a considerable portion of my life. As a youngster and young man, I was a student. At the outset of my career, I was a teacher. Now that I have been freed from career and enabled to pursue my vocation, I find myself teacher-and-student in constant interplay. And as my vocation deepens, I experience the truth of Whitehead's claim that "the essence of education is that it be religious." For Whitehead, a religious education is one which evokes duty and reverence. Our duty is to know: "Where attainable knowledge could have changed the issue, ignorance has the guilt of vice." But our knowledge is made humble by reverence, by the perception "that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity." (*The Aims of Education*, p. 26)

The centrality of these themes in my life may help explain my attraction to the educational images of Quakerism. For as I see the Society of Friends, teaching and learning are a way of life, and reverence and duty (read "faith and practice") are the complementary movements of that life. These, at least, are themes which have come alive for me at Pendle Hill.

The Idea of "Meeting"

Much of what I want to say about education in a Quaker context can be organized around one of Quakerism's most central, concrete, yet spacious images: the image of "meeting." Among Friends, of course, there is first the meeting for

worship, but then there is the meeting for business, the meeting for marriage, the meeting on the occasion of a graduation, the meeting in memorial of one who has died. I remember the jogging my mind got when I realized that the use of "meeting" in all these contexts was no accident; that Friends believe all meetings can and should be held in the same spirit that informs worship.

Worship and business, for example, had always been contrary activities to me. The one was quiet, the other noisy; the one solemn, the other often contentious; the one selfless, the other motivated by a simple desire for results and success. But Friends made a simple and compelling point: The common element in both worship and business should be the search for truth—and the expectation that, if we give it space and time, truth will come to us. Though I now know more about the difficult discipline required to "meet" in that way, I remain convinced of that claim as both reality and hope.

As my understanding of meeting enlarges, it becomes clear that one may speak of another kind of meeting: meeting for learning. Where else should the search for truth have greater prominence than in the process of education? Of course, for many of us, "education" has come to mean a scramble for information, which leads to grades, which lead to a diploma, which leads to a job. There are too many educational institutions where truth is not the point! Perhaps the image of a "meeting for learning" will remind us of forgotten depths in the educational process, just as the silent meeting for worship once stood as a rebuke to ways of worship which put the human before the divine.

I want to use that image to explore three aspects of education by asking three questions about the "meeting for learning." First, what is the nature of such a meeting? What are its textures, rhythms, shapes? Second, how does one prepare for a meeting for learning? What should the teacher/learner bring to it? Third, what do we take from a meeting for learning? What consequences flow from it?

What I have to say is only metaphor; I shall not deal with practical pedagogy, with educational technique. At Pendle Hill, unencumbered as we are with diplomas, credits and grades, we have the luxury of exploring this metaphor in practice, and I do not presume to know what applications it may have for other educational settings. But there is power in metaphor. If you can internalize it, make it your own, the applications will surely follow. One does not "apply" worship to life. You make it your practice until worship and life become one.

What is the Nature of a Meeting for Learning?

A meeting for learning is, in the first place, a genuine encounter between persons, a "meeting" in the literal sense. In conventional classrooms the focus is on the isolated self. The teacher addresses the individual student, treating him or her as a receptacle to be filled with knowledge. But in a meeting for learning the individual is always in relationship, and knowledge emerges in dialogue. It is not only what the student hears but what the student says back that counts. Here, learning happens *between* persons and not simply *within* the learner.

Real meeting requires fresh expectation each time we meet, so a meeting for learning must guard against our tendency to stereotype one another as familiarity

grows. Studies have shown what incredible damage can be done when teachers respond to students on the basis of such stereotypes; if you assume that a student is slow, the student becomes slow! When we anticipate and predict one another's responses, we kill off the novelty which infuses authentic education. Against this tendency, the image of meeting urges us to encounter each other as strangers whenever we meet. For we are strangers to each other and to ourselves—unable to reveal at any moment all that we hold within. When we meet to learn with the openness which we bring to a stranger, teaching and learning are enriched.

The encounter between persons in a meeting for learning is deepened and disciplined by a "third party" to the dialogue—whether that be an idea, a text, some data, or a concrete experience. This "third thing" mediates the relation between selves. It saves the dialogue from becoming a simple sharing of subjectivities. The common text—a poem, for example—has an irreducible reality of its own. And that reality is capable of breaking through the closure and deadlock which can sometimes occur in a simple dialogue. It enables the participants to speak and to listen to something outside of themselves.

