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Could We Have Some Silence Please?

By Christine E. Black
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At my Quaker Meeting, occasionally someone will say, "Could we have some silence please?" especially during a business meeting, which we call Meeting for Worship with a Concern for Business. Someone may request silence when the discussion becomes too contentious, and we are not progressing towards resolution. We wait and listen.

What are we listening for? As corny and old-fashioned as it may sound, we are waiting for guidance from god. I have been attending the Quaker Meeting for many years now and have felt increasing awe and reverence for this process by which Quakers conduct business. No shouting. No interrupting. Even the most timid, the most outlying or awkward person may be given time to gather her thoughts, to breathe and to speak, perhaps falteringly, even if she has to pause before continuing. People wait. It is quite amazing. I had never seen anything like it.

Quakers do not vote on issues but discuss, sometimes a lot, and tiringly. Members direct comments to the clerk. At its best, there is time for each person who wants to speak to be heard during the meeting. Instead of voting, we try to discern the "sense of the Meeting" before acting. We are trying to discern god's will. And even one person can change the movement of the group as he or she feels led to speak. One voice can be the one to heed even if the whole group is going another way – because we believe that all have direct access to god's guidance, no one person more than another. If the group has not gathered a sense of unity, then the meeting may decide to postpone action. We wait and listen more — and try again at another meeting.

As I have sat it these business meetings, I have noted what a miracle they are to have survived in this form for hundreds of years of Quaker history, women as well as men, speaking and following leadings.

In this contentious time of lockdowns, isolations, staggering losses of livelihoods and social supports, then violence, snarling faces, flying opinions and accusations, burning buildings, crashing glass, and dizzying confusion of language and numbers and messages changing every day, I have longed to hear someone say those words: "Could we have some silence please?" This signals a pause for us to collect our thoughts and feelings.

Apart from monthly business meetings, our meetings for worship are filled with mostly silence while we wait and listen for god. As led, someone may stand to share what we call vocal ministry, which is usually brief. After the message is shared, the Meeting then settles into silence once again, so the message has time to live in the air among us. It is also during our Meetings for Worship that we gather strength to act in the world.

At Meeting, all kinds of people gather in silence, old people, couples, single people, families.

We haven't been able to meet in person for months now, and I do not participate in computer meetings because they usually make me queasy.

Flashing Internet images and slogans on social media and other web sites also make me queasy. Anyone can create in seconds a poster with short texts or an image with a caption, and can immediately broadcast it to thousands, even millions. These patched-together messages blink and flash and multiply. I don't use Twitter, don't really understand it, but it sounds to me like something a 13-year old boy made up. Yet, we see public figures use haphazard phrases — tweets (which sounds silly) that instantly become headlines in national newspapers. This cannot be good for our clear thinking or our culture. We can't even open our email programs without seeing the lowest forms of speech elevated to look like relevant news. We drown in cacophony and mayhem.

Many at protests and riots hold up their devices, filming, and those films and images fill screens and minds. It becomes very hard to think clearly about anything. The Internet has changed our brains, as Nicholas Carr describes in his book, *The Shallows.* He describes how our attention spans have been shattered by clicking through short texts and flashing images as we are increasingly challenged to sustain even the concentration required to sit and read a whole book, for instance. Carr summarizes the findings of early computer scientist Joseph Weizenbuam, who notes the danger as we become more intimately involved with our computers and "experience more of our lives through the disembodied symbols flickering across our screens — is that we'll begin to lose our humanness, to sacrifice the very qualities that separate us from machines" (p. 207). Weizenbaum says that to avoid that fate we must "have the self-awareness and courage to refuse to delegate to computers the most human of our mental activities and intellectual pursuits, particularly 'tasks that demand wisdom'" (p. 208).

Images, language, repetitions flash too quickly for adequate processing and wise decisions. They repeat across TV stations that call themselves news but work more like advertising. For instance, inanimate objects like face masks, become imbued with values and feelings like care, protection, altruism, even membership in a community, regardless of conflicting information on their effectiveness to prevent the spread of a virus.Similarly, Coke can come to represent fun and belonging through repetition, language, and images; a cigarette brand can endow someone masculine strength; Campbell's soup can represent nurturing. Advertising is also used to pressure us into conformity, for instance, wear this brand of athletic shoes, and you will exude status and success. Now, advertising strategies become mixed with daily bombarding messages, and it becomes very hard to think independently. Once advertising works, it does not matter what the facts may be.

Could we have some silence please?

