

The Quaker Basics2

By

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I was talking with a friend last Sunday afternoon about decision-making. I noticed he seemed to make very difficult decisions with apparent ease and I wanted to know his secret. **I'm not a very good decider.** I tend to vacillate, decide to do one thing, then the next day change my mind and do something else. It drives Joan nuts. **Joan is a fantastic decider.** She makes up her mind to do something, then does it. Never looks back. Just decides and goes. **It's amazing!** Every morning, I'm sitting at the kitchen table trying to decide whether to eat *Grape Nuts* or *Cocoa Krispies* and she's already eaten, has a load of laundry in the washer, and is dressed for the day.

So I asked my friend how he made decisions. **He said, "Easy, I narrow my choices down to two possibilities, then I flip a coin."**

"How does that work?" I asked. "Are you pleased with the results?"

"I get it right about half the time," he said.

Half the time isn't bad. That's a .500 batting average in baseball. So I tried it this week, and it worked really well. I was zipping along, making decision after decision, then got to dinner on Wednesday night. **Joan was out of town, so I was in charge of supper.** I couldn't decide whether to stay home and fix a meal or take the boys to White Castle, so I flipped a coin and it landed on White Castle and I've not felt well since.

Do you have a hard time making decisions? If so, you're not alone. In the Bible, when the apostles had to pick a new disciple to replace Judas, they drew straws. **Wouldn't that be an interesting way to conduct church business?** If we draw a long straw, we build a new meetinghouse; short straw, we stay put. Long straw, we give Phil and Jennifer a raise; short straw, they have to keep their day jobs.

We've been talking about the Quaker basics. **While Quakerism has undergone many changes in the past 350 years, some of our beliefs and practices have remained constant.** Last week, we spoke about *The Equality of God's Presence*. We believe there is that of God in all people, that God is present in all people everywhere. **Today, I invite us to think about the Quaker decision-making process.**

I want to think about this on two levels—how we make personal decisions, and how we make our community decisions, because the two rely upon the same conviction—that wise choices happen when we quiet ourselves, listen carefully to others and that of God in us, and avoid solutions which are based on hysteria, fear, or ignorance.

The first time I experienced a Quaker meeting for business was at Plainfield Meeting under the direction of a woman named Carolyn Kellum, who was serving as the meeting's clerk.

It is the clerk's job to listen carefully to what is being said, and discern, among the various suggestions and expressions, what we Friends called "the sense of the meeting." **It can be a difficult job and requires someone who is well-balanced.** Too often the sense of the meeting and the clerk's personal wishes have turned out to be the same. (When God always seem to agree with the clerk or pastor, it's time to find a new clerk or pastor.) **But as Carolyn Kellum clerked the meeting, I saw her take an intractable problem and by listening carefully and speaking thoughtfully, break the matter down to smaller, more workable parts, then suggest a solution which honored our understanding of God, addressed our practical concerns, and made everyone present think it was their idea.**

The experience was memorable not only because of her skillful clerking, but because it was the first time I'd seen people in a church have a say. **In the past, I'd always been told what to do by the pastor.** The idea that regular church folks could gather, speak thoughtfully, listen carefully, and arrive together at a fitting solution was a new experience to me. **It marked the beginning of my appreciation for the Quaker process of discernment.** My appreciation has been occasionally shaken when I have seen the process abused, but when the process has been honored, I've admired the quality of decisions it has produced.

I eventually discovered that if I applied that same process of quiet contemplation, careful listening to others and God, making every effort to educate myself about a certain situation, and not letting my fears have too much influence, that the decisions I made would be better than if I had approached them haphazardly.

Now I know this isn't the most riveting topic, but learning how to make good decisions is important. **When we don't decide well, it creates a lot of problems in our lives.** Sometimes a bad decision can be corrected and its effects lessened. But there are other decisions which when made aren't easily reversed. **Lives which are really difficult and painful, can often be traced back to a poorly made decision.** Any effort we spend learning how to make wise decisions, will be one of the best investments we could ever make in our lives.

I want to shift gears a bit and talk about how we make decisions as a church. I want to begin by pointing out a common misunderstanding and that is the difference between consensus and *the sense of the meeting*. **Consensus, or unanimity, is the idea that everyone must agree on something before it is**

done. There are a lot of Quakers who think the goal of our business process is unanimity. That isn't accurate, and probably not even possible.

The problem with unanimity is obvious—it would only take one person to sabotage any good effort by simply refusing to go along. **So a group could only act as morally and ethically advanced as its least mature member.** It would be morality by the least common denominator. When Quakers have confused consensus with the sense of the meeting, it has usually been disastrous.

Discerning *the sense of the meeting* means listening to what people perceive to be the will of God in a given situation, paying careful attention to the majority point of view, while being sensitive to minority voices, not letting the herd stampede a well-intentioned few, because sometimes the minority voice turns out to be right. **This is where the idea of *weighty Friends* comes into play.** *Weighty Friends* are those Quakers whose wisdom, intelligence, and spiritual maturity are especially well-developed. In discerning the sense of the meeting, their voices are often sought and appreciated. This is not snobbery. **It is the simple recognition that some people have made the attainment of wisdom and spiritual sensitivity a priority, and that what they have to say merits careful consideration.**

We practice this in every other area of our lives. **On a whole range of issues, if we're perplexed or need a learned perspective, we pay closer attention to someone well-trained in a certain subject.** If your child were in a bicycle wreck and broke his leg, you would be more inclined to call Sherry Gilliland, who has dedicated her life to healing children, than me, who would tell your child to walk it off.¹

Now in many religions, power is given to those persons in particular positions. **One might have power by virtue of being the pastor, or the bishop, or the head of the session, or the president of the board.** The position is invested with power. Authority is granted or conferred, not necessarily earned. But in a Quaker meeting, one's authority depends less upon their position, and more upon their reputation for wisdom and maturity. This, of course, is the ideal. **Sometimes people in a meeting or yearly meeting have authority because they've desired it, the body is too dysfunctional to challenge them, and no one else wants the job.** If a Quaker organization is on a downhill slide, this is invariably how it has happened—that power has been entrusted to unqualified persons who've cared more about their own will than God's will. **But I'm moving dangerously close to editorializing and should probably stop there.**

¹ When our son Sam was five, he wrecked his bicycle and cut his chin. I referred to it as a scratch, but Joan overrode my counsel and took him to the emergency room where he received 12 stitches. Joan is a weighty Friend when it comes to childhood emergencies. I am not.

So let's go back over it: Good decisions begin with us, and our commitment to speak thoughtfully, listen carefully, and educate ourselves thoroughly about a given matter. **Those good decisions come to fruition when a sensitive clerk discerns God's will among those voices, paying careful attention to those persons who are especially wise and mature, while not neglecting the minority voice, which has often been a bellwether, articulating a point of view others have not yet reached, but eventually will.**

This process depends upon our commitment to kindness, wisdom, education, and mutual respect. **When those qualities are present, we will not only make better decisions in families, we'll make better decisions as a church.**

Educating ourselves thoroughly, listening to others and God carefully, speaking thoughtfully, then acting faithfully.