The presence of this third thing can also pose problems for education, just as trios in daily life are often more difficult than pairs. One member of the trio may feel especially protective of another, thus preventing the third from entering into the relationship. There have been times in my own teaching when I have tried to protect students from a text, or even protect the text from the students! The teacher must be responsible for watching these meetings with care, just as a thoughtful host establishes an atmosphere in which the guests can become truly known to one another.

If we are faithful to the image of "meeting," we can say even more about the relation of person and person and some third thing. For it is precisely in the rich and unpredictable mix of a triad that some truth beyond ourselves, some presence we do not create, might break in. So it is in a meeting for worship or business. One speaks, and a thought or a feeling enters the room. Another listens and responds both to the speaker and to what is spoken. As that process moves on, a fuller light can illumine us all.

In conventional education, the "third thing" becomes the focus of the educational process. The idea or text is objectified (and sometimes sanctified) to the exclusion of all else. It becomes the judge and jury of what goes on between selves; how often in the classroom have we sacrificed our own intuition to the idol of the printed page! But in meeting for learning, the idea or text is never given the prominence of doctrine. If the metaphor of meeting means anything to Friends, it means that experience is honored over doctrine. Only as doctrine has experiential validity can it be honored at all. The important question is not what the text says, but what it says that can be validated by you. Whether the subject is literature or atomic physics, the test is always experiential (or experimental).

One of the basic disciplines of an experience-based meeting for learning is to claim only what one knows, and no more. Think of what could be gained if we could adopt that discipline in education! The greatest gain would be the legitimate exposure of doubt and ignorance, of that whole range of questions and quandries which motivate inquiry but which we often suppress for fear of appearing unlearned. If we did not claim more than we know, students would learn that teach-

ers are seekers too. And teachers would learn directly what students need to know rather than having to ferret it out from a thicket of words.

Another important feature of the meeting for learning is that it places trust in the group itself. In conventional education the group is only an accident; it just happens to be more convenient for a teacher to deal with individuals in a group rather than separately. But in a meeting for learning the group assumes an importance at least equal to that of any individual in it—just as a meeting for worship is more than a collection of individuals in meditation.

There are at least two implications of this fact. One is that among members of the group there is equal opportunity for light or insight. Just as a meeting for learning is experiential and not doctrinal, so also does it lack priests or incontrovertible authorities on the matters in question. In a meeting for learning the roles of teacher and student continually move from one person to another, and it should be impossible at any moment to anticipate who will be teacher next.

A second implication of the trust vested in the group balances out the potential chaos of the first! Whatever insight one thinks one has in this democracy of knowledge must be put forward publicly and tested against the knowledge of the group. And the individual must feel the weight of the group's response to what he or she has offered—whether that response is one of support, negation, or indifference. In this respect a meeting for learning may be akin to a "clearness committee" in a Friends meeting.

These two features of a meeting for learning—the lack of formal authority and the trust placed in the group—might be taken as a downgrading of the teacher's role. Not so. In a meeting for learning the teacher's task is much more demanding than in the conventional classroom. The teacher will, of course, have expert resources on the subject. The question is how to nurture and encourage the expertise of others. The most difficult task in teaching is to give away what you have without making students feel like the resentful recipients of welfare. And the teacher must also be expert in helping build a group which can be trusted by its members. In this kind of education the role of the teacher gains in subtlety and significance what it loses in visibility.

But what must finally be trusted in a meeting for learning is not a text or the group or the technique of the teacher, but a truth that lies beyond all our devices. I do not have a language adequate to name this truth or tell how it comes to us—except for one symbol which arises naturally in any consideration of "meeting." I mean the silence. Conventional education is almost always busy and/or noisy, as it hustles after knowledge with confidence in its own methods and conceptions. But a meeting for learning will know when to cease moving and talking, to cease *pursuing* truth, and to wait in silence for truth to come into its midst. Some of my most important moments of learning have been in such stillness—as insight coalesced, as knowledge settled in, or as a simple receptiveness opened within me. Above all, the silence symbolizes that so much of what we seek to teach and learn involves mystery to be pondered as well as problems to be solved.