Lately, I find myself longing for a Ticonderoga number two pencil, soft lead, rustling steadily over nubby white paper. I am reminded of one of my poetry teachers describing how long it can take to craft a good poem or to compose a whole poetry manuscript. "You know what it's like," he said. "It's like carving a chair." I remember how long it takes to learn to play the violin, to learn to draw. These slower, more methodical activities strengthen our brains for concentration; they build pathways for creativity, for problem-solving, ultimately for more careful thinking, for judgement and wisdom, which we seem to be increasingly lacking now.

Shouts and crashes, burning and shooting reverberate through Chicago, Illinois where there

were 18 murders in 24 hours this past weekend, according to *The Chicago Sun Times*. "The most violent weekend in the city's modern history," the paper reported. Eighty-five people were shot and 24 killed in just one weekend. "And no police were anywhere," the story stated. On May 31, there were 65 thousand 911 calls, which was 50 thousand more than a usual day, the paper reported, while just a couple of weeks ago, the mayor of that city, as well as other governors and mayors around the county, threatened to jail or fine people who were out anywhere, even small groups.

Young people have been out in massive gatherings now all over the country with small and large businesses looted and destroyed, fires raging in buildings and churches, car windshields smashed and car bodies burned, belying mainstream media reports that the protests were mostly "peaceful." We can't lockdown whole societies for months, rip down whole social fabrics without dire consequences. Young people had no school, no graduations to attend, no sports activities or clubs; they lost part-time jobs pieced together at restaurants or coffee shops; they have had no grandmothers making them go to church youth group or funerals or family picnics because there have been none of these. Just weeks and weeks inside with video games and cell phones and what else? There is a deep breakdown of trust in our institutions and the means by which we get information. Forty million people are unemployed, a quarter of the U.S. population. A black man is killed by a policeman, almost three months into lockdown. What tinderbox is inside – the killer, the victim, and everyone else?

Can we have some silence please?

We hear cries to defund the police, but I remember that an average police officer makes about as much as a public-school teacher. The African American police chief in Seattle may disagree with this proposal to defund the police as her entire department has been disbanded with the building taken over by protesters and rioters. Instead of defunding local police departments, we may consider starting by defunding a fighter jet or two. One of them costs about 89.2 million dollars, according to Lockheed Martin's web site. Or, perhaps cutting a nuclear submarine or two. Twelve of them will cost 128 billion dollars, according to an April 8, 2019 *Time* magazine story. How many literacy programs for children, teens, and young adults in Chicago would some of that money fund? How many small business loans for black business owners would it provide?

A kid may call the police when his father is beating up his mother. He would want the police to be there. Police get called when someone is suicidal, wielding a knife, maybe high on meth or Fentanyl. Police have to deal with assaultive mentally ill people shouting in their face; they have to deal with protestors with clubs – and try to contain violence, protect themselves and others, and not get anyone hurt or killed. It is a very hard job, my cop friends have described to me. One of my friends teased me, saying that maybe I should join him on the right-wing side of politics. I reminded him that I am not on anyone's wing. In fact, I believe the wings, right and left, have outlived their meanings and their usefulness and think they should lift on the wind and fly off, making room for more independent thinking and more options.

"It's the responsibility of the alternative media to hit the pause button, to take a breath and not be swept away along with the emotional current," writes an editor of *Off-Guardian* magazine, a site developed by writers and thinkers who had been banned from making comments on the Open Comments section of the mainstream U.K paper, *The Guardian*. We are in treacherous times when independent thinkers and writers, who

question dominant narratives, may be banned from speaking or writing – or worse, lose friends or family members or jobs. This development is deeply sad and worrisome.

Could we have some silence please?

Seeing computer images of riots, massive looting, a black woman crying over her destroyed business, a black man, D.C. city employee, in required mask and gloves, outside in the heat, cleaning graffiti from the Lincoln Memorial, I long for one of our elder members, Tim Hall, to stand up and say what I imagine he might after we have sat in a long silence. He may share a message about god's surrounding love for all of us, no matter who we are. He might remind us, in his corny, old-fashioned way that I have often found comforting, that in spite of its challenges, this is a mostly good world that god has given us to care for.

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Christine E. Black's work has been published in The American Journal of Poetry, New Millennium Writings, Nimrod International, The Virginia Journal of Education, Friends Journal, Sojourners Magazine, English Journal, Amethyst Review, and other publications. Her poetry has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and the Pablo Neruda Prize.

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