What Does One Bring to a Meeting for Learning?

There are some ways one ought *not* to prepare for a meeting for worship—for

example, by writing the script for a ministry one plans to deliver. To prepare in this way would undermine the spontaneity of worship and the influence of the gathered group upon it. But historically there *has* been a preparation for worship among Friends, one which involves the total fabric of a person's life: what one reads, how one works, one's relations with others, one's service to a world in need.

So it is in a meeting for learning. For conventional education, the learner prepares only with the mind. But in a meeting for learning, one's total life must be brought along—not only intellect, but values, beliefs, relationships, actions, aspirations. Education, no less than worship, makes a claim on our total lives, and we must come to both meetings with that totality recollected and held up to the light.

The danger with such advice is that some parts of our total selves come along more reluctantly than others, and these parts are likely to get left behind as we emphasize the whole. In education, the stress on the total self has too often resulted in an outpouring of emotion at the expense of ideas, logic, and fact, for our feelings are more readily available to us than our minds. We must make sure that the meeting for learning does not simply encourage expressions which come cheaply, without discipline. Wholeness is the norm, not a new tyranny of feeling over intellect.

We must also bring to meeting for learning a capacity for patient waiting and expectation, attitudes hard to cultivate in a time when education is being replaced by training. Authentic education is not necessarily quick in achieving results, nor are its results predictable in advance. And education suffers when we keep uprooting the plant to see how well it is growing. We must trust that growth is happening, and have patience to wait it out.

Here, of course, the meeting for learning moves against some of the strongest currents of contemporary schooling. The grading system, for example, is premised on the idea that results are predictable and measurable. The current rage for constant evaluation too often involves pulling up the plant before it can take root. Then there is the idea of "contract education" which seems to assume that we can know at the beginning of the course what is to be learned by the end, thereby eliminating the need for any course at all!

Against all these pressures the meeting for learning will be a place where people can adventure toward truth without any preconceptions of what it might be—and without any expectation that it will "do" anything for them except be true!

Finally, we prepare for a meeting for learning by trying to become vulnerable to both hurt and healing in others and ourselves. Such concerns are ignored in conventional education because that process supposedly deals with only a narrow slice of our selves, a trainable bunch of abilities and skills which do not seem vulnerable to feeling. Of course, that is an illusion. In most schools people pay a high emotional price in terms of self-image and self-confidence. In a meeting for learning those hurts, and our capacity to speak to each other's condition, become part of the educational process. Whatever the subject of study in a classroom the shadow subject is ourselves, our limits, our potentials. As long as that remains in the shadows, it will block both individual and group from full illumination. If both hurt and self-doubt can be brought into the light, then learning will flower.

What Does One Take From a Meeting for Learning?

No meeting must be "justified" by its consequences. Both meeting for worship and meeting for learning can be experienced as ends in themselves. There is a phrase in the Pendle Hill catalogue which, more than any other, first attracted me to this place: "The purpose of Pendle Hill is to provide a learning time in which life can be lived for its own sake." Living for the sake of living, and learning for the sake of learning: that is the spirit in which I wish both to live and to learn.

But when we live and learn that way, we discover that our lives and our learning then have genuine consequences, authentic results! This is Jesus's paradox, that "He who finds his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39). The power of a fully lived life or a truly learned mind is not a power to be sought or contrived. It comes only as we let go of what we possess and find ourselves possessed by a truth greater than our own.

The consequences of a meeting for learning are not uniform or predictable, for it is not possible to tell what shape the spirit will take in the life of individual or group. It may come in the form of art, or writing, or decision, or action. The meeting for learning must abandon the conventional notion that there is a single kind of outcome to be expected of all learners.

But at the same time, the meeting for learning can expect consequences. In these lie the test of whether the spirit has been moving, and how. It is part of the genius of Quakerism, I think, that the movement of the spirit is not enclosed as a private matter, but is made manifest in public ways and put to public test.

The most important consequence of any meeting is the nurture of community, of recentered and reconnected selves. Education (as contrasted with training) comes from a community and creates community. When a meeting breaks, the community goes out to embrace people and events in new and more powerful ways. When the community meets again, they bring all of that back with them, to hold it in the light.

Some Queries

If Friends take seriously the meaning of "meeting," then its spirit must apply to all they do—not least this thing called education. But there are other spirits abroad in the world which will discourage the meeting for learning. Teachers may be wary of losing their authority, their role. Students may be reluctant to be drawn into greater involvement with education than many of them think they want. Institutions may balk because their business of sorting and certifying people is contrary to the spirit of genuine meeting.

But if Friends wish to conduct their education in some other spirit the reasons must be cogent and compelling. The meeting is such a central image for Friends that to deny it in the education Friends offer is to deny the image itself. And quite apart from Friends there is urgent need in this world for styles of education which will raise up peacemakers, inventors of new futures, and persons confident of their own humanity—not competitors, consumers, and diminished selves.

Of course it is more in the spirit of Friends to ask questions than to give advice, so though I do not recant the advice already given I want to close with some queries! Here are a few which come to me as I ponder the "meeting for learning;" perhaps there are others you will want to ask yourself:

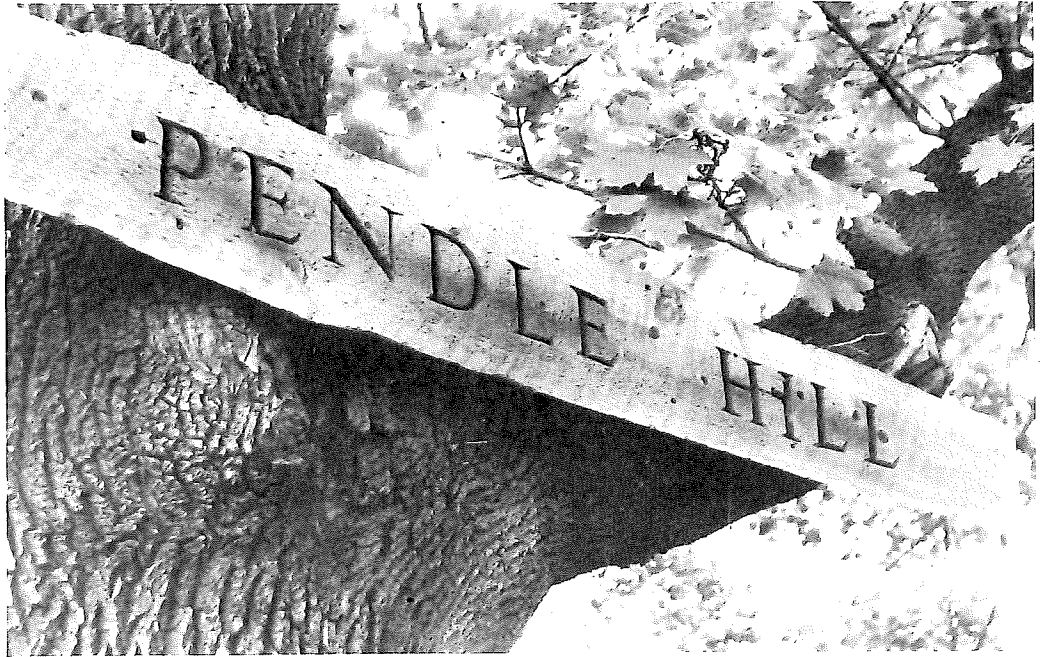
- Do I come to learning prepared for a genuine meeting between myself, other persons, ideas and texts?
- Do I try, in teaching and learning, to stay close to what I know experientially, and do I take the care to ask the same of others?
- Am I willing to devote the energy necessary to engage my whole self in the learning process, and especially to cultivate those aspects of myself which are underdeveloped?
- Do I take full advantage of the community of learning by sharing my insights with others, and by willingness to test myself against their experience? Do I help foster the learning community in this way?
- Do I appreciate that the consequences of learning will be different for different people, and am I open to unexpected consequences for myself?
- Do I accept the possibility that meeting for learning may change not only my mind but my life?

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PENDLE HILL is a Center for Study and Contemplation, founded in 1930 by members of the Religious Society of Friends. Each year a unique group of people comes together here for a living-learning experiment grounded in the cornerstones of worship, study, work, and caring for one another. It is an educational community of adults in search of more meaningful lives of wholeness, wrestling with their hardest problems and celebrating their deepest joys.